

LANGSTON-DEMOTT, BROOKE, Ph.D. "Reading is Power!" Critical Literacy in Practice: A Formative Experiment Using Critical Literacy to Address Issues of Gender Inequity with a Fifth Grade Class. (2016)  
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The purpose of this research study was to explore the ways a fifth grade teacher and her students engaged in critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity. Additionally, this study worked to examine the ways teacher and student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study. An additional purpose was to determine what factors enhanced or inhibited the ability of the teacher to use critical literacy with her students to address issues of gender inequity. The theoretical framework used to guide this study drew from feminist theory and critical literacy. The study included one fifth grade teacher and her class of 21 students, with an emphasis on six focus students from her classroom. A formative experiment approach was used to conduct this study. Multiple data sources were utilized including audio recording, fieldnotes, student and teacher interviews, a card and book sort activity, and a focus group session with the 6 focus students. A critical literacy framework based on the dimensions of critical literacy as described by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) was used to analyze the data related to both teacher and students. Findings indicated that the teacher took specific instructional approaches that allowed her to use critical literacy with students, which included: (a) use and selection of literacy resources, (b) engage students in critical conversations, (c) explicitly teach and model, and (d) merge standards with critical literacy practices. Students also engaged in critical literacy in specific ways, which included: (a) make personal and real world connections, (b) take risks, (c) engage

in critical conversations, and (d) identify hidden messages. Findings also suggest that teacher and student understandings of critical literacy increased and understandings of gender shifted. Factors that enhanced the teacher's ability to engage in critical literacy were identified. These included: (a) the teacher's leadership qualities and (b) support from teammates/school personnel. Factors that inhibited the teacher's ability to engage in critical literacy were also identified. These included: (a) the teacher's learning curve related to critical literacy and gender, (b) time, and (c) issues of discomfort.

Administration was a factor that both enhanced and inhibited the teacher's ability to use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity with her students. The findings from this study have implications for research and practice. Specifically, additional research using formative experiments need to be conducted. Teachers need to work to foster critical conversations among students related to issues of gender inequity, create an environment where students feel safe to take risks when discussing such topics, and recognize the importance of helping students understand the ways hidden messages about gender in texts influence their thinking.

*Keywords:* Critical literacy practices, gender inequity, feminist theory, critical conversations, elementary students, fifth grade.

“READING IS POWER!” CRITICAL LITERACY IN PRACTICE: A  
FORMATIVE EXPERIMENT USING CRITICAL LITERACY  
TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF GENDER INEQUITY WITH  
A FIFTH GRADE CLASS

by

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Approved by

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For Dale

for your patience,

for your selflessness,

for your encouragement,

for your love.

You made this journey possible.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2013, the National Bureau of Economic Research published a report that showed girls' high school graduation rate was on average 7% higher than boys. This gap was true even when race and ethnicity were taken into account with 59% of African American girls but only 48% of African American boys graduating from high school (Fortin, Oreopoulos, & Phipps, 2013). Fortin, Oreopoulos, and Phipps (2013) found that similar statistics exist for Latino/a students, with 58% of girls and only 49% of boys earning a high school diploma. Despite these seemingly positive findings for female students, the report also found that even girls who earn a 3.5 high school grade point average still get paid less than boys who graduate with a 2.0 once they enter the work force. These findings make it apparent that girls' hard work academically does not seem to be paying off.

Furthermore, "Worldwide, in every society, women as a category are subordinated to men.... nowhere are substantial numbers of women in political control; nowhere do women have the opportunity to carry out national agendas giving women truly equal rights" (Epstein, 2007, p. 3, 9). Seven years after Epstein's claim, Emma Watson, in her 2014 speech to the United Nations, reinforced this idea. She fiercely and passionately reminded us that, "There is [*still*] no country in the world where girls and women are equal to their male counterparts." Fleming (2000) reported that despite the

progress that has been made in gender equity in the US, wage gaps between men and women persist, poverty continues to increase and disproportionately affect women and children, women and girls are affected by gender-based violence, gender bias and stereotypes are rampant in and out of classrooms, and male-focused student-teacher interactions dominate both elementary and secondary schools.

Some may read this and point to the workplace as the source of the problem, or argue that boys' literacy achievement should be the focus of educators' and researchers' attention. Others might point out that girls need to be encouraged to take more math and science courses in school as a way to obtain jobs in higher paying, male dominated, career fields. Although these are both valid points that I very much agree with, for the purpose of this study I have emphasized a focus on how educators might approach the underlying issues of gender inequity that seems to be the common thread. It is imperative that students, beginning at the elementary school level, learn to take on critical perspectives as a way to push back against oppressive institutional systems that perpetuate inequities. As bell hooks reminded us, "We inhabit real institutions where very little seems to be changed, where there are very few changes in the curriculum, almost no paradigm shifts, and where knowledge and information continue to be presented in the conventionally accepted manner" (hooks, 1994, p.143). Something has to change in order for issues of inequity to truly be addressed. I believe that part of this change should be a more widespread critical approach to literacy education.

However, one major problem with critical literacy implementation is, as Flint & Lanman (2012) emphasize, such practices are practically nonexistent in elementary

classrooms. This fact is extremely alarming considering the growing diversity in U.S. schools and the continuing gap in equity on many levels, including race, class, and gender. It is also socially irresponsible to place the burden of teaching students to engage in critical literacy to middle and high school teachers. Perhaps even more concerning is the idea that some students may go through their entire K-12 experience never having had the opportunity to question the power structures that exist in society, always taking the printed word for absolute truth. Elementary school teachers cannot ignore the important role they play. Norris, Lucas, and Prudhoe (2012) would agree, as is apparent in the following statement:

As we begin to prepare our young children to become thinkers and learners, we should not wait to have them start thinking critically when they get to high school. Young children are already capable of moving beyond what is in front of them on the page. Teachers of young children can guide their students through early literacy using critical literacy with the purpose of creating global thinkers who are comfortable dealing with issues and who are actively working toward change (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012, p. 61).

There are two additional problems that stand out when it comes to the current state of critical literacy implementation: (1) students from diverse backgrounds often have less opportunities to engage in critical literacy than those from dominant backgrounds; and (2) even when students are given the opportunities to engage in critical literacy it is not with mainstream texts but with exemplar models of multicultural texts (Au & Raphael, 2000; Flint & Lanman, 2012; Jones, 2006).

The study described here aimed to find ways to push back against each of these issues. First, I conducted my research using a critical literacy perspective with a fifth grade teacher and her students, addressing the issue of critical literacy scarcely occurring at the elementary school level. Second, the elementary school where the classroom was located had a diverse student body, with more than half of the students identifying as Latino/a and more than ninety percent receiving free or reduced lunch. In working with this school, I aimed to address the issue of students from diverse backgrounds having fewer opportunities to engage in critical literacy. To confront the third issue, I encouraged the teacher to model for students how to engage in critical literacy using mainstream texts, such as student textbooks and popular children's books—not just exemplar models of children's literature.

Additionally, through this research study I worked to counter the “symbolic annihilation” of women and girls that has been found in twentieth-century children's literature and which suggests to children that female characters and their experiences are less important than their male counterparts (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, Tope, 2011). This term as described by Gerber and Gross (1976) focuses on the lack of representation in the media of a group of people based on race, class, gender, or sexual orientation which works to maintain systemic oppression and inequity. This term has also been used to describe the underrepresentation of such groups in children's books (McCabe et al., 2011). In collaboration with the fifth grade teacher, we helped guide students thinking about the ways in which the books they read

and the systems they are a part of perpetuate oppression, specifically the oppression of women and girls. This study worked to address the following research questions:

- RQ1a: In what ways does a fifth grade teacher use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity in her classroom?
- RQ1b: In what ways do fifth grade students engage in critical literacy to challenge gender inequity in their everyday lives?
- RQ2a: In what ways does the teacher understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?
- RQ2b: In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?
- RQ3: What factors enhance or inhibit the ability of a fifth grade teacher to use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity with her students?

In the following section I describe the theoretical framework that was used to frame this study. Next I provide an overview of the relevant literature, followed by an explanation of the methods I used to address the research questions. I then share the findings that came out of the data. In the final chapter, I discuss the findings and implications of this work for research and practice.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

With the statistics and issues surrounding gender that I shared in the introduction, and because it relates to the major goal of this study, I drew on feminist theory as my theoretical framework. In the following paragraphs, I provide a description of feminist theory. Next I discuss some of the key concepts this body of research has focused on that are important to the background of this study including, language and discourse, and identity and intersectionality. I then share a brief description of the criticisms of feminist theory and why these are important to consider when thinking about the study described here. Finally, I explain how feminist theory fits within the context of this study.

#### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequity, specifically focusing on the politics of gender (Agger, 2013; Smith, 2010). This theory also focuses on issues of language and power relations as they relate to gender (Finders, 1997; Smith, 2010). A major goal of feminist theory is social transformation (Weiler, 1991). Feminist theorists work to accomplish this goal by validating difference, making visible the sociopolitical tensions that create social roles, and promoting women's rights (Finders, 1997; Smith, 2010; Weiler, 1991). They also argue that the personal is political, what Janks calls "little *p*" politics (Agger, 2013; Janks, 2012). Such theorists believe that permanent change to oppressive systems must not be postponed, arguing instead for feminists to

begin making changes in their everyday lives now (Agger, 2013). In the paragraphs below, I have chosen to highlight three aspects of feminist theory that are important when thinking about this study, its context, and participants. These include: feminist pedagogy, language and discourse, and identity and intersectionality. I provide a brief description of each, some key ideas from the literature, and an explanation of why I chosen to focus on these specific concepts

**Feminist Pedagogy.** Under the umbrella of feminist theory falls the concept of feminist pedagogy. This concept is an alternative paradigm for teaching that takes up issues of gender, power, and privilege (hooks, 1994). Feminist pedagogy builds on and enriches the work by Paulo Freire and as Weiler (1991) argues, “offers a more complex vision of liberatory pedagogy” (Weiler, 1991). Historically, feminist pedagogy was born because male critical theorists dominated the discussion of critical pedagogy. The concept was a way to push back against some of the ideas proposed by “founding fathers” of critical theory, for example Paulo Fiere in order to highlight issues and viewpoints related to other genders (Weiler, 1991; Luke & Gore, 1992). As Shrewsbury explains, feminist pedagogy is “a vision of what education might be like but frequently is not” (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 8). Feminist pedagogy emphasizes empowerment, community, and leadership in the classroom setting. It places particular importance on personal experiences and focuses on the perspectives of people from different races, classes, and genders (Weiler, 1991). One unique aspect of feminist pedagogy is the emphasis it places on voice (hooks, 1994). Specifically, feminist pedagogy stresses the importance of recognizing the “uniqueness of each voice” (hooks, 1994). In doing so, teachers who

take up this stance work to create classroom spaces where all students feel “free to speak” and know that teachers and peers “recognize and value” their contributions and presence (hooks, 1994).

Although feminist pedagogy has been described as difficult to define, there are some key characteristics of teachers who work from this paradigm. One characteristic of feminist pedagogy is that it questions the role and authority of the teacher. Thus, in feminist classrooms power dynamics between teachers and students might look more fluid than in traditional classrooms as teachers work to break down the teacher as authority figure structure of schooling. Additionally, feminist pedagogy raises questions about claims of knowledge and truth and who gets to determine such stances. Rather than emphasizing a universal truth or giving authority to some “other” to produce such truth teachers who practice feminist pedagogy recognize personal experience as a source of knowledge. In keeping with this way of thinking they, explore the perspectives of people of different races, classes, and cultures (Weiler, 1991). They focus on feelings, sharing, and listening to each other’s lived experiences (Weiler, 1991). Their goal then becomes one of collective, rather than individual, raising of critical consciousness and working toward social change (Weiler, 1991). Teachers who work from a feminist pedagogy standpoint implement classroom strategies such as: focusing on students individually and collectively, developing independence and self-esteem, and placing responsibility on *all* members of the classroom community to help each other succeed (Shrewsbury, 1993). Feminist pedagogy is an important aspect of this study because it is a way of thinking about instruction that the teacher in this study worked to take up.

**Language and Discourse.** Feminist theorists have focused on issues of power and marginalization embedded within language and discourse (Alarcon, 1990; Silverman, 1983; Trinh, 1989). These scholars each in their own way work to raise readers' awareness of language and aim to get their audiences to begin to question it. Ultimately, it seems all would agree that language carries with it the privilege of dominant discourse, ideals, and values. The points these authors make also tie into one overall theme of feminist theory: context matters. Nothing, including and perhaps especially, language, is an ahistorical or apolitical act.

Silverman (1983) argues that semiotics, language, and discourse are not neutral acts. She highlights the point that these ideas cannot be separated from "the human subject who uses it and is defined by [it]" (Silverman, 1983, p. 3). Nor can these ideas be separated from the "cultural system, which generates" them (Silverman, 1983, p. 3). Silverman (1983) challenges readers to think about semiotics in a way that they may not have thought about it before, as distinctly tied to individuals as well as the broader culture and society. She calls for readers, writers, and users of language to reconsider its use and to be more critical of its implications for marginalized groups.

Additionally, Trinh (1989) offers a strong critique of language and points to ways it further oppresses marginalized groups without allowing for a way around this oppression in its continued support of dominant values. She argues, "...language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation, being at the same time the locus of power and unconscious servility" (Trinh, 1989, p. 52). She calls attention to the ways in which language and discourse contribute to oppression in terms of race, class, and gender in that

it forces those from the most marginalized populations to use the language of the dominate group leading to participation in their own oppression. Feminist theorists, such as those referenced here as well as others, call for a reimagining of how language is used in order to address the wants, needs, ideas, values, and voices of those who it has inevitably silenced for so long.

When thinking about this study, language and discourse are important to consider. They play a role in the power dynamics of the classroom, particularly when considering the texts students are exposed to. As discussed in the findings, language was an important aspect of the ways in which the teacher and students worked to use it to challenge gender stereotypes and address issues of gender inequity. It is one of the things I considered when analyzing the data in terms of how the teacher and students used language to critique texts, engage in self-reflection, and develop a sense of hope for the possibility of change toward more equitable gender norms.

**Identity and Intersectionality.** Feminist theorists place an important emphasis on the ways in which the various identities intersect and overlap (Alarcon, 1990; Butler, 2004; Eng, 2001; Shields, 2008). They recognize the importance of identifying how people can be marginalized in multiple ways depending upon the different identities they take on or are given in society. For example, Butler (2004) emphasizes, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes” as “the normalizing categories of oppressive structures” (Butler, 2004, p. 354). She argues, that gender specifically is a performance that produces an illusion of an identity. She also argues that identification for political purposes is a form of oppression in and of itself. She describes gender as “a

surface sign...that produces this illusion of inner depth” (Butler, 2004, p. 366). Butler (2004) attempts to get readers to think about gender identity in terms of the political and cultural ties it has that complicates the way we think about it in individualistic or autonomous terms.

Alarcon (1990) also touches on issues of identity and emphasizes the idea that there is not a universal women’s experience. She calls attention to the ways academics tend to ignore the ways race and class impact how women experience oppression in addition to how they experience it through gender. She states, “With gender as the central concept...we lose sight of the complex and multiple ways in which the subject and object of possible experience are constituted” (Alarcon, 1990, p. 361). Here Alarcon works to emphasize the importance of recognizing the ways multiple aspects of one’s identity impact their experiences. In other words, it is not simply gender that impacts the way people experience the world. These scholars highlight the complexity of identity and emphasize the importance of recognizing this when engaging in any work, but particularly work that uses feminist theory as its framework.

Intersectionality is defined as “the mutually constitutive relationships among social identities” (Shields, 2008, p. 301). Shields (2008) reminds us, “Intersections create both oppression and opportunity.” Here Shields focuses on the complexity of identifying with different subgroups of people and the ways those identities interact or intersect. For example, a white woman may experience oppression due to her gender but at the same time benefit in certain situations because of her race where as a Latina woman may experience oppression both because of her race and gender. Eng (2001) calls into

question the ways in which psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theories have emphasized “sexual difference over and above every other type of social difference” (Eng, 2001, p. 5). Specifically, Eng (2001) argues for the inclusion of race and gender in these theories. He works to get readers to see the importance of intersectionality in understanding identity. He states, “identification is a request for political action” (Eng, 2001, p. 25). Eng (2001) works to get readers to understand what is at risk when ones’ identity is defined by others, particularly when those others are the very people who have contributed to the oppression of the groups at hand. Although this study did not focus on race, class, or sexual orientation it is important to recognize that these aspects of the teacher and students’ identities did play a role in their experiences.

**Feminist Theory & Education.** Whereas the previous section focused on an overview of some of the aspects of feminist theory that are important in the context of this study, this section provides insight into the ways feminist theory connects to education. Based on the arguments shared above, specifically relating to identity and intersectionality, I find it important to share a few key findings from the research on these concepts in educational settings, specifically as they relate to literacy education.

Feminist theory has impacted literacy education in important ways. It has helped set a research agenda that has focused specifically on the issue of gender and literacy. For nearly four decades, feminist researchers have argued that gender inequities in education must be addressed in order for equity to be realized in the adult world (Gallas, 1998). These researchers have suggested that inequities must be attended to in the “day-to-day dynamics of the classroom” (Gallas, 1998, p. 2). This argument made by feminist

researchers and theorists in the field of education encompasses what is at the heart of this proposed study—an attempt to help children develop the type of critical questioning about gender inequities that may begin to cultivate meaningful change in the way gender is represented and perceived in their adult lives.

It seems impossible and undesirable, to talk about issues of oppression without recognizing that intersectionality is at play. Especially when we consider that progress among groups of women (i.e. African American, Latinas, Asian Americans, Caucasians, and American Indians) has been uneven (Fleming, 2000). With my focus on an educational setting, this brings up the issue of the ways identity and intersectionality come in to play in schools. Luttrell (1993) found that the women in her study reported a disparity in opportunities to look, act, and be treated as feminine. None of the women in her study felt comfortable in school due to their race or class status (Luttrell, 1993). Additionally, issues of self-worth impact girls differently depending on their race or class. For example, Orenstein (1994) reports that African American girls are less affected by issues of self-esteem and are able to maintain higher concepts of self-worth than their Caucasian or Latina counterparts. Despite this seemingly positive finding, girls from nonmainstream backgrounds may be more pessimistic about school or reluctant to perform well due to a fear that by assimilating to school norms they will distance themselves from their own families or culture (Jones, 2006; Luttrell, 1993).

One's economic status can also impact their identity and ability to assimilate into the dominant culture, do well in school, and feel a strong sense of self-worth. Poverty is a topic that is rarely discussed with school children and yet is something that continues to

expand and disproportionately affect women and children (Fleming, 2000; Jones, 2006). Traditional gender roles represented and reinforced in schools are those of the white middle class. However, gender dynamics in communities impacted by poverty look very different than those in mainstream America (Jones, 2006). Women who are impacted by poverty work to support their families financially and do so without the support of men who are often incarcerated, leaving young girls to take on the role of mother in caring for siblings, cooking dinner, or helping with domestic up keep (Jones, 2006; Luttrell, 1993). Class status also impacts how welcome one's family feels in school settings and how reluctant they may be to interact with teachers or other school personnel (Luttrell, 1993). Poverty plays a central role in how children's identities develop, opportunities available to them, and their ability to relate to the mainstream world of schooling. As Jones (2006) states, "Living in poverty shapes our physical, social, and psychological beings. To overcome poverty may possibly mean to overcome oneself" (Jones, 2006, p. 23). I recognize that although I have not emphasized aspects of race or class in this study these aspects of identity have without a doubt impacted the experiences of the teacher and students who participated.

**Latino Critical Theory.** With the research and findings regarding identity and intersectionality in mind, I find it important to address one aspect of these concepts that plays a role in the research study described here. This dissertation addresses issues of gender inequity with elementary students. However, the research site has a population comprised mostly of Latino/a students. Because I am a white woman conducting research where informants come from backgrounds different than my own I feel it is

necessary to address, at least briefly, the research related to the experiences of this group of people. In the following paragraphs, I share research conducted by researchers in the field of Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit), a body of scholarship that was born out of Critical Race Theory as a way to highlight the voices and concerns of Latinos/as.

There are two key points I would like to highlight from the LatCrit literature. First, as Fernandez (2002) points out, Latino/a student perspectives have often been left out of research. This is problematic for several reasons but particularly because of the increasing number of Latino/a students attending school in the United States. Fernandez (2002) also points out that the discourse surrounding Latino/a students in public education in the U.S. focuses on what she refers to as “crisis talk.” This is problematic because it takes on a deficit lens and fails to address the systemic issues within the education system that contribute to the academic challenges this subgroup faces. She suggests that more qualitative and narrative research be conducted as a way to highlight the voices of students from this community and offer insight into their educational experiences.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that students from Latino/a backgrounds may have different views and experiences of the world that provide alternative perspectives for understanding various phenomena (Bernal, 2002). Bernal (2002) offers a critique of a Eurocentric perspective of Latinos/as in schools pointing to the deficit lens that it takes in regard to this group of students. He suggests a framework, what he calls Critical Raced-Gendered epistemology, that focuses on both race and gender pulling from a Chicana Feminist perspective and Critical Race Theory. This framework emphasizes

the intricate connection between race and gender. He suggests that researchers use counter storytelling as a way to affirm the experiences of Latino/a students and validate “students of color as holders and creators of knowledge” (Bernal, 2002, p. 106).

Although this is not a framework I am working with, I find that it connects to feminist theory and critical literacy in its emphasis on race, gender, and oppression. This study has worked to do as Bernal suggests and legitimate Latino/a students’ experiences and knowledge by incorporating direct quotes from student interviews and focus groups as well as highlighting their contributions to their classroom community in the form of critical conversations and in the ways they made personal and real world connections to the content being discussed.

Chavez (2012) ties these two points from the literature together by sharing her experiences with discrimination based on her accent that she experienced as a Latina kindergarten student. She argues that without voices like this in research, educational institutions are limited in their perspectives. These limitations lead to an inability on the part of such institutions to create school conditions that are equitable for all children—not just those in dominant groups (Chavez, 2012). It is my hope that by sharing the experiences of the Latino/a students in this study and providing a platform for their voices to be heard through the findings presented in chapters 5-7, I have addressed some of the issues the researchers in the field of LatCrit emphasize as important for this population of students.

**Criticisms of Feminist Theory.** Before describing the ways feminist theory fits in to the context of the study described here, I would like to address criticisms of this

field of study, particularly as I write from a white woman's perspective about students from Latino/a populations. From the perspective of some feminist scholars, Western feminism and the field of Women's Studies have not adequately addressed issues of gender inequity (Mohanty, 1991; Rubin, 1993; Salamon, 2008). These scholars problematize issues of ethnocentrism, reductionism, marginalization, and binary discourse found in feminist scholarship. For example, Mohanty (1991) argues that even "...feminist scholarly practices (whether reading, writing, critical, or textual) are inscribed in relations of power.... There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship" (p. 53). It is important to recognize just how much context, especially historical and political context, plays a role in the ability to understand issues of oppression. Mohanty (1991) emphasizes this point by drawing the readers' attention to the ways in which feminist scholars of the Western world describe third world women as "reductionist" and having undertones of what she calls "ethnocentric universality." She encourages feminist scholars to recognize the importance of the various forms of oppression that women face not solely based on gender, but also, and at times more so, based on race, class, and politics. Specifically, she emphasizes a critical piece of feminist scholarship—engaging in critical self-reflection. Mohanty (1991) argues that feminist scholarship should recognize how the discourse used to talk about issues of oppression is itself intertwined with relations of power and politics. She suggests that if feminist scholars fail to recognize this power they are, in fact, contributing to the marginalization and oppression of the groups of people they study. She states, "It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented"

(Mohanty, 1991, p. 74). Ultimately she calls for Western feminists to either find ways to work with diverse groups of women that allow their authentic voices to be heard without imposed Western views and assumptions or to allow women in diverse communities to take up their own empowerment.

Like Mohanty, Rubin (1993) focuses on the influence of politics, but extends this idea to include sexuality. She argues that the lack of focus on sexuality in feminist scholarship marginalizes anyone who does not fall into binary categories of hetero- or homosexual. Rubin (1993) seems to believe that feminist scholars need to focus on being more inclusive and recognizing the injustices and oppression faced by people of various sexualities. Rubin (1993) extends Mohanty's (1991) argument and aims to get readers to conclude that not only are the topics and discourses feminist scholars write about political so too, and perhaps more so, are the topics they choose *not* to write about. Salamon (2008) makes a similarly convincing argument for gender. Specifically, she argues that feminism "has not been able to keep pace with nonnormative genders as they are thought, embodied, and lived" (Salamon, 2008, p. 115). Essentially she points out that the often-binary thinking that seemed to dominate much of the field of Women's Studies is problematic in that it perpetuates the oppression and marginalization of those who do not fit into mainstream gender categories. Salamon emphasizes, "Gender and sexuality are inevitably, if unpredictably, bound. But this does not mean that they are the same thing" (Salamon, 2008, p. 122). She argues that feminist scholars have not adequately addressed these issues and instead fall into patterns of reductionist thinking. Like Rubin (1993), Salamon (2008) recognizes that feminist scholars have become more inclusive in

terms of race, class, sexuality, and ability, however she points to the fact that the same has not been true for gender. Ultimately, she calls on feminist scholars and Women's Studies departments to acknowledge this problem, become critical of it in their own work, and take action to correct it.

With the attention these authors give to the importance of engaging in critical self-reflection, I find it essential that as a researcher working to push back against gender inequities that I hold myself to this standard. In chapter three I include a section in which I engage in critical self-reflection and aim to uncover my own biases and the ways in which I am intertwined in and bound to a system of oppression in the language and discourse used to write about these issues. Additionally, I have worked to highlight the ways the teacher and students in this study discussed gender in non-binary terms and the discomforts and challenges that came up in such discussions.

### **Feminist Theory in the Context of this Study**

Salamon (2008) states, "transgender studies need feminism" (Salamon, 2008, p. 115). When designing this study, I continued to ask myself: who *else* needs feminism? It is as true today as it was in the '80s—we don't all need Western feminism, and surely not the Western feminism that was being practiced thirty years ago. On the one hand, it is disheartening to think that no matter how far we have come in working toward equity, there will always be injustices suffered. Yet, on the other hand, it inspires me to keep working—this is a field that *is* and *will* continue to be needed.

Feminist theory is a broad way to think about gender inequity. It offers a framework for understanding the history of gender inequity and why such injustices

continue today. As a researcher working in elementary schools, I appreciate the insights feminist theory has to offer, but recognize that I need a more practical approach to addressing the issues of gender inequity with teachers and students.

### **Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is a perspective that can be used to question gender inequity. In particular, it is a framework that has been used in classroom settings to problematize the privileging of some groups over others (Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014; Jones, 2006; Medina & Costa, 2013). However, it is important to recognize that critical literacy and feminist theory are crucially and inseparably intertwined. The two fields overlap in their focus on issues of power related to language and discourse as well as in their emphasis on marginalized groups and highlighting voices that have historically been silenced. They are also driven by similar kinds of questions related to race, class, and gender. Thus, I plan to use critical literacy as a way to address some of the issues raised by feminist theory, such as the limited roles female characters represent in children's literature, the teaching of history as dominated by the male experience, and the ways language is used in texts to maintain unequal power relationships, in the everyday classroom.

I have organized the remainder of the theoretical framework in order to first help readers understand what critical literacy is, how it has been defined, praises and criticisms of this framework, and why it is used in classrooms. I then discuss how critical literacy can be used in this study as a tool to address issues raised by feminist theory.

Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy is a perspective some teachers use to challenge students to reconsider the world and ask if the status quo is socially just (Jones, 2006). It provides a space for teachers and students to consider their own perspectives as well as the perspectives of those who are at the center and the margins of texts. Critical literacy challenges the belief that education is politically neutral (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). A key aspect of critical literacy is the idea that readers learn that texts are bound to context, the context of both the “perspectives of the writer and the socio-cultural times in which they were written” (Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 159). Critical literacy has roots in critical theory and intersections with feminist poststructuralist theories, theories around language and power, and education as a liberatory practice (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Jones, 2006).

When teaching literacy through this perspective, students may be asked to answer questions about a text such as: what kind of world is normal or privileged in this text, who and what is not represented in this text, whose interest does this text serve, and in what ways can this text be challenged. Critical literacy examines multiple perspectives, focuses on issues of power, and promotes reflection, transformation, and action (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004). By teaching students how to read and write using a critical literacy lens, we can begin to cultivate young minds that question the status quo and think about the world in a way that can promote equity and justice.

**How has Critical Literacy been Defined?** Critical literacy stems from critical pedagogy. Most people associate critical pedagogy with Paulo Freire (Weiler, 1991). Freire’s theories of oppression have had a major influence on literacy education around

the world (Weiler, 1991). Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, based on his resistance to class disparities and oppression occurring in Brazil in the 1960s, is considered one of the foundational works of critical pedagogy. Critical literacy is one approach to literacy education that was born out of critical pedagogy.

Luke (2012) reminds us that, "Critical literacies are, by definition, historical works in progress" (Luke, 2012, p. 9). As such, critical literacy has been defined in many ways by different researchers (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011). There are some aspects of critical literacy that several researchers agree on and others where they diverge. For example, two core aspects of critical literacy that researchers seem to agree on are taking on multiple perspectives and using literacy as a tool to work toward social justice (Flint & Lanman, 2012; Jones, 2006; Lapp & Fisher, 2010; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; McLaughlin & DeVogd 2004). However, different researchers have also used a variety of other terms and definitions to describe critical literacy. In the literature, I have come across three different definitions that I would like to highlight here. These include definitions by Janks (1991, 2000), Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002), and Jones (2006).

According to Janks (1991), critical literacy is based in sociocultural theory and sociolinguistics. Both sociocultural theory and sociolinguistics emphasize the social aspects of learning, with sociolinguistics highlighting the language aspect of literacy learning (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Hillary Janks (1991), a leading scholar in the field of critical literacy education, emphasizes the importance of drawing students' attention to the ways in which language is used to maintain oppressive practices and unequal power

relationships. She describes critical approaches to teaching literacy as those that work to empower students by teaching them how to “deconstruct discourse” as a way to help them “resist attempts to subject them through language” (Janks, 1991, p. 192).

In her later work, Janks (2000) proposes a framework for critical literacy that encompasses four orientations to literacy education. These include: domination, access, diversity, and design. Educators, researchers, and theorists working from a domination orientation toward literacy see language and discourse as a way to maintain and reproduce relations of power (Janks, 2000). Those who take on this view work to help readers see how they are positioned in texts in the interest of power. An access orientation asks how educators can provide access to dominant texts while valuing student diversity and avoiding further marginalization (Janks, 2000). Literacy educators that adopt a diversity orientation support the idea that they must value diverse ways of reading and writing the world in order to allow for social change (Janks, 2000). The fourth orientation in her framework is design. Those who take on a design orientation focus on student creativity and ability to create an infinite number of new meanings (Janks, 2000). In her framework, Janks (2000) argues that these four orientations are interdependent and cannot be viewed as separate orientations. She advocates for using this framework as a way of “holding all of these elements in productive tension to achieve...equality and social justice” (Janks, 2000, p. 179).

Lewis, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) also identified what they considered to be key dimensions of critical literacy. They propose the following four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on

sociopolitical issues, and promoting social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The first dimension, disrupting the commonplace, focuses on using language to challenge the status quo and advocates critically analyzing popular media in the everyday curriculum (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Elementary school teachers typically avoid engaging in this dimension with students as it has historically been seen as controversial. Interrogating multiple viewpoints is the second dimension discussed by Lewison and colleagues and is primarily concerned with making difference visible (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002). This dimension also draws attention to voices that have been silenced (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002). Focusing on sociopolitical issues is the third dimension, which aims to use literacy to question the unequal power relationships that exist in everyday life (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002). This is what Janks (2012) calls, *little p* politics. She describes the politics of everyday life as the “minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are” such as our identity, desires, and fears (Janks, 2012, p. 151). The fourth and final dimension is promoting social justice. This dimension is what many people see as *the* definition of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002). Students and teachers can use this dimension to question privilege and redefine cultural borders (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002). Lewison and colleagues (2002) definition of critical literacy plays a key role in this study as I have chosen to work from this definition when conducting data analysis.

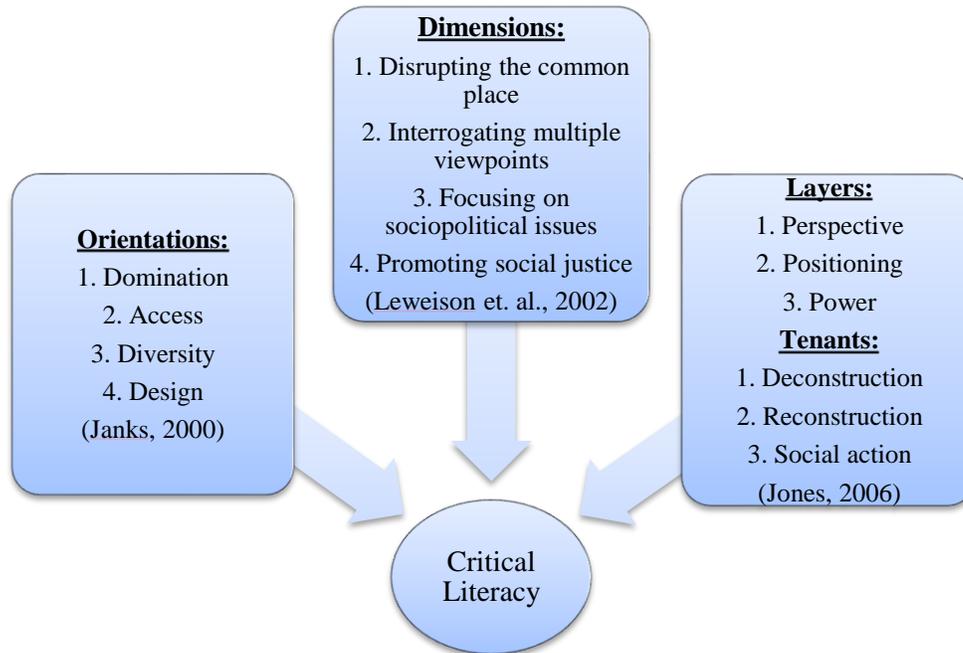
Whereas Janks (2000) discusses critical literacy in terms of orientations and Lewison and colleagues (2002) describe it in terms of dimensions, Jones (2006) defines critical literacy as consisting of layers (perspective, positioning, power) and tenants

(deconstruction, reconstruction, social action). Layers of critical literacy focus on texts: from whose perspective is a text constructed, how are people in a text positioned, and how does the language used in a text perpetuate the values of our hierarchical society (Jones, 2006). Jones' (2006) layers of critical literacy include (1) perspective, (2) positioning, and (3) power. The first layer, perspective, focuses on the creator of the text and the idea that people with certain ideologies, beliefs, and perspectives construct texts (Jones, 2006). Positioning, the second layer, suggests that *all* texts place some people at the center and other at the margins, making the experiences of some people seem more valuable than the experiences of others (Jones, 2006). The third layer, power, focuses on the idea that all texts are created out of language practices that are ingrained in a hierarchical society and therefore can be used to oppress or resist (Jones, 2006). Tenets focus on what readers and writers can do with texts to engage in critical literacy. These include (1) deconstruction, or analyzing a text for how different people are positioned, (2) reconstruction, where the identities of marginalized groups are reconstructed, and (3) social action, or working for social change. Like Janks (2000) in her argument about literacy orientations, Jones (2006) believes that the tenets and layers of critical literacy never work in isolation; rather they are always interacting with one another.

Several of these definitions maintain overlapping themes, the most obvious being a focus on using critical literacy as a way to work toward social action, thus promoting social justice. When taken together, these definitions have helped me to conceptualize critical literacy as a theoretical perspective, an approach to literacy teaching and learning, and a tool we can use to push back against systems of unequal power and oppression.

Figure 1 provides a visual of each of these three definitions of critical literacy.

**Figure 1. Definitions of Critical Literacy**



**Praises of Critical Literacy.** Lewison and colleagues (2002), emphasize that teaching is bound by social, historical, and political contexts. They argue that despite this, it is often thought of as a neutral act and rarely, if ever, are the systems of which it is a part called into question (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002). Critical literacy may have the power to change this. It provides teachers and students with the tools necessary to see teaching and the various forms of texts associated with this practice for what they are: biased, partisan, hegemonic acts that perpetuate dominant ideologies and position certain groups as having more power than others. Because of this, critical literacy has received praise from literacy researchers and educators.

Critical literacy has been praised for its versatility. It can be applied to a broad range of school subjects (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011). Critical literacy is a skill that students can use with any subject or text. Teachers can work critical literacy practices into the already established curriculum for reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. There are an infinite number of ways to apply critical literacy practices (Jones, 2006). Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe (2012), praise critical literacy for helping students move beyond basic comprehension.

Critical literacy has also received praise for being socially responsible (Janks, 2012; Jones, 2006 Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012), because it encourages critical thinking and social action (Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012). Additionally, teaching students to examine the ways language is organized to reinforce marginalization based on race, class, and gender is an act of social responsibility (Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012). Norris and colleagues (2012) emphasize that critical literacy challenges teachers and students to work toward change (Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012). As Janks (2012) explains, critical literacy is “both backward and forward looking” in that it encourages students to “engage consciously” with how language and literacy have been used to serve the interests of the producers of texts, while also thinking about different ways language and literacy could be used to reposition that power. This is a form of social responsibility.

Critical literacy has been praised for the ways in which it empowers students, particularly those from marginalized groups (Au & Raphael, 2000; Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012). When taught how to engage in critical literacy practices, students gain ownership over their literacy lives (Au & Raphael, 2000). It helps children, particularly

from dominant groups, understand situations other than their own (Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012). At the same time, it helps to connect student lives to texts, by opening spaces where voices of marginalized groups are valued (Jones, 2006). In this way, critical literacy is culturally responsive and can build a bridge between schools and nonmainstream students who may otherwise be reluctant to participate or assimilate to the culture of school (Jones, 2006; Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012). Critical literacy has also been praised for its ability to increase student engagement (Flint & Lanman, 2012; Jones, 2006).

**Criticisms of Critical Literacy.** As with anything related to education, particularly literacy education, critical literacy is not immune to criticism. Several researchers point to the idea that teachers are hesitant to teach using this approach because they are unsure of what critical literacy instruction looks like and/or worry that topics such as race, class, and gender are too controversial (Hall & Piazza, 2008; Lewison, Flint, & van Sluys, 2002; Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Teachers and parents have criticized critical literacy for being inappropriate, particularly in elementary school classrooms (Au & Raphael, 2000; Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). For example, Au & Raphael (2000), suggest that parents from nonmainstream backgrounds may feel that their children are not being held to the same standards as mainstream students when home and community literacies are incorporated into the classroom. Teachers in Wollman-Bonilla's (1998) study specifically suggested that reading texts that address racism or sexism as a social problem is inappropriate for children. This is concerning in the eyes of critical literacy proponents because addressing

these issues is at the very core of liberatory education. Without teachers' willingness to address such topics, issues of oppression and inequity are sure to continue.

Additionally, students have resisted, become uncomfortable, and even expressed anger when asked to engage in critical literacy practices that encourage them to examine or question their own beliefs (Janks, 1991; Hall & Piazza, 2008). This has garnered further criticism as it raises concerns, particularly from teachers, about critical literacy causing students to disengage from reading and take away from the aesthetic aspects of reading (Gutierrez, 2014; Mission & Morgan, 2005). Gutierrez (2014) also reported that teachers were critical of this approach because it took away from teaching requirements, such as preparing students for formal assessments. Criticism from the media, particularly in places such as Australia where critical literacy is part of the required curriculum, have focused on critical literacy as "overly ideological" and political (Gutierrez, 2014). Teachers who take on a critical literacy perspective have been accused of abusing their platform and pushing a political agenda. Just do a quick Google search of teacher suspensions and you will have no trouble accessing multiple articles that detail instances where teachers have been reprimanded and even fired for addressing what some might consider controversial issues. Hess (2004) points this out when referencing issues that came up for teachers who tried to address controversial topics surrounding the 9/11 attacks. More recently, in 2012 a North Carolina teacher was suspended for showing Macklemore's "Same Love" video to a middle school class as a way of discussing marriage inequity.

In his review of classroom practices that support critical literacy, Behram (2006), criticized critical literacy for lacking a consistently applied set of instructional strategies. He claims that without such a set of strategies, critical literacy is not a “coherent curricular approach” (Behram, 2006). Through the review he works to understand and explain why critical literacy lacks a unified curricular approach. Luke (2012), acknowledges a major criticism of critical pedagogy, including critical literacy, is the lack of attention this approach has given to the need for students to master a variety of text genres. Proponents of this critique argue that social justice cannot be achieved through critical literacy alone and suggest that part of social justice is helping students understand and gain access to how texts work (Hasan & Williams, 1996, cited in Luke, 2012).

Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) criticize critical literacy for maintaining too narrow a definition and not giving students enough credit for the types of critical literacies they gravitate toward naturally. They argue that critical literacy is an “embodied performance that is always and already occurring, regardless of whether or not it is recognized as such” (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012, p. 36). Students are already engaging in critical literacy practices even without formal instruction in how to do so in what Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) call “critical performances.” These include the ways in which students resist social norms in their everyday speech, dress, and gestures (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012).

As a researcher working to increase the number of teachers and students who engage in critical literacy it is important that I recognize and understand the criticisms of

this approach. Despite these criticisms, I believe the benefits of critical literacy far outweigh the constraints. In the following section I will address why and how critical literacy has been used in literacy classrooms.

**Why is Critical Literacy used in Classrooms?** “One cannot understand text without understanding the system from which it derives” (Freebody & Freiburg, 2011). This quote summarizes the many reasons why critical literacy is used in classrooms. With traditional literacy instruction, students focus on aspects of reading such as fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The main goal is to understand the literal message of the author. In some cases, teachers also encourage students to use their own experiences and background knowledge to take away messages from the text. Often, students will have to answer comprehension questions about the texts either informally in guided reading groups or formally in the form of standardized tests. However, in these literacy classrooms, the author holds the ultimate power: the power to privilege some voices over others, to determine who is heard and who is silenced. Students who are not taught to engage in critical literacy practices with texts, particularly students from marginalized groups, tend to read “submissively” or give the text authority (Franzak, 2006; Hall & Piazza, 2008). Critical literacy helps students become aware of the messages authors send about power, race, class, and gender (Hall & Piazza, 2008). Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) emphasize, elementary school teachers’ “...traditional role is one of disempowerment, with teacher perceived as transmitters of ‘knowledge and curriculum’ that have been dictated from above” (p. 383). Critical literacy is a way to help students understand the system of which they are a part and resist traditional power structures

through their literacy acts. In doing so, students who have historically been placed in the margins are able to move toward the center (Jones, 2006).

Critical literacy also provides a way to connect texts to students' lives (Janks, 2014; Jones, 2006). It brings multiple perspectives into the classroom, and encourages teachers to provide students with access to a variety of texts (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). This helps students understand people who are unlike themselves, particularly children from mainstream groups who are encouraged to recognize and value the lived experiences of people from nonmainstream groups (Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012). When implemented effectively, critical literacy can teach students how to access relevant information from multiple sources (Janks, 2014). In the twenty-first century classroom where students have a world of information (and misinformation) at their fingertips via the Internet, being able to apply critical literacy to such texts is an important skill to develop.

One of the most important reasons why critical literacy needs to be used in literacy classrooms, from my perspective, is to help students learn how to make positive social change. When taught how to read texts using critical literacy approaches, students have the potential to imagine possibilities for making a positive difference in the world (Janks, 2014). This can help students see themselves as important impetuses for change, help give their life fuller meaning, and help them to feel empowered.

### **Critical Literacy: A Tool to Address Issues Raised by Feminist Theory**

Critical literacy and feminist theory complement each other well and when taken together, serve as a way to merge equity and literacy, as well as help students develop

critical thinking about the social world in which they live. Applying a critical literacy perspective in a real-world classroom setting to address issues raised by feminist theory could help children begin to develop understanding about gender equity and how it benefits both girls/women and boys/men. Epstein (2007) makes several key observations that point to the importance of engaging in research that utilizes critical literacy and takes on a feminist lens: (1) categorization based on sex is the most basic social divide and the one most resistant to social change, and (2) not many critical theorists have included gender in their analysis. This study uses critical literacy as a tool to address issues, such as these, that feminist theories describe as problematic.

Additionally, critical literacy and feminist theory are both based in the teachings that came out of the literature on critical pedagogy. In many ways feminist theory parallels critical pedagogy and Freirian thought (Weiler, 1991). Both feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy focus on social transformation (Weiler, 1991). Whereas Freire worked to transform class inequities, feminist theory works to remedy oppression based on gender. Both schools of thought maintain common beliefs regarding oppression, consciousness, and historical change (Weiler, 1991). For example, feminist and critical pedagogy theorists believe that oppression can occur as the material conditions in which people live as well as in people's consciousness (Weiler, 1991). Finally, proponents of feminist theory and critical pedagogy "hold a strong commitment to justice and a vision of a better world and of the potential for liberation" (Weiler, 1991, p. 450).

By teaching students how to question texts using critical literacy schools may just help to foster thinking that pushes back against oppressive practices, in this case those

specifically highlighted by feminist theory. However, as Tyack & Tobin (1994) point out, the chains of the traditional education system are seemingly impossible to break. I choose to hold on to the hope that there may be a remedy to these problems and that remedy could lie in the hands of educators and researchers (Rossatto, 2008). To this I would add, *critical literacy* educators and researchers whose work aims to challenge gender inequities perpetuated by the educational system and the ways gender is represented in texts children are exposed to at a young age.

In this study, critical literacy was used to address issues raised by feminist theory in several ways. First, when collaborating with the teacher on planning the eight-week unit, we planned all lessons using a critical literacy perspective as our guide. Students and teachers worked to engage in critical literacy practices that question the way gender is portrayed in the texts and materials that the teacher and I collaboratively selected for use during the unit. Based on my pilot study data and experiences, it was important to incorporate children's literature into the eight weeks. Books represented both mainstream texts, such as traditional fairytales (e.g. *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Princess and the Pea*, etc.) as well as nonmainstream texts that challenge traditional gender stereotypes (e.g. *The Paper Bag Princess*, *The Frog Prince Continued*, *Cinder Edna*, etc.).

Critical literacy was used to address issues raised by feminist theory when selecting children's literature for the eight-week unit. Children's literature covers many topics, from environmental issues to homelessness, racism to war. It provided a safe, familiar, accessible starting point to have conversations about issues of oppression with even the youngest of children. By using critical literacy to address issues raised by

feminist theory, the teacher in this study was able to facilitate discussions about gender inequity as it was represented in the children's books used during the unit. Additionally, by asking critical literacy questions with an emphasis on the way women/girls and men/boys are and are *not* represented in children's literature, the elementary students in this study seemed to begin to develop a critical consciousness and learn to question the authority of everyday texts.

Furthermore, critical literacy was also used throughout collection and analysis of the data to address issues of gender inequity. I analyzed the data using a priori codes taken from the literature on critical literacy and applied them to issues of gender the teacher and students discussed. The dimensions of critical literacy proposed by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002), were used to code both teacher and student data. I worked to observe the ways the teacher and students used these dimensions to address issues of gender inequity during their English Language Arts block.

As I have worked to make clear here, critical literacy is a framework that can be used as a tool to address issues raised by feminist theory. With the focus critical literacy places on questioning power relations in texts and bringing groups of people traditionally placed at the margins to the center it seems to be a natural connection to feminist theory which emphasizes these same issues. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to apply the practical approaches critical literacy offers educators through a feminist theory lens in an elementary school classroom. In the following section I explore some of the empirical literature that has been conducted using a critical literacy framework as well as literature on gender, literacy, and children's literature.

### CHAPTER III

#### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As I emphasized in the introduction to this study, despite the fact that girls are outperforming boys in literacy education, in the long run their hard work is not paying off. Girls continue to face gender inequities around the world including unequal pay for equal work, marginalization, and gender-based violence at staggering rates. The literature covered here may provide insight as to why in the year 2016, nearly one hundred years after women won the right to vote, the male to female ratio of US senators is only 80/20 and women working in the US are paid seventy-nine cents to the dollar of what men are paid for the same work (Hill, 2015). So long as boys and girls are never taught how to critically question the status quo, so long as girls are marginalized in literacy classrooms where male characters dominate the texts they read, and so long as the very first experiences children have with literacy reinforce gender stereotypes, it is likely that gender oppression and inequities will continue.

In order to gain insight into critical literacy, gender, and children's literature I conducted a three-part literature review. For the first part of this review I looked at research that has been conducted in the field of critical literacy. Specifically, I wanted to know how teachers and students engaged in critical literacy in previous research studies. For the second part of this review, I focused on literature related to gender and literacy education. I was curious to find out more about what previous researchers had studied

related specifically to girls and literacy education. Finally, I included a review of the literature focused on gender issues in children's literature.

Each of these bodies of literature provides important insight that helped me to understand the various components that come together in my study: critical literacy, gender, and children's literature. By focusing on what research has reported on critical literacy, I was able to see more clearly how elementary school children are, or perhaps more importantly *are not*, being taught how to take on critical perspectives of texts. I decided to focus on the literature covering gender and literacy education because it helped to paint a picture of the way researchers have looked at gender, and specifically what the literature had to say about girls' literacy practices. The research on children's literature offers insight into the ways both girls and boys are represented in the texts they are often exposed to in the elementary grades and the messages these texts send to young children. In the following sections I explore the literature in these three areas.

### **Critical Literacy**

As mentioned in my theoretical framework, critical literacy has been defined in many ways. This was clear in the studies I came across. I decided not to restrict my search to a specific definition, instead I have included literature that addresses critical literacy in a broad sense—from a perspective that teachers and/or students take on in order to critically question power in texts to studies that talk about critical literacy as a way to read and write for social action. In my review of the literature related to critical literacy, I found four main concepts across the research: classroom practices, pedagogical knowledge, interdisciplinary, and classroom environment. First, research on classroom

practices related to critical literacy show that teachers and students rarely engage in critical literacy practices and when they do it is in narrow or limited ways. Second, research has shown that teachers need to have specific types of pedagogical knowledge to effectively implement critical literacy practices. Third, this body of literature provides evidence that critical literacy practices can be utilized effectively in all subject areas—not just English Language Arts. Finally, research on critical literacy emphasizes the importance of creating a classroom environment in which students feel safe to take on critical perspectives. In the following paragraphs, I describe this research in more detail.

**Classroom Practices.** Behrman (2006) conducted a review of the literature focusing on classroom practices that support critical literacy. He reviewed 36 articles published between 1999-2003 that presented lessons intended to support critical literacy in grades 4-12 (Behrman, 2006). From this review, he found six categories of ways teachers worked to support critical literacy, including: reading supplemental texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing counter texts, conducting student choice projects, and taking social action (Behrman, 2006). One teacher who encouraged students to produce counter texts had students rewrite a fairytale from a different character’s perspective (Behrman, 2006). Another teacher asked students to read supplemental reading material such as magazines, newspapers, and websites after they engaged in a discussion focused on the removal of the confederate flag from South Carolina state house (Behrman, 2006). One criticism of the articles he reviewed was that none of the teachers challenged the hierarchical power relationships within their own classrooms (Behrman, 2006). He makes the following point: “If social

justice and democracy are indeed goals of critical literacy, then we might expect not only classroom practices but also classroom structures to reflect those goals” (Behrman, 2006, p. 488). Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

Other studies have been conducted that provide insight into how teachers can take on a critical literacy perspective in their classrooms. For example, Hall and Piazza (2008), reported findings from two case studies in which critical literacy was used. Teachers from one of the cases came up with suggestions for how they could help students engage in critical literacy practices. These included: understanding their own beliefs and biases, understanding their students’ views on reading and writing the world, making issues of power a central focus, and moving beyond cultural snippets (Hall & Piazza, 2008). These suggestions align with what other researchers have suggested (Janks, 2014; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Jones, 2006).

**Critical Conversations.** One classroom practice that has been used as a way to incorporate critical literacy into classrooms is critical conversations (Fecho, Collier, Friese, & Wilson, 2010; Schieble, 2012; Smith, 2001; Vetter & Schieble, 2016). I would like to highlight this particular classroom practice as the teacher and students in this study engaged in critical conversations. I provide a brief definition of critical conversations here and discuss what these looked like in this study further in the findings chapters.

Critical conversations are those that are framed around “critique, hope, and action, and not critique alone” (Smith, 2001, p. 163). They create a platform for individual student voices, experiences, and points of view to be heard through literacy practices of reading, writing, speaking, and internal dialogue (e.g. through journaling) (Fecho et al.,

2010; Schieble, 2012; Smith, 2001). They also require students to hear and respect the voices, experiences, and points of view of others (Smith, 2001). Such conversations can create tension, anxiety, and/or avoidance as students engage in reflection or discussion surrounding power and privilege associated with various identities (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation) (Fecho et al., 2010; Schieble, 2012; Smith, 2001; Vetter & Schieble, 2016). Experiencing such tensions can lead to increased knowledge, critical consciousness, and awareness about systemic oppression and whose interests it serves (Schieble, 2012; Smith, 2001).

Some ways educators and students can engage in critical conversations by asking questions about everyday living conditions, examining personal responses, creating dialogical classroom spaces, and engaging in self-reflection (Fecho et al., 2010; Schieble, 2012; Smith, 2001; Vetter & Schieble, 2016). Using texts as a basis for such conversations is one way educators can and have engaged students in critical conversations focused on sociopolitical issues such as race, class, and gender (Schieble 2012; Smith, 2001).

**Pedagogical Knowledge.** Critical literacy requires teachers to have a distinct set of skills and pedagogical knowledge (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011). These skills develop on a continuum and can be learned by novice and veteran teachers alike (Au & Raphael, 2000; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). In their study of teachers, Lewison and colleagues (2002), found that elementary teachers who were new to critical literacy merely opened up space for discussion about critical literacy, but did not engage in any of the four dimensions. Teachers who had some experience with teaching from a critical

literacy perspective taught students to interrogate multiple perspectives and disrupt the commonplace. However, there was little evidence of focusing on sociopolitical issues and no evidence of taking social action (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). This study is evidence that with experience, teachers can incorporate multiple aspects of critical literacy. However, teachers, particularly those at the elementary school level, shy away from or engage in critical literacy at a superficial level due to uncertainties about what critical literacy looks like and what is appropriate content to discuss with children. Teachers are also hindered by their own knowledge and understanding of historical and political events.

**Interdisciplinary Application.** Critical literacy can be used in multiple domains across the curriculum (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Lapp & Fisher, 2010). Therefore, critical literacy has the potential to be occurring in all subjects throughout the school day, teaching students to question texts whether they are in Language Arts or Science—no text is neutral or free from its historical, political, and social context. Additionally, it is important to recognize that just like texts, teaching is not a neutral act, yet is rarely recognized for its tie to sociopolitical systems (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002). Teaching is intertwined with power relations that perpetuate a system of placing certain groups at the center, as normal or desirable and those at the margins as different or deficit. Attending critical literacy workshops, peer sharing of critical literacy instructional practices, and having access to children’s books that cover social issues have been found to help teachers engage their students in critical literacy practices (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

**Classroom Environment.** An important aspect of critical literacy instruction is creating a classroom environment that lends itself to engaging in such practices. One aspect that research has proven essential to successfully engaging in critical literacy with students is to model how to read from a critical stance (Lapp & Fisher, 2010; McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004). It is also recommended that teachers teach students about critical literacy by encouraging discussion about the content of texts such as the language the author chooses; providing access to a variety of texts that offer multiple perspectives on the same topic; juxtaposing texts, photos, videos, or music lyrics; teaching students to question the author’s message using a critical perspective; and providing students opportunities to write about their thinking via reading response logs or critical writing workshops (Cherland, 2008; Lapp & Fisher, 2010; McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004).

**Gaps in the Research.** There are several important areas missing from this body of literature that I address in the study I conducted. First, there is little research on critical literacy in elementary school classrooms. My study focused on how one fifth grade teacher and her students engage in critical literacy practices. Additionally, I found few examples of research that addressed how critical literacy can be used to focus on gender inequity with elementary school students—the study I describe here takes on this specific perspective. Finally, to my knowledge, there has been no research conducted using a formative experiment approach to study critical literacy. This approach “intimately merge[s] research and practice, producing findings more transparent and useful to practitioners” and could prove to be an effective way to help teachers implement critical literacy into their classrooms (Reinking & Bradley, 2008, p.9).

## **Gender and Literacy Education**

In this section I review the literature on gender and literacy. I specifically chose to read research based books and articles that focused on girls' experiences in literacy education. For example, literature in this section includes the ways girls are positioned and position themselves in schools surrounding reading, writing, speaking, and listening practices. Research conducted with girls in elementary and middle school is included in this section. I highlight the ways girls' literacy experiences in schools support the idea that the education system contributes to gender inequity and argue that this systematic oppression is one reason it is crucial to teach young children how to question power relationships through a critical literacy perspective. While, I focus here on gender specifically, I find it important to briefly discuss how other aspects of identity such as race and class impact girls' educational experiences.

In the following paragraphs, I share some of the main ideas researchers have found about gender and literacy. These main ideas include power, language, gender socialization, institutional sexism, and gender roles. First, a common theme among the research on gender and literacy is focused on the ways boys learn to exert power over girls at an early age and the ways girls use silence as a source of power in school. Second, the research on gender and literacy also talks a lot about language and how language in texts, among students, and between teachers and students is used as a way to maintain gender inequity. Third, gender socialization is a theme that came up in this body of literature. This theme emphasizes the way girls and boys are socialized in to specific gender roles through literacy education practices. A fourth theme that is closely tied to

gender socialization is institutional sexism. This theme provides evidence for ways schools reinforce gender stereotypes. A final theme in this literature is focused on the ways girls take on traditional gender roles and the ways they find to resist these roles in literacy classrooms.

**Power.** Power was one theme that spanned across the literature I read on gender in literacy education. As Walkerdine (1990) points out, “power is not static, but produced as a constantly shifting relation.” The setting, topic of conversation, people involved, and historical context are just some of the things that contribute to shifts in power relations. The discussion of power in the literature ranges from the limited roles in which women have power (i.e. as mothers and teachers) to young boys using language as a way to gain control and power over others (i.e. girls/women or other marginalized groups) (Gallas, 1998; Reay, 2001; Walkerdine, 1990).

In her 2001 study, Reay, organized workshops in which seven-year-old children were taught simple interviewing techniques and engaged in interviewing each other. She found that all of the girls in the study at various times acted in ways which reinforced boys’ power at the expense of their own (Reay, 2001). Likewise, Gallas (2001) worked with first and second graders, found that girls took on the role of “good girls” as a way to achieve their goals, appear competent, and keep a low profile, reinforcing gender stereotypes and providing space for boys to use language and power to exclude girls and other children in the classroom who belonged to marginalized groups (i.e. low socioeconomic status, Latin@, African American). The role of the “good girl” seems to appear often throughout the literature on gender and literacy education (Gallas, 1998;

Luttrell, 1993; Pipher, 1994). This is just one way in which girls internalize the language and power structure of the dominant discourse creating a cycle in which girls live up to the expectations society has set out for them, in turn keeping the male-centered ideology going strong.

However, it is important to note that "...girls are not always weak and dependent, but appear to be engaged in a *struggle* with the boys...to create the situations as ones in which they are powerful" such as in turning a play situation into one that takes place in the home or at school where mothers and teachers have more power (Walkerdine, 1990). Walkerdine (1990) attributes girls' early success in schools to their ability to relate to domestic and educational situations where women hold the power. Unfortunately, girls lose this sense of the possibility of power by the time they reach middle school and it becomes detrimental to their sense of self-confidence (Pipher, 1994). Finders (1997) argues that adolescent girls use writing as a "tangible means by which to claim status [and] challenge authority." I suggest that through critical literacy even younger girls can begin to use both reading and writing to gain power and challenge the status quo.

**Language.** Language is another theme that surfaced in many of the readings I completed on gender and literacy education. Language and power are closely connected in that language is used to gain and maintain power. As Finders (1997) points out, "The link between language and power makes visible sociopolitical tensions that create and constrain social roles" (Finders, 1997, p.9). Several studies have found that both boys and girls use language as a way to gain power, exclude others, and accomplish their goals (Gallas, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990). However, boys and girls go about using language in

different ways to gain power. For example, boys tend to use language in public spaces, such as the classroom and on the playground to control situations whereas girls are more private, often using silence as a vehicle for gaining power in these same situations. Gallas (1998) emphasizes the power that young girls can gain in social interactions and can maintain for themselves by remaining silent. She states: “Silence as a personal position is a far safer place from which to maintain a sense of control over any situation, but silence is both a fortress and a prison” (Gallas, 1998, p. 53). This quote indicates that by remaining silent, a strategy that some girls use in schools helps them to maintain power and control. However, this can be liberating in the sense that they are not giving in to societal expectations but it can also be detrimental in the way it keeps girls from speaking up and sharing their thoughts.

Additionally, language is used in the texts children are exposed to in and out of schools as a way to maintain hegemonic gender ideologies. For example, Cherland (2008) analyzed the *Harry Potter* books for ways in which gender is represented. She found that language was used to make female characters seem irrational and male characters seem rational (Cherland, 2008). Both girls and boys read these books from a young age, learn these messages about gender, and eventually perform them through their own social interactions. As Taylor (2003) put it, “[through language] gender ideology becomes internalized as a system of sign...a code” that children learn to abide by (Taylor, 2003).

**Gender Socialization.** Gender socialization is another area that came up frequently in the readings I completed. Children learn from a very early age how to enact

gender roles and to associate certain traits with boys or girls, often times associating more negative feelings toward female characteristics than male (Fleming, 2000; Gallas, 1998; Orenstein, 1994; Reay, 2001; Taylor, 2003). This was very clear in Orenstein's (1994) study in which she found that by the sixth grade both boys and girls equated being female with constraint and saw it as a liability, whereas they viewed maleness as the central aspect of the culture and boys as having fewer concerns as well as more power.

In Gallas' (1998) study of primary children's oral literacy development and gender relations, she found that boys used language to exercise power over and exclude their female, African American, and low socioeconomic status classmates. She states: "Sometimes I think much of what these boys do surprises even themselves" (Gallas, 1998, p. 41). She goes on to argue that this is because there is deeper power at work. The boys (and girls) in her study had been learning these social behaviors and gender roles since birth (Gallas, 1998). Gender socialization was also apparent in Walkerdine's (1990) study where she observed kindergarten children during classroom play and noted that boys very rarely played powerful fathers when girls were present. The values of the larger society, in particular those of the dominant group (i.e. white men), had been almost subliminally ingrained into who these boys were, the roles available to them and their female classmates, and how they interacted with the people around them including their white female teacher. As educators, it is important to remember that "there is not agreed-upon ways of 'being' a boy or a girl...it is more useful to view gender roles as social constructs" and to be aware of how our interactions with young children impact how they think they should act and who they think they can become (Newkirk, 2002).

**Institutional Sexism.** I found that throughout the readings I completed, authors often referred to the ways in which schools perpetuate oppressive practices and reinforce gender stereotypes. Schools continue to directly and indirectly tell children that the white, male experience is the one that really matters by having children read textbooks that feature mostly or solely white male experiences, valuing traditional male characteristics over traditional female characteristics, and lowering expectations for girls and other marginalized groups (Fleming, 2000; Luttrell, 1993; Orenstein, 1994; Reay, 2001). Schools also disseminate the message of individualistic thinking. As the women in Luttrell's (1993) study illustrated when they took away the central message from their schooling experiences that "the nature of knowledge and power [is] personalized and individual rather than collective and social" (Luttrell, 1993). The individualistic values that schools promote completely ignore the importance of empathy, nurturance, cooperation, and intuition (Luttrell, 1993; Orenstein, 1994). This hurts both boys and girls in that it provides narrow ways of being, thinking, expressing, and interacting from the time children enter school. Additionally, schools are not providing students with the skills necessary to fight against injustices but rather indoctrinate students into ways of being that allow the current system to continue, creating divisions among students based on race, class, and gender (Luttrell, 1993).

**Gender Roles: Reinforced & Resisted.** Gender role reinforcement by schools and teachers is another theme that is closely related to gender socialization and institutionalized sexism. The ways in which schools help to reinforce traditional gender roles is concerning, particularly for the ramifications this has for girls and women.

Despite the fact that achievement tests indicate that girls are more successful in school than boys, as Reay (2001) articulates, “girls and boys still learn many of the old lessons of gender relations which work against gender equity” (Reay, 2001). This can be seen in teacher-student interactions where teachers encourage more assertive behavior in boys (Orenstein, 1994). Several authors discuss the ways that schools, teachers, and the broader society reinforce gender role stereotypes by limiting the career options available to girls and women to domestic and academic realms which in turn can create a cycle of economic dependency upon their male counterparts who are exposed to a wider range of career options, particularly in higher paying industries such as math and science (Fleming, 2000; Walkerdine, 1990).

However, several authors have discussed girls who have resisted gender stereotypes with both positive and negative conclusions (Orenstein, 1994; Reay, 2001). Reay (2001) found that girls who take on more “masculine” gender roles “do not seem to disrupt but rather appear to endorse existing gender hierarchies” (Reay, 2001). On the other hand, Orenstein (1994) found that girls who can resist gender role stereotypes in their classrooms are also able to do so in other settings. If we can begin to understand how some girls are able to resist gender role stereotypes but also work with them to disrupt gender hierarchies, it’s possible that spaces could open up for girls’ ways of being. As Newkirk (2002) states, “No one is ‘free’ to be able to create a self-outside the influence of cultural norms, however there is a responsibility to try” (Newkirk, 2002). School and teachers play an important part in that responsibility and they can start by examining the ways in which they reinforce gender role stereotypes.

Now that I have covered gender and literacy in broad terms, I would like to turn to the ways gender is represented in children's literature. In the following section, I share the major themes across the research on this topic.

### **Gender Issues in Children's Literature**

"Children's literature is one mechanism through which society exerts its influence on young minds" (Louie, 2001, p. 142). Books children are exposed to are a reflection of the dominant culture and the values of the larger society or in other words are culturally, politically, and historically situated (Finders, 1997; Freebody & Freiberg, 201; Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002). With these thoughts in mind, it is important to consider what, exactly, are children's books influencing the young minds of today to think and feel? Specifically, what are the messages children receive about *what* and *who* to value? In the following paragraphs, I explore research on children's literature, focusing on studies that have emphasized the ways in which gender is portrayed in texts. In particular, I highlight the ways in which children's literature promotes and attempts to push against gender stereotypes. As you will see, children's literature has historically reinforced gender stereotypes and despite more recent efforts in children's books to portray both boys and girls in nontraditional roles, there is still a lot of work to be done.

**Promoting Gender Stereotypes.** Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (1972), in their seminal study, analyzed several hundred popular children's picture books including Caldecott and Newberry award winners as well as the Little Golden books series. They reported that females were underrepresented in children's book titles, central roles, pictures, and stories in every sample of books (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972).

A third of their sample included no women at all (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). When girls were included, their roles were stereotyped and limited, with girls being portrayed as passive, dependent, and confined to domestic roles (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). Not a single woman in their sample of Caldecott books had a job or profession (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). The researchers concluded that these books sent the message to girls that their main role was to serve others and maintain low aspirations (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). Furthermore, they claimed, “It is easy to imagine that the little girl reading these books might be deprived of her ego and her sense of self” (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972, p. 1130). These findings were alarming and started a conversation about gender in children’s books that has spanned four decades.

Since Weitzman and colleagues’ (1972) study, several other researchers have analyzed children’s texts for gender stereotypes (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Bekkedal, 1973; Clark, Lennon, & Morris, 1993; Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Davis, 1984; Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011; Roper & Clifton, 2013; Taylor, 2003; Turner-Bowker, 1996). These and other authors have helped to confirm that gender stereotyping continues to appear in children’s books. Turner-Bowker (1996) conducted a study focused on gender-stereotyped descriptors in children’s picture books. She analyzed Caldecott medal and honor books published from 1984-1994 (Turner-Bowker, 1996). Results from this study showed a larger number of males than females in both book titles and illustrations (Turner-Bowker, 1996). Additionally, male

characters were described as more active than female characters and described more frequently (Turner-Bowker, 1996).

Many of the children's books read in and out of schools reinforce male and female gender roles (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Cherland, 2008; Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Taylor, 2003). For example, Crabb and Bielawski (1994), analyzed the illustrations of 220 Caldecott award and honor books published from 1937-1989 and found that female characters are more often found using household artifacts whereas male characters are portrayed using non-domestic items. They also confirmed that female characters are underrepresented in children's literature (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994). Women and girls have been portrayed in narrow and biased ways in children's literature (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). Female characters have typically been limited to traditional roles such as mother, caretaker, grandmother, or teacher, reinforcing dominant gender ideologies (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Taylor, 2003). In their study of gender role stereotyping of parents in children's picture books, Anderson and Hamilton (2005), found that the mothers are portrayed as nurturers with babies being nurtured ten times as often by mothers as by fathers. Even the beloved *Harry Potter* series uses discourse to portray female characters as irrational and foolish and position boys as reasonable (Cherland, 2008). This is extremely concerning in that, "Psychologists and leaders of liberation groups affirm that gender stereotyping in children's books has detrimental effects of children's perception of women's roles" (Gooden & Gooden, 2001, p. 89).

Recent researchers have extended the idea of gender stereotyping to address a major concern about the way gender is portrayed in children's books through the discussion of "symbolic annihilation" (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011; Roper & Clifton, 2013). Symbolic annihilation is when certain groups of people are underrepresented or even nonexistent in texts or the media. This concept suggests to society that those groups that are left out are less important than others. Women and girls have suffered from this form of systemic oppression in the form of children's literature. McCabe et. al. (2011) conducted a large-scale study analyzing over 5,000 children's books published throughout the twentieth century. They found that across all measures, males are represented more often than females in children's book titles and as main characters. For example, males were represented in up to 100 percent of the books published in a given year but female representation never exceeded 75 percent. Further, in a given year up to 100 percent of male characters played central roles whereas females were found as main characters no more than 33 percent of the time. (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011). From these findings McCabe and colleagues (2011) suggest, "this widespread pattern of underrepresentation of females may contribute to a sense of unimportance among girls and privilege among boys" (p. 221).

The findings from the research on gender stereotypes in children's literature are disheartening. Issues of gender inequity and oppression exist even in what one might consider the most innocent of places: children's books. The message that these texts send

to girls and boys is clear: women are less valuable than men. This message sets girls up for failure in many ways that go beyond their days on the schoolyard.

**Pushing Against Gender Stereotypes.** Despite the glum findings focused on how children's literature perpetuates gender stereotypes, there is some research to suggest that progress, however minor, has been made (Clark, Lennon, & Morris, 1993; Davis, 1984; Hansen, 2015; Roper & Clifton, 2013). For example, Clark and colleagues (1993) replicated the study conducted by Weitzman et. al. They also extended the study to include updated samples of Caldecott and Coretta Scott King winners and runners-up from 1987-1991. Although gender stereotyping was still apparent in the Caldecott books, none of the King books were without female characters (Clark, Lennon, & Morris, 1993). In fact, more than half (63.6%) of the main characters featured in the Coretta Scott King books were female (Clark, Lennon, & Morris, 1993). Additionally, the female characters depicted in the King books were more likely to be described as independent, competitive, persistent, nurturing, aggressive, emotional, and active (Clark, Lennon, & Morris, 1993). Clark and colleagues suggest that the Black authors and illustrators of the Coretta Scott King books are more likely to feature women and portray them in more diverse ways due to the values of Black feminists who acknowledge the importance of relationships among female characters (Clark, Lennon, & Morris, 1993).

In the years since the Weitzman et. al. study, there has been an attempt on the part of children's book authors to represent women and girls in more diverse roles and from researchers to study such books. For example, Davis (1984) conducted a study looking at gender stereotypes in nonsexist children's books. She found that female characters in

these books were portrayed as independent and capable of making decisions. Male characters were more nurturing and less aggressive than in conventional children's books. These are seemingly positive findings, however, Davis (1984) argues that with the introduction of nonsexist books, gender equity has not been accomplished and instead "the balance has tipped in favor of the female, at the expense of the male, thus reversing the traditional stereotype" (Davis, 1984, p.12). This is just as problematic as books that perpetuate traditional stereotypes because rather than imparting values and ideas of equity to the children who read them they are creating spaces where new and equally as oppressive images are being portrayed. This continues to add to binary thinking and an "us vs. them" mentality—something, as a society, we should be working to dismantle.

With more recent publications such as Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace*, Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess*, Shana Corey's *You Forgot Your Skirt Amelia Bloomer*, and Andrea Beaty's *Rosie Revere, Engineer* girls can begin to see themselves in new roles that portray them in ways that prove girls can be smart, independent, active, and have a voice. Hansen (2015), analyzed *The Hunger Games* trilogy and found ways this popular series, featuring a female main character, works to break gender stereotypes and depict girls in more dynamic, yet at times, conflicting ways. She draws attention to the way Katniss uses her bow as a "sort of vigilante who seeks justice" as well as a tool to hunt and provide for her family, roles traditionally associated with male characters (Hansen, 2015). However, she also points out that Katniss' gender has been shaped more by traditional masculine traits than traditional feminine traits and in fact rejects feminine traits, as a sign of weakness (Hansen, 2015). This seems to send a mixed message to girls.

On the one hand, they are being told that they can engage in activities traditionally reserved for males. Yet on the other hand, they are also being sent a message that implies traditional female traits are undesirable.

Overall, the research on gender stereotypes and children's literature points to the fact that children are being taught to devalue women. Despite some minor changes being made to incorporate more female characters in more diverse roles, improvement has not been significant or consistent (Louie, 2001; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, Tope, 2011). Children's literature continues to send the message that women ought to remain in subordinate roles in society. In the following section I will argue that it is imperative for educators to pay attention to gender issues in children's literature.

### **Tying It All Together: Critical Literacy, Gender & Children's Literature**

After conducting a review of the literature on the previous topics, I searched for research that investigated all three concepts: critical literacy, gender and literacy education, and children's literature. I conducted a search in the ERIC database using several combinations of the words "critical literacy," "gender," and "children's literature." I found that several researchers have conducted work with students and teachers using a critical literacy perspective to analyze gender in children's books (Dutro, 2001; Taber, Woloshyn, & Lane, 2013; Taylor, 2003; Yeoman, 1999). For example, Taber et. al. (2013) worked with four girls in grades 5-7 who participated in an after-school book club. The focus on the book club was to help empower the girls move beyond restrictive ideas of gender (Taber, Woloshyn, Lane, 2013). The girls in the study were asked critical questions and engaged in activities such as role playing, discussions, and character

sketches intended to help them critique gender in *The Hunger Games* novel (Taber, Woloshyn, Lane, 2013). Findings indicate that the girls in this study were able to extend their thinking and begin to question inequalities (Taber, Woloshyn, Lane, 2013). However, they struggled to recognize some of the complex issues of gender presented in the book (Taber, Woloshyn, Lane, 2013).

In addition, Yeoman (1999) asked elementary school students to engage in writing disruptive stories, creating versions of classic fairytales or other popular stories from the perspective of supporting characters. In her findings, Yeoman (1999) reports that students were able to write disruptive stories in which they shifted what it meant to be a woman. Children in the study gave responses indicating that they were questioning gender stereotypes, such as stating that anyone can be a knight in shining armor or that princesses do not need to wait for a prince (Yeoman, 1999). They were beginning to question dominant discourses of gender (Yeoman, 1999).

Working with undergraduate students, Taylor (2003) worked to facilitate awareness of gender issues in children's literature. Her findings provide support for why it is essential to teach young children how to question the way gender is portrayed in children's literature (Taylor, 2003). She asked students to critique their favorite children's books on the basis of gender. Afterward they engaged in discussion and students, despite recognizing gender inequalities in the books, came to the conclusion that they were reading too much into it, things have changed and gender inequity is no longer a concern, or that the gender roles in the books reflect reality (Taylor, 2003). If these are the beliefs and attitudes of children as they grow into adults, it is not surprising that

gender inequalities and oppression based on gender continue to exist. After engaging in further discussion around gender issues, the students in this study began to realize they have internalized certain attitudes about gender (Taylor, 2003). This study makes apparent the need to teach children how to read texts with a critical eye and begin to develop awareness of inequalities that exist in their everyday lives.

Louie (2001) suggests one way to help teachers and students address gender stereotypes in children's literature is to introduce books that contain balanced gender roles. "There are thought-provoking books that teachers can use to stimulate class discussion to combat gender stereotypes" (Louie, 2001, p. 145). The books she suggests challenge gender stereotypes in glaringly obvious ways such as, Kathryn Cristaldi's *Baseball Ballerina* (1992), which tells the story of a girl who prefers baseball to ballet. Although books like this are beneficial to students and necessary for children to see characters portrayed in ways that challenge traditional gender roles they are the exception to the rule. The majority of books children read both in and out of school are mainstream texts. As we have seen in the research on children's literature, these texts perpetuate gender stereotypes, portray men and women in limited and confining ways, and reinforce hegemonic ideologies. Few children have access to a wide variety of books that push back against the gender stereotypes portrayed in the books that are prevalent in libraries, schools, classrooms, and homes.

Louie (2001) suggests that teachers ask students questions such as "How does societal pressure influence the emotional life of the characters? How will the characters react if they are of a different gender? How will people treat them if they are of a

different gender? What will happen to these characters if they behave in ways against other people's expectations?" (Louie, 2001, p. 146). Although these questions are a step in the right direction and offer teachers a starting point in addressing issues of gender inequity, the questions critical literacy teachers ask help students to think more deeply about these issues. Critical literacy questions ask students to critique whose voices are heard, whose voices are missing, who has the power in the text, and whose interests does the text serve. These questions can be used with children's literature in literacy classrooms as a tool to open up conversation about issues of inequity, including those surrounding race, class, and gender.

Furthermore, pre-service and in-service teachers need to be taught how to take on a critical literacy perspective with students. Teachers often, unknowingly, reinforce the very stereotypes portrayed in children's literature and have been conditioned to read texts in unquestioned ways (Louie, 2001). They need to learn either through teacher education programs or professional development how to purposefully and thoughtfully select children's literature and then how to help students problematize those texts. Some suggestions for how teachers can begin to address issues of gender inequity through children's literature with students include: comparing historical fiction and contemporary stories, introduce historical accounts that focus on women's experiences, supplement textbooks with historical fiction and biographies to help students reshape their conceptions of gender roles throughout history (Louie, 2001). Jones (2006) reminds us of the importance of using critical literacy to help students recognize social inequities, whether based on race, class, or gender. She emphasizes the importance of teaching

children of all ages to understand that “power, perspective, and positioning operate in *all* [emphasis added] texts” (Jones, 2006, p. 127).

The suggestions and findings from these studies are promising, but additional work needs to be done in order to encourage more teachers and students to engage in conversations about gender issues and children’s literature. Gaps still exist. For example, I only came across three studies (Beecher, 2010; Harwood, 2008; Taber, et. al, 2003) that focused on teaching young children (i.e. primary or elementary school students) how to engage in critical literacy practices that challenge gender stereotypes in children’s literature. There were several ways this study addressed issues not addressed in these studies. For example, the Taber et al. (2003) study did not take place during the regular school day but rather took place during an after-school book club. It also focused on four girls and the girls’ teacher(s) in this study did not participate in the book club nor did the remainder of the class. Both boys and girls need to engage in conversations that question the gender stereotypes present in the texts they encounter in schools. Teachers need to learn how to teach with critical perspectives in mind. The research does not compellingly prove that this is occurring in schools, particularly elementary schools. Additionally, no studies on this topic have used a formative experiment approach as a way to merge research and practice. The study I describe here attempts to begin to fill these gaps as a fifth grade teacher and I implemented a unit focused on using critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity her students. In the following section I describe the methods I used to conduct this research.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODS

This study used a formative experiment design; an approach to research that is still emerging (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). However, despite being in its infancy, this approach to research shows great promise for working toward a more effective way to conduct research in educational settings. As Reinking and Bradley (2008) emphasize, formative experiments have the potential to move beyond the “methodological and epistemological differences that divide the literacy research community” (p. 2). This approach to research brings together two key aspects of educational research: 1) the attempt to gain “deep theoretical understandings of teaching and learning” and 2) to use such understandings to “make education more effective and enriching” (Reinking & Bradley, 2008, p. 2).

In the sections that follow I will describe the research design I have chosen for this study. I will then introduce readers to the research site and informants. Details about the data collection and analysis methods will be provided. Additionally, I will discuss the ways I worked to address trustworthiness.

#### **Research Design**

After careful consideration, I chose a formative experiment design for this research project. As described by Reinking and Bradley (2008), formative experiments are intervention centered, guided by theory, goal oriented, adaptive and iterative,

transformative, methodologically flexible, and pragmatic (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Qualitative researchers may be hesitant to use the term “intervention” as it has been traditionally associated with quantitative research. However, Reinking and Bradley (2008) emphasize that formative experiments have drawn from qualitative research methods. One way they describe the term intervention as it is used in formative experiments is “a coherent collection of instructional activities aimed at accomplishing a specific instructional goal” (p. 100). In this particular study, the intervention encompasses an eight-week unit designed to use critical literacy to question gender stereotypes with a fifth grade teacher and her students. Throughout the unit a “coherent collection of instructional activities” were implemented with hopes of accomplishing the instructional goal of developing critical literacy skills among students with an emphasis on using these skills to question gender inequities in texts.

Although I have chosen a formative experiment design, this research also encompasses influences from other qualitative methodologies including case study and ethnographic methods (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012; Yin, 2009). As Reinking and Bradley point out, the formative experiment approach to research has been used to explore literacy education using qualitative methods, particularly those most often associated with ethnographic research (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Drawing on ethnographic methods is appropriate and important in this study because like formative experiments, ethnographic methods are flexible in data collection, analysis, and research write up (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). When implementing the eight-week unit both the classroom teacher and I had to be flexible in terms of

implementing the instructional plans. The unpredictable nature of classroom life, from unexpected changes in schedules to the ambiguity of the types of questions students asked, made being flexible an essential part of this study. Additionally, situations arose that required new ways of thinking about the data. As we progressed through the school year, it was important for us to be open to the possibility of plans having to change—as they often did. This is a characteristic of both formative experiments and ethnographic research. As Campbell and Lassiter emphasize, “...all ethnographers must be prepared...to change plans, expectations, and goals for any number of reasons as any given project develops or unfolds” (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 32).

Formative experiments and ethnographic research methods encourage researchers to engage in collaborative relationships with informants (Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). As Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) remind us, “...collaborative approaches will have the advantage of a different kind of depth” (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012, p. 33). This research study relied heavily on collaboration with the fifth grade teacher who agreed to participate. The teacher brought important insight to this study. She knew her students, standards, school, and schedule better than I, as researcher, ever could in the amount of time I had to work with this group of students. In many ways, she brought an expertise to the project that may not have been used to its full potential if engaging in other research methods. The teacher and I worked collaboratively on planning the literacy instruction that took place during the eight-week unit, at times we even collaboratively taught the lessons planned—taking

advantage of the different types of expertise we each brought to the situation, and the teacher provided valuable insight in understanding the students.

Furthermore, drawing on ethnographic methods to inform this formative experiment provided the opportunity to gain a thick, rich description of the classroom culture and members of the classroom community (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). However, the use of ethnographic methods in formative research goes beyond gaining a thick, rich description of the classroom, its members, and their interactions. In formative experiments, the purposes of the ethnographic nature of data collection and analysis has a much more “functional and pragmatic mission...accomplishing a valued pedagogical goal and...extending theoretical understandings of what is likely to work or not work in actual practice” (Reinking and Bradley, 2008, p. 48). By collecting data over the course of the 2015-2016 school year and making use of ethnographic research methods such as participant observation and interviews, I was able to gain an in depth look at this one particular classroom. Furthermore, I was able to use this data to work collaboratively with the classroom teacher to pursue the goal of teaching students how to use critical literacy to question gender inequities in the texts they read. The write up of my findings took on a more ethnographic style, using direct quotes from informants and detailed descriptions of the lessons taught and physical classroom space, to provide readers with an in depth look at what occurred during this study.

Formative experiments are needed in educational research because other methods are too limited and often fail to merge research and practice in a way that leads to

meaningful and lasting change in classrooms (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Formative experiments on the other hand offer a “socially responsible” approach to educational research (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). A major goal for formative experiment researchers is to inform practitioners. Rather than researchers and practitioners having to work to translate research in to practice, formative experiments are *based* in practice. This approach to research “must be studied in an *authentic instructional environment* [emphasis added]” (Reinking and Bradley, 2008, p. 18). This is similar to case study methods in that “a case study is an *empirical inquiry* that investigates a contemporary phenomenon *in depth* and within its *real-life context* [emphasis added]” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This study met these criteria. The classroom, students, and teacher selected for this case were situated in a contemporary and specific historical context during a time when girls and women had more opportunities available to them than ever before and yet continued to struggle to close the gaps that exist between them and their male counterparts. By collaboratively designing this unit, using the already in place literacy standards, and implementing it as a regular part of the literacy curriculum, this study took place in an authentic instructional environment and worked to address authentic, real-world issues of inequity.

Reinking and Bradley (2008) continue by emphasizing that formative experiment research is appropriate when multiple sources of data will be collected, when the research is open to multiple factors that may influence the success or failure of the intervention, and when there is flexibility in how the data is analyzed. Data collected during the research described here was based on multiple sources of evidence including: interviews,

observations/fieldnotes, focus groups, a student card sort, a student book sort, and audio recordings. All of which were used during the data analysis process to gain deeper understanding of why and how the intervention was or was not successful.

Moreover, a formative experiment approach seemed most appropriate for this study because it was “Aimed at discovering workable instruction and relevant theory in the real world” (Reinking and Bradley, 2008, p. 8). This specific study could contribute to discovering workable instruction by collaborating with the fifth grade teacher in planning instruction that combines critical literacy with a feminist lens and focusing on elementary students—something that has yet to be done. It could also provide a significant contribution to theory that is relevant to elementary school teachers by giving insight into how young students develop critical consciousness, use knowledge of gender inequalities to engage in critical conversations, and learn to read and write for social action.

**Research Questions.** Gates (2004), maintains that formative experiment research is most appropriate for “how,” “what,” and “why” questions specifically focused on how the intervention can be used in classrooms, what it looks like when implemented in authentic contexts, and why it is or is not successful. The research questions I sought to address in this study were congruent with these guidelines, thus providing one more reason why a formative experiment design made sense for this project. One characteristic of research questions in formative experiments is that they may highlight the role of the researcher. For the purposes of this study I have chosen to focus on answering questions pertaining to the teacher and her students rather than analyzing my role in this study. The

answers to these questions seem to be pertinent in the current climate surrounding gender roles and expectations in our culture, society, and education system. Research questions for this study included:

- RQ1a: In what ways does a fifth grade teacher use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity in her classroom?
- RQ1b: In what ways do fifth grade students engage in critical literacy to challenge gender inequity in their everyday lives?
- RQ2a: In what ways does the teacher understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?
- RQ2b: In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?
- RQ3: What factors enhance or inhibit the ability of a fifth grade teacher to use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity with her students?

Formative experiment research was best suited for addressing these questions for multiple reasons. First, formative experiments are closely aligned with qualitative research, which provides detailed understandings of a research problem as a few individuals are studied in great depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In the case of this study, I worked with a few individuals including a single fifth grade teacher and six of her students. Additionally, when conducting formative experiments, like in case studies, researchers have the benefit of studying phenomena in the natural setting, for this study this meant that I was able to collect data in a single classroom and engage in face-to-face interactions with the students and

collaborations with the teacher over the course of the school year (Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Yin, 2009). Both formative experiment and case study researchers also have the benefit of being able to use multiple sources of data, including interviews, observations, and artifacts such as photographs, student work, teacher lesson plans, as well as audio/video recordings (Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Yin, 2009). This array of data sources allows researchers to provide a holistic account, leading to deeper understanding of complex phenomena (Creswell, 2009; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). As I explain further in following sections, I made use of a variety of data sources, making the formative experiment approach a good choice for my research design.

Before moving on to the next section it is important to remember that formative experiment research is still emerging. This means that there is not a common set of terminology or methods manual to guide researchers through using this approach (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). It is recommended that researchers planning a formative experiment approach use a combination of existing qualitative methods to justify methodological decisions (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). With this in mind, I borrowed from ethnographic and case study research methods in conceptualizing this study. It was helpful to think about the teacher, students, and classroom as a “case” (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). As Yin (2009) defines it, “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

In the next section I discuss the process used to select the case that was the focus of this study.

### **The Pilot Study**

There are several important purposes for conducting a pilot study as described by both Yin (2009) and Maxwell (2013). One purpose for conducting qualitative pilot studies is focused on research methods. A pilot study can be used as a platform for testing the methods and ideas of a study including plans and procedures for data collection (Yin, 2009; Maxwell, 2013). It can offer researchers the opportunity to refine research questions that will guide the final study (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

Additionally, pilot studies can be used to gain insight into participants' understandings, perspectives, and actions related to the concepts being studied prior to conducting the main research study (Maxwell, 2013). The study piloted prior to this dissertation was conducted with these purposes in mind. In the following paragraphs, I provide a description of the pilot study and the influences it had on the study presented here.

**The Pilot Study: A Description.** I conducted a pilot for this study in the spring of 2015. Hope Johnson (all names are pseudonyms) the fifth grade teacher at Wilcox Elementary, who also participated in this study, served as my informant along with her students. For the pilot study, I conducted one observation prior to beginning plans for a six-week unit. I conducted an initial and follow up semi-structured interview with Hope as well as informal interviews throughout the implementation of the unit. Hope and I met two times to plan the unit prior to implementing it, spending between two and three hours

collaborating on the details of the unit each time we met. We also met once a week for an hour after the start of the unit in order to refine plans as necessary. During the implementation of the unit I conducted observations every day for six weeks during Hope's ninety-minute English Language Arts block.

Additionally, I selected six female students to focus on during the study. I conducted a semi-structured initial and follow up interview with each of the girls during which they were asked questions about their reading practices, understandings of critical literacy, and perspectives on gender. They each also completed a card sort activity in which they sorted adjectives into categories (i.e. descriptions of boys/men, descriptions of girls/women, descriptions of both boys/men and girls/women). Following the completion of the unit all six girls participated in a semi-structured focus group interview in which they were asked questions focused on their reflections regarding the unit of study.

I analyzed the findings from the pilot study and presented them at the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) in November of 2015. A manuscript of the findings was drafted and is being prepared for submission to a professional publication.

**The Pilot Study: Influence on this Study.** The pilot study influenced this study in three important ways, all of which fall under the reasons for conducting a pilot study suggested by Yin (2009) and Maxwell (2013). First, the pilot study helped me to refine my methods for this study. Second, it allowed me to make necessary adjustments to my research questions. Third, it allowed me to gain insight into Hope's understandings of critical literacy and gender while establishing a professional relationship with her and

other school personnel. Each of these influences is discussed further in the paragraphs below.

First, the pilot study provided an opportunity to refine my methods. It was conducted using case study methods, however after collaborating with Hope and receiving advice from trusted advisors it became clear that a formative design approach was more appropriate for the type of study I wanted to conduct. A formative design approach focused specifically on putting theory into practice which is what Hope and I attempted to do during the pilot study—use critical literacy in an authentic, practical setting. It also allowed me to test the interview protocol I had developed and make adjustments based on questions that were unclear or did not elicit answers from the participants that helped me better understand the concepts I focused on. For example, after conducting the pilot study I decided to add additional questions to the teacher interview protocol. I decided to add several questions asking Hope to reflect on the ways her own race, class, and gender might influence her instructional decisions. I felt this was necessary because education and feminist scholars alike encourage critical self-reflection. It seemed that such questions would allow space for Hope to share the ways in which she recognized (or failed to recognize) the impact her own identity intersections might have on planning and implementing the unit. I also added questions that asked about her views and understanding of gender fluidity as a way to understand Hope's position related to this concept and how this also might influence her instructional decisions throughout the unit. It was a way I worked to move passed the binary thinking Hope and I both engaged in during the pilot study and be more inclusive in the current study.

Additionally, I made several adjustments to the student interview protocol that provided insight in to focus students' home lives and family values. Each of the new questions in both the teacher and student interview protocols were intended to help me gain a more complete picture of the informants. I also decided to have students complete a book sort in addition to the card sort for the dissertation study, something they had not done in the pilot study. Another insight I was able to gain from the pilot study was what worked and what did not work throughout the implementation of the unit. One conclusion Hope and I came to after the pilot was that it would be more efficient to do a novel study rather than attempting to pull supplemental materials in the form of articles and picture books. Thus, when planning the unit for this study we decided to use *The Hope Chest* by Karen Schwabach as the basis for the plans during the majority of the unit. We also decided that an eight-week unit would more appropriately align with her schedule and provide the time needed to incorporate the novel study than the six-week unit timeline we used in the pilot study. The pilot study allowed me to recognize the ways Hope and I were working from a binary standpoint in terms of gender. This realization lead to shifting our focus to challenging gender norms related to both men and women during this study. We did this, for example, by including both women in career fields traditionally dominated by men (i.e. law enforcement) and men in career fields traditionally dominated by women (i.e. elementary school teacher) in the career fair that we organized for the end of the unit.

Secondly, the pilot study also helped me to refine my research questions. For the pilot study, I focused on two broad questions, one related to the teacher and one to the

students. It became apparent through analysis of the pilot study data that I needed to refine these questions to make them more specific. The questions for this study also needed to reflect the new research design. Thus, original questions were rewritten in a way that made them more efficient for data analysis and new questions were added to address the formative design of this study. Specifically, a formative design focuses on the factors that enhance and inhibit the use of theory in practice as well as the ways in which an intervention impacts the views of the informants. New research questions were added to address these two aspects of the formative design of this study.

Finally, the pilot study allowed me to establish a relationship with Hope, her colleagues and administration, as well as, provided opportunities for me to gain insight into Hope's understandings, perspectives, and actions related to the central concepts of this study—critical literacy and gender inequity. During the time, I worked with Hope in the spring of 2015, we were able to get to know each other as professionals. It allowed me to become accustomed to Hope's classroom procedures, expectations, and preferred teaching and planning style. I also was able to gain familiarity with her teammates and the ways in which they collaborated. The principal and I also got to know each other. This was helpful in having an established relationship with her when conducting my dissertation study. One of the most important pieces of insight the pilot study provided was associated with Hope's understandings and perspectives related to critical literacy and gender. It helped me establish a baseline for where Hope was in her understandings prior to starting the unit that we implemented during the pilot study and prior to conducting the dissertation study. Below are responses Hope provided during our initial

interview in the fall of 2014 (see Table 1). These are key in understanding the growth and change Hope experienced as she became more familiar with critical literacy over the course of the pilot and dissertation studies. These responses are important to keep in mind when considering the findings from the dissertation study, which are discussed in chapter five. In the quotes provided I have bolded several phrases in an effort to highlight key aspects of her thinking. In addition to Hope’s responses I also included my notes and reflections related to her understandings and how they connect to this study.

**Table 1. Pilot Data**

<b>Interview Question</b>	<b>Hope’s Response</b>	<b>Researcher Notes</b>
<i>What does the term “critical literacy” mean to you?</i>	“ <b>When I think of the word critical I think of the word thinking</b> , so when I think of critical thinking, I think about <b>thinking about things in a way that is different than you usually would</b> think about it. So, it’s actually changed a little since I started talking to you cause in the beginning I just thought it was <b>higher order questioning and discussion</b> , but now I know <b>critical literacy is more about asking questions</b> . When I think about critical literacy I think about <b>thinking critically about a text and asking questions from multiple perspectives.</b> ”	At this point, Hope does not seem to have a clear understanding of critical literacy. Her focus is on “critical thinking” and “higher order questioning” rather than questioning in terms of power, privilege, and social justice. She does touch on the idea that critical literacy has to do with taking on “multiple perspectives” but again does not talk about specifically what this means in terms of race, class, or gender—issues important to the definition of critical literacy. This is very different than the definitions she provides during the dissertation study.
<i>Describe a feminist. What do they do?</i>	“I know it’s <b>usually thought of as a negative thing</b> . I think of the word <b>empowering</b> , because I think that... (long pause) ... <b>man</b>	Hope’s response to this question makes it clear that she has minimal understandings of feminism. She does touch on the

Interview Question	Hope's Response	Researcher Notes
<p><i>What do they look like? What visual comes to mind when you think about a feminist?</i></p>	<p><b>this is a good question for me to be speechless...</b>Someone who is...it could be <b>any person</b> really...<b>sensitive</b>, um...<b>intuitive</b>...able to look at things neutrally <b>without being offended</b>. But if we are talking about feminists for the female...<b>I don't know what I'm trying to say...I've never really thought about what a feminist is</b>. I just think of <b>someone who is all about female power</b>, Rosie the Riveter, we can do it. <b>Clearly I don't know (nervous laughter). I don't think I've ever thought about it.</b></p>	<p>idea of empowerment specifically female empowerment and recognizes up front that the term has negative connotations. However, at times her definition illustrates misconceptions such as when she describes a feminist as someone who is "sensitive," "intuitive" and not easily "offended." Her long pauses, admission of being as a loss for words, and nervous laughter indicate that she is uncomfortable with her lack of knowledge on the topic. In the end, she openly declares that she does not know what the term means (i.e. "Clearly I don't know...; "I don't think I've ever thought about it." This response is much less nuanced than the one she provides during our interviews that took place at the beginning and end of the dissertation study.</p>
<p><i>What does it mean to you to be a feminist? Do you consider yourself a feminist?</i></p>	<p>"I consider myself <b>strong willed and opinionated</b> and I will do what I need to do for the <b>well-being of others</b> but it's <b>not always in the direction of other females</b>.</p> <p><i>Researcher: So, is that a yes or a no?</i></p> <p>"<b>I guess maybe</b>, but <b>I never really have done it from just the female perspective</b> of this is important to me because I'm a</p>	<p>This response indicates that Hope believes that to be a feminist one has certain characteristics such as being "strong willed and opinionated" and concerned with the "well-being of others" particularly "other females." It seems that she identifies with some of these characteristics but because she is unsure of what it means to be a feminist her response is heavy with hesitation (i.e. "I guess I could be..."). She admits that</p>

Interview Question	Hope's Response	Researcher Notes
	female but <b>I have been one to be known to get my point across</b> in an effective way so <b>I guess I could be...I'm going to Google 'what is a feminist' when I get out of here!"</b>	she needs to understand the definition of a feminist before making the assertion that she identifies as such (i.e. "I'm going to Google 'what is a feminist'..."). When compared to her response that is shared in the findings chapter, it becomes clear that from this initial interview to her final interview during the dissertation Hope's understandings of feminism significantly changed.

All three of the influences the pilot study had on the dissertation study are important to consider when working to understand the findings presented in chapters five through seven. Specifically, I encourage readers to keep Hope's initial responses to these questions during the pilot study in mind. These responses indicate the changes that occurred in her understandings and perspectives on the key concepts of this study—critical literacy and gender—from the time the pilot study occurred until the dissertation study took place. In the next section I discuss how I came to work with Hope and her students in this capacity.

### **Informant Selection Process**

The teacher, Hope Johnson, who I worked with throughout this study was a fifth grade teacher that I collaborated with during the 2014-2015 school year as I conducted the pilot study described above. After completing the pilot study, she agreed to continue to work with me during the 2015-2016 school year. Based on the observations I

conducted while in her classroom during the pilot study as well as her continued interest and enthusiasm for implementing critical literacy with a focus on gender, Ms. Johnson seemed to be a good fit for this study. Initially she was selected for my pilot study after I reached out to principals, curriculum facilitators, and county personnel in local school districts. I provided them with a description of the study I planned to conduct. They were asked to identify fifth grade teachers that may be willing to participate in this study and who they believe to be examples of teachers who engaged in best practices of literacy instruction.

The director of elementary curriculum, Ms. Hamilton, identified Hope Johnson as a good candidate, sharing that she was “impressive even as a first-year teacher” due to the fact that she was “engaging” and “did everything she could” to help her students “understand the curriculum.” Ms. Hamilton explained that even as a first-year teacher, Hope incorporated “manipulatives and realia,” “movement,” “songs,” and “high interest materials” into her lessons. This was encouraging as it seemed Hope ran the kind of classroom that I was looking for—engaging and student centered. Ms. Hamilton had positive things to say about Ms. Johnson based on observations she conducted in her classroom over the course of the six years that Hope had been teaching at Wilcox. She shared a memory from one of the first observations she conducted of Hope in which she remembered Hope “implemented the suggestions” Ms. Hamilton gave and “asked for more!” She described Hope as having a “growth mindset” and “the best interest of her students at heart.” Additionally, she portrayed Hope as a life-long learner who was “constantly searching for ways [to] improve student understandings.” I found these to be

positive signs that Hope would be open to implementing the kinds of ideas related to critical literacy and gender that I was looking to study.

Furthermore, Hope was already engaging in some critical literacy practices with her students and seemed to create a classroom environment conducive to this kind of thinking. For example, Ms. Hamilton shared that Hopes strength was in teaching literacy. As she put it, “One of the practices that stands out to me is her strong sense of justice and critical stance that she incorporates” into her literacy lessons. She referenced of a lesson Hope implemented and she observed related to the Civil Rights Movement as an example of Hope’s commitment to addressing issues of social justice with her students. Ms. Hamilton believed this lesson helped Hope’s students “understand the world,” engage in “self-reflection,” and work toward becoming “citizens with a strong sense of right and wrong.” For these reasons, it became clear that Hope would be a prime candidate to participate in this study.

Once initial recommendations were obtained, teachers were contacted via email. In the email, I provided a brief description of the study and let them know that I had obtained their information from principals, curriculum facilitators, and/or county personnel. Hope was one of three teachers that responded to my email and who was willing to participate in my pilot study. We set up a time to meet in person. After our initial meeting, Ms. Johnson, was still interested and seemed like a good fit, so we scheduled a time for me to come in and conduct a preliminary observation of her classroom. The point of this observation was for Hope and her students to get used to me being present and taking notes during lessons, for me to see if it seemed like the teacher

was engaging in literacy practices that would help me understand how critical literacy is enacted in a classroom setting, as well as to establish a positive working relationship with the possible informants.

At this point, we began our work together on the pilot study. We met to plan the six-week unit, I conducted observations during the implementation of the unit, and piloted the card sort, initial and follow up interviews, and focus group session with her students. My final interview with Hope occurred at the beginning of April 2015, a couple weeks after the unit concluded. However, after our last official contact connected to the pilot study, Hope and I remained in touch. She reached out to me throughout the summer months, sharing gender equity related articles, books, and movies with me via email, text message, and social media. As the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year approached, Hope was very excited to incorporate what she had learned from the gender unit with her new group of students. She messaged me asking for ideas for how to incorporate gender equity into her classroom theme. I could sense her excitement through the messages. She decided to go with the theme “Social Justice Super Stars” in which she took pictures of her new students at open house and had them hold up a sign featuring a social justice concern that they felt strongly about. She shared these pictures with me and pointed out a few students that she thought would be good to focus on during the gender unit when we implemented it again. After reflecting on these interactions, it became clear to me that working with Hope throughout the 2015-2016 school year would be a great way to conduct the type of research I wished to conduct. Thus, Hope became the main informant for this study.

## The Case

As mentioned earlier, since formative design research is still emerging it is necessary to borrow terminology from existing and more established methods. With this in mind, I draw from case study and ethnographic research methods in my description of this study. I have chosen to refer to Hope, her students, and my time with them as a “case.” In this section I provide a description of what I mean by this term and how I define it for this specific study.

As Dyson and Genishi point out, “Every case is uniquely experienced by participants and uniquely bounded and theorized by researchers who are sometimes also participants” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 126). With this in mind, it is important to describe the specifics of the particular case I studied for this dissertation. Hope Johnson’s fifth grade classroom in a rural county in a Southeastern state was selected as the case for this study. Hope is a White female in her late twenties. At the time this study began, she had six years of teaching experience all at Wilcox Elementary School and held a Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education. There were 21 students in Hope’s fifth grade classroom. Eleven of the students were girls and ten were boys. See Table 2 for additional demographic information on the students.

**Table 2. Classroom Demographic Data 2015-2016**

Total	Girl	Boy	Black	White	Latino/a	Other (Egyptian)	English Language Learners
21	11	10	2	7	11	1	8

Hope’s classroom was situated in Wilcox Elementary a small K-5 elementary school with a total student population of 547 for the 2014-2015 school year—this was the most recent data available on the school’s continuous improvement plan. Wilcox had a large Latino/a population, with 66.4% of its total student body identifying as such. Table 3 provides additional demographic information on the student population. Additionally, Wilcox had been identified as a Title I school with 91.6% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. The most up to date information available for the end of grade testing (EOG) data indicate that 35.1% of the fifth graders were considered proficient in reading during the 2014-2015 school year. Given this and other EGO scores, the elementary school as a whole did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). They received a “D” in reading and an overall school grade of a “C” on the 2014-2015 school report card. This was the most up to date information available via the school’s website at the time this was written. Wilcox’s population seemed to bode well for addressing some of the issues surrounding critical literacy. For example, based on demographic data, the students in Ms. Johnson’s classroom were from diverse backgrounds and had opportunities to engage in critical literacy practices through the critical literacy and gender unit and possibly at other times during the school year, addressing the issue of minority students having fewer opportunities to engage in critical literacy.

**Table 3. School Population Demographic Data 2014-2015**

<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>American Indian</b>	<b>2+ Races</b>	<b>English Language Learners</b>	<b>Free or Reduced Lunch</b>
547	6.2%	1.8%	21.8%	66.4%	0.4%	3.5	43%	91.6%

The boundaries of the case included the 2015-2016 school year, which encompassed the eight-week unit on critical literacy and gender, the teacher, the students, and the classroom. Observations and interviews occurred throughout the school year beginning in September 2015. The unit was implemented from the beginning of February through the end of March 2016. The physical space, such as the layout and décor as well as the classroom community, were also included in the boundaries of this case.

**Context.** The case study took place during the 2015-2016 school year in Ms. Johnson's classroom. Figure 2 provides a glimpse into Hope's classroom including the reading area she set up, books included in her classroom library, and a poster she had hanging on the wall that caught my attention because it seemed to relate to the focus of this study—gender and critical literacy. Specifically, I collected data during the scheduled ninety-minute English Language Arts block and during planning sessions for the critical literacy and gender unit. Specific details of the unit were planned in collaboration with the teacher and were informed by the pilot study conducted during the previous school year. Beyond the context of the unit, it is important to note the broader educational context in which this study took place. The data collected related to this case took place during a time of intense focus on standards and assessments at the local, district, state, and national levels. There was undeniable tension between policy makers, administrators, and teachers surrounding what should be taught in classrooms. The principal at Wilcox had started her first year at the school and as a principal during the 2014-2015 school year, making the year this study was conducted only her second year

of experience in this role. Due to these factors teachers at Wilcox were struggling to maintain agency in their classrooms. They were being asked to implement a more rigid literacy block than they had been in previous years and there was an increased focus on preparing students for standardized testing.

Despite these less than desirable conditions, Hope was committed to implementing literacy practices that went beyond teaching test based skills. As one of four teachers on the fifth grade team, Hope had a supportive group of women who all collaborated and shared the responsibilities of planning instruction.

**Researcher Roles.** At the beginning of my time in Hope's classroom, I anticipated that I would be more of a silent observer, taking in the sights and sounds of the classroom before, during, and after the unit. I quickly realized that this was not a feasible or appropriate role as Hope was a novice in her understandings of both critical literacy and gender. Instead, I became a part of the classroom community and took on the role of participant observer (Spradley, 1980). As a participant observer, I took on several roles as I worked with Hope and her students. For example, I took on the role of teacher, as described by Stake (1995). The role of the teacher is one that informs, increases competence, and/or liberates (Stake, 1995). As I planned, collaborated with, and at times even co-taught with Hope I took on this role. Although Hope had been teaching from a critical literacy perspective even before we met, she lacked the vocabulary and formal training surrounding these practices. There were also gaps in her knowledge and understanding of the historical content associated with gender equity and women's rights. I took on the role of teacher to help bridge these gaps for both Hope and

her students. It is important to recognize this particular role that I played as it undoubtedly colored my relationship with Hope, her students, and the research I was conducting. As mentioned earlier, for the purposes of this study I chose not to focus on analyzing the data pertaining to my role as researcher and instead focused on what I saw as the more pressing issue—how this teacher and her students engaged in critical literacy as a way to address gender inequities in their classroom and everyday lives.

**Figure 2. Pictures from Hope’s Classroom**



*Reading Area*



*Classroom Library Books*



*Poster*

### Focus Students

I chose to work with the six focus students in this study after conducting several whole group observations in the Fall of 2015. I wanted to include students with a variety of personality traits. During the observations, I made note of students who seemed interesting for different reasons, whether it be that they were more outspoken than other students, quieter than their peers, made comments about gender during whole group discussions, or based on insight Hope had provided. There were several students who I

initially wanted to work with but who did not provide student assent for participation. I wanted to be sure that the students I chose to focus on were representative of the school and classroom demographic population. A large percentage of the school and classroom populations identified as Latino/a (See Tables 2 and 3 for demographic information). Therefore, three of the six focus students I chose to interview also identified as such. Since the focus students shared their specific Latino/a heritage with me (i.e. Mexican), I will use this term when describing them throughout the study. However, when referencing the school and classroom populations, since they were made up of students from a variety of Latino/a backgrounds, I will use this more general term (i.e. Latino/a) as I have in previous sections. I also wanted an even number of girls and boys represented to help gain both perspectives, particularly when thinking about issues of gender inequity. Finally, I attempted to include students across a variety of ability levels in reading.

The students I chose to focus on, three boys (Ricardo, Miguel, Nick) and three girls (Isabella, Emma, Angelene) are described in more detail below. In the descriptions, I provide detail about their self-perceptions as students, information about their self-reported reading practices, and brief descriptions of details they shared with me about their home and family lives.

### **Ricardo.**

*Personal & Academic Background.* Ricardo's family immigrated to the United States from Mexico when he was a baby. English was his second language. He had received services from the ELL teacher at Wilcox for several years but Hope shared that he had "tested out" at the beginning of fifth grade. Hope described him as a student who

continued to “struggle with reading and writing.” She said despite his struggles he put forth “good effort” and was a student who despite being slightly “timid” worked to “contribute to class discussion.”

Ricardo lived with his mom, her boyfriend, his younger brother, and his maternal grandmother who Ricardo seemed to worry about quite a bit due to a chronic illness she suffered from. He shared that his family valued “all the family members” and that they were “always taking care of” him.

***Self-Perception as Student.*** He described himself as a “good student” and saw himself as being good at “math and other things.” His favorite subject was math because he was often able to “get the hang of it.” His least favorite was science because he found the vocabulary challenging.

***Reading Practices.*** Ricardo enjoyed reading books with suspense and shared that at the time of our initial interview he was reading *Caught: The Missing* by Margaret Peterson Haddix. He shared that he also liked to read books about history, books that were funny like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and that even though he did not feel that science was his best subject he still enjoyed reading “science books.” He described himself as a “reader, a fast reader” but admitted that “the words” were sometimes hard for him to understand so he used strategies such as “context clues” to help him when he got stuck. Hope shared that he started the beginning of the year at an end of third grade reading level and by the end of the year had moved to a beginning fourth grade reading level. She also shared that he scored a 58% on his cumulative end of year reading benchmark. However, Hope expressed that she felt Ricardo was a higher reader than the reading

assessment indicated but that his scores were a reflection of the language barrier he continued to work through.

***Purpose for Selection.*** I chose Ricardo as one of the focus students for this study because I had observed his efforts to contribute to class conversations during my first few visits to Hope's classroom. His seemingly sensitive demeanor and friendliness toward other students in the class, particularly another focus student, Roselyn, also intrigued me.

**Miguel.**

***Personal & Academic Background.*** Miguel's family also immigrated to the United States from Mexico but had done so before he was born. He spoke Spanish as his first language and was receiving ELL services at the time the study took place. Hope shared that his family was of low socioeconomic status and that he struggled to keep up with his peers on academic assessments. When this study began, he was at a beginning third grade reading level and had scored 27% proficient on the most recent reading benchmark. Hope described him as a "good kid" but said that he struggled to focus during class and believed that his behavior at times hindered his ability to do well academically. During one of our first informal interviews she described him as a "typical boy" always having "trouble sitting still." She also shared that he was quite social and seemed to always "need attention." He often was reprimanded for socializing with peers during times Hope felt were inappropriate.

Miguel lived with his mom, dad, and two older sisters one who had been in Hope's class the previous school year. He had a difficult time articulating his family values but shared that his dad was "hard working and playful," his mom was "hard

working and respectful”, and his sisters were “weird.” He shared that his dad worked two jobs, one in which he helped manufacture furniture and the other in the kitchen at a local restaurant—something Miguel seemed to be proud of.

***Self-Perception as Student.*** Miguel described himself as “kind of a troublemaker.” He shared that he would often get in trouble at school “because whenever I get near kids or my friends I just start talking to them.” His perception of himself as a student aligned with what I observed in the classroom, how Hope described him, and how his peers seemed to also view him. He shared that his favorite subject was math and his least favorite subject was reading. Although, he said he wanted to become a better reader because his mom told him “when you read books...you get smart.”

***Reading Practices.*** Miguel struggled to articulate insight into his reading practices. He said he liked to read fiction but could only point to books he was required to read in class when asked about his current and past reading practices. When asked about his strengths as a reader he said, “...only the reading part” and shared that he found writing to be a challenge. These responses seemed to align with his performance on literacy assessments in class. By the end of the year he had moved to a beginning fourth grade reading level and scored a 45% on the final reading benchmark assessment.

***Purpose for Selection.*** I chose to focus on Miguel because he seemed to provide a sharp contrast to the characteristics displayed by Ricardo. He was a student who seemed to enjoy the attention of others, particularly his female peers. There were several instances during my initial observations in which Miguel made comments that could be seen as perpetuating stereotypes such as using the word “girl” as an insult to other male

students. He seemed to seek attention from his teacher as well. He was also quite sensitive and would become upset if he felt left out or that others did not like him.

**Nick.**

***Personal & Academic Background.*** Nick was Caucasian. He was labeled as Academically Gifted in reading. He started and ended the school year reading above grade level with a cumulative final reading benchmark score of 81%. Hope described him as a student that “thinks outside of the box.”

Nick lived with his mom, stepdad, and baby sister. Hope shared that he came from a family with low socioeconomic status. His parents were divorced and he shared that he did not get to see his biological father often. His extended family was from Maine and Florida, two states he visited often in order to spend time with relatives. During our initial interview, Nick shared that his family valued traveling, vacation, and family.

***Self-Perception as Student.*** When asked to describe himself as a student, Nick shared, “Most of my friends call me intelligent and fun.” His favorite subject was science because as he put it, “it’s more creative and I like being creative.” He shared that he did not enjoy math because he found it more difficult than other subjects.

***Reading Practices.*** Nick enjoyed reading particularly because it allowed him to “imagine stuff.” He described himself as a “really fast” reader who was “good at doing vocabulary and finding out the meanings” of words. He shared that he liked to read fiction books and nonfiction books focused on topics like history and geography. At the time of our initial interview he was reading *Sword of Summer* by Rick Riordan. Nick

also felt that his strength in reading was his ability to “explain the text” after he had read it but found “reading out loud” to be challenging at times.

***Purpose for Selection.*** I chose to focus on Nick because he was quite outspoken during class discussions I observed in my first few observation sessions. He was a student that seemed to be more aware of gender stereotypes than his peers from the very start. Before the unit began he was using terms like “justice” and “injustice” to describe things, such as the way Malala Yousafzai was treated. He was also one of the first students to point out male characters who challenge gender norms.

**Isabella.**

***Personal & Academic Background.*** Like Ricardo and Miguel, Isabella’s family was from Mexico. She spoke English as her second language and prior to fifth grade had received ELL services at Wilcox. She also received services for speech therapy prior to and throughout the fifth grade school year. In addition, she was labeled as Academically Gifted in reading, beginning and ending the school year reading above grade level. Her final reading benchmark score was 97%.

She lived with her mom, dad, brother and sister who were both in their early twenties, and her sister’s baby boy. Hope shared that Isabella came from a family of low socioeconomic status, something Isabella also touched on during our initial interview. When asked what her family valued she they valued food and money. She shared, “My dad doesn’t get paid a lot so the stuff that we have, we’re grateful for it. We have to eat what we have even if it’s something we don’t like.” Like Miguel’s dad, her dad also worked at a local furniture manufacturing plant. Despite these financial struggles

Isabella seemed to have a happy home life, describing her dad as “playful,” her mom as “generous,” and her sister as the “very fun one in the family.”

***Self-Perception as Student.*** Despite Isabella’s high reading ability, she started off as one of the quietest students in class during my observations, often having to be coaxed by Hope to share her thoughts and ideas during whole group discussions. This is something she recognized and reflected on during our initial interview. She shared, “I’m not the very talkative one. Like I laugh when they call me sometimes...I get it sometimes, but I don’t want to be called on.” Her favorite subjects were reading because she loved “to read lots of books” and math because she felt she was “really good at it” since her dad taught her “a lot of tricks.” Her least favorite subject was writing because as she put it, “I can’t think what to write. I’m like stuck.”

***Reading Practices.*** Isabella enjoyed reading fantasy, realistic fiction and books with “lots of drama.” At the time of our initial interview she was reading the book *Minnie McClary Speaks Her Mind*. She shared that she liked reading books because “...it takes your mind off stuff that is bad or good. You feel more comfortable.” However, she admitted that sometimes the vocabulary words were challenging for her. She also discussed her challenges with reading related to her speech disorder saying, “It’s harder for me to read sometimes because of my tongue. I don’t know why. I can’t say my “s” or my “z” that well so I had to go to speech therapy.”

***Purpose for Selection.*** I chose to interview Isabella because she offered a perspective that seemed to be quite different than the other two girls in the study. In

addition, her quiet demeanor intrigued me and I wondered how the unit might impact her hesitations to share in class.

**Emma.**

***Personal & Academic Background.*** Emma, a Caucasian female, was labeled as Academically Gifted in reading. She started and ended the school year reading above grade level. Her final reading benchmark score was a 93%. Hope suggested her as one of the students I might want to focus on during my first visit to her classroom. She described Emma as “outspoken” and shared that other students sometimes interpreted her bold personality as her being “bossy.” However, Hope saw her as a leader in the classroom and encouraged her to speak her mind.

Emma lived with her dad, stepmom, and two older brothers. Her biological mother struggled with drug addiction and lost custody of Emma when she was in first grade. Emma visited her biological mom and grandma, who lived out of state, for a short time during the summers. During our initial interview Emma shared that her family valued family and stability despite some of the challenges they had faced saying specifically, “we all treasure each other. We argue a lot but just little squabbles. We value that we have money and a roof over our head because we know that some people don’t have that kind of stuff.”

***Self-Perception as Student.*** Despite the fact that Emma felt others would describe her as “really mature” and “smart” she saw herself as “funny” and a “hard worker.” Her favorite subject was math because she felt it was “the easiest and the most

fun.” However, she like science least because as she put it, “it’s just boring” and she didn’t “understand it very well.”

***Reading Practices.*** Emma enjoyed reading and seemed to be quite the avid reader. She liked that “you can put yourself in the speaker’s shoes” and “see from their perspective...it’s a whole different perspective on life.” She shared that she liked to read books about Anne Frank because she was “a role model for young minds.” She also liked to read fiction and Greek Mythology. At the time of our initial interview she was reading *The Lightning Thief* by Percy Jackson. Despite her enjoyment for reading and her success with it in school she admitted that at times it could be challenging if there were words she didn’t understand or know the meaning of. She shared that she would “usually just get my dictionary from home and look them up” when she came to unfamiliar words.

***Purpose for Selection.*** From my very first visit to Hope’s classroom it became apparent that Emma was a student I would want to include in the study. Not only did Hope suggest her as a potential participant, but I witnessed firsthand her passion for human rights. On the first day of observations she became visibly upset when talking about girls’ lack of access to education around the world. She also had work that Hope had displayed on the classroom door where she had written that she wanted to speak out about women’s rights. Hope encouraged Emma to share the quote she had written on the cover of her literacy journal, which read: “Nobody has ever failed by being themselves.” After sharing this with me she said, “It’s a quote I live by.” This interaction confirmed for me early on that Emma would be a student who would be interesting to focus on

throughout the unit of study on critical literacy and gender because of her outspokenness and interest in women's rights.

**Angelene.**

***Personal & Academic Background.*** Angelene started and ended the school year reading above grade level. She scored a 75% on her final reading benchmark assessment for the school year. Hope described her as “the epitome of a well-rounded, cultured, exposed, awesome kid. She challenges her peers because she’s got opinions and she’s not afraid to speak them.” She suggested I include Angelene as one of my focus students.

Angelene’s family was from Egypt. They were also of the Muslim faith. Both aspects of her home life that Angelene often spoke about in class and during the time I spent with her conducting interviews. She lived with her mom, dad, and older brother. Hope described her as coming from a family with high socioeconomic status. Angelene shared that her family valued family, especially because they had immigrated to the U.S. from Egypt and had no extended family that lived close by. She also said that her parents wanted to maintain a connection to their Egyptian heritage, especially for Angelene and her brother so they made an effort to visit each summer.

***Self-Perception as Student.*** Angelene felt pressure to live up to her older brother’s reputation at Wilcox. She shared, “all the teachers talk about [my brother]. [They say] ‘awe he was a great student’ and I’m just like ‘I want to be like that.’” Because of this pressure to follow in her brother’s footsteps, Angelene worked hard to be a good student. As she put it, she was always “trying my best to be better.” Her favorite subjects were writing because liked “getting her “pencil on paper” and science because

she liked “hearing all the fun stuff.” However, she did not enjoy math because she found it confusing.

***Reading Practices.*** Like Emma, Angelene seemed to be an avid reader and spoke in detail about her reading practices. She enjoyed reading chapter books that encompassed fantast, mystery, adventure, and action. At the time of our initial interview she was reading *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard: The Sword of Summer* by Rick Riordan. Angelene liked reading because she could “get lost in it.” She shared, “I feel like I’m watching it, like I’m standing in the scene.” She did not like when she had to read books that had been assigned to her because she worried she would not like the content. She also felt that reading aloud was challenging for her because she at times became “tongue-tied.”

***Purpose for Selection.*** I chose to work with Angelene after just a few days of conducting whole group observations in the Fall of 2015. I noted in my research notebook that very early on she was aware of and brought of power relationships. For example, on my third day of observations during whole group discussion she contributed to the discussion by stating, ““Children don’t have much power. Kids’ voices aren’t heard. Like the girls in Pakistan.” Her awareness of gender inequities in this observation also caught my attention. Additionally, Hope suggested her as a student I might want to focus in on because as she put it, Angelene “constantly talks about gender stereotypes.” Angelene seemed to have an awareness about issues of inequity related to gender, and other topics, that was well beyond that of her peers even before the unit began. This

seemed to stem from her experiences traveling to Egypt where she witnessed inequitable treatment of women first hand.

### **Data Collection**

In concurrence with the framework proposed by Reinking and Bradley (2004), the study occurred in six phases. Appendix A provides a visual of these phases and the data that was collected in each phase. These phases included recruitment of the school and teacher, demographic data gathering and initial observations, gathering of baseline data to establish where informants were in relation to the pedagogical goal, implementing the intervention—the “heart” of the study as Reinking and Bradley (2004) describe it, post assessment to provide a comparison to the baseline data, and finally determining findings and writing up results. Appendix B provides a visual representation of my data collection timeline and management plan for this study. Additionally, I have included a data collection crosswalk demonstrating which data sources helped to answer the research questions in Appendix C. In the following paragraphs, I provide further explanation of each of the six phases.

**Phase I: Recruitment.** The process I used to recruit informants was described in detail in the section above titled “informant selection process.” During this phase I recruited the teacher who agreed to participate in this study by reaching out to administrators and other district personnel for suggestions of teachers who engaged in critical literacy and might be willing to participate in this study. Once Ms. Johnson showed interest in participating I met with her to further explain the details of the study. I

presented her with the consent to participate form and she signed, agreeing to participate in this study.

## **Phase II: Demographic Data Gathering.**

*Observations and Fieldnotes.* The first part of the study occurred during Fall 2015. Beginning in September and going through the end of January, I visited Hope's classroom 1-2 times per week and recorded observations during her literacy block. I arranged the best days and times of the week to visit based on Hope's schedule. During my observations, I used the observation/fieldnote protocol to focus in on how Hope and her students engaged in critical literacy. I have provided a copy of this protocol in Appendix D. During each visit, I aimed to enter the classroom quietly as not to disrupt instruction. I sat at the teacher's kidney table located at the back of the classroom. I used a digital voice recorder to record the lessons and interactions occurring at the time of the observations. Rather than printing multiple copies of the protocol, I used a composition notebook that I designated as my researcher notebook I took notes using a two-column format, writing descriptive details in the left column (i.e. observations) and reflections or questions (i.e. fieldnotes) in the right column (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). I also included a list of critical literacy components and dimensions at the top of the protocol to help keep me focused on the things I should look for during observations. This two-column organization followed the same format as the digital copy of the protocol I designed. I printed a single copy of the protocol and kept it in my researcher notebook, referencing it as I completed observations. I listened in for ways that Ms. Johnson and her students used critical literacy practices and/or brought up issues of gender inequity.

For example, I listened for ways Hope did this through questioning (i.e. “Who has the power in this text?”) and the ways student did this through sharing of personal connections (i.e. “People say I shouldn’t wear pink because I’m a boy”). I made note of factors that seemed to enhance (i.e. support from teammates) or inhibit (i.e. time constraints) the ability of the teacher and students to engage in critical literacy. I also used this time to determine which 3 boys and 3 girls would be best to include in the student interviews and focus group session. I noted specific students that seemed to have interesting insight and represented the diversity present in the classroom. The data from these sources helped me to answer each of the research questions.

### **Phase III: Baseline Data Gathering.**

*Initial Interviews.* This phase took place in January and February 2016. In phase three, I conducted initial interviews with Hope and the 6 students selected as focus students for the study. Hope and I determined the best time to meet to conduct the initial teacher interview. We met in her classroom during times when she did not have other responsibilities such as instructing students or attending faculty meetings. I used a digital voice recorder to record our conversation. Using the teacher interview protocol, I asked Hope questions about critical literacy (i.e., *What does the term critical literacy mean to you? From your perspective, what role does dialogue play in engaging in critical literacy with your students?*) and gender (i.e., *How, if at all, have you challenged traditional gender roles in your classroom this year? How, if at all, do you see your gender influencing your perspectives in the classroom?*). The answers to these questions helped me to answer research question 2a: *In what ways does the teacher understandings of*

*critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?* Appendix E provides a copy of the interview protocol used with the teacher.

Student interviews were conducted during this phase as well. I met with one student at a time to conduct initial interviews. The student and I found a quiet place to sit together; this included spaces such as a corner of the school library, a desk in the fifth grade hallway, and a nearby empty classroom. I used the digital voice recorder to record each interview with students. Students were asked questions about their reading habits (i.e. *Can you tell me a little bit about what you like to read?*), critical literacy (i.e.: *Describe what you have noticed about the way girls are represented in the texts you've read in class or on your own.*), and gender (ex: *How, if at all, do you think school experiences are different for girls and boys? Finish this sentence: "The best thing about being a girl/boy is..."*). The data gathered from this data source helped to answer research question 2b: *In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?*

**Card Sort.** When time permitted at the end of each interview I asked students to complete a card sort in which I provided students with a set of index cards, when there was not sufficient time we met on a different day to complete the sort. Each index card contained a single word or phrase, either an adjective (i.e. strong, weak, emotional, kind, beautiful, etc.) or role (ex: pilot, police officer, baker, parent, doctor, etc.) that have been used to describe men/boys and women/girls in children's literature. Students were asked to place each card under one of the following headings: Boys/Men, Girls/Women, or Both Boys/Men and Girls/Women. After they placed the card under the heading of their

choice, I asked students to explain why they placed the card where they did. This data helped me answer research question 2b: *In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?*

**Book Sort.** On a separate day, I again pulled each student individually and found a quiet spot to meet. Students were asked to complete a book sort focused on the ways gender is represented in children's texts. Students were given a set of books that were pulled from their classroom and school library and asked to place them under the headings: Boys Books, Girls Books, or Books for Both Girls and Boys. Examples of books that were included in the sort include: *The Paperbag Princes*, *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink*, *Maniac Magee*, *Knights of the Lunch Table*. The set of books used for the book sort contained a variety of topics and represented boys and girls in varying roles—some female main characters and some male main characters. Students were asked to explain their placement of each book. Both the book and card sort were also recorded using a digital voice recorder. Appendix F provides a detailed look at the protocols I created and followed when collecting student interview, card sort, and book sort data. Like the card sort data, the book sort activity helped me answer research question 2b: *In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?*

**Unit Planning and Informal Interviews.** Additionally, during this phase, I began to meet with Hope to collaboratively plan the eight-week unit focused on critical literacy and gender. We met four times to plan and discuss ideas for the unit. I audio recorded our planning sessions that took place after school in Hope's classroom. Informal

interviews also occurred during planning sessions as we spoke about Hope's thinking regarding critical literacy and gender. I continued to visit Hope's classroom 1-2 times per week during phase three in order to conduct observations of Hope and her students. This data provided insight in to each of the research questions.

#### **Phase IV: Implementing the Intervention.**

*Observations and Fieldnotes.* The fourth phase of this project was focused on the implementation of the critical literacy unit. The unit was taught from the beginning of February through the end of March 2016. Hope and her students were engaged in lessons we collaboratively planned during the previous phase. Lessons took place during the ninety-minute English Language Arts block. During whole group instruction, I audio recorded and took fieldnotes in my researcher notebook looking for the ways the teacher and students engaged in critical literacy practices focused on questioning gender inequities. I also took note of factors that seemed to enhance or inhibit the ability of the teacher and students to engage in critical literacy practices focus on gender inequities. During observations, I looked for the instructional practices the teacher and students engaged in and how these might be similar to or different from the practices they engaged in during phase two. For example, I looked for ways that both Hope and her students used literacy to question unequal power relationships (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002). One way Hope did this during my pilot study was by implementing a lesson in which she had students tally the number of male and female names listed in the index of the fifth grade social studies textbook. In this example, Hope and her students were surprised to find that of 134 names listed in the index only 18 of them were female. This turned in to

a discussion about who had the power in this text, who the authors of the text were, and what their purpose for including more men than women in the textbook might have been. Appendix C provides additional examples of the kinds of things I looked for during observations. These data sources helped me answer each of the research questions.

***Informal Interviews.*** Additionally, during this phase, I conducted several informal interviews with Hope and the 6 students selected as focus students during phase two. These interviews were similar to conversations. For example, at times I had questions about what a student was thinking as they wrote a reading response or worked on a group task or why Hope decided to ask a specific question during instruction. These questions could not be fully projected prior to the implementation of the unit, however, as I anticipated clarifying questions did arise. These data sources helped me address each of the research questions.

***Researcher Role.*** My role during this phase was flexible. Formative experiments allow space for the researcher to take on a broad range of roles that other methodologies may frown upon. For example, researchers in formative experiments might help manage classroom activities, teach whole class lesson, work with small groups, or work one-on-one with students (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). During my pilot study, I struggled with the roles Ms. Johnson often needed me to take on. It seemed that as a researcher I was breaking some kind of rule about taking over a lesson when Hope struggled to teach the concept or to rephrase a question she asked the class to help students think about it in a different way. Hope would often turn to me in the middle of a lesson and say “Help me out Ms. Brooke” or “Do you have any questions for the class?” She invited me in,

welcomed me, made me feel like a part of the classroom community, and even placed me in the role as a co-teacher at times. However, with taking on a formative experiment approach to research, these roles are all completely acceptable and even encouraged. During this study, I worked with Hope however she needed me to. This included working with students in small groups, teaching parts of lessons, and working one-on-one with students. Every lesson was recorded and I took copious notes in my research journal immediately after each data collection session to help make up for the time that I was not be able to take notes during instructional time.

#### **Phase V: Post Assessment.**

*Follow Up Interviews.* Post assessment data was collected in the sixth week of the unit and in the week after the unit ended. During this phase, I completed a follow up interview with both the teacher and each of the 6 focus students. The interview consisted of the same questions asked during the initial interview as well as a few additional questions. For example, in the student follow up interview, I asked students about their experiences during the unit on critical literacy and gender (ex: *How do you feel about reading a text and asking these kinds of questions? Do you think it's important to ask these questions? Why or why not?*). Each of the 6 focus students were also asked to reflect on the same card and book sort as they completed during phase three of the study. Prior to meeting with each student, I set up the card sort and book sort in the way that the student arranged it during phase three. They were then asked to look at how they completed each sort and decide if they still agreed with the way they originally completed the tasks. They were given the opportunity to make changes and then explain why they

made the choice to change the placement of a card or book. This data helped me to answer research questions 2a (*In what ways does the teacher understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?*), 2b (*In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?*), and 3 (*In what ways do fifth grade students engage in critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity?*).

**Student Focus Group.** During this phase, I also conducted a focus group with all 6 of the boys and girls selected as focus students. During the focus group students were asked to have a discussion about critical literacy and gender (ex: *In what ways can reading be used as a tool to help overcome injustices, specifically injustice experienced by girls and women? Of all the things you have learned during this unit, what is the most important to you? Why?*). Additionally, the group of students were shown an example of a completed the card and book sort. They were asked to examine the sorts and engage in a discussion based on questions about the sorts (ex: *Is there anything about the way this student completed the book sort that you find interesting? What? Why?*). When conducting the focus group with students, we met in an empty classroom down the hall from Hope's room. I audio recorded the focus group and took notes in my research notebook during and after the group session. This helped me answer research question 2b (*In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?*)?

## **Phase VI: Writing Up Results.**

*Observations and Fieldnotes.* The sixth phase of the study took place after the critical literacy and gender unit ended, from the first week in April through the third week in May 2016. As in phase two, I visited Hope's classroom 1-2 times per week during her English Language Arts block. During my observations, I used the observation/fieldnote protocol to focus in on how Hope and her students engaged in critical literacy. Each week when I visited the classroom I again aimed to enter quietly, as not to disrupt instruction. I resumed my spot at the teacher's kidney table located at the back of the classroom, as I did in phase two. I used a digital voice recorder to record the lessons and interactions occurring at the time of the observation. I once again began to take notes using a two-column format (Appendix C). I listened in for ways that Ms. Johnson and her students used critical literacy practices and/or brought up issues of gender inequity. I also made note of factors that seem to enhance or inhibit the ability of the teacher and students to engage in critical literacy. This data helped me to answer each of the research questions. During this time, I also began the initial phases of refining data analysis, reflecting on the data I had gathered throughout the project, and writing up results. Writing up the final results was not complete until October 2016.

## **Data Analysis**

As mentioned in previous sections, the formative experiment approach to research is still emerging and has yet to provide specific guidelines for how researchers should go about analyzing data. Reinking and Bradley (2008) emphasize the idea that data analysis is flexible and "may be adapted in response to developments during the investigation"

(Reinking & Bradley, 2008, p. 21). Data analysis should align with the goals of formative experiment research and work to help the researcher draw conclusions, clarify theory, and offer recommendations (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Reinking and Bradley (2008) recommend that the aim of data analysis should be to characterize the instructional content, identify factors that enhance or inhibit progress toward the pedagogical goal, explain unexpected outcomes, and determine the extent to which the intervention transformed the learning environment (Reinking & Bradley, 2008).

As I utilized mostly qualitative methods throughout the formative experiment, I drew from Creswell (2013) to help me conceptualize a plan for data analysis. However, I also recognized the importance of being flexible in this process and have quantified some of the data to provide additional insight in to the findings (i.e. card and book sort data). Creswell (2013) provides a general description of data analysis in qualitative research that consists of preparing and organizing the data, reducing data into themes, and finally representing the data (Creswell, 2013). This is the approach I took as I analyzed the data. I relied on Creswell's (2013) idea of the "data analysis spiral" as a way to conceptualize this process as ongoing. Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral consists of data managing, reading/memoing, describing/classifying/interpreting, and representing/visualizing—all of which happened continuously throughout the data collection process. In the following paragraphs, I will describe how I analyzed the different types of data I collected for this study.

**Interviews and Focus Groups.** I recorded and then had a transcriptionist transcribe the semi-structured teacher and student initial and follow up interviews as well

as informal interviews that took place throughout the school year. Using a digital voice recorder, I recorded each of these sets of data. As soon as possible after leaving the research site I transferred the data from the digital recorder to my computer and deleted it from the recorder. Each file was named systematically indicating the informant, date, and type of data source. I then, with the help of a transcriptionist, transcribed the interviews in a Word document. I read through the transcriptions and engaged in open coding, looking for recurring ideas that came up across the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next I developed a list of initial codes that I continuously returned to as I gathered additional data, looking for evidence that supported the initial codes. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) describe it, during initial open coding researchers are “brainstorming possible kinds of relevant information” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 85). I simultaneously coded using a priori codes taken from the research on critical literacy (ex: disrupting the common place, focusing on sociopolitical issues, interrogating texts using multiple viewpoints, and taking action to promote social justice). See Appendix G for additional descriptions and examples of these a priori codes. The a priori codes were used initially to see if/how the teacher and students engaged in critical literacy related to any social inequity (i.e. race, class, gender, etc.) during phase two and then again in phase six. During phase five these codes were used to focus on the ways the teacher and students used critical literacy specifically as a way to talk about gender inequities. After several interviews, I began to make a list of emerging patterns in which codes were collapsed in to themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I then engaged in the process of thematic coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used an Excel spreadsheet to organize themes and codes,

placing evidence for each in corresponding worksheets and cells. This allowed me to keep the data organized. Throughout this process I met on a semi-regular basis (i.e. bi-weekly or monthly) with my advisor. Prior to our meetings I would send her questions regarding the codes and/or themes that emerged from the data. During our meetings, we would discuss the codes and/or themes and address any questions we had for each other. This process allowed me to clarify and refine my thinking about the data and what I was finding. It also provided an opportunity for another literacy expert to provide insight into the findings.

Teacher interviews and observations during instruction helped to answer the research questions by providing insight into ways the teacher used critical literacy with her students, addressing research question 1a (*In what ways does a fifth grade teacher use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity in her classroom?*). These data sources also offered insight into research questions 2a and 3 (*In what ways does the teacher understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study? What factors enhance or inhibit the ability of a fifth grade teacher to use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity with her students?*). Student interviews, observations, the focus group session, card sort and book sort data provided insight into research questions 1b and 2b (*In what ways do fifth grade students engage in critical literacy to challenge gender inequity in their everyday lives? In what ways do students understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?*). Interview and focus group protocols included questions that were aimed at answering the research questions. For example, in the teacher interview protocols, I asked the teacher

specifically about the factors she believed enhanced or inhibited the use of critical literacy in her classroom. Additionally, by conducting interviews with both students and teachers prior to and at the conclusion of the eight-week unit, I was being able to see how their perspectives and understandings of critical literacy and gender shifted throughout the course of the intervention. This insight allowed me to reflect on ways critical literacy might be modified to better suit classroom instruction aimed at addressing issues of gender inequity—something I discuss further in the chapter five.

**Card Sort and Book Sort.** The card sort and book sort were initially analyzed in a manner similar to the interviews and focus group session. Both of these data sources were recorded using a digital voice recorder. After completing the card sort and book sort with each student and leaving the research site, I immediately transferred the audio files from the recorder to my password protected laptop computer. Each file was named systematically indicating the informant, date, and type of data source. I then transcribed the recordings of the book and card sort sessions in a Word document with the help of my transcriptionist. I read through each transcript, creating initial codes. A priori codes were simultaneously used to analyze this data. Finally, I collapsed any major patterns into themes.

These data sources were also used to answer the research questions. By having students complete the card sort and book sort prior to the start of and after the conclusion of the eight-week unit, I was able to compare student responses to see if the implementation of the intervention made a difference in the way students thought about gender stereotypes and inequities. This helped me to answer research question 2b (*In*

*what ways do student understandings of CL related to gender shift during a unit of study?).*

The book sort and card sort data were also quantified. First I organized this data in an Excel spreadsheet creating a column for each student and a row for each card or book, placing student responses in corresponding cells. I counted how many students placed each index card under the different headings and how many students placed each book under the different headings. I created tables for both the card and book sort data comparing student responses pre-and post-unit. The tables focus on the percentage of students who placed cards and books in the “both men/boys and women/girls” category before and after the unit (See Appendices H and I). I also used the quantified data to create a table that illustrates the increase in change from a binary category to the more fluid category, “both,” for each student. A double bar graph indicating this change has also been included as it points to the ways that students changed on two separate occasions—when completing the card sort on one day and the book sort on a different day. This data helped support themes that emerged related to research question 2b (*In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?).*

**Recordings, Observations, Planning Sessions.** These data sources were analyzed similar to the other data sources, with one minor difference—my approach to transcription of these data sources was selective. Transcription selections were based on time stamps taken from my research journal following the observation/fieldnote protocol (Appendix C) that indicated when the teacher and/or students engaged in any activity

having to do with critical literacy or gender (i.e. instruction, discussion, informal conversations, etc.). Selective and purposeful transcription of these data sources helped me to manage the large amounts of data I collected throughout the school year. After each session at the research site, I immediately transferred recordings of planning sessions, whole group, and/or small group lessons to my password-protected computer. I saved each systematically indicating the date, type of data, and included informants. I then transcribed the sections selected based on the time stamps I noted during the session. Like with other types of data, I engaged in open coding, looked for major patterns, and collapsed codes into themes. Again, I used an Excel spreadsheet to keep the data organized by theme and code, placing evidence for each in corresponding cells and worksheets.

The selected transcripts from the recordings, observations, and planning sessions helped me answer each of my research questions. In each of these data sources I looked for ways the teacher and students engaged in critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity, ways their perspectives seemed to shift, or factors that seemed to enhance or inhibit their ability to use critical literacy. I paid particular attention to questions asked, activities engaged in, and discussions had among teacher and students. As with other data sources, the information I gained from analyzing the selected transcripts allowed me to reflect on how critical literacy can be utilized in authentic settings to address issues of gender inequity, which I discuss further in chapter five.

**Research Memos.** After each data collection session, I typed or wrote a research memo. The memos consisted of things that stood out to me, interesting things, feelings I

had, specific details that I wanted to remember, excerpts of transcripts, and any thoughts I had on initial patterns I was seeing in the data. Research memos were utilized as a way to incorporate descriptive details and enhance the ethnographic nature of the final research write up. They were also used as a way to help me process my thoughts. The memos also helped me to engage in reflexivity as I reflected on my observations and happenings of the day. Research memos were also analyzed using the same process as described above.

### **Reflexivity**

As Campbell and Lassiter (2015) remind us, ethnography is “as personal as it gets” (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 4). They push back against the idea that research of any kind can ever really be objective. These researchers argue that any attempt at objectivity “masks rather than erases one’s worldviews, sensibilities, agendas, hopes, aspirations, positions, and subjectivities of others” (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 5). I agree with this position. Even quantitative researchers who may point to the idea that “numbers don’t lie” have allowed, either knowingly or unknowingly, their worldviews, agendas, and positions to influence the type of research they choose to do, the questions they ask, and the specific numbers they choose to report and draw attention to. Nothing is free of being influenced by some context or another and it seems worse, even dangerous, to conduct research without acknowledging the ways one’s positionality impacts their informants, data collection and analysis, and report of findings. With this in mind, I have worked toward an “honest and rigorous appraisal of [my] own assumptions and ethnocentrism” throughout this research project (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015, p. 5).

I fully recognize that as a woman, previous elementary school teacher, and self-identified feminist that there are biases I have in conducting this research. As a white woman, I recognize that there are privileges I have benefited from and continue to benefit from because of the color of my skin. I live in a country where I am part of the dominant group. I see people who look and sound like me regularly represented in the media. I speak the language of the dominant group, allowing me to freely communicate with those around me. I fully acknowledge that these aspects of my identity have afforded me opportunities other groups may not have access to due to the systemic oppression that exists in our society.

Additionally, I understand that the feminist movement has a complex history and is guilty of marginalizing groups of women, particularly women of color. It has been seen as a white women's movement in which the issues important to this subgroup have been at the forefront while issues of race and class have been ignored, or worse, used as a way to argue for the betterment of white women at the expense of men and women of color (Newman, 1999). By drawing attention to issues of gender within my research I risk playing a part in this continued marginalization and valuing the values of one group over another. However, in conducting this research, I recognize that beyond gender there are aspects of the informants' identities that impact the opportunities available to them. Race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation are just some of the aspects of informants' identities that play an important role in how they see the world and how the world sees them. In order to make sure I have recognized these differing worldviews and addressed the needs of the informants in this study who come from a largely Latino/a

population, I sought out the expertise of a scholar of Latina heritage who also conducts research in this area. I asked this expert to review my descriptions of Latino/a student informants and excerpts of my findings and interpretations. She then debriefed with me via email, offering insight into the ways I wrote about these students and how I could make changes to more accurately represent them. The advice and guidance I received from this scholar has been incorporated into my description of students in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

I also recognize that my own personal history largely impacts my worldview and what, as a research, I choose to study, the data I choose to focus on, and the ways I write up my findings. I am from working class background and was raised by a single mother. I am the oldest of four children and a first-generation college student. These life experiences have colored my worldview. I witnessed gender oppression from a young age as I watched my mother work overtime and struggle to make ends meet. Growing up in an area inundated with low socio-economic families, my experience was not unique. However, when I went away to college I began to see just how different my experience was from my peers, many of who were from white upper middle class backgrounds. I quickly realized that the injustices experienced in the world were not experienced equally. This set me on a path that would lead me to teaching at Title I schools, working to support my students' potential, helping them to question and push back against injustices they were facing or would likely face. I recognize that it is because of these experiences that I have been drawn to wanting to know more about how teachers can engage in social justice work with their students. It is undeniable that these experiences impacted the way

I viewed and interpret the data. However, I have worked to engage in self-reflection both as I have done here and in my research memos that I completed on a weekly basis throughout the data collection process. I also discussed my thoughts on my own biases as they came up with my advisor during our bi-weekly meetings. Within my researcher journal I would make note of times when I would find myself questioning the ways my life experiences and/or aspects of my identity seemed to be influencing my thoughts. For example, I often questioned how I decided to focus on different aspects of the classroom during observations, asking myself why was I drawn to what a specific student was saying or who was I *not* paying attention to that might provide a different perspective. When I began to notice myself paying attention to a particular student or aspect of the conversation for too long or too heavily, I worked to make a conscious effort to stop myself and focus on other things going on or being said. By engaging in self-reflection, I have worked to keep my own biases in check throughout the research process.

### **Limitations**

As with any research study, from case studies to experiments, from qualitative methods to quantitative and everything in between, there will always be both affordances and constraints of the study, its design, and trustworthiness. In order to work toward minimizing the weaknesses any research, researchers can recognize and be forthcoming about the limitations of the study so that readers can decide for themselves what to take away from the findings.

One constraint of this study is that it utilized an emerging approach to research in literacy education that has yet to establish specific guidelines. This was limiting in that I

had to borrow terminology from other methods, such as case study methods, in order to address aspects of this study. This could also make it difficult to establish legitimacy of this research in the field, while on job interviews, or when trying to publish. Another constraint of the study is that it only focused on one teacher, her students, and classroom. There is no way to guarantee that all teachers or students would have the same experiences or reactions in a similar study.

Additionally, due to time constraints and resources I was only able to focus on the ways Hope and her students worked to address gender inequities. I recognize that critical literacy can be used to address other issues such as race, class, and ability and that these factors also play a role in the experiences of the individual students and teacher who took part in this study. A final limitation is the likelihood of researcher bias; however, this is a limitation of all studies and cannot be avoided. I have worked to counter this limitation by engaging in self-reflection and recognizing the ways my personal experiences and background colored what I observed in Hope's classroom. By keeping a researcher journal where I made note of my personal reactions and worked to temper them, I have attempted to minimize this limitation.

Despite these limitations, the many strengths of this research design and the importance of this research topic outweigh the limitations described here. With the plans, I made to ensure validity and trustworthiness, I believe that I was able to minimize the negative impact that these biases may have had on the findings.

## **Trustworthiness**

As an emerging approach to research, formative experiments have no agreed upon set of guidelines for establishing validity. However, there are several things that have been suggested to help researchers establish validity in formative experiments. These include the use of multiple data sources, flexibility in data analysis, triangulation, and an attitude of skepticism rather than romanticism in what the intervention can accomplish (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Additionally, Reinking and Bradley (2008) suggest using a variety of previously established validation methods associated with qualitative and quantitative research. That being said, I draw from the qualitative paradigm to establish validity in this study.

Validity in qualitative research has generally been replaced with the word trustworthiness (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Trustworthiness is not something to be taken lightly in qualitative research where researchers often get to know their informants on a deep and personal level. It is essential that qualitative researchers take steps to ensure the trustworthiness of their studies, in order to maintain the respect, safety, and comfort of their informants.

A validity threat in qualitative research, according to Maxwell (2013), is “a way you might be wrong” (p. 123). These include, but are not limited to, researcher bias, and reactivity or the threat of what an informant says being influenced by the researcher (Maxwell, 2013). Researcher bias occurs when “selection of data that fit the researchers existing theory” are used to draw conclusions (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Reactivity is an unavoidable threat to validity in qualitative research. As Maxwell (2013) points out,

“what the informant says is *always* influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation” (p. 125). The goal of the researcher then is to understand the ways in which they are influencing the informants and how that influence affects the conclusions that can be drawn from the data (Maxwell, 2013). This is particularly important in formative design experiments because of the subjective nature of this type of inquiry and the degree to which the researcher is involved in the implementation of the intervention. In order to address trustworthiness in this study I used several validation strategies including triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing.

Triangulation, or the use of many different sources of evidence, is a major strength of case study research (Yin, 2009). This is because through triangulation the researcher can develop what Yin (2009) calls *converging lines of inquiry*, or in other words, multiple sources that support the events, facts, and findings of a particular study (Yin, 2009). In this study, multiple sources of data (i.e. observations, interviews, focus groups, a card sort activity, audio recording) were utilized to ensure triangulation and increase the validity of the findings.

In addition, I engaged in member checking with the teacher informant. Member checking is when the researcher “solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (Creswell, 2013). I asked Hope to read over excerpts of my interpretations of the interviews and observations she participated in obtaining her approval of my representations of her before including them in the findings. It was also important that I portrayed the students in the study accurately. Therefore, I also asked Hope to read excerpts of my descriptions and interpretations of student data. This has

helped increase the validity of this study as Hope knew the students well and developed a relationship with them and their families over the course of the school year.

Peer debriefing is another process I used to increase the validity of this study. This process involves asking a peer to play “devil’s advocate” by asking “hard questions about the methods, meanings, and interpretations” of the study (Creswell, 2013). I engaged in this process with two expert advisors. The first, my advisor and committee chair who was also an expert in the field of literacy, met with me throughout the research process as described in the data analysis section of this chapter. During these meetings, she worked to answer questions I had regarding coding, themes, and data analysis. She also provided feedback related to my interpretations, often asking questions that helped push my thinking to new insights. Her guidance during these debriefing sessions provided me with clarification and direction in my analysis and writing. Additionally, as described in the reflexivity section above, I engaged in peer debriefing with another scholar at my university. She was of Latina decent and was an expert in the field of elementary teacher education and critical pedagogy. I sent her excerpts from my descriptions of the Latino/a students that participated in this study along with sections of my findings related to data gathered from these students. She answered questions and provided professional insight into my interpretations of findings related to these students. She also offered suggestions for ways to more sensitively describe students from backgrounds different than my own. This debriefing process occurred via several email exchanges during the data analysis and write up process. In this section I have described the methods I used throughout this research study. As described here a formative

experiment approach was taken with influences from qualitative research approaches such as ethnographic and case study methods. Appendices have been provided for additional information and visual representation of varying aspects of the study. In the following chapters I share the findings from this study.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS PART I

This research study demonstrates the ways Hope and her students engaged in critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity, the ways their understandings related to critical literacy and gender shifted throughout a unit of study, and the factors that enhanced and inhibited Hope's ability to take up this approach with her students. In the following sections I share the findings from each of the research questions this study worked to answer. I have organized the findings into three chapters. I begin with sharing the findings from research questions 1a and 1b in chapter V, followed by findings from research question 2a and 2b in chapter VI, and end with research question 3 in chapter VII. Within each research question there are multiple main and subthemes that are described. Evidence for each theme is provided in the form of quotes, transcripts, and fieldnote descriptions. These pieces of evidence work to support each theme and highlight key aspects of the findings related to the research questions.

#### **RQ1a: In What Ways Does a Fifth Grade Teacher use Critical Literacy to Address Issues of Gender Inequity in her Classroom?**

Four major themes emerged from data pertaining to this research question and that demonstrate the ways Hope's approach to literacy instruction allowed for critical literacy practices to occur among her students. The major themes were based on the dimensions of critical literacy proposed by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002)

and included: disrupting the common place, focusing on sociopolitical issues, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and taking action and promoting social justice. As I discuss each theme in the sections below I provide a description of how I am defining them for the purpose of this study as well as examples from the data that demonstrate the ways Hope engaged in each dimension.

Before moving on to the specific themes it is important to address the ways the four dimensions of critical literacy are interrelated. As I analyzed the data related to this research question I began to realize that in many ways the dimensions overlap when considering what each looks like when put in to practice. For example, Lewison and colleagues (2002) include in their definition of disrupting the commonplace the idea of interrogating texts and developing a language of critique. In their definition of focusing on sociopolitical issues they talk about focusing on issues related to race, class, and gender (Lewison et al., 2002). These two concepts were often happening simultaneously in Hope's classroom. When Hope used critical literacy practices in her classroom the dimensions were connected in ways that made them difficult to talk about separately. This was to be expected as the concepts related to each dimension are highly intertwined. However, I have attempted to do discuss the dimensions separately by including in each main theme the same set of subthemes as a way to talk about how Hope used each dimension with her students. For example, while reading a text Hope would often ask "What message does this send to girls?" This question is an example of how she disrupted the common place by interrogating the text. At the same time, it was also an example of how she focused on sociopolitical issues (i.e. gender).

Although the four dimensions of critical literacy are all approaches to literacy instruction, the subthemes discussed here demonstrated specific ways Hope's approach to literacy instruction allowed her to use the dimensions of critical literacy with her students to challenge gender stereotypes. Subthemes include: using and selecting literacy resources, engaging students in critical conversations, explicitly teaching and modeling, and merging standards with critical literacy practices. Since the same subthemes are discussed in each main theme section I provide brief definitions here as a way to avoid repetition.

For lack of a better term I have decided to call this first subtheme *using and selecting literacy resources* although it may also be thought of as literacy materials or texts. This subtheme includes resources such as children's literature, fiction and nonfiction articles, videos and audio clips, and pictures. The literacy resources Hope selected for instruction encouraged a critical approach to topics in the English Language Arts classroom by focusing on social justice issues. These resources could be found in use during whole and small group instruction. When discussing this subtheme, I will also reference literacy resources around the classroom such as word walls, anchor charts, and bulletin boards, which often offered students an interactive experience that supported their critical literacy practices.

A second subtheme that I will discuss here is focused on *engaging students in critical conversations*. On a weekly, and at times daily basis, Hope asked questions, drew upon literacy resources, and made use of the physical set up in her classroom to engage students in critical conversations. The conversations that occurred between

teacher and students and students and their peers were focused on issues of social justice such as race, class, and gender. Specifically, Hope used these conversations as a way to engage students in challenging gender stereotypes.

The third subtheme was *explicitly teaching and modeling*. Hope supported students in their understanding and engagement with critical literacy by explicitly teaching critical literacy strategies and modeling how to use such strategies. She used instructional time to build student background knowledge about historical and current events specifically related to issues of gender inequality, providing students with opportunities to learn *how* to engage in critical literacy practices.

A final subtheme that came out of this dataset was related to Hope *merging standards with critical literacy practices*. Hope's approach to literacy instruction provided a supportive space where students were able to engage in critical literacy, but she was also able to continue meeting the expectations of administration. Throughout her literacy instruction Hope worked to stay focused on covering the fifth grade English Language Art standards through the use of "I can" statements and opportunities to practice reading strategies and skills while also incorporating critical literacy practices in to both small and whole group instruction.

In the following sections I discuss each main theme: disrupting the common place, focusing on sociopolitical issues, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and taking action and promoting social justice. Within each of the main theme sections I provide evidence of the ways Hope used critical literacy in her approach to literacy instruction through each

of the subthemes described above. Evidence in each section is taken from teacher interviews, observations during instruction, and fieldnotes from planning sessions.

**Disrupting the Common Place.** There was evidence that Hope engaged in critical literacy by disrupting the common place. Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) define this dimension of critical literacy as interrogating texts, including popular culture and media as part of the curriculum, and developing language of critique and hope. When focusing on the teacher data I have considered developing a language of critique to indicate ways she focused on language with students in terms of building and encouraging the use of vocabulary related to critical literacy and systems of oppression. For example, by using, teaching, and expecting students to use terminology related to critical literacy and/or issues of gender inequity. Some of these terms included: marginalized, problematic, and injustice. Another way I am defining how Hope developed a language of critique and hope was in the questions she asked and encouraged students to ask that focused on interrogating the authority of texts, ideas in texts, or past or current systems that perpetuated oppression related to issues of race, class, or gender—with a specific focus on gender. For example, during a lesson on women's voting rights Hope asked the following questions: *Why is it important for every voice to be heard and for everyone to have the right to vote? What will happen to those groups who don't get to vote? How does being marginalized impact their feelings as citizens? Think about Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr. They wanted people to peacefully protest but others were being violent—why?* These questions were intended to help students develop a language of critique in the sense they were aimed at getting students to critique

systems of injustice that worked to oppress certain groups—in this case women, African Americans, and other people of color—and to think about the consequences of such systems.

Additionally, I have thought about developing a language of hope in terms of the ways the teacher focused on change, or potential for change and emphasized actions students could take to make change happen. One way she did this was by highlighting the ways people throughout history worked to bring about change such as peacefully protesting as she does in the example above. Another example of a time Hope worked to develop a language of hope was after reading and analyzing traditional fairytales with students. After the class concluded that the ways men and women were represented in these stories was problematic due to the gender stereotypes they perpetuate, Hope asked students to think about and discuss the following question: *What could authors do to change stories?* This indicated that she was working to develop a language of hope in the sense that she made change seem possible. Further examples are provided in the sections below.

***Using and Selecting Literacy Resources.*** Throughout the critical literacy and gender unit that was implemented during the third nine weeks there was evidence that the literacy resources used during instruction continued to encourage a critical approach to topics in the English Language Arts classroom. What all of the materials had in common was that their content provided a space for Hope to ask students to engage critically with the texts. For example, during the unit, Hope read aloud a section from the book *The Hope Chest* by Karen Schwabach. This historical fiction novel, written by a local author,

followed the journey of a young girl as she set off to find her sister who joined the suffragette movement during the early 1900s. It dealt with issues of gender equality, race, and class. During her read aloud Hope stopped and the following interaction between her and the students occurred:

**Hope:** I have to stop and talk about this. They called Chloe a “New Woman” and that’s what they call her because she voted. Why do you think they called her a “New Woman?” What does that tell you about their view on women voting? [Is it] negative or positive?

**Several students callout:** Negative.

**Hope continues:** What else could we say besides “New Woman”?

**Miguel attempts:** Terrible?

**Nick responds:** Crazy.

**Fernando declares:** Rebellious woman.

The text, in dealing with issues of voting rights in the early 1900s, provided a platform for Hope to be able to engage in disrupting the common place with students in the language the text used to describe a female voter (i.e. “They called Chloe a ‘New Woman’...because she voted”). Here Hope disrupted the common place by developing a language of critique through the use of her literature selection (i.e. “What does that tell you about their view on women voting?”). In this instance the teacher called attention to the author’s tone by asking students if the terminology used to describe female voters was “negative or positive.” By asking this she is opening up a space for students to develop a language of critique in the sense that they focus on the negative ways the characters were being described specifically because of their gender. She also emphasizes the language

in the text by highlighting the phrase “New Woman.” The students begin to develop a language of critique as they work to determine what the author meant by the phrase and come up with terms like “terrible,” “crazy,” and “rebellious.” It was because of the literature selection, focused on gender inequity surrounding women’s voting rights, that Hope was able to engage in disrupting the common place with her students and ask questions that helped them begin to develop a language of critique.

The literacy materials selected even once the unit ended and Hope moved into the final quarter continued to provide a platform for her to engage in disrupting the common place. During our final interview Hope discussed a text the team had selected for their final novel study of the year, *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. This realistic fiction text focused on a young boy who was born with a facial disfigurement that incites bullying and difficulty adjusting to a mainstream school setting. It dealt with issues of social injustice surrounding disabled bodies and, as Hope described below, also provided space for students to continue challenging gender stereotypes. She reflected,

With the book, we are reading right now, *Wonder*... [the students] were talking about how the characters...challenge gender stereotypes because [there] is a strong female character. Whereas, the boy...is the one who...has the insecurity. [The students] were talking about how with most texts it’s the opposite. They also brought up how the mom and the dad are stereotypical because the mom is the comforter, the nurturer.... Dad...has the strong personality, he’s leader of the family. So, they’ve picked up on those in texts.

Although this text did not directly discuss issues of gender, students were able to practice disrupting the common place by focusing on the ways the characters challenged

(i.e. "...is a strong female character") or enacted (i.e. "...mom is the comforter, the nurturer...Dad [is]...the leader of the family") gender stereotypes. In this example, students were interrogating the text by focusing on the ways different genders were represented even though this was not something the content of the text itself focused on. In large part because of the texts Hope selected to read with students, they were able to interrogate the texts' messages, as they did with the novel *Wonder* and develop a language of critique as they did with *The Hope Chest*.

***Engaging Students in Critical Conversations.*** In another lesson that took place during the first week of the unit Hope provided a space for students to engage in disrupting the common place through critical conversations, as described in chapter two, surrounding gender. After reading and comparing the ways traditional (i.e. *Little Red Riding Hood*) and nontraditional (i.e. *Cinder Edna*) fairytales portrayed male and female characters, Hope and the class came together on the carpet to discuss student observations and conclusions about the texts. Hope asked students to share out character traits they noticed about the male and female characters in the two different sets of books—traditional and nontraditional fairytales. As students shared she made two anchor charts one for traditional and one for nontraditional fairytales, dividing both into a t-chart with male character traits listed on the left and female character traits listed on the right (See Figure 3). After compiling the student observations on the anchor charts the following exchange took place,

**Hope:** Look at the character traits, what do you notice about men and women?

**Nick:** Some are the same in the [nontraditional] and the [traditional].

**Colton:** They're kind of portraying women and men to be equal. I think in fractured they make kids think they are equal.

**Hope** probes: Why?

**Kaylee** attempts: They kind of switched roles.

**Hope** returns to Colton's point: Do you agree with that Colton?

**Colton** states firmly: No.

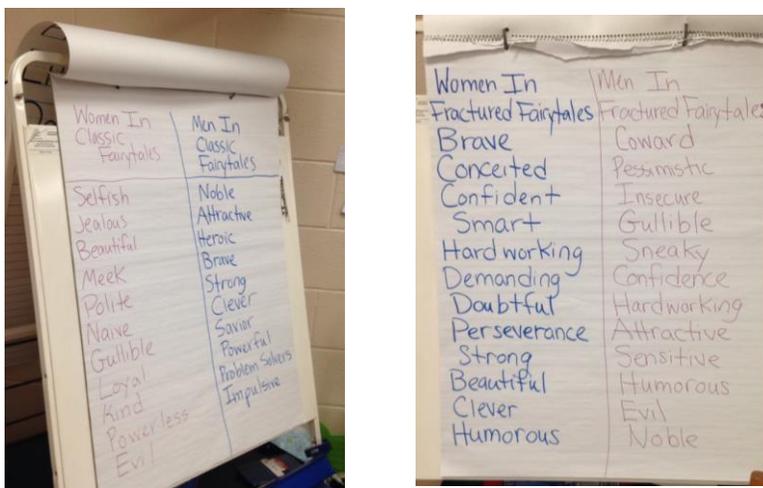
In this first part of the interaction, Hope helped students engage in critical conversations about gender by asking them to critique the conclusions they drew about male and female characters in the two different types of texts. She did this when she asked them to share what they “notice about men and women.” She also required students to hear and respect the viewpoints of others by inviting Colton to agree or disagree with Kaylee's point (i.e. “Do you agree with that Colton?”). The lesson continued,

With help from the students, on a separate anchor chart, Hope proceeded to write a conclusion focused on the nontraditional fairytales. They eventually came up with the conclusion that “[Nontraditional] fairytales give men and women similar traits to show that nobody is perfect and to show equality.” The conversation shifted to focus on conclusions that the students drew from the traditional fairytales. Hope summarized what several students shared, “Even though the titles of the books are Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, etc. it's not really their story.” She then wrote, again with the help of student contributions, on the traditional fairytale anchor chart, “Usually the main character's voice is missing in classic fairytales. The story is named after them but it's not their story.”

Here the conversation surrounding the conclusions students drew about the ways male and female characters were portrayed in the fairytales helped students develop a language of critique through the critical conversation. This was clear in the conclusions

they drew about traditional fairytales in which they essentially concluded that women’s voices were less important than men’s (i.e. “...it’s not really their story” and “...the main character’s voice is missing...”). Hope was also able to help students develop a language of hope through the critical conversation as is apparent in the conclusion students drew about nontraditional fairytales (i.e. “...[they] show that nobody is perfect...”). This indicates a language of hope in that students recognized that authors of nontraditional fairytales attempted to push back against gender stereotypes.

**Figure 3. Fairytale Character Traits T-Charts**



Throughout my time in Hope’s classroom she conducted several introductory lessons focused on key vocabulary words. She would often use this time to engage students in critical conversations about where they had previously heard such words in their own lives. For example, when introducing the word, marginalized, to the class the following interaction took place:

**Hope:** Where in history have you experienced or seen someone being marginalized?

**Colton** shares with the whole group: In sports. Women aren't allowed to play football or hockey.

**Hope** follows up by asking: What message does this send to girls? Is that a problem?

**Emma** protests: Yes! Girls can play football if they want but they can't play in the NFL. That's sexist!!

**Hope:** So, we can all agree that being marginalized based on gender is an issue in sports.

Here Hope and the students engaged in disrupting the common place by developing a language of critique within the conversation. By introducing students to the term, marginalized, she opened up a space for students to talk about power and privilege associated with a variety of identities as only certain groups experience marginalization. She then extended the opportunity to engage in a critical conversation by asking students to think about where they have seen or experienced this word in action. This question asked students to reflect on and critique their everyday life experiences which is one way educators can encourage critical conversations in their classrooms. Furthermore, when she asked, "is that a problem" she provided students the opportunity to practice using this language of critique to challenge gender roles in our society through critical conversation. This conversation, in turn, allowed Emma to disrupt the common place by critiquing girls' opportunity (or lack thereof) to engage in sports (i.e. "they can't play in the NFL. That's sexist!").

***Explicitly Teaching and Modeling.*** Another way Hope was able to use critical literacy, specifically to disrupt the common place, was through explicit teaching and

modeling. Hope had chart paper on an easel that was a focal point in the carpeted area at the front of her classroom where the class met daily as they began the English Language Arts block. She often used this as a space where she could explicitly teach and model critical literacy practices. Anchor charts, created with student help, were later posted around the classroom for students to reference. Although there were many examples of ways Hope explicitly taught and modeled concepts of critical throughout the school year, here I share an example that stood out as being particularly important to her ability to help students understand and apply the dimension of critical literacy, disrupting the common place.

On one of the first days of the critical literacy unit, Hope officially introduced students to the concept of critical literacy and began to help them develop a language of critique and hope. I took notes during this lesson and share them below:

Hope started the lesson by asking students to write down on a sticky note what they thought Critical Literacy might mean. She gave them a few minutes to write their ideas and then collected the sticky notes, reading them aloud, and placing them on an anchor chart with the title “Critical Literacy” written in large black font across the top. Student ideas of what critical literacy might mean included: reading intensely, it’s about race and gender and how to look from the outside, stories about people judging other people, voting/fairness, to disagree respectfully, writing in a different way, being sensitive and what we have to be mature about. Hope then asked the students to notice any common themes in student definitions they came up with. Emma stated, “How things are portrayed.”

Student ideas of the definition of critical literacy indicated that Hope had already taught and modeled how to use such language. This is apparent in responses such as “race and gender and how to look from the outside,” “disagree respectfully,” and “being

sensitive and...mature.” The terminology students used here was indicative of previous lessons Hope taught where she disrupted the common place by developing a language of hope. The lesson continued,

She had students open their notebooks and copy a student friendly definition of critical literacy as she wrote it on the anchor chart. The definition she provided was: “Critical literacy is the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships. When we engage in CL we move beyond just accepting the texts’ message, we look at different points of view and ask critical questions.”

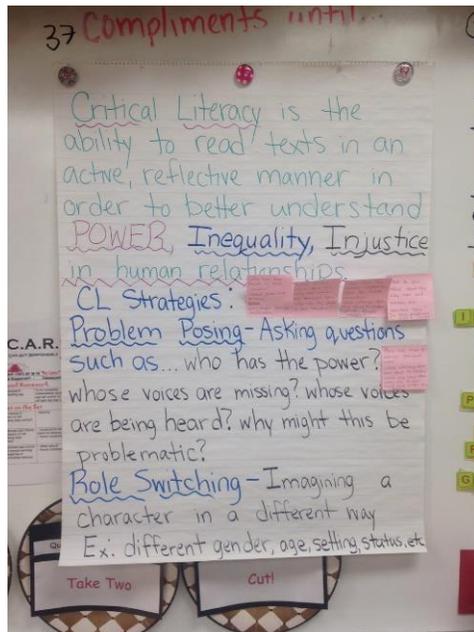
The anchor chart was something she referenced and asked students to reference throughout the unit (Figure 4). It was displayed at the front of the classroom where students could easily be reminded of the definition of critical literacy as they worked to engage in it. Hope explicitly taught students the definition of critical literacy, giving them the language necessary to interrogate texts (i.e. “read texts in an active, reflective manner... understand power, inequality, and injustice... ask critical questions”). Hope continued with the lesson, further providing the support students needed to disrupt the common place,

She then made a list of questions readers ask themselves and each other when engaging in critical literacy. These included: Who has the power in the text? Whose voices are being heard in the text? Whose voices are not being in the text? Is this a problem? How are different groups of people being represented?

Hope provided examples of questions students might ask themselves while reading as a way to put critical literacy in to practice. She was disrupting the common

place by explicitly teaching students about critical literacy questions and giving them specific language they could use to critique and interrogate texts (i.e. “Who has the power in the text?” “Whose voices are not being heard?,” etc.).

**Figure 4. Student Friendly Definition of Critical Literacy**



***Merging Standards with Critical Literacy Practices.*** Hope was able to merge the standards she was required to cover with disrupting the common place. One way she did this was by connecting the ideas of interrogating texts with learning vocabulary strategies. Hope was required to cover the following standard: “determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 5 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4). After taking a benchmark assessment the fifth grade team concluded that students needed extra practice with this particular standard. In the excerpt below, taken from my fieldnotes, Hope

conducted a mini lesson where she worked to review this standard with students while connecting it to critical literacy.

Hope addressed the class, “Another thing we will be working on is our vocabulary strategies throughout this novel.... As we read, we all will be using strategies to help us figure out the meaning of unknown words.” Students called out ideas for strategies they can use and Hope listed them on an anchor chart titled “Vocabulary Strategies.” The list included: read on in the text and infer, look in the glossary, look for a text feature that defines the word, think about parts of the word that you know.

During this first part of the mini lesson Hope focused on the standard she was required to cover—vocabulary strategies. As the standard required, students were encouraged to figure out the meaning of unknown words using a variety of strategies. By listing the strategies on the anchor chart Hope provided a place for students to refer to and easily access these strategies throughout the novel study. She then went on with the lesson,

**Hope:** If you’re asking questions like whose voice is heard, who has the power, how are different groups of people represented but you don’t know the vocabulary words [in the text] then can you answer those questions?

**Students** chorally respond: No!

**Hope:** You aren’t going to be able ask bigger questions if you don’t understand the words [in the text].

In this part of the mini lesson Hope set the purpose for learning the required standard as important and necessary to students’ ability to engage in critical literacy (i.e. “You aren’t going to be able ask bigger questions if you don’t understand the words [in the text]”). Specifically, she focuses on how improving students’ skills with this standard

will provide opportunities for them to be able to disrupt the common place by asking questions such as “who has the power” in order to interrogate texts. Additionally, Hope taught this mini lesson as the class was participating in the novel study using *The Hope Chest*. Students would be required to practice using the vocabulary strategies with a text focused on issues of gender inequity, giving them the opportunity to interrogate the text while simultaneously practicing the standard related to vocabulary strategies.

Another example of how Hope worked to merge the standards with disrupting the common place occurred during a read aloud of *The Hope Chest*. Hope was required to cover the following fifth grade ELA standards: (1) “use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read accurately unfamiliar multisyllabic words in context and out of context” CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.5.3. a; and (2) CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4. a Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase. In the following exchange, Hope stops during a read aloud of *The Hope Chest* to discuss the word “oppressive” with students.

**Hope:** Let’s focus on the word oppressive. What can we infer it means? What word is inside oppressive?

**Lydia:** Press, like you do not feel free.

**Hope:** Beautiful! Can you find a place in the text to support your thinking?

**Lydia:** Like “high walls closing in on her.”

**Hope:** See how she used the text and she also used parts of the word?

Here Hope highlighted the word oppressive—a word associated with issues of social justice. By focusing students’ attention on terms such as this one she engaged in disrupting the common place. She did this by helping students build their vocabulary with terms (i.e. “oppressive”) associated with issues of social justice and systemic oppression. Not only did she introduce them to such words, but she also asked students to think about the meaning of these terms (i.e. “What can you infer it means?”) and provided opportunities for students to use them. This exchange in turn provided students with the opportunity to develop vocabulary related to critiquing issues of social justice, specifically pertaining to the oppression of women and gender inequity because the term was used in relation to women’s voting rights as the class read a section of *The Hope Chest*. At the same time Hope focused on the standards related to vocabulary she was required to cover when she encouraged Lydia to use parts of the word to determine its meaning (i.e. “What word is inside of the word oppressive?”) and then again by having her use context clues from the text to support her response (i.e. “Can you find a place in the text to support your thinking?”).

**Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues.** Focusing on sociopolitical issues is another dimension that Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) suggested as a way teachers and students can engage in critical literacy. They define this dimension in terms of focusing on issues like race, gender, and class; attempting to understand and challenge sociopolitical systems to which we belong; using literacy to engage in politics of everyday life; and aiming to use literacy to question the unequal power relationships. Hope engaged in this dimension in several ways, described below.

*Using and Selecting Literacy Resources.* Literacy resources such as bulletin boards remained interactive and focused on social justice issues throughout the school year. Prior to the start of the school year, Hope decided to utilize the classroom theme “Social Justice Super Stars.” On my first visit to Hope’s classroom in September of 2015, I observed several ways she was using bulletin boards and classroom wall space to provide a platform for critical literacy through this theme. For example, Hope decorated her classroom door using student work focused on social justice issues. Below is a description of what this looked like taken from my first day of fieldnotes,

Across the top of the door she placed shiny gold letters that read “Stars of Social Justice: Learning to Speak out in 5<sup>th</sup> Grade.” Pictures of students were displayed on the door. Next to each student’s picture were half sheets of paper with paragraphs they had written about topics each student wanted to “speak out” about. Topics that students had chosen to write about included wanting “kids voices to be heard,” “helping people that are hungry,” “finding homes for animals and people,” plans to “join the military to serve our country,” “equal pay and treatment for female soccer players,” ideas about how to “keep art in schools,” “protecting animals and their habitats,” and “fighting for women’s rights.”

Hope was using her classroom door, the first thing students, fellow teachers, parents, and administrators who walked by or visited her class would see to focus on sociopolitical issues with her students by providing an opportunity for students to engage in the politics of everyday life (i.e. Via the topics they chose to write about— environmental issues, animal rights, and the gender pay gap) through having their writing displayed in a public forum. She used it as a type of literacy resource that provided a space for her students to engage in critical literacy by highlighting student voices as was

apparent in the title of the display, “Stars of Social Justice: Learning to Speak Out in 5<sup>th</sup> Grade.” She encouraged students to focus on topics that were connected in some way or another to social injustices related to race, class, and gender which they did in their write ups (i.e. “helping people that are hungry” and “fighting for women’s rights”).

Hope used other literacy resources as a platform for focusing on sociopolitical issues, specifically those related to gender inequity. During an introductory lesson to the novel, *The Hope Chest*, she decided to use an interactive online map focused on women’s voting rights around the world. The map allowed her to click each country and provided information on the year women gained voting rights. The following excerpt provides evidence of how she used this resource to focus student attention on sociopolitical issues:

**Hope:** Let’s go to Africa first. [She clicks on Egypt, the country Angelene is from.] In Egypt, women got the right to vote in 1956. [She clicks on another country, South Africa.] White women could vote in 1930, black women in 1994. Why do you think that is?

**Angelene:** Parts of Europe attacked and white people took over.

**Hope:** That’s why there are a lot of white wealthy people there. [She then briefly touches on the concept of conquering vs. exploring and moves on]. Let’s look at South America since many of you are from there. [After clicking on several South American countries to reveal when women got the right to vote she asks students to think about two questions]. What are common themes? What do you notice?

[Students notice that in general women were granted the right to vote first starting in Western European countries and the pattern moved further west to North America and then down to South American countries].

Hope was able to use this online resource to focus on sociopolitical issues—voting rights—a related to gender (i.e. “In Egypt, women got the right to vote in 1956.”).

She did this in her attempt to engage students in conversation as she displayed the map, compared the differing years women were granted the right to vote in various countries, and asked students to share their thoughts on this topic (i.e. “What are common themes? What do you notice?”). These actions also indicate that she was focusing on sociopolitical issues by drawing students’ attention to issues of race, class, and gender as well as focusing on unequal power relationships. This was evident when she discussed the differing years white and black women were granted the right to vote in South Africa (i.e. “White women could vote in 1930, black women in 1994. Why do you think that is?”). The lesson continued,

Once the whole group part of the lesson came to a close, Hope attempted to make the topic of women’s voting rights relevant to today. She posed several questions and asked students to respond to them in their literacy notebooks.

**Hope:** Do you think women have the right to vote in every country today? Why might women today be able to vote in some countries and not in others? How is this [women’s voting rights] still impacting us today?

In the second part of the lesson, Hope used literacy as a way to engage students in the politics of everyday life, specifically related to issues of gender (i.e. “Do you think women have the right to vote in every country today?”). She extended this by asking students to question unequal power relationships (i.e. “Why might women today be able to vote in some countries and not in others?”). Hope was asking students to use literacy to focus on sociopolitical issues in her plan for them to produce written responses to the questions she posed focused on the past and current status of women’s voting rights around the world.

***Engaging Students in Critical Conversations.*** The literature Hope selected served as a platform to engage in critical conversations with her students about issues of race, class, gender, and other sociopolitical factors such as immigration. For example, the theme Hope and the fifth grade team decided on for the first nine weeks of school was focused on human rights. Literacy materials used during this time included award winning multicultural children's literature such as *Henry's Freedom Box* and *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*. Hope also read sections of the book *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up For Education and was Shot by the Taliban* with students, highlighting issues of gender inequity. The book the fifth grade team selected to read for the novel study during the unit on critical literacy was *The Hope Chest*, a young adult novel that takes place during the women's suffrage movement. This text provided many instances in which Hope and her students were able to engage in critical conversations pertaining to gender. For example, during a background building activity in which Hope had students read and listen to a reenactment of a speech Susan B. Anthony gave during a court appearance for illegally attempting to vote, Hope had her students use literacy to question unequal power relationships. The following is an example of a critical conversation that took place surrounding this topic:

**Hope:** Why did Susan vote when it was against the law?

**Monique:** It wasn't fair for women.

**Jose:** To make a difference to change the way people think about women voting.

**Hope:** How might it change?

**Fernando:** That women are capable.

In this critical conversation, Hope opened up a space for students to focus on the sociopolitical issue of gender, specifically as it pertained to women's voting rights throughout history (i.e. "Why did Susan vote when it was against the law?"). Students had the opportunity to build on each other's ideas for example, when Jose builds on Monique's comment taking it from simply being unfair to a focus on making a difference and changing "the way people think about women." Monique was using critique to engage in this critical conversation by pointing to the inequity women faced. Hope's question, "How might it change?" allowed Jose and Fernando to use literacy—in this case Susan B. Anthony's speech—to understand how one might challenge unequal power relationships based on gender. The boys used the text to come to the conclusions that Susan was trying to "make a difference," "change the way people think" and show that "women are capable." These comments indicate they brought a sense of hope to the critical conversation, focusing on the possibility of change.

This practice continued as the class moved in to reading the novel, *The Hope Chest*. During a lesson where Hope was reading a section of the novel aloud to students, she stopped and asked questions focused on sociopolitical issues, which led to another critical conversation.

**Hope:** So, what does mom want her to do?

**Isabella:** Marry someone.

**Hope:** And what does Chloe want to do?

**Nick:** Work as a nurse.

**Hope:** So, that tells us Chloe does not value marriage or having babies...What does that tell you about women and college?

**Angelene:** They're not going to work so they don't need to.

**Hope:** Not only that, what did people think about women's intelligence compared to men?

**Emma:** They were smarter.

**Hope:** That's why they were encouraged to go to four years of college.... I'm going to reread this sentence and I want you to really think about what it's saying. "A woman shouldn't let herself be those sorts of things." Why is that interesting?

**Rueben:** [It shows her parents think] men should rule.

**Hope:** Yeah and she doesn't want to let a man control her choices.

In this critical conversation, Hope used the text to focus on the sociopolitical issue of gender (i.e. "Chloe does not value marriage or having babies") and to help students question unequal power relationships ("...what did people think about women's intelligence compared to men?"). Students seemed to recognize the inequitable messages being sent to different genders when given the opportunity to engage in critical conversations about sociopolitical issues, for example when Emma states that men "were smarter" than women and when Rueben concludes that the text insinuates "men should rule." The text and Hope's questions focus on recognizing and critiquing society's expectations of women, particularly when it came to education, marriage, and motherhood. This was in comparison to expectations of men, particularly when focused on educational opportunities and expectations. Hope specifically referenced and quoted

the text to help students engage in this kind of thinking and discussion (i.e. “I’m going to read this sentence again…”).

***Explicitly Teaching and Modeling.*** Hope explicitly taught and modeled how to engage in critical literacy practices. In the example below she used a read aloud of a traditional fairytale, *Cinderella*, a graphic organizer, and questioning to model for students how to focus on sociopolitical issues when reading (Figure 5). Students were seated on the carpet and each have a copy of a graphic organizer that contained critical literacy questions such as: what gender was the focus of the text, whose point of view was missing, and what does the author want reader to think about men/women. In the lesson, Hope focused specifically on gender and modeling how to use literacy to engage in politics of everyday life, specifically focusing on the text’s messages regarding gender.

**Hope:** What do you notice about the way men and women are described?

**Emma:** Men are needy

**Silvia:** Women are jealous

**Kaylee:** Women are beautiful

**Hope:** Is the way they are portraying women and men a problem?

**Emma:** Yes.

**Angelene:** It makes girls want to compete.

**Hope:** It shows girls in competition? Based on what?

**Emma:** Looks.

**Angelene:** They have to be pretty.

**Hope:** Who does that give the power to?

**Colton:** The man.

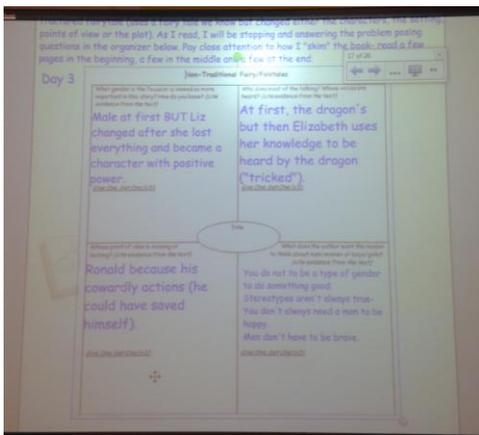
In this excerpt, Hope helped students focus on sociopolitical issues related to gender by explicitly modeling how to engage in this dimension of critical literacy. During her read aloud she modeled how students could stop and asked questions that would help them think about the messages being sent to readers about male and female characteristics and roles in society (i.e. “What do you notice about the way men and women are described?”). She furthered this by asking students to consider if this was problematic, using the content of the text to get students to question unequal power relationships between the male and female characters in the story (i.e. “Who does that give the power to?”). The lesson continued,

After she completed the read aloud Hope modeled how to complete the graphic organizer based on the text, asking for student input as she did. As a class, they concluded that males were seen as more important in the story because the goal of all the female characters was to marry the prince. They determine that Cinderella’s point of view was missing because even though the story was named after her readers never got to really know what she wanted or thought. Finally, they decided the author wanted girls to know they have to be pretty to attract a husband and that boys have the power to decide who they want to marry.

By asking questions related to gender (i.e. “What do you notice about the way men and women are described?”) during the read aloud Hope was able to help guide students to use critical literacy to focus on gender inequity. This became apparent as students shared their conclusions regarding the text in the second half of the lesson (i.e. “males were seen as more important” and “Cinderella’s point of view was missing...”). With Hope’s modeling and guidance, she was able to help students use critical literacy to focus on sociopolitical issues in the text as they related to messages about gender and

marriage (i.e. "...boys have the power to decide who they want to marry"). Students were not asking these kinds of questions or coming to these kinds of conclusions prior to Hope providing them with explicit teaching and modeling focused on critical literacy. The following part of the lesson provided students with the time to work in small groups to practice engaging in critical literacy in similar ways—something they were able to do once they had this type of instruction.

**Figure 5. Modeled Example of Critical Literacy Graphic Organizer.**



*Merging Standards with Critical Literacy Practices.* Hope also found ways to merge the standards she was required to teach with focusing on sociopolitical issues. One standard she was required to teach during the implementation of the unit was, “Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.1). She did this through the use of “I can” statements and questioning when teaching about women’s voting rights and the suffrage movement—both sociopolitical issues related to gender. For example, during a lesson on the women’s suffrage movement she included the following “I can”

statement: “I can infer why Susan B. Anthony wrote and delivered ‘On Women’s Right to the Suffrage.’” She also included the following questions in her lesson: Is there support in the text? What can you infer from the text about why Susan gave this speech? She purposefully selected a text that addressed issues of gender inequity and then asked questions about inferences as a way to address the standard. In the following excerpt of this lesson we see Hope put this into action.

**Hope:** What can you infer from the text about why Susan gave this speech?

**Angelene:** She was done with it [not being able to vote].

**Colton:** She said [the constitution says] we the people NOT we the white men.

**Hope:** It’s interesting because white males wrote [the constitution] but they didn’t write it that way. Why else did she give it? What else can we infer?

**Colton:** To prove that she’s not breaking the law and so that more women will start voting. [If they did] she’d be a big influence.

**Emma:** For publicity. They can’t keep all women in jail.

**Hope:** These are all good inferences about why she might have written this speech.

After this discussion came to a close, Hope had the students respond to the following questions in their notebooks: Is Susan a leader of change? Why? Use the inferences we discussed as a class and the text to support your answer.

This lesson was largely focused on making inferences, addressing the standard Hope was required to cover with her students. This was clear as Hope began the class discussion with the question: “What can you infer from the text about why Susan gave

this speech?” She was able to engage students in making inferences about the text throughout the lesson (i.e. “She was done with it...” “...so that more women will start voting...a big influence,” and “For publicity”). These statements were evidence of students inferring, as they were concepts that were not explicitly mentioned; yet students were able to draw these inferences from the text. At the same time, Hope is encouraging students to focus on sociopolitical issues, in this case gender and the history of gender inequity in terms of women’s voting rights. Thus, Hope used the text to focus on inferences but her lesson was also focused on merging this required standard with a focus on sociopolitical issues related to gender. In addition to those already mentioned, these included women’s right to vote, women being jailed for voting illegally, and the rights of women based on the wording of the constitution. As is illustrated in this example, Hope worked to merge the standard on inferencing with focusing on sociopolitical issues through her selection of a text focused on women’s voting rights, questioning, I can statements, and the written assignment she asked students to complete.

**Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints.** Using multiple voices to interrogate texts, drawing attention to voices of those who have been silenced, and making difference visible are how Lewison and colleagues (2002) defined interrogating multiple viewpoints, a third dimension of critical literacy. Additionally, I have included in this definition the way Hope used questions and instructional moves to get students to think about perspectives different from their own.

**Using and Selecting Literacy Resources.** At the beginning of the year Hope created a floor to ceiling bulletin board display featuring pictures, quotes, and short bios

of celebrities and historical figures who used their voices and notoriety to advocate for social justice (See Figure 6). She titled the bulletin board, “Fight for Fairness Walk of Fame.” Featured on the wall were people like Martin Luther King Jr., Malala, Emma Watson, Ryan Gosling, Susan B. Anthony, Prince Harry, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. During several of my observations I noticed students reading about the people displayed on the wall, the students referencing people from the wall they had learned about, and Hope encouraging students to use the wall as a resource when discussing social justice issues and engaging in critical literacy. For example, during a lesson opening focused on taking on alternative perspectives, Hope asked students to brainstorm a list of historical people. Below are the notes I took during this lesson.

Hope asked students to share out some of the names on their lists while she wrote them on the board. Names shared out included Maya Angelou, Malala Yousafzai, Cesar Chavez, Ruby Bridges, Susan B. Anthony, Marie Curie, Esther Morris, and Nelson Mandela. Hope then had students separate the list into male and female historical figures—there were nineteen men and eighteen women represented. As a class, they went through and put a star next to the names of historical figures they learned about during the 2015-2016 school year—all the female historical figures had a star placed next to them. Several students, including Emma, Nick, and Isabella, shared that they read about the women on the “Fight for Fairness Walk of Fame” wall display.

This interaction indicated just how powerful the bulletin board had been for students—even more powerful than the teacher realized (i.e. “put a star next to the names ...all the female historical figures had a star...” and “they read...on the ‘Fight for Fairness Walk of Fame’”). Hope shared with me that her expectation was that students would list more men than women. However, students listed many more women (i.e. 18)

than she expected and that their lists were much more varied in names (i.e. Maya Angelou, Susan B. Anthony, Marie Curie, Esther Morris) than when she had done this activity the previous year during which students could name far fewer women (i.e. 5) and with less variety in names (i.e. Ruby Bridges, Ameila Earhart, Rosa Parks). Additionally, the male to female ratio of names was much smaller during this lesson than it had been the previous year (i.e. 19:18 compared with 15:5) indicating that this group of students had a larger repertoire of female figures that they knew about. When Hope and I debriefed after the lesson she shared that the majority of the names students had come up with came from the bulletin board. She seemed shocked by how much they had read and retained on their own saying, "...That bulletin board was worth the trouble! (laughs)". By highlighting voices of those who had historically been silenced through the bulletin board, Hope was able to help students engage in students in considering multiple perspectives even when she was not teaching them how to do this explicitly.

**Figure 6. Fight for Fairness Walk of Fame Bulletin Board**



*Engage Students in Critical Conversations.* During a lesson about women’s suffrage, Hope asked students to write a letter to Harry Burn from the perspective of his mother, predicting what she might have said to him in the telegram she sent prior to his opportunity to vote for or against the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment as a member of the Tennessee legislature. After providing time for students to write, Hope called students to the carpet to share their responses. She asked, “What might Harry Burn’s mother have said to him?” Below is a transcript of what students shared:

**Miguel:** I am a woman!

**Isabella:** Think of everyone. This affects everyone.

**Hope:** What do you think Isabella means when she says it affects everyone?

**Emma:** Women are part of this country too. [Emma then shares, taking on the perspective of Burns’ mother, talking to him as a child.] Don’t you remember, you told me I was the best and smartest mommy.

**Ricardo:** That’s powerful! That’s so sad.

In this example Hope provides an opportunity for students to focus on multiple viewpoints by having students take on the voice of a woman in the 1920s—someone whose voice had historically been silenced. For example, when Isabella emphasized that “This affects everyone” and Emma made the point that women “are part of this country too,” they highlight that women’s voices deserved to be heard alongside the men’s voices of the time. These statements also indicated that they were engaging in this critical conversation by critiquing the historically oppressive system of voting. By sharing in this critical conversation focused on multiple viewpoints, Ricardo seemed to be impacted emotionally by Emma’s response (i.e. “That’s so sad”). The conversation not only allowed students to take on multiple viewpoints but also seemed to impart empathy for the opposite gender as it did for Ricardo. This also indicated that 1) Ricardo could have been experiencing some tension or anxiety related to this topic as his response to Emma is laced with emotion and 2) Hope required him, and the rest of the boys in the class, to hear and respect the voices and experiences of others—two important aspects of critical conversations.

There are several other instances where Hope draws attention to voices that have historically been silenced through critical conversations. In another lesson Hope had students brainstorm a list of historical figures, as mentioned in the previous section, they learned about during their K-5 educational experiences. After the class came up with a

list Hope wanted to draw further attention to voices that had been silenced. In the excerpt below she worked to engage students in a critical conversation about their list.

**Hope:** Look around our room, what population is missing from our list?

**Several students call out:** African American

**Maria:** Black females.

**Hope:** I only see one of these (on the list) and this is a problem.

**Nick:** Hispanic.

**Hope:** Take that a step further. Hispanic what?

**Nick:** Hispanic women.

**Hope:** Yes!

Being that the majority of students in Hope's class came from Latino/a backgrounds, Hope made an effort in this interaction to focus specifically on the fact that these voices had been left out or silenced in the student's own educational experiences. She encouraged Nick to take his thinking beyond ethnicity to focus on gender in particular (i.e. "Take that a step further..."). By encouraging students to "look around the room" she was also making difference visible while engage in critical conversation with her students. She was encouraging students to critique this observation (i.e. "I only see one...and this is a problem"). She was also using the space as a way to problematize students' everyday living conditions—being Latino/a and yet not learning about important historical Latinos/as in school. This was a critical conversation Hope had with her students as a way to highlight multiple viewpoints.

This is something that Hope did several times throughout my time in her classroom. Below are two short examples where Hope worked to make difference visible when discussing multiple viewpoints through critical conversations with her students. During a read aloud of *The Hope Chest*, Hope used the text to expand on the differences between two of the main characters, Violet who was a white female and Myrtle who was a black female.

**Hope:** Would Violet's parents think Myrtle is the "wrong kind of person?"

**Several students call out:** Yes.

**Hope:** Why?

**Emma:** She's African American.

**Hope:** Yes. And if they are closed minded about women, they're probably closed minded about African Americans.

After reading another section of *The Hope Chest* where Myrtle, realizes that some of the suffragists are working to be granted voting rights for *white* women Hope focuses student attention on the aspects of Myrtle's identity that make her different from the other main characters.

**Hope:** Is she just a woman?

**Several students call out:** No

**Hope:** How else can we describe her?

**Kaylee:** She's black

**Nick:** She's poor.

**Miguel:** She's a kid.

In both instances Hope emphasizes the differences between the experiences of women from varying backgrounds (i.e. "...they're probably closed minded about African Americans" and "How else can we describe her?"). She is not only focusing on female voices that have been silenced but on the ways, different groups of women have been silenced—in this case based on race and class (i.e. "She's African American;" "She's poor."). She is encouraging critical conversation with and among her students by asking questions about everyday living conditions such as multiple aspects of one's identity and how these varying identities might impact one's experiences (i.e. by using a text that addresses issues of privilege related to gender and race—white women were fighting for the right to vote in this section at the expense of other minority groups). By using such a text and providing space for students to interrogate these points, Hope also opens up potential for herself and/or students to experience tension—often a byproduct of critical conversations—although none seemed to be expressed here.

Each of these examples show that texts along with Hope's questioning and planned activities provided students the opportunity to interrogate the ideas in the texts and engage in critical conversations with their teacher using multiple voices—white women, black women, Latina women, women dealing with poverty. Hope was focusing on using multiple viewpoints to interrogate texts, as a way to engage in critical conversations with her students about race, class, and gender.

***Explicitly Teach and Model.*** As with the other dimensions of critical literacy, Hope planned lessons where she explicitly taught and modeled for students how to

engage in taking on multiple viewpoints. Using a critical literacy strategy suggested in McLaughlin and DeVogd's (-2004) book, *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text*, Hope explicitly taught and modeled for students how to take on multiple perspectives through juxtaposing. Hope planned a lesson focused on women's historical role in sports. She first read with students an article published about the winner of the 1967 Boston Marathon, Dave McKenzie. Below is how she begins the lesson:

Hope defines juxtaposing and adds the definition to an anchor chart with other critical literacy terms and strategies. She says, "I'm going to model juxtaposing" and gives each student a copy of a newspaper article written about Dave McKenzie. She proceeds to read the article with students, stopping along the way to ask questions such as "who is missing," "what would an alternative text say," "how are people represented," and "who has power."

Here Hope was explicitly teaching by providing the definition of a critical literacy strategy—juxtaposing. She also added this definition to the anchor chart that students had been encouraged to reference throughout the unit up to that point, which provided them with a constant reference for how they could use critical literacy. Hope engages in modeling by reading aloud and using planned stopping points to ask critical literacy questions focused specifically on taking on multiple viewpoints (i.e. "who is missing" and "what would an alternative text say"). These questions were also added to the anchor chart for students to reference as needed. Hope continued with the lesson,

Hope then...shows a short video clip of the race taken from actual news footage from 1967. In the video...It cuts to...Dave crossing the finish line. Katherine Switzer one of the first women- to run the marathon and Jock Sample the race manager are also briefly shown. In the clip Jock tries to

tear Katherine's race bib off and push her out of the race. Hope then addresses the class and asks, "What do you think the girl was thinking?" Students call out ideas that include, "This is so unfair!" and "She looked angry." Hope poses the question, "What do you think Dave was thinking?" Miguel responds with, "I'm a champion." She explains that what they just did as a class was a short version of juxtaposing—learning about the same event from alternative perspectives.

In this part of the lesson Hope continues to explicitly teach and model for students how to take on multiple perspectives. She does this by guiding them through an example of what this would look like via asking questions intended to get students to think about the varying viewpoints of the male and female runners (i.e. "What do you think the girl was thinking?" and "What do you think Dave was thinking?"). Student responses to these questions demonstrate that they are taking on multiple perspectives because of Hope's instructional decisions (i.e. "This is so unfair!" and "I'm a champion"). By specifically and purposefully pointing out what students were doing (i.e. juxtaposing) Hope was able to return the attention of students to the main point of her lesson—taking on multiple perspectives. She continued with the lesson by having students practice in small group,

She separates the students into four groups—two groups will read an interview with Katherine, the other two will read a short biography about Jock Semple—focused particularly on the time of his life in which he managed and organized the Boston Marathon. Each group is instructed to answer the following four questions in their notebooks: Who is missing? What would an alternative perspective say? What different groups are represented? Who has the power? Students then have the opportunity to read, respond, and come back together as a class to compare, or juxtapose, what the two different texts said about the same event.

In this part of the lesson Hope provided students with the opportunity to practice juxtaposing multiple viewpoints via texts with their peers by using a text written from Katherine's point of view and one from Jock's. She explicitly taught and modeled in the first part of the lesson, which offered scaffolding and support as students practiced this strategy. Additionally, she used the same questions during her read aloud and video clip in which she modeled how to answer such questions for students as she had students use during their small group work (i.e. "Who is missing?" "What would an alternative perspective say?," etc.) This lesson allowed Hope and her students to take on multiple viewpoints include those of Dave, Katherine, and Jock, to interrogate the texts. Women's voices that had historically been silenced in the field of sports, particularly in the Boston Marathon in which it was against the rules for them to participate, were highlighted (i.e. via the video and article specifically written from Katherine's point of view). This example illustrates the ways Hope explicitly taught and modeled in order to help students interrogate texts using multiple perspectives.

***Merging Standards with Critical Literacy Practices.*** This particular dimension of critical literacy seemed to provide an easy connection to the standards Hope was required to teach. For example, during the lesson focused on the Boston Marathon, which actually spanned over the course of several days, Hope was able to teach students how to take on multiple viewpoints and address three standards she was required to teach during the third quarter. The standards included: (1) Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3); (2) Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view

influences how events are described (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.6); and (3) Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.6). She covered these in several ways including by having students create mind portraits of either Dave McKenzie or Jock Semple and Katherine Switzer in which they were asked to compare the thoughts each might be having during and after the race.

Hope also merged the standards with critical literacy practices through the use of “I can” statements, which were written in her lesson plans, placed in Smart Board slides, and read aloud with students at the start of each lesson. For example, during the lessons surrounding to Boston Marathon she included the following “I can” statements: “I can consider male and female points of view of the same event” and “I can use alternative perspectives to analyze, evaluate, and represent various points of view being portrayed in an event in history.” The I can statements she came up with used the language of the standards (i.e. analyze, same event, point of view) and of taking on multiple viewpoints (i.e. alternative perspectives, point of view).

On the day that she introduced the juxtaposing strategy she had students do some reflective writing in their notebooks after having read an article about Dave and watched news footage from the actual race. She had students take on the perspective of someone else for their independent writing time by asking students to respond to the following questions:

Do you think all runners in the Boston Marathon in 1966 had the same experience as Dave? How might they describe their experience differently

or similarly to his? She also provided a list of possible viewpoints student could write from (ex: a female runner, the second-place winner, a non-white runner).

In this example and the others described in this section and the previous, Hope addressed the standards she was required to cover by having students compare “characters” and “events” in a story, in this case a real-life story of discrimination based on gender. She also had students analyze “multiple accounts of the same event, noting important similarities and differences” specifically the ways in which men and women experienced the Boston Marathon. She tied these standards to this dimension of critical literacy through the use of “I can” statements and the questions she had students respond to in their literacy notebooks (i.e. “Do you think all runners in the Boston Marathon...had the same experience...?” and “How might they describe their experience...?”). She scaffolded this by also providing some suggestions for the various points of view students might consider taking on (i.e. a female runner...a non-white runner). Additionally, weaved throughout this lesson was Hope’s effort to use critical literacy to help students address issues of gender inequity by highlighting a time in history when women were not permitted to participate in certain sports (i.e. the Boston Marathon).

**Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice.** The final dimension of critical literacy suggested by Lewison et. al. (2002) is promoting social justice. Lewison and colleagues define it as challenging and redefining cultural borders and using language to exercise power and question privilege. This has been shown to be the most difficult dimension for teachers and students to engage in, as was the case for Hope. While Hope

engaged in this dimension, she did so much less often than the other dimensions. In fact, I could not find any evidence of how she explicitly taught and modeled this dimension and could only find one or two examples that fit with the other subthemes. However, I decided to include this dimension along with the other three and provide the evidence that I do have to show the ways, although few, that Hope was able to use this dimension to take action and promote social justice. She did this even if it she was not always in a way that directly addressed issues of gender inequity. The evidence here illustrates that she was still opening up space for students to challenge and redefine cultural borders and use language to exercise power and privilege.

*Using and Selecting Literacy Resources.* One way Hope worked to redefine cultural borders in her classroom was through literacy resources. Word walls played a prominent role in Hope's classroom as Hope and her students frequently referenced the walls and added new words to them. Many of the words were clearly written in students' handwriting—a sign that she was breaking down the traditional power structure that is often found in classrooms. Although this dimension of critical literacy is one that Hope was able to engage in less often it seems that by giving students power over the words included on the walls signified that she was promoting social justice. Many of the words found on the wall were those she taught during the critical literacy and gender unit including marginalized, alternative, equality, and justice. She was engaging in this dimension by challenging traditional cultural borders of classrooms in her effort to provide space for students to take ownership of word walls, typically a literacy resource teachers maintain control over. Although not directly challenging gender stereotypes she

was using the same vocabulary on the walls that she and the students used to do so during the unit and encouraging students to use and reference the words often.

Additionally, within Hope's classroom there were several bulletin boards and wall displays promoting social justice and critical literacy including one called "Instagraffiti," clearly a play on the social media phenomenon Instagram. The hash tags #socialjustice, #speakout, #change and the question "how will you choose to participate" were displayed on the bulletin board. The teacher would find current event articles and pin them on the board. Students were encouraged to do the same. The articles were available for students to borrow and read during independent reading time or other free time they had during the school day. Some of the articles that were posted related to gender. For example, one article was about Mo'ne Davis, a 13-year-old pitcher and Little League World Series winner who made headlines for breaking gender stereotypes about girls in sports. Another was about the gender wage gap faced by professional women's soccer players.

This seemed like a way that Hope was encouraging students to take action and promote social justice by challenging the cultural borders of public elementary schools where issues of gender inequity are not often talked about let alone highlighted as they were on the "Instagraffiti" bulletin board. It also seemed to encourage students to take action by engaging in awareness of current events—an important part of being able to take action is the knowledge one has about what is going on in the world around them. By encouraging students to find current event articles and add them to the board themselves she was fostering this kind of thinking and awareness. Hope herself was

promoting social justice by creating the board itself and then providing current event articles for students to read.

*Engaging Students in Critical Conversations.* An important aspect of this dimension of critical literacy is the ways in which teachers and students use language to exercise power and question privilege. It seemed that Hope was able to do this by frequently asking some version of the questions, “Who has the power?” followed by “Is that a problem?” Much of the time she asked these questions in relation to a text the class was reading together. When she asked these questions, Hope was using language to question privilege. However, she never really expanded on her questions in a way that encouraged students to exercise power. Despite this, Hope was able to facilitate critical conversations among her students by asking these questions which could potentially create tension and/or anxiety in students and foster their awareness of oppressive systems related to race, class, and gender—all essential aspects of critical conversations. This can be seen in the transcript below taken from the first week of the unit when Hope had students read and analyze traditional fairytales. In this instance the conversation centered on *Little Red Riding Hood*.

**Hope:** Who does that give the power to?

**Colton:** The wolf.

**Hope:** What is the message?

**Ricardo:** It teaches girls to be polite.

**Hope:** Is that a good thing?

**Ricardo:** Yes, because children should learn manners.

**Bryson:** It's bad because it says *girls* have to have good manners.

**Hope:** Who controlled little Red's actions?

**Colton:** The wolf, she got distracted.

**Hope:** What message does that send about women?

**Emma:** They have to be delicate.

**Lydia:** They have to be sensitive.

**Angelene:** They have to be perfect

**Silvia:** Males are smarter and women need to be looked out for.

**Hope:** Is that a problem?

**Colton:** Yes, because they will think it's true.

**Emma:** They (little kids) are vulnerable.

**Hope:** Do you agree with the message that sends?

**Several students call out:** No!

Hope uses language to question the privilege given to male characters in traditional fairytales in the critical conversation focused on gender in the above example (i.e. "Who does that give the power to?" and "What message does that send about women?"). This also shows how she challenges cultural borders, an important part of promoting social justice. She does this by encouraging her students to problematize children's literature—texts written *for* them—that they had, up to this point, been taught were innocent stories with "good" messages (i.e. "It teaches girls to be polite"). She does this through the use of questioning (i.e. "Is that a problem?" and "Do you agree with the message that sends?"). By fostering conversations such as this in her classroom she is promoting social justice. These are not common topics covered or conversations heard in

fifth grade classrooms in public schools, yet Hope worked to incorporate them—this seemed to be an attempt to redefine the cultural borders in her classroom and school.

Another instance where Hope used this dimension to engage students in critical conversations took place during a read aloud of a section of *The Hope Chest*. In the following excerpt Hope has just finished reading about a male character in the novel, Mr. Martin, who has worked to help the main characters in a variety of ways.

**Hope:** What about him do they like? What makes him different?

**Fernando:** He wants women to get the right to vote.

**Emma:** He's a feminist.

**Hope:** HE himself is a feminist. What is a feminist?

**Isabella:** Someone who believes in equal rights for women.

**Hope:** Just women?

**Isabella:** And men.

In this critical conversation Hope used critical literacy to challenge the cultural borders of public elementary school classrooms by providing a platform for students to engage in a conversation about feminism (i.e. “What is a feminist?”). Encouraging students to use this term and using it herself, a term that is likely unheard of in other elementary school classrooms. This was one way Hope promoted social justice—simply by broaching this topic. On a larger scale, she challenged the cultural borders of society by discussing the definition of a feminist and highlighting the fact that a feminist believes in equal rights for *both* women and men (i.e. “Just women?”). In doing this she also addresses issues of gender surrounding the word feminism, which has, in some circles,

come to be seen as a group of women who hate men. In both instances Hope worked to facilitate action and promoted social justice with her students by engaging them in critical conversations and fostering an awareness of current and past gender inequities.

*Merging Standards with Critical Literacy Practices.* There were a few instances where Hope was able to merge the standards with this dimension of critical literacy. Two of the standards she was required to cover focused on writing. They included: (1) Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.1); and (2) Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.7). One way she addressed this standard was through a writing assignment.

After the unit, had concluded Hope worked to incorporate these two standards into a writing assignment focused on issues of social justice. She asked students to choose a social justice issue they were interested in and write an opinion piece about it that included facts and statistics that would persuade their audience to become aware of and involved in the issue they chose to write about. Students chose to write about a variety of topics and several chose to focus on issues of gender inequity such as girls' education rights and the gender pay gap between men and women's professional soccer. This seemed to be a way that Hope gave students the opportunity to use language to exercise power by providing a platform for their voices to be heard, or at least that seemed to be what she was aiming for. For example,

On the first day that students began writing, Hope asked for volunteers to share their introductions. After having several students share their introduction paragraphs Hope says, “You all are off to a really good start. I have chill bumps after reading these. When we write about things that we really experienced it makes it more powerful, more meaningful.”

Students had the power to decide what to write about and who their intended audience was. She encouraged them to write to people that could help make change in the causes they were interested in such as local and state government officials, school administration, and their peers who might rally with them for their cause. Hope was using this dimension of critical literacy in this example to empower her students through the use of language. She was encouraging them to exercise power in a way that allowed them to speak out about social justice issues they felt were important and at the same time addressing the literacy standards pertaining to writing and research that she was required to cover.

In this section I have worked to provide evidence of the ways in which Hope used critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity in her classroom. The four main themes, disrupting the common place, focusing on sociopolitical issues, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and taking action to promote social justice, taken from Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) were discussed. In the following section I share the major themes and findings from research question 1b, which focuses on the student data from this study.

### **RQ1b: In What Ways Do Fifth Grade Students Engage in Critical Literacy to Challenge Gender Inequity in Their Everyday Lives?**

As was the case with the teacher data, four major themes emerged from the data pertaining to the student data and research question 1b. These themes were based on the four dimensions of critical literacy proposed by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002). They included disrupting the common place, focusing on sociopolitical issues, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and taking action and promoting social justice. The ways in which Lewison and colleagues (2002) described these themes focuses largely on the ways teachers approach instruction. However, I have slightly adapted their definitions when thinking about the student data to focus on the actions students took to engage in critical literacy practices which I will specify in the sections where I introduce each of the dimensions below. Again, like with the teacher data, the dimensions are highly interrelated and can be difficult to discuss separately. Nevertheless, I have worked to do this here through the use of the same subthemes that became evident within each dimension.

The subthemes that emerged included actions students took to engage in critical literacy practices to challenge gender stereotypes. These included: making personal and real world connections, taking risks, engaging in critical conversations, and identifying hidden messages. Each of these subthemes will be discussed in terms of the four dimensions of critical literacy. Since they will be discussed multiple times throughout this section I provide brief definitions of each subtheme below.

The first subtheme related to this data I have decided to call *making personal and real world connections*. As students learned and worked to engage in critical literacy

practices they made connections to personal experiences and the real world. These connections seemed to enable them to engage in the dimensions of critical literacy by providing concrete examples of ways they were able to challenge gender stereotypes or ways they understood others to do so. Students made specific connections focused on gender to their own lived experiences, characters in books, television shows, commercials, and to their friends or family members and in doing so challenged gender stereotypes.

A second subtheme was *taking risks*. This subtheme references the ways in which students seemed to take risks in and out of the classroom setting as a way to engage in critical literacy practices. Students took risks by asking questions during literacy instruction that challenged gender stereotypes. This subtheme focuses on how students took risks by critiquing texts and challenging each other's ideas and sharing thoughts or ideas of their own that might make them or others uncomfortable or that may be seen as controversial for example by challenging commonly held beliefs about gender. It also took the form of students' willingness to share with their teacher, peers and families the books they chose to read, the activities they chose to engage in, and their likes and dislikes that defied gender norms. Each of these actions can be seen as students taking risks because they risk being denied social acceptance by peers and/or make themselves vulnerable to bullying or ridicule. Although students took risks often and engaged in this practice throughout each of the other categories, I felt it necessary to show case it in a subtheme of its own. It seemed important to highlight what taking risks looked like in a classroom where critical literacy was taking place.

A third subtheme that emerged was *engaging in critical conversations*. Students engaged in critical conversations, as defined in chapter two, throughout the unit. This subtheme illustrates the ways in which students engaged in critical literacy practices through conversations as they talked about issues of gender inequity. The examples provided show how students used conversation to build on each other's ideas, agree and disagree with their peers or ideas presented in class and in texts. It goes beyond the ways the teacher worked to engage them in critical conversations as the examples focus specifically on the ways students initiated conversations with their teacher and peers or continued conversations on their own without additional teacher direction.

The final subtheme related to this dataset was *identifying hidden messages*. This subtheme includes the ways students engaged in critical literacy by identifying hidden messages beyond basic understanding of texts' content. They focused specifically on the hidden messages that authors and storylines portrayed related to gender. The examples provided under this subtheme illustrate the ways students recognized texts' gendered messages and implicit societal values related to gender roles. It also provides examples of the ways students began to purposefully select texts for independent reading that they thought might challenge traditional gender roles.

In the following sections I discuss how the students engaged in each of the four dimensions of critical literacy through each of the subthemes. It is important to note that although the majority of the examples use data from the six students I chose to focus on, there are several instances where the focus students interacted with their classmates and/or examples from whole group instruction are used to support the themes. In these

sample transcripts, the contributions of students other than the six focus students are included.

**Disrupting the Common Place.** There was evidence that students engaged in critical literacy by disrupting the common place. Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) define this dimension of critical literacy as interrogating texts, including popular culture and media as part of the curriculum, and developing language of critique and hope. Since their definition was based on the ways teachers engaged in this dimension, I have taken out "as part of the curriculum" and am thinking about this in terms of the ways students question ideas and messages in the texts they read. As part of developing a language of critique and hope, I have included examples that illustrate questions students ask, ways students use the language of critical literacy, and ways students challenge ideas related to gender or are aware of when others do so.

***Making Personal & Real World Connections.*** One way students engaged in disrupting the common place was by making personal and real world connections. They used these connections as a way to interrogate texts and develop a language of critique and hope. In the following example, Hope introduces new vocabulary terms to the class. She has students turn and talk about the term marginalized and then asks them to share with the whole group what they discussed. In their discussion students make connections to their own experiences, their observations of the world around them, and media in reference to the movie *Mean Girls*.

**Hope:** What do you think of when you think of being marginalized?

**Emma:** [In] movies, every girl cares about her appearance and I don't think that's what makes her happy...Like in the movie Mean Girls they marginalized the girl who didn't dress all fancy.

**Angelene:** I'm relating this to me, but girls are expected to wear dresses but I hate them because I can't move.

**Fernando:** There is a girl at my church who dressed like a boy and cut her hair short. Some people didn't even know she was a girl.

Students engaged in disrupting the common place and challenging gender stereotypes in each of these examples. Emma used language of critique by first recognizing the messages sent to girls via media such as movies aimed at young female audiences (i.e. "In movies, every girl cares about her appearance") she then critiqued this message by sharing her own thoughts on it (i.e. "I don't think that's what makes her happy"). Finally, she provided a real-world connection to a movie that demonstrated her point and related her connection back to the critical literacy term, marginalized (i.e. "...they marginalized the girl who didn't dress all fancy").

Angelene also developed a language of critique surrounding gender norms through the personal connection she shares. She first made a connection personal by saying, "I'm relating this to me." She then recognized a gender stereotype (i.e. "girls are expected to wear dresses"). Finally, she engaged in critique by challenging gender norms through her personal experience related to the expectations of girls to dress a certain way despite this expectation being, at least in from her perspective, impractical (i.e. "I hate them because I can't move").

Fernando disrupted the common place by recognizing when others challenged gender stereotypes. In his statement, he made a real-world connection drawing on his experiences with another child in church. He was aware of the fact that a child he knew from church challenged gender norms because she “dressed like a boy and cut her hair short.” Each of these examples in the excerpt illustrate the ways these students were able to disrupt the common place by making personal and real world connections related to issues of gender inequity.

Another example took place during a lesson that Hope taught after the unit had ended. I provide this example below to demonstrate that even though Hope was no longer teaching the unit on critical literacy and gender, students continued to engage in similar thinking related to these topics. During the lesson Hope and her students analyzed John Mayer’s song *Daughters* for gender stereotypes. The following is a partial transcript from the discussion that occurred surrounding the text. It shows several instances where students made personal and real world connections as a way to disrupt the common place.

**Hope:** He says, “boys, you can break.” What does it show about Mayer?

**Fernando:** He’s breaking the stereotype that boys aren’t supposed to cry.

**Hope:** Yeah he’s challenging that because clearly he cried.

**Miguel:** I cry sometimes too.

**Hope:** There are a lot of examples of famous women who do this too—who challenge female gender stereotypes.

**Emma:** Uh, yeah what’s her name...Megan Trainer. She’s writes about it in her songs.

**Hope:** Yes, she does. Emma Watson is another example.

**Emma:** Yeah, Hermione was really tough in the Harry Potter movies.

Throughout this interaction students disrupted the common place by interrogating the text and making connections. Fernando began by making a connection to a real-world stereotype “boys aren’t supposed to cry.” In doing so he interrogated the popular culture text by formulating his own interpretation of what Mayer meant in the lyric Hope referenced. Miguel extended this by making a personal connection to the text and admitting “I cry sometimes too.” Emma’s real world connections to Megan Trainer songs, which she suggested challenge gender stereotypes placed on women, is an example of how she disrupted the common place by interrogating popular culture. She does this again by extending Hope’s reference to Emma Watson. She makes a connection to popular culture that illustrates her thinking about the ways Hermione from the Harry Potter movies broke gender stereotypes and described her as “really tough.” Each of these examples show how students continued to challenge ideas related to gender norms. They also illustrate students’ awareness of others who also challenge such ideas, as Emma and Fernando did when referencing celebrities from popular culture.

***Taking Risks.*** Students took risks throughout the school year and did so in ways that indicated they were disrupting the common place. This often took the form of developing a language of hope and critique as they seemed to gain confidence over time in their willingness to take risks related to sharing about their personal views, likes and dislikes that went against gender norms. The example below was taken from an interview conducted with Nick after the unit ended.

**Nick:** I used to be a cheerleader and I used to do gymnastics and I am brave a little bit but um I like playing with my sister and that breaks the stereotype because my brothers don't want to. They want to play outside. So.

**Researcher:** Can you talk to me a little bit about that experience?

**Nick:** A lot of people said that boys couldn't do it. A lot of girls said that too. They still say that and I keep saying that I used to and I showed a picture for proof but they still didn't believe me.

**Researcher:** How do you feel about that?

**Nick:** It's okay if people pick on you and stuff but you still like doing it so that's all that matters.

This example shows ways Nick took risks and disrupted the common place by sharing his personal interest in cheerleading and gymnastics. He not only shared it privately with me during our interview, but shared it with his teacher and peers even showing them "a picture for proof." The picture was one that he chose to display on a bulletin board in the fifth grade hallway that Hope and the students designed for literacy week and that focused on breaking gender stereotypes. The picture captured Nick in his red, white, and blue gymnastics uniform doing a split. Not only was Nick willing to take risks in his classroom he was willing to extend that risk to the rest of the school by selecting this picture to be displayed in a more public place. In this example Nick disrupted the common place by using language that signified critique (i.e. "I am brave a little bit but um I like playing with my sister and that breaks the stereotype") in which he critiqued the common notion that he should not want or like to play with his sister. Additionally, he used language that suggests a sense of hope (i.e. "...you still like doing it so that's all that matters"). All of these statements could be seen as controversial and

could even have led to bullying or him being ostracized by peers, yet he was willing to share his experiences and thoughts indicating he took risks to disrupt the common place.

Another instance where several students disrupted the common place by taking risks took place after a read aloud of the text *The Hope Chest*. In the example Hope has recently finished reading a scene where the main character, a twelve-year-old girl named Violet, met an older woman who asked her gendered questions related to her goals in life focusing on her plans to marry and have children. Students were instructed to respond to the scene by writing a reflection in their literacy notebooks and then given the opportunity to share their thinking with the whole group.

**Hope:** Who would like to share? What did Violet mean by “If growing up meant having seven children or wearing a dead bird on her head Violet would rather have been a boy”?

**Nick** [reads his response]: The last sentence on page 30 shows that Violet doesn’t want to be a “proper lady” and she has a very complex lifestyle. Also, this shows that she doesn’t believe in gender or the contrast of boys and girls.

**Hope:** Woah! That was awesome!

**Emma:** Three cheers for Nick!

**Hope:** How does that show that she does not believe in the contrast of boys and girls?

**Nick:** Like girls don’t have to be a proper lady and boys don’t have to work and play in mud.

**Hope:** Anybody else want to share?

**Walter:** The last paragraph on page 30 shows that she would rather be a boy than to be a slave to white men.

**Hope:** How does her being expected to have seven children symbolize her being treated as if she were a slave? Maybe not a slave but like an object?

**Walter:** Because it's what everybody is telling her she has to do.

**Fernando:** She doesn't want to grow up to be like other women. She wants to break the stereotype that women should have children and dress to impress.

The students in this example took risks by interrogating the ideas in the text that either reflect or challenge gender stereotypes and by sharing thoughts that might be seen as controversial or cause discomfort among their peers or teacher. For example, Nick took a risk by bringing up a concept that other students, or even the teacher, might have found controversial (i.e. "she doesn't believe in the contrast of boys and girls"). He seemed to be getting at ideas of gender equity and possibly gender fluidity in this statement and in his extension of this idea (i.e. "girls don't have to be a proper lady and boys don't have to work and play in mud"). These are ideas that are not widely accepted, especially when coming from a fifth grade boy. He was taking a risk in opening up himself for judgment among his peers for holding such viewpoints. Walter took a similar risk with his comment comparing the relationship between women and white men to that of slaves indicating that it would be better for the female character in the story to "be a boy than to be a slave to white men." Walter was taking a risk by addressing issues of power—power that he, as a white male, benefits from even today. Fernando interrogated the text and took a risk in his interpretation by suggesting that the character wanted to break stereotypes about women. It is interesting to note that this conversation took place between the teacher and all male students with the exception of Emma's response to Nick in which she encouraged his thinking by cheering him on. This seemed to highlight that these students were taking risks by interpreting the feelings of the female character in the

story in the presence of their female teacher and classmates who could potentially disagree or even become offended by their comments—although none expressed such feelings in this case. They were also taking risks in that they were challenging the very systems of power that benefit men. All of this was done through their interrogation of the text, thus disrupting the common place. This is important because it opens spaces and possibilities for students to envision the way the world could look differently and increases student empowerment to push back against oppressive practices.

*Engaging in Critical Conversations.* Another way students engaged in disrupting the common place was through critical conversations in which they addressed issues of gender inequity in the texts they read in class. These conversations often led students to interrogating texts with their peers and use language that signified critique and/or hope when it came to challenging gender stereotypes.

During the first week of the unit students worked in groups to read and analyze traditional fairytales such as *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Princess and The Pea*. Students answered critical literacy questions, completed a graphic organizer, and discussed the texts in their small groups. Afterward, the entire class met on the carpet to share out what they noticed in the texts. Below I describe the conversation that occurred during the debriefing session among the whole class.

Hope kept track of student thinking on an anchor chart divided into a t-chart with female characteristics on one side and male characteristics on the other. Students shared that their groups determined that women in the traditional fairytales had the following traits: jealous, attractive, beautiful, polite, naïve, meek, clumsy, gullible, loyal, and kind. They then moved

on to male characters traits, which included: noble, heroic, brave, courageous, strong, smart, hardworking, and powerful.

**Hope** then asked: What do you guys think of this?

**Colton**: Men have all the good traits. They do what they want.

**Hope** probed: What else?

**Nick**: Marrying and choices.

**Emma** extended this comment by adding: Yeah, men are making the choices for the females. With Cinderella, he made the choice like, “We’re getting married.”

In this example, students used a language of critique as they interrogated texts, focusing on gender. The students, while in their small groups, determined that the male and female characters in the traditional fairytales had distinct and gendered character traits. This became apparent when the class came together to share out and Hope began to track student thinking on the anchor chart with male character traits being described as positive or strong and female character traits being described as negative or weak. Colton acknowledged this and started a critical conversation focused on gender stereotypes when he said “Men have all the good traits.” This comment suggests a critical conversation took place in that it focuses on power and privilege associated with gendered identities. Nick and Emma extended this and provided specific examples of the ways these texts portray men in a positive light and give them power (i.e. when Emma says, “Yeah, men are making the choices for the females”). This part of the critical conversation demonstrated that students were able to engage in such a conversation, allowing the perspectives of others to be heard in a respectful manner. The conversation

allowed students to engage in disrupting the common place by providing dialogue around an interrogation of the text based on issues of gender inequity.

Another example of students engaging in critical conversations to disrupt the common place can be seen in the partial transcript from the focus group interview below. Here students developed a language of hope during their conversation reflecting on the text *The Hope Chest*.

**Isabella:** I remember when we did a theme about The Hope Chest [and it was] “we all matter.” In The Hope Chest, it showed how some people are underestimated, like girls and women, and how some people are overestimated, like boys and men. [It showed us] how people that have the power are overestimated and people that don’t have the power are underestimated all the time.

**Ricardo:** I agree with Isabella because it’s showing us all that all of us have power from within our hearts. We can all have power to believe in something that we want. Something we like, something that we love.

**Emma:** I think the whole [critical literacy unit] taught us a little bit about ourselves and a little bit about others. [It showed us] what we can do to stop all these social injustices and see what’s wrong with the world and not just think “America’s great, the world’s great.” We get to see that there are things that we are capable of stopping and things that are easier than others to stop.

In the critical conversation above students are developing a language of hope, which is a prominent part of the definition of disrupting the common place, surrounding issues of gender inequity and social injustice. Isabella engages in this dimension by starting the conversation and reminding the group that despite the ways men are portrayed as powerful and women as weak in the texts they read that ultimately this message is untrue. She does this by focusing on how “people that have the power are

overestimated” and how “people that don’t have the power are underestimated.” Here she was able to share her perspectives, while her peers listened respectfully despite the potential tensions or anxieties such comments could produce. Her emphasis on the theme “we all matter” provides a sense of hope in regard to her views on gender.

Ricardo extended this sense of hope by first agreeing with Isabella and then adding “all of us have power from within our hearts.” Again, he was engaging in this critical conversation about gender by agreeing respectfully. Here he touched on the idea that power does not have to come from physical ability, like the traditional fairytales they read at the beginning of the unit implied, but from attributes related to emotions and belief in oneself. This is another way he engages in the critical conversations—engaging in self-reflection.

Emma took the conversation a step further and broadened it to talk about not just the novel but also the experiences the class had during the entire critical literacy and gender unit. She used a language of hope by emphasizing the idea that learning “a little bit about ourselves and a little bit about others” was a positive experience and one that allowed the class to determine “there are things that we are capable of stopping.” Like Ricardo, Emma contributed to the critical conversation through self-reflection and awareness of social injustices. She also disrupted the common place in this critical conversation by taking up a language of critique (i.e. “...see what’s wrong with the world and not just think America’s great, the world’s great”). This comment could also be seen as having the potential to induce tension or anxiety among the other members of the conversation, as it begins to call in to question systematic oppression based in our society

in a space where some might view patriotism as something not to be questioned. Each of these examples illustrates the ways students disrupted the common place through their participation in critical conversations.

***Identifying Hidden Messages.*** Students engaged in disrupting the common place by identifying hidden messages that went beyond basic understandings of texts and focusing specifically on the messages sent about gender norms. In some cases, students purposefully selected texts that they thought had characters who would break gender stereotypes. For example, in an interview with Isabella she described a book she purposefully selected because the title and description of the plot indicated that the main character in the story would challenge gender stereotypes that girls do not stand up for themselves. She shared with me,

I read *Minnie Speaks her Mind*. The girl, she was in the sixth grade and...she finally speaks her mind about things. She knew a lot of things but she didn't say them out loud. She was really quiet but then suddenly she starts speaking out more.

By purposefully selecting this text Isabella interrogated the text and identified hidden messages (i.e. "...she starts speaking out more"). Based on her assessment of the text Isabella determined that it met the criteria she was looking for—a book with an outspoken female character. This indicates that not only did Isabella identify the hidden message it seemed to extend her comprehension in that she understood more than just the face value of the content of the text. It seems that she used the hidden message to seek

out a book with specific characteristics related to gender—in this case a female character who worked to speak her mind.

Emma provided another example of how students identified hidden messages in a text she selected for independent reading titled, *Rules*. In an interview, she shared with me her take away from the text that showed her focus on messages the text sent about gender.

They're (girls) teased a lot.... They really worry about their appearance except one, which is *Rules*. The girl just puts her hair up in a ponytail, wears a faded t-shirt, but she also worries about makeup and stuff. In any story, they try to sneak a girl statistic or stereotype in there even if the girl is a tomboy they'll try to sneak something in there. Like in *Rules*, the girl doesn't care how she looks but yet whenever her friend Ryan comes over she puts makeup on.

Here Emma's comprehension went beyond the storyline to focus on identifying the hidden messages—the way girls are portrayed and the way authors “try to sneak a girl statistic or stereotype in” the text. She engaged in disrupting the commonplace by interrogating this particular text and using a language of critique in her recognition of the hidden messages authors include about gender (i.e. “...they'll try to sneak something in there”). Her tone in this excerpt also indicated that she was critiquing texts for the messages they send in that she came across as being irritated with such messages. She seemed to take away the message that female characters focus on their appearance. Furthermore, she recognized that even when female characters who break gender stereotypes (i.e. “tomboys”) were included in texts, authors still sent the message that male characters were worth changing for—as was the case in her example from *Rules*.

These are examples of messages Emma took away from the text that are not explicitly stated in the content. She disrupted the common place and identified hidden messages about gender in the reading she did on her own and in class.

During the focus group interview, several students engaged in critiquing popular culture and media when they discussed the hidden messages on an episode of the television show, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. In their conversation, we can see how they comprehended or took away more than what the show may have intended. Below is part of the transcript from the focus group session.

**Angelene:** Yesterday I was watching *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and on the wrestling team they were asking why is a girl here –

**Ricardo:** Patty.

**Angelene:** They were saying why is she here this is boys' wrestling and I don't think they even had a girls' wrestling team at all.

**Emma:** But she beat all of them.

**Ricardo:** Yeah and she beat all of the boys.

**Isabella:** Her parents should sue the school for not letting there be a girls' team.

In this example, Angelene engaged in disrupting the common place by critiquing the fictional school setting on the show when she said, “I don't think they even had a girls' wrestling team at all.” Angelene's tone was that of, at best surprise and at worst disgust in her recognition of this detail related to the show. It was clear that this was not merely a statement but an interrogation and critique of the text in the way it handled gender inequities. This did not seem to be something that had been explicitly stated in

the show but rather a hidden message that Angelene took away from it. Isabella extended this critique by suggesting that it was wrong, even illegal, to provide opportunities for boys to participate in sports and deny girls those same opportunities (i.e. “Her parents should sue the school...”). Isabella was also clearly being critical of and even upset about the hidden message being sent—that girls cannot and/or should not wrestle—as was apparent in her tone and her suggestions that the character’s parents take legal action against the school. Both of the girls seemed to have identified hidden messages in the texts focused on the ways gender was portrayed in an inequitable and oppressive manner. This seems to indicate that their comprehension of the content extends beyond what was on the surface, digging deeper to uncover the injustices in something that might otherwise have just been viewed as a funny scene in a popular children’s cartoon.

**Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues.** Focusing on sociopolitical issues is another dimension that Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) suggest as a way teachers can engage in critical literacy. They define this dimension in terms of focusing on issues like race, gender, and class; attempting to understand and challenge sociopolitical systems to which we belong; using literacy to engage in politics of everyday life; and aiming to use literacy to question the unequal power relationships that exist in everyday life. I did not find it necessary to adapt this definition as students engaged in critical literacy by focusing on sociopolitical issues within the four subthemes discussed below.

***Making Personal & Real World Connections.*** Students made connections to topics when focusing on sociopolitical issues specific to gender inequity. There were instances where they even challenged such systems and used literacy, including popular

culture and media, to question unequal power relationships. For instance, on the day Hope introduced the novel study about *The Hope Chest*, she built background knowledge about voting rights by engaging students in a simulated activity in which students had the opportunity to vote for the book they wanted the class to read and then tallied only the girls' votes when making the decision. When students realized that the boys' votes hadn't counted there were protests from the class about fairness and justice. Hope then discussed with students the history of women's right to vote. After which she asked the class, "Do you think girls still get a taste of that [being discounted, silenced, left out of the conversation] daily?" Below is the conversation that followed:

**Several students call out:** Yes.

**Hope:** How?

**Angelene:** When men get to go ahead. There is a city in Egypt where girls have to wear that headscarf thing or the men will kill them. Several other students gasp.

**Emma:** They can't show any skin.

**Angelene:** My mom's cousin lives there. Whenever she goes in to the city she wears it.

**Fernando:** I would be glad because I would be protected.

**Maria:** Sometimes girls can protect themselves too.

**Hope interjects:** Girls, have you ever felt this way? Many of the girls nod their heads yes. Raise your hand if you've ever felt this way. Almost every girl in the class raises her hand.

**Emma:** One time the boys in my neighborhood were playing football and I asked if I could play and they said no because I was a girl and wasn't strong enough.

**Hope:** So, let's think about this—all the girls can think of examples. Is this a problem?

The entire class calls out: Yes!

Both Angelene and Emma use connections, both personal and real world, as ways of focusing on sociopolitical issues. Angelene's real world connection brings up the sociopolitical issue of women's attire being policed by men (i.e. "girls have to wear that headscarf thing") and the violence that women are at risk for if they fail to adhere by such requirements (i.e. "or the men will kill them"). This example is one in which she made a personal connection to talk about such issues (i.e. "My mom's cousin lives there") as a way to engage in the critical literacy dimension, focusing on sociopolitical issues. Emma added to this connection with her statement, "They can't show any skin." She later provided her own personal connection to feeling like her voice was discounted based on gender when she shared the story about boys in her neighborhood not allowing her to join in their football game. This example focused on sociopolitical issues in that it alludes to the idea that the boys held the gender stereotype that girls can't play football (i.e. "...because I was a girl and wasn't strong enough"). This also indicates that the students were challenging systems of inequity by pushing back against ideas related to gender norms and expectations.

During our follow up interview, Emma made a real-world connection focused on sociopolitical issues. In this example, she references a current event related to gender inequity and reflects on her feelings surrounding the topic. She shared,

There was the commercial on YouTube and on TV and it's for *Always*...It says that girls love emoji's but we really don't get to show who we are. It's about...girls, it has a few curse words...It says that there should be a super bad "A" [bad ass] girl, there should be a pop girl, a girl playing the drums, a girl skateboarding and girls doing anything a guy would do because all of the emoji's, there are no professions for girls... "unless you count being a bride a profession." That's a direct quote from a girl [in the commercial] ...Always is on the brink of creating those emoji's to show that girls are powerful...So the worst thing about being a girl is being misrepresented in everything. [Interview on 4/19/16]

Emma makes a real-world connection by discussing the *Always* commercial focused on the representation of girls in the selection of emoticons available on the iPhone. She uses this connection as a way to challenge the sociopolitical systems to which we belong (i.e. "girls love emoji's but we really don't get to show who we are"). Here she seems to point out that despite the fact that girls buy iPhones and use emoticons as a way to communicate they are not represented. She also uses media literacy (i.e. her awareness of the messages being sent via television commercials) to engage in the politics of everyday life such as the limited opportunities such outlets provide for girls (i.e. "There are no professions for girls..."). This connection also allows her to question unequal power relationships as is evident in her final statement, "the worst thing about being a girl is being misrepresented...."

***Taking Risks.*** Another way students engaged in focusing on sociopolitical systems was by taking risks. In the examples provided here students focus on issues of gender inequity, question unequal power relationships, and challenge sociopolitical systems by critiquing texts, challenging commonly held beliefs about gender, sharing personal likes that go against gender norms, and making comments that may be seen as

controversial. This first example is taken from a lesson where Hope had students list historical figures they learned about in their K-5 schooling experiences. After compiling a class list of historical figures and searching the index of their social studies text books for the names of historical figures discussed in the text, the teacher and students came to the conclusion that white men are the focus of the curriculum teachers are expected to teach. The following discussion occurred during this lesson:

**Hope:** Why are white women teaching this?

**Colton:** They have to.

**Emma:** The system, man!

**Hope:** Is this is problematic?

**Angelene:** Yes. You don't have a lot of power because you're not a white man.

Here the students are challenging the sociopolitical systems to which they and the teacher belong (i.e. public school). This is apparent when Emma blames the fact that students mostly learn about white male historical figures by saying "The system, man!" She specifically focuses on and recognizes that her white female teachers have been required to teach about certain groups of people over others by the system they are a part of in turn limiting students to learn about and retain information about the accomplishments and contributions of white men. This seems to indicate that Emma is taking a risk in that she is challenging a system she is also a part of and which has power over her. Her statement might be seen as controversial in that it places blame on those in power. Angelene takes a similar risk by questioning unequal power relationships within

the school system and confirming that it is problematic that white female teachers teach diverse groups of students about certain groups of people while leaving others out. She takes this risk a step further by actually naming the group that benefits from such unequal power relationships (i.e. You don't have a lot of power because you're not a white man").

In the lesson referenced earlier where Hope built background knowledge about women's voting rights she also reviewed the vocabulary words, discounted and marginalized. At one point she asks students to share if they could relate to either of these terms. Two boys, Nick and Fernando share their experiences. In their responses, they take risks while focusing on sociopolitical issues.

**Nick:** I have an example. I wanted to go to this Frozen show and my sisters got to go but I like it too and I didn't get to go because I was a boy.

**Hope:** What about the rest of the boys? Have you ever been told you shouldn't like something because you're a boy?

**Fernando:** Pink. People say I shouldn't wear pink because I'm a boy, but I still wear it.

Both boys focus on ways they challenge gender stereotypes, admitting to liking things typically associated with girls (i.e. the movie *Frozen* and the color pink). These are statements they make in front of their entire class, which indicates they are taking a risk by making these admissions to their peers who may judge or tease them about having such interests. They focus on sociopolitical issues by recognizing that wanting to watch *Frozen* or wear the color pink go against the gender norms of our society.

***Engaging in Critical Conversations.*** Students also engaged in critical conversations as a way to focus on sociopolitical issues by hearing and respecting the

voices and perspectives of their peers, engaging in reflection and discussion about power and privilege, and demonstrating their increased awareness of systemic oppression. In the following examples, students address sociopolitical issues such as unequal opportunities for education based on gender and the gender pay gap. They referenced texts they read in class such as, *I Am Malala*, an article they were assigned for homework about Mo'ne Davis, a female little league pitcher who was one of the only girls to play in the Little League World Series, and research they conducted for the social justice papers they wrote at the end of the unit. The sections from the critical conversation shared below took place during the focus group interview that I conducted with the six focus students.

**Nick:** Like education wise, women don't really get that much education around the world.

**Angelene:** Like Malala.

**Nick:** But like men do and they get an occupation right away after they graduate college but women, they still have, they don't get an education so they can't have an occupation or be what they want to be.

**Emma:** Yeah, females have to work twice as hard as males to get half the respect, like the detective from the career fair. She had to do the same stuff as the guys and they just kept telling her she wasn't smart enough or strong enough.

**Nick:** I agree because while I was doing my social justice paper I read this article about that women work harder but they get paid less.

**Emma:** It's harder to take care of a family on that salary.

During this first part of the conversation Nick and Angelene both referenced texts they read (i.e. articles from a research project and *I am Malala*) to help them make the

point that gender inequity exists when it comes to access to educational opportunities. This indicates a critical conversation was taking place in that it illustrates an awareness of systemic oppression. Nick uses what he has read about girls' education rights around the world to question unequal power relationships and engage in politics of everyday life (i.e. "men do and they get an occupation right away...but women...don't get an education..."). Again, this demonstrates his awareness of systemic oppression but in this statement, he also addresses whose interests such oppression serves (i.e. men). Emma uses an example from the career fair that was organized as part of the unit to help break gender stereotypes and featured men and women in fields typically associated with the opposite gender to further support Nick's points. She too is engaging in the politics of everyday life and questioning unequal power relationships based on gender (i.e. "females have to work twice as hard...like the detective..."). This example also indicates that students are engaged in critical conversation. Emma has a platform to share her opinion. The rest of the students listen, displaying respect for a viewpoint different from their own. Emma's comment is also one that touches on issues of systemic oppression and demonstrates critical consciousness. She focuses on the idea that women have to work harder to earn respect than men do, especially in particular career fields (i.e. law enforcement). This was a comment she heard during the career fair presentations that stayed with her indicating that she was aware of the significance of this comment not just for the presenter but as it also related to gender inequity. Her comment had the potential to create tension and/or anxiety among the group, particularly because it was made up of

both male and female students leaving her open to critique from the rest of the group who may not agree with the statement.

Later in the conversation, the group brought the focus back to the gender pay gap, using the critical conversation as a way to focus on sociopolitical issues such as the lack of opportunities for girls in to participate in sports.

**Emma:** Like how men doctors are paid more or like how any man is paid more. Like women's league soccer –

**Miguel:** They get paid less.

**Emma:** Where men league soccer get paid more. Just like in, like for example...men pilots get paid more. Female doctors and nurses get paid less than male doctors and nurses.

**Angelene:** But also like for instance girls and boys like in sports, like when you guys were talking about soccer you were talking about the money but it was kind of right there in front of you, sports are divided by girls and boys they're not divided by age or anything...It's just not soccer, but anything. Why can't girls play baseball? They have to play softball.

**Nick:** Probably because they think they're weak.

**Emma:** Exactly.

**Miguel:** And they can't do it like a guy.

**Emma:** It's literally the word soft. They can't play baseball but they can play softball.

In this second half of the conversation, Emma highlighted the issues surrounding gender and the sociopolitical systems to which we belong. She made her point by focusing in on the gender pay gap and referencing several examples such as the medical field, aviation, and sports (i.e. "men doctors are paid more," "men pilots get paid more," and "men league soccer get paid more"). Again, each of these contributions to the

conversation indicate that Emma had an awareness of systemic oppression yet also raised the potential for other students in the group to experience tension as her comments focused on highlighting the way men benefit from such systems. Angelene extended this by focusing on the unequal opportunities for girls to participate in sports. She challenged the reasons behind having separate sports teams for girls and boys (i.e. "...sports are divided by girls and boys...") and questioned the notion that girls have to play watered down versions of the same sports boys play (i.e. "Why can't girls play baseball? They have to play softball"). Angelene engaged in this critical conversation by questioning power and privilege associated with various identities, specifically related to gender.

Nick and Miguel engaged in the conversation and pointed to the politics of everyday life such as commonly held stereotypes about girls' abilities (i.e. "they think they're weak" and "they can't do it like a guy"). These comments also had the potential to cause tension between the boys and the girls in the group. However, the rest of the students listened to Nick and Miguel's comments with respect for their point of view. Emma's final comment during this critical conversation demonstrated how she challenged the role gendered language plays in the unequal power relationships present in sports. She emphasized the way men's and women's sports are described using language that automatically portrays women's work in sports as less than their male counterparts (i.e. "It's literally the word soft...softball"). Again, she highlighted power and privilege associated with various identities, in this case gendered identities, and demonstrated an awareness of systemic oppression. It is interesting that she took her focus on system oppression beyond just the system of professional sports and focused on problematizing

the language itself. This seems to indicate an even deeper understanding of such systems of oppression—all of which she was able to share through a critical conversation in which sociopolitical issues of gender were the focus.

The opportunity to engage in the critical literacy unit seems to have impacted student's ability to engage in critical conversations such as these. This conversation went on for longer, was more focused, and illustrated that students were able to speak knowledgably about sociopolitical issues related to gender than the conversations I observed prior to and even during the first few weeks of unit.

***Identifying Hidden Messages.*** A final way that students focused on sociopolitical issues was through identifying hidden messages. They were able to recognize the hidden messages authors were sending related to gender norms and expectations. Students not only recognized these messages but also reflected on the ways they might impact the boys and girls who receive them through reading such texts. For example, during the lesson previously referenced in which students read and analyzed traditional fairytales, several of the girls shared their understanding of the messages these texts send. Below is a section of the transcript from this conversation.

**Hope:** If the main character's voice is missing, what message does it send? This question makes the students pause...there is a long silence before Emma finally speaks up.

**Emma:** They aren't as important as the reader thought they would be.

**Ricardo:** I agree, in red riding hood you don't hear from her.

**Hope:** Why is that a problem?

**Emma:** Because little kids are vulnerable.

**Colton:** They will think it's true. That's why some people might not ever speak up in life.

**Lily:** It tells them to change their personality.

**Emma:** It makes them a target for bullying. I think it impacts girls more.

**Hope:** Why?

**Emma:** They are seen as the weaker gender.

**Hope:** If we are reading these books to children at a young age what will they think?

**Emma:** A lot of little girls think they will find their prince and develop insecurity.

**Lily:** They'll realize the perfect life isn't possible.

This conversation illustrated the ways students in Hopes class identified hidden messages as a way of engaging in focusing on sociopolitical issues surrounding gender norms and expectations. Rather than focusing on the basic messages the texts send—for example in little red riding hood students might typically be asked where red was going or what happened on her journey and be expected to know that the wolf tricks red, she is saved by the wood cutter, and the moral of the story is to never talk to strangers—the students identified hidden messages that focused on sociopolitical issues. This is particularly evident when reflecting on the messages Colton, Lily, and Emma take away from the texts about women (i.e. “They aren’t as important...” “They will think it’s true...” “...think they will find their prince”). In these examples students are engaging in the politics of everyday life in which women are faced with challenges due to their gender. This is also apparent in the ways this group of students predict these messages

might impact the actions of girls and women (i.e. "...might not ever speak up in life," "It makes them a target for bullying," they will "develop insecurity").

Later in the same discussion about traditional fairytales, Hope asks students to think about the messages being sent to boys about the roles of men and to consider if this is problematic. Similar to their conversation about the messages sent to girls about the roles of women, students identified hidden messages and focused on sociopolitical issues when thinking about the messages the texts send to boys.

**Silvia:** Men learn that they have to be brave and save the day.

**Fernando:** If men read it they think they have to do all the work and save the day.

**Silvia:** People say that men aren't supposed to cry. If something bad happens to them they will think they can't cry.

**Colton:** I agree with Silvia. A lot of boys do hold it in and that causes a lot of anger issues when they get older.

Again, students use literacy to engage in the politics of everyday life by challenging gender norms in the ways they comprehend the text. They recognize the hidden messages being sent about the roles of boys in our society (i.e. "they have to be brave," "they have to do all the work and save the day,") and the limited ways boys are allowed to express themselves in the sociopolitical systems to which they belong (i.e. "If something bad happens to them they will think they can't cry"). Colton takes this further and addresses the consequences such hidden messages might have (i.e. "A lot of boys do hold it in and that causes a lot of anger issues when they get older").

None of the messages that students discuss here based on the traditional fairytales are messages that authors of these texts intend to send, but they are messages that are being sent nonetheless. Students who read these texts would typically not be asked comprehension questions in a class discussion, assignment, or assessment that focus on the messages this group of children took from these stories. However, they are messages that impact what children learn about the values of our culture, the expectations society has for them, and the expectations they have for themselves and each other.

**Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints.** Using multiple voices to interrogate texts, drawing attention to voices of those who have been silenced, and making difference visible are how Lewison and colleagues (2002) defined interrogating multiple viewpoints, a third dimension of critical literacy. For the purposes of looking at student data through with this theme, I have expanded uses multiple voices to interrogate texts as the ways students think and talk about perspectives different from their own, for example when male students took on perspectives of female characters in texts. By taking on multiple perspectives students seemed to develop empathy toward those different from themselves which is something I have included as part of this theme.

***Making Personal & Real World Connections.*** Students made personal and real world connections as a way of interrogating multiple viewpoints. This included the ways in which girls took on the perspectives of boys and vice versa as well as the way both boys and girls took on the perspectives of people different from themselves in terms of race and class. For example, during our follow up interview, Ricardo shared,

The worst thing about being a boy is like you don't know what it's like to be in girl's shoes....to be bullied. Like in *Red Riding Hood* girls are kind of marginalized because the wolf is eating them so that doesn't give them any power to do anything at all. But then the man just comes in to save the day.

Here Ricardo made a personal connection to the way he felt he was unable to fully understand girls' perspectives (i.e. "you don't know what it's like to be in a girl's shoes"). It seems he recognized that there were experiences and perspectives different from his own that are difficult for him to fully understand. He drew attention to the idea that women's voices had been silenced or as he put it "kind of marginalized" by giving the example from *Little Red Riding Hood* in which girls were given "any power to do anything at all" but men have the power to "save the day." It seems he felt he could relate to the power that the men were given in this story but was aware of the ways this differed from what girls who were reading the text might experience.

In another example, Isabella shared a personal example where she seemed to attempt to take on the perspectives of a male friend—a perspective different from her own. In our follow up interview she talked about male characters in the books she was reading at the time, *Okay for Now*, and related this to gender stereotypes. She shared,

*Okay for Now* shows how much the man has the power...but he doesn't use it for the right things. I'm not glad about it because like [men] have power.... Sometimes it's hard for boys too because there's stereotypes a lot. Some boys have it really tough. I have a friend and instead of being more like a male, he's not very athletic and all that stuff. He gets bullied a lot but I try to stick up for him.

Isabella interrogated this text using a viewpoint different from her own. She recognized that in this text although the dad had the power in his family, there were negative consequences that came with it. The family, in particular the sons, suffered the consequences of that power in terms of their relationship with their dad. She took this idea further by making difference visible in the personal connection she made when thinking about male stereotypes (i.e. “I have a friend and instead of being more like a male, he’s not very athletic and all that stuff”). By interrogating the text and making a personal connection it seems she also expressed empathy for the viewpoints different from her own as is apparent when she said, “Sometimes it’s hard for boys too because there’s stereotypes a lot. Some boys have it really tough.”

Although there were several instances where this seemed to occur, the example below taken from a reaction Miguel had to learning and reading about women’s voting rights, highlights how powerful taking on multiple perspectives was for him. This interaction occurred after Hope engaged students in a simulation where they had to vote for which book to read as a class and then proceeded to only count the girls’ votes. A discussion followed the simulation that tied the experience to women’s voting rights and a shared reading and viewing of a reenactment of Susan B. Anthony’s statement in court after being arrested for voting illegally. During the discussion Hope noticed that Miguel was almost to the point of tears. She checked in with him and said, “You’re looking really hurt. Why?” Miguel responded, “Because people in history really felt like this.” This experience seemed to allow him to take on perspectives different from his own and really imagine how women whose voices had been silenced might have felt. His

emotional reaction to this realization seemed to indicate that by taking on multiple perspectives he developed a deeper sense of empathy for others.

***Taking Risks.*** Students engaged in interrogating multiple viewpoints by taking risks in which they shared thoughts with others that might be seen as controversial, challenged commonly held beliefs about gender, and/or critiqued texts for perpetuating gender stereotypes. For example, Ricardo reflected on the thoughts he had while reading *Little Red Riding Hood* and worked to interrogate the text using multiple perspectives. “When I read it I thought ‘why are they not fighting back? The girls should fight back.’” His statement seemed to be indicative of him taking risks in that they might be considered offensive (i.e. “The girls should fight back”). This might be considered victim blaming which could upset or offend some of the girls in his class. At the same time, it could be seen as his way of critiquing the text for perpetuating the gender stereotype that girls are weak and do not have the power to fight back. Either way he is taking a risk by sharing his interpretation of the text during a whole group discussion while at the same time considering the text from the female character’s perspective—that which is different from his own. This is important because it opens spaces for students to begin to understand perspectives of others, develop empathy for various standpoints, and empowering them to push back against systems of oppression that they may otherwise not have been aware of. By taking on perspectives different than their own students have the potential to become allies for marginalized groups, using the power they may have in connection with dominant groups to make change toward a more equitable world.

Another example of students engaging in taking on multiple perspectives while taking risks occurred during a discussion about women's voting rights. In this lesson, as described earlier, students read Susan B. Anthony's speech about her right to vote and watched a reenactment of it. They then participated in a simulation Hope planned in which, students were asked to vote on the book the class would read for their novel study. After all votes had been turned in Hope announced that only the girls' votes would count. The following discussion took place after Hope revealed that the vote was really just a simulation:

**Hope:** Girls, now you get to be the opposite how do you feel about the boys' votes being discounted?

**Emma:** Like I have the power. It also made me feel bad for the boys.

**Hope:** Which feeling won out?

**Emma:** Feeling bad.

**Angelene:** I didn't feel bad. They deserve it. They need to feel how we felt.

**Maria:** It is important for everyone's voice to be heard so we can know how they are feeling.

**Nick:** Because we need to hear what people think. We need multiple opinions so you can bounce ideas off of each other like what Susan B. Anthony was saying.

Here students were able to take on multiple perspectives through the experience of the voting simulation (i.e. "...made me feel bad for the boys"). Similarly, Maria and Nick emphasized the importance of all voices being heard drawing attention to voices that have been silenced (i.e. "...important for everyone's voice to be heard..." "...we

need to hear what people think... We need multiple opinions...”). It seemed that Nick was also taking a risk by encouraging all voices to be heard which would challenge his own positions or potential positions of power as a white male. Angelene took a risk during the conversation by admitting that she did not feel bad for the boys when their votes were not counted because as she put it “They deserve it.” This could have been taken offensively by her male peers causing backlash, although it did not she still took a risk by making this statement. She furthered this risk by pushing for the boys to take on perspectives different than their own (i.e. “They need to feel how we felt”). With this comment, she is challenging the boys in her class to be open to feelings of marginalization—something that might make them feel uncomfortable or even be seen as controversial.

During our final interview Emma took on perspectives different from her own by taking risks and challenging commonly held beliefs about gender. When asked to describe what, she noticed about the ways boys are represented in texts she shared,

I also think that that’s wrong because there are stereotypes for boys that they’re supposed to be big and manly.... I also think that it’s wrong that they’re trying to sneak boys’ statistics and stereotypes in there. I don’t just feel for the girls; I feel for the guys in the story too because I know that they’re being misrepresented too.

Emma used multiple voices to interrogate texts by focusing both on the ways boys and girls were misrepresented through stereotypes (i.e. “I don’t just feel for the girls; I feel for the guys in the story too”). She took risks in this statement by challenging commonly held beliefs about gender (i.e. “that’s wrong because there are stereotypes for

boys...”). This seemed to indicate that she disagreed with this stereotype and was thus challenging this commonly held belief. She also took risks by sharing ideas that might be seen as controversial by implying that authors attempt to “sneak...statistics and stereotypes” in to their stories.

In these examples, students took risks by critiquing texts and challenging each other’s ideas, often in ways that left them vulnerable for judgment or ridicule by peers. They shared thoughts that might make them or others uncomfortable or that may be seen as controversial.

*Engaging in Critical Conversations.* Students were able to take on multiple perspectives by engaging in critical conversations about gender inequity. During a whole group discussion about *Sleeping Beauty*, students engaged in critical conversation while taking on multiple perspectives. For example, Fernando brought up the idea that the evil fairy in the text had power because she placed the curse on the princess. Hope probed students to think about this and the conversation that follows demonstrated the ways in which students take on the perspectives of characters traditionally viewed as mean or evil in fairytales. Below is a portion of the conversation.

**Fernando:** [The evil fairy] has the power. She curses sleeping beauty because she doesn’t get invited to the christening.

**Hope:** So, there we have a female with power.

**Nick:** But it’s like bad power.

**Hope:** How else could you describe it?

**Emma:** Minor power.

**Isabella:** Evil power.

**Hope:** So, what message does that send about girls with power?

**Emma:** They turn bad.

**Colton:** In *Monaro's Beautiful Daughters* Manyara's voice was heard, she had power but in a bad way because she influenced the way every character acts with her actions and she changes the way the king thought.

**Hope:** So, we have two females the evil fairy and Manyara in strong roles. They have power but perceived as?

**Emma:** Evil or corrupted.

**Hope:** So, it sends the message that?

**Angelene:** Girls with power are bad.

**Emma:** Girls can't handle power.

**Nick:** Girls shouldn't have power or they will do bad things.

**Fernando:** There's bad power in Cinderella.

**Hope:** Who?

**Isabella:** The [step] sisters.

**Fernando:** And the [step] mom.

Here students engage in a critical conversation focused on gender while they interrogate texts by taking on multiple perspectives as think about women with power in traditional fairytales. Nick recognizes that the way female power is represented is different than the way male power is represented in the traditional fairytales the class read, allowing him to think about perspectives other than his own and make difference visible (i.e. "But it's like bad power."). As the conversation continues and Hope probes the students to think about this concept, Angelene, Emma, and Nick interrogate the text and come to conclusions that focus on the gender inequity in the ways power is represented in texts (i.e. "Girls with power are bad," "Girls can't handle power," and "Girls shouldn't

have power or they will do bad things”). Fernando continues this interrogation of texts from multiple perspectives by providing an additional example when he suggests that there is “bad power” in *Cinderella*. Isabella helps support his point with her example of the stepsisters. This critical conversation was started and continued largely because of student contributions with little questioning or input from the teacher. Students were able to engage in taking on multiple perspectives as a way to talk about gender stereotypes through this critical conversation and others like it that occurred throughout the unit.

***Identifying Hidden Messages.*** Students identified hidden messages by taking away messages related to gender inequity that were not explicitly stated in the texts they read when they took on multiple perspectives. This was particularly apparent when students shared their mind portraits completed in conjunction with the lesson on the 1967 Boston Marathon. In this lesson the students read about the marathon from the perspective of the race winner, the race organizer, and Katherine Switzer the first woman to enter and run the marathon despite a verbal and physical attack by the race manager. Below is an excerpt from discussion surrounding student work pertaining to this lesson that seem to indicate that students took away messages from the text that go beyond basic text comprehension and focus on gender inequity.

**Colton:** I wonder if an African American or a woman won if they would have written it like that.

**Angelene:** It would have been like “surprise!”

**Fernando:** History is so messed up.

**Hope:** A lot of you took on a female perspective.

**Isabella** shares what she included in her mind portrait on Katherine Switzer: Just because you're a girl doesn't mean you're better than me.

**Hope:** What message is the text about Dave sending to the readers about marathons?

**Fernando:** They can only be won by young white men.

**Angelene:** That if you're a girl you can't run a marathon.

**Hope:** What's the hidden message?

**Isabella:** Women do not run.

Colton takes on multiple perspectives and wonders aloud about how an article about an African American or female runner would have looked like and Angelene's sarcastic response shows that she was able to take on a perspective different from her own. Her response also indicates that she took a message from the text that went beyond what was written about Dave—the idea that it was expected that a white man would win the race but unheard of for a female or black runner to win (i.e. “It would have been like ‘surprise!’”). The article was not critiquing history, rather it was praising and celebrating Dave for winning the race, however, Fernando takes away the message that “History is so messed up!” Demonstrating that by taking on the perspectives of minority groups he came to the conclusion that the way things were in 1967 were unfair. Isabella is also able to do this as is clear in the statement she shares from her mind portrait “Just because you're a girl doesn't mean you're better than me.” Isabella identified hidden messages by taking on the perspective of Katherine and coming to a conclusion that was not included in the article on Dave. Taking on multiple perspectives also allowed Fernando, Angelene, and Isabella to identify hidden messages in the text (i.e. “They can only be

won by young white men,” “...if you’re a girl you can’t run a marathon,” and “Women do not run”).

**Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice.** The final and most difficult dimension of critical literacy suggested by Lewison et. al. (2002) is promoting social justice. This has been shown to be the most difficult dimension for teachers to engage in. In fact, I could not find strong examples of ways students engaged in critical conversations or identified hidden messages as ways to engaged in taking action and promoting social justice. Lewison and colleagues define it as challenging and redefining cultural borders and using language to exercise power and question privilege. Although there were very few instances of this theme and its subthemes, I have included it to show that it is also difficult for students to engage in this dimension but to provide the few examples that were in the data that demonstrated ways they might.

***Making Personal & Real World Connections.*** Several students made real world or personal connections that could be seen as a way they engaged in promoting social justice and taking action. For example, during an interview, Angelene worked to redefine cultural boarders when asked what she thought she might want to be when she grows up she responded by saying, “I know this might sound really weird, but I want to be President.” She was promoting social justice and taking action by working to redefine cultural boarders and making a personal connection to the role she might play in such change. Her proclamation that she might one day want to be president, something that has never been done in the history of the United States, indicates the action she plans to take

to make change happen. Later in the interview she makes real world connections as she reflects on the gender norms in our society that restrict women saying,

Like [men] are the people who made the laws and became all the presidents and did everything so they're like "oh it's just meant to be, for girls to be like this. It's not like you're supposed to be anything else." It's how it's always been...but it's like girls are becoming not really like that anymore. They're changing....

When asked to further explain what she meant by "they're changing" she provided the following response,

We are still on our way there...I think we have to wait until like um maybe a lady becomes president and I think she might do a lot of stuff.

Angelene was using language to question privilege (i.e. "Like [men] are the people who made the laws...so they're like oh it's just meant to be..."). In this example, she places responsibility for -gender inequity largely on law and policy makers who have historically been men. She questions this privilege when she recognizes that things are changing for women and suggests that if a woman were to become president perhaps even more might change in their favor (i.e. "...we have to wait until like um maybe a lady becomes president...").

***Taking Risks.*** There were a few instances where students engaged in promoting social justice and taking action by taking risks. For example, the school had a week celebrating literacy for Dr. Seuss' birthday and the class decided they were going to extend the conversations they had been having about gender inequity and critical literacy

to the rest of the school. Each class was expected to decorate their classroom door and on the last day of the celebratory week the whole school would take a tour of the school to see what other classes had come up with. The class decided to create a display that focused on challenging gender stereotypes in which they posted pictures of themselves engaging in activities that defy gender norms and featured books they read that challenged gender stereotypes. Hope asked students to help her think of a title from the door. Ricardo suggested, “We challenge you to question gender stereotypes!” Colton then shared an idea he had to enhance the door decorations. He suggested, “We could put books around the door and make a sign that says, ‘More books to challenge your thoughts on gender.’”

By opening the ongoing conversation that the class had been having about gender inequity to the rest of the school was a way students were engaging in taking action and promoting social justice by taking risks. Parents, teachers, administrators, and their peers could have viewed this topic as controversial. Students were taking risks in their willingness to place pictures of themselves doing activities that defy gender norms on such public display. Ricardo and Colton specifically worked to take action and promote social justice in their suggestions for the literacy door. Ricardo’s suggestion for the door title encourages the whole school to engage in a conversation about gender inequity. This is also him taking a risk by starting that conversation in the first place, a conversation that others might take offense to. Colton’s suggestion to provide book ideas to the students and teachers that view the door is a way he is taking action and promoting social justice by providing materials to others that might help to challenge their thoughts

on gender stereotypes. Again, some of the book suggestions might be seen as controversial or inappropriate for younger students so he engages in risk taking with this idea.

In this section of I have worked to provide evidence of the ways in which students engaged in critical literacy practices to challenge gender stereotypes. The four main themes discussed were taken from the dimensions of critical literacy suggested by Lewison and colleagues (2002) and included disrupting the common place, focusing on sociopolitical issues, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and taking action to promote social justice. Subthemes for each dimension were addressed and examples were provided to illustrate specific ways students engaged in critical literacy practices.

This chapter has provided evidence for research questions 1a and 1b. The data for these two questions focused on the teacher and students, respectively. First, the ways the teacher used critical literacy to addresses issues of gender inequity with her students was discussed. Evidence pertaining to this question indicated that Hope engaged in critical literacy practices connected with the dimensions of critical literacy proposed by Lewison and colleagues (2002). Her approach to literacy instruction included the ways in which she used and selected literacy materials, engaged in critical conversations with students, explicitly taught and modeled how to use critical literacy, and merged the standards she was required to teach with critical literacy practices. I then provided evidence for research question 1b which described the ways students engaged in critical literacy practices to challenge issues of gender inequity in their everyday lives. These findings were summarized in the paragraph above. In the next chapter I report the findings related

to research question 2a and 2b, which focus on ways the teacher and students' understandings of critical literacy related to gender shifted throughout the implementation of the unit.

## CHAPTER VI

### FINDINGS PART II

Whereas the previous chapter addressed the ways the teacher and students used critical literacy to address gender inequity, this chapter highlights the ways their understandings of critical literacy and gender shifted throughout the unit of study. The data related to research questions 2a and 2b are an important extension of the previous data. The evidence for these questions emphasizes how teacher and student thinking about critical literacy and gender was impacted as a result of engaging in such practices. For researchers interested in social justice issues these findings provide insight in to how the practical application of this approach to literacy education can make a difference in the ways teachers and students work to push back against oppressive systems. Like with the previous chapter I have organized this chapter by research question. I first share findings for research question 2a, focused on the teacher, and then for 2b, focused on the students.

#### **RQ2a: In What Ways Does the Teacher Understandings of Critical Literacy Related to Gender Shift During a Unit of Study?**

There were two main themes that emerged from the data related to research question 2a. These included ways Hope's understandings of critical literacy increased and the ways her understandings of gender shifted. In the sections below I provide descriptions of each of these themes and evidence to support them.

**Increasing Understandings of Critical Literacy.** Hope's understandings of critical literacy moved from basic understandings and beginning practices to more complex understandings and experienced practices during my time in her classroom. This was apparent in the ways in which her definition of critical literacy changed from before the unit began to when it ended. Overtime it also seemed apparent that Hope became more skilled and confident in her ability to use and engage in such practices through the questions she asked and the materials she selected. Along with guidance from the researcher, Hope used personal experiences to develop understandings of critical literacy through self-reflection and recognition of her personal biases. I encourage readers to reference Hope's initial responses to these questions during the pilot study, which I shared in chapter three.

*Defining Critical Literacy.* Hope's basic level of understanding was clear in her initial interview that took place in January prior to the start of the unit. She was asked to share her definition and understanding of critical literacy. Below I share her explanation, highlighting with bolded font some of the key ideas related to critical literacy in her explanation:

I think it is, to use the word critical, **looking at a text critically**. I think that it's when you just don't read a book to read a book, to absorb information but **you read it through the lens of how would multiple people read this text**. I think that you look at too, and this is the hard part for kids is, they look at it and they read it just their way. But, you want to ask okay well what if I put this book in front of so and so, how would they read it? **Why does everybody read it differently? ... Why did the author write it this way? What was their purpose and then you can even talk about their unintended purpose...**So, I think it's literally **looking a text critically from every viewpoint...? and then asking**

**challenging questions—what’s in this...what’s not in this and why is it not in there.**

Here Hope demonstrates a basic understanding of critical literacy. She focuses on the first part of the phrase to help her formulate her definition (i.e. “looking at a text critically”). She expands upon this and explains that critical literacy has to do with interrogating texts from multiple viewpoints (i.e. “...how would multiple people read this text”) and furthers this by suggesting that it also encompasses asking a follow up question to probe students further (i.e. “Why does everybody read it differently?”). She also has a basic understanding that critical literacy involves disrupting the common place through interrogation of a text in terms of the author’s purpose and hidden messages that may be present in the text (i.e. “Why did the author write it this way?” “...unintended purpose,”). The last part of this statement also touches on the idea of highlighting voices that have been silenced (i.e. “what’s not in this...”). In this definition, she seems to focus on two of the four dimensions of critical literacy that Lewison and colleagues (2002) suggest, interrogating multiple viewpoints and disrupting the common place. This demonstrates a basic understanding of the concept of critical literacy as it leaves out two important aspects of the definition: focusing on sociopolitical issues and taking action to promote social justice.

After the unit concluded, I conducted a follow up interview with Hope. During this interview, I asked her to reflect on her original definition of critical literacy. Specifically, I asked her to share if she thought her definition had changed throughout the course of the unit and if so, how. She shared that she thought her definition and

understanding of critical literacy had changed. Below she elaborated on what she meant, again I have bolded key phrases in her elaboration that are related to critical literacy:

**Before it was scary, like the phrase ‘critical literacy’ now it’s just more like the way everyone should be reading...** I think in the beginning I was thinking about challenging texts...but now I think it’s kind of **expanded into getting kids to think about even themselves**. It’s like in your *own* perspective, whose perspective is missing? ...It’s a way to teach children how to be well-rounded citizens.... **It’s almost like the vehicle for addressing social justice**. I think critical literacy was more what I was trying to do [all along]. **I was trying through literacy to get [my students] to the point where they were thinking about “how does this relate to me in the real world.”** So, **by questioning text and questioning the authors of text they are then forced to question themselves**. I think I’ve started to see it more like that, as **a way to still do my social justice piece of it but to do it through critical literacy**. **I think it’s the way I was trying to [teach] before; I just have a defined term for it now.**

The definition that Hope provided after the unit concluded is more complex than the one she offered during our initial interview. She recognized that her definition had changed (i.e. “.in the beginning I was thinking ...”). Initially she was simply thinking about how to challenge texts, leaving out some key ideas of critical literacy related to issues of power and sociopolitical factors. She admitted that initially teaching from a critical literacy perspective was intimidating for her (i.e. “Before it was scary...”). She seemed to have been apprehensive of the term itself but later recognized that it actually provided her with a framework for engaging in the kind of teaching she had worked to implement throughout her career (i.e. “...I just have a defined term for it now”). Additionally, she expanded her initial thinking by adding to her definition a focus on sociopolitical issues (i.e. “... vehicle for addressing social justice”)—touching on the

fourth dimension of critical literacy. Part of the definition of this dimension focuses on questioning power and questioning privilege. Hope, in her definition addresses this somewhat (i.e. "...getting kids to think about even themselves..."). This part of her definition indicated ways that students might question their own power and privilege.

Her definition also seemed to go beyond critical literacy in the ways that it has been defined in the literature by including an emphasis on using this perspective to instill a sense of responsibility for others and our society as a whole (i.e. "...teach children how to be well-rounded citizens...") and as a way to use literature to engage in self-reflection (i.e. "...they were thinking about 'how does this relate to me'...").

*Asking Critical Literacy Questions.* Hope's understanding of how to implement critical literacy with her students matured as well. This was apparent in her ability to ask critical literacy questions of her students without assistance. Although Hope focused on social justice issues prior to the start of the unit, her questions often were not clearly related to critical literacy or gender inequity. During the unit Hope's questions became more nuanced and focused on both critical literacy and gender. To demonstrate this in the excerpts below I have included examples from my field notes of questions she asked and interactions she had with students over the course of the data collection process from before the unit began through its conclusion. I have organized these examples chronologically and included the date to help illustrate how Hope changed over time. This first excerpt was taken from fieldnotes in December—before the unit or unit planning began. It demonstrates Hope's novice understandings of critical literacy.

*Fieldnotes, 12/3/15*

Hope reads a section of the book *Esperanza Rising* that talks about how Esperanza completes work typically reserved for the oldest son of the family. She stops and says, “That’s interesting,” but doesn’t ask students to think about why it might be interesting. She just continues reading. Later she reads a section that describes Esperanza’s parents. She asks, “Where do they fall in to this?” One student says, “They are owners.” Another says, “They are rich.” Hope asks, “What gives you clues?” One student says, “They owned land.” The teacher attempts to get students to think about additional clues by asking, “What about how they dressed?”

Here, Hope could easily have taken on a critical literacy lens, focusing on issues of class, power, and privilege by focusing on the ways these characters were privileged as land owners as compared to the characters that worked for them and how the revolution impacted the two groups differently. However, she focused instead on recognizing that Esperanza’s parents were rich and leaving the conversation at that (i.e. “What about how they dressed?”). She even could have tied in gender when asking about dress expectations in the 1950s of women from the upper class compared to women of lower class backgrounds. However, Hope did not go beyond pointing out that Esperanza’s family was rich. Students were never asked to question the underlying power and privilege apparent in the text. Hope did not problematize the class issues implicit in this chapter, how they are rooted in historical oppression, or how they related to issues that are still a problem for marginalized groups today. However, she did choose a book that dealt with these issues and explained in an informal interview that the selection of the text was purposeful in that she wanted to expose students to issues of social justice

related to immigration since many of their families had immigrated, some illegally, to the U.S. from places such as Mexico.

This second excerpt came from fieldnotes taken during the first week of the unit. It demonstrates how Hope's understanding of implementing critical literacy with a focus on gender had changed since December but was still in its infancy.

*Fieldnotes, 2/2/16*

On the first day of the unit, Hope read aloud the classic fairytale, Cinderella. She selected this text as a way for her to model for students how to stop and ask critical literacy questions while reading. Prior to this read aloud, during our planning session, Hope asked if I could help her with planning the stopping points and coming up with critical literacy questions to ask. In order to help her with this, I went through and marked stopping points with sticky notes and included on the notes questions she might want to ask while reading. Questions included: what do you notice about the way men and women are described? Is the way they are portraying women and men a problem? Who has the power in this scene? What message does this send to girls/boys? Why might this be problematic? She read the book to students and used my stopping points and questions to guide her lesson never branching out to ask questions of her own but rather sticking to the questions I had planned.

Here, Hope demonstrated that her understanding of critical literacy was limited in her lack of confidence to plan stopping points and questions to go along with the lesson. She was aware that this would pose a struggle for her, a sentiment she shared with me as we planned the lesson together (i.e. "Hope asked if I could help her..."). By engaging in this kind of self-awareness and accepting it as part of her own learning process she was able to seek out the assistance she needed. This allowed her to implement a lesson focused on critical literacy and gender. It provided a space for Hope to practice using

critical literacy with the assistance of the researcher (i.e. "...used my stopping points and questions...never branching out..."). This experience allowed Hope and her students to focus on sociopolitical issues, disrupted the common place, and interrogated multiple viewpoints—something Hope had not done to this degree in her previous lessons. Students responded to the questions she asked and engaged in discussion surrounding them as was described in the findings for research question 1b. Some of the conclusions students came to based on this lesson included: "Women are jealous," "They have to be pretty," "The man [has the power]." This seemed to indicate that the lesson was successful and seemed to build Hope's confidence in her ability to engage in critical literacy with her students.

The following excerpt taken from my field notes later in the first week of the unit illustrates how in just a few days Hope had already increased her confidence and ability to use critical literacy with her students.

*Fieldnotes, 2/4/16*

Today's lesson shifted from a focus on traditional fairytales that students had been using to practice critical literacy to nontraditional fairytales. Like with the traditional fairytales, Hope opened the lesson by modeling how to use critical literacy with the nontraditional fairytale, *The Paper Bag Princess*. This time Hope planned the stopping points and questions on her own, marking pages she felt were good places to use critical literacy with students using sticky notes, without any assistance from me. She included questions such as: what do you notice about the way male and female characters are portrayed in this picture, who has the power in this scene? What do you notice about the way the author switches roles of male and female characters? How is this different from the traditional fairytales? What do you notice about the way women are portrayed? What message does this send to the reader? How have women's roles changed?

In this example, just two days after the previous, Hope gained enough confidence to practice asking students critical literacy questions without assistance. The questions she asks focus on sociopolitical issues (i.e. “What do you notice about...”), aim to disrupt the common place by interrogating the text (i.e. “Who has the power in this scene?”), and using multiple viewpoints (i.e. “What do you notice about...male and female characters?”). This example illustrates the ways Hope grew in her understanding of critical literacy in that she is able to ask such questions without assistance. Her growth continued throughout the unit as her confidence and comfort with using critical literacy increased.

This final excerpt, taken from several weeks into the unit, demonstrates how Hope continued to grow in her ability to use critical literacy. She went from needing the researcher to plan stopping points for her, to planning stopping points using the same questions provided by the researcher, to this example in which she asked and planned questions without any assistance.

*Fieldnotes, 2/25/16*

During a read aloud of *The Hope Chest*, Hope reads a scene in which the main character, Violet, a twelve-year-old girl is asked by an older woman about her aspirations in life, focusing specifically on her plans for marriage and children. Hope stops after reading this. She looks at me, eyes wide and says, “What!?! This lady is ignorant!” She then addresses the students, asking, “How does this relate to today? How many of you have been asked about marriage or babies?” All of the girls in the class raise their hands; not a single boy does. Hope then asks, “Is that problematic? Is it a problem that all of the girls have been asked this and none of the boys have?” Students respond in choral agreement. “Why is it problematic? What does this tell you about expectations of girls or the way our society values them today?”

In this example, Hope did not have time to pre-read and plan the questions she asked students during this lesson. The questions she did ask she came up with on the spot without assistance. Unlike with the nontraditional fairytale example, here Hope felt confident enough to be able to engage students in critical literacy without using sticky notes to plan stopping points and questions. She practiced using this perspective often enough over the previous few weeks that she came up with critical literacy questions that she asked frequently (i.e. “Is that problematic? Why is it problematic? What does this tell...?”). Hope became comfortable asking students to problematize texts. She also often brought a focus back to how the gender inequities she discussed with students were still, in some form or another, currently relevant (i.e. “How does this relate to today? How many of you...?”). Other questions, not asked here, that Hope often relied on were: who has the power? how do you know? and whose voices are missing? By having this repertoire of a few critical literacy questions, she was able to easily incorporate them in to any lesson or read aloud without hesitation.

The progression illustrated in each of these examples demonstrates how Hope’s understanding of critical literacy developed over the course of time, through practice, and with assistance. Her initial definition provided before the unit began left out key factors of critical literacy, which by the time the unit ended she was able to expand her definition to include. As was demonstrated in the fieldnote excerpts her confidence and ability in asking critical literacy questions also increased throughout the unit. She went from simply using texts that addressed social justice issues, as was the case in the example from her read aloud of *Esperanza Rising*, to needing researcher support in planning

critical literacy questions, to having a repertoire of questions she was able to pull from on the spot as a way to use critical literacy with students. This evidence supports the finding that she had increasing understandings of critical literacy throughout my time in her classroom.

**Shifting Perspectives of Gender.** Hope's perspectives on gender shifted as she worked to use critical literacy in her classroom to challenge gender stereotypes. Her awareness of current and historical events related to gender inequity increased as she prepared lessons. This awareness came from interactions with the researcher, reading the world with a critical lens, and increasing her exposure to gender related current events through social media. This theme included her understandings and perspectives related to gender fluidity and feminism. I have organized the data related to the ways Hope's perspectives on gender shifted under one subtheme—engaging in self-awareness and reflection.

***Engaging in Self-Awareness and Reflection.*** Hope seemed to display *her* growing understanding of critical literacy through self-awareness and reflection related to her perspectives on gender. This was apparent in examples where she stopped herself from using specific language. For example, during a read aloud of *The Hope Chest* Hope caught herself using language that she seemed to feel went against her goal of challenging gender stereotypes in her classroom. She stopped to discuss the way girls were expected to dress and said,

They're not saying the girls have to wear dresses because they're girls but because they need to look professional and the only professional outfits

they had during that time were dresses. If you're a tomboy—that's not a good description—if you're athletic and have a job interview you still need to dress professionally.

Here Hope displayed self-awareness and corrected herself (i.e. “tomboy—that’s not a good description”). It seemed that she felt this was an inappropriate term to use, indicating that she was aware of the gendered norms and stereotypes it carried with it. In order to address this, she adjusted the language she was using so she could talk about gender in a way that went against the gendered term “tomboy.” She did this by changing the idea she was trying to describe from “tomboy” to “athletic”—a term she seemed to find more acceptable in this case. This indicated that she was engaging in self-awareness by making a conscious effort to adjust the language she was using in a way that was less laden with gender stereotypes. Although she could have taken this a step further by explaining her thinking to students, this was still a step in the direction toward challenging her own gender norms and those she accepted in her classroom.

Another example of this occurred during our final interview. As we discussed her thoughts on the unit she reflected on her own gendered ways of thinking pointing to an interaction she had with the female pilot who attended the career fair as well as interactions with her daughter. She shared,

I think [the unit] opened up some of my own...stereotypes that I had or just you know...misconceptions. For instance, when the pilot was here I was...talking to her about pilots, I kept saying “he, he, he.” Afterward I realized I was just assuming the other pilots she works with are men. So, it just, it made me more aware of stuff.

Again, here Hope engaged in self-reflection and recognized the ways her own biases related to gender found their way in to her everyday life through the language she used (i.e. "...I kept saying "he, he, he." Afterward I realized I was just assuming..."). This indicates a conscious awareness of her gender biases and assumptions and more importantly, an effort to acknowledge and correct this type of thinking. She acknowledged that this was something new to her since practicing critical literacy with her students (i.e. "[the unit] opened up some of my own...stereotypes..." "it made me more aware of stuff"). This signifies that it was because of the experiences she had in planning and implementing the unit of study that she began to engage in such self-awareness and not any other outside influences.

Hope engaged in self-awareness and reflection related to the ways she incorporated critical literacy related to gender in to her personal life as well. She often talked about how critical literacy impacted the way she thought about interactions she had with her then three-year-old daughter. Engaging in the unit seemed to change the way Hope thought about gender and the messages she was sending about gender norms to her daughter. Several times she shared with me her surprise and even disgust at the gendered messages in the movies, books, and toys available to young children. She reiterated this during our final interview when reflecting on the critical literacy unit. She said,

It changed the way I think about things outside of school too, with [my daughter] Eve, her books and the things I expose her to and even the things I buy for her like the color of her outfits, I've started buying more like gender-neutral stuff. I don't want her to have gender stereotypes. I

want her to be aware of stereotypes but I don't want her to harbor certain opinions and thoughts and think that they are accurate or the only way.

It seems that before engaging in critical literacy with her students Hope had not put much thought in to the ways gender stereotypes might impact her daughter. Here though she recognizes that implementing the unit impacted her thinking both in and “outside of school too.” She shared how this shift in perspective about gender changed her actions (i.e. “...buying more like gender-neutral stuff”). She also seems to have taken on the goal of navigating gender stereotypes with the next generation through the values she wants to help instill in her daughter (i.e. “I don't want her to have gender stereotypes....”). This shows how engaging in critical literacy in her classroom impacted her everyday life and view of the world—making it apparent that this was more than just an academic goal for her. It was also indicative of her personal values and views of her role as a teacher, mother, and citizen.

Hope's understanding of gender and feminism also shifted throughout the course of the unit. This was clear in our initial and follow up interviews where Hope discusses her understandings of gender fluidity, her definition of feminism, and her identity as a feminist. Below I share her responses during the initial interview and then show how they changed overtime in her responses from the follow up interview that took place after the unit ended. I encourage readers to refer back to chapter three where I shared Hope's initial definition of feminist that she gave during the pilot study as it provides an even greater reference point for where she started in her thinking on this journey. During our initial interview, I asked Hope to share her definition of feminism with me. I have bolded

important phrases related to her understanding of this concept in her response. Her response was,

I think my definition of what it means to be a feminist is evolving. It's **not so much this black and white view of female against male**. It's really about **human rights in general**. So, equal rights for **all people, not just for girls**. I think that you can even talk about **equal rights for men**, that male stereotype that's always there. I think too, I'm really passionate about the Latino culture and so to me even feminism goes with the equal treatment of them. I look at the **Latina female and I started thinking about the stereotypes that are associated just with that subgroup**...So, I think for me, it's challenged me. **It's changed the way I think about everything—everything.**

Hope engages in self-reflection here by recognizing that she is developing in her understanding of feminism (i.e. “my definition of what it means to be a feminist is evolving”). She shares how she has grown from thinking about feminism in terms of “female against male” to thinking about it in terms of “human rights in general.” This part of her statement seems to indicate that she understands that feminism is about issues that go beyond those related to gender, that it goes beyond this to include issues of human rights such as those topics she had covered in class throughout the year (i.e. immigration, race, class, ability). She also recognizes that feminism is a concept that can benefit everyone from women to men to specific ethnicities (i.e. “...you can even talk about equal rights for men...,” “...Latino female...the stereotypes that are associated just with that subgroup”). These comments indicate that she recognizes feminism as a complex and multifaceted concept with layers that go beyond gender. Hope recognizes that critical literacy has impacted her thoughts on feminism by challenging her to think about

it in this way (i.e. “it’s challenged me. It’s changed the way I think…”). Again, this points to the idea that this was more than just about academic goals for Hope, rather it was a personal journal for her that seemed to shape her life and personal relationships.

When asked if she identified as a feminist, she said she did and connected this to her effort to engage in self-awareness of her personal prejudices. Again, I have highlighted some key phrases in her response that are important in understanding her identification. She shared,

I do because I feel like **the constant thought process that I have of being conscious of either my unspoken stereotypes** that I have for others or even just the **inequality that people are experiencing** around me. Just that feeling of **wanting people to be treated equally**. Even people I may not like. So, I think **that makes me a feminist**.

Her self-identification as a feminist extended her definition of the term by highlighting the importance of acknowledging the stereotypes she holds (i.e. “being conscious of...my unspoken stereotypes…”). She also expanded on her definition by focusing on the idea of awareness of inequalities faced by those around you, people who may or may not look, act, or believe like you (i.e. “the inequality that people are experiencing around me... that feeling of wanting people to be treated equally... Even people I may not like”). It is important to note that Hope did not always identify as a feminist as can be seen in the section related to the pilot study in chapter three.

During our follow up interview, Hope reflected on her growth and understanding of feminism. Again, she shares her definition of the word and how it has changed over the course of the unit.

A feminist believes in **equal rights for all people** but I think **they're also an activist** in equal rights for all people. As an activist, it doesn't mean that you have to be doing protests and doing stuff at the polls. It can be terms of **how you talk and interact with others**. When people think of you are they thinking 'wow she's really closed minded, I wouldn't go to her with any of this or this'. Or are you somebody that people feel is more of an open-minded person that is **willing to embrace change** and accept change or want change. So, I think **feminist has become this broad term for me** and that it's more just like someone that **not only wants equal rights for all people but actually treats all people equally**. Because you can claim to be something but if you don't do it yourself you're not really that something. **I don't think any of us can ever be feminists truly** because we're all working towards treating people equally all the time.

The definition she provides here is more complex than the definition she provided in her initial interview. In this definition Hope brings up issues of activism (i.e. "...they're also an activist..."). She extends her original definition which focused on the belief that feminism means equality for all people to focusing on the actions people are willing to take to help achieve that state of equality. Hope emphasizes that the actions she is referring to are more about values and beliefs that impact one's world view and the ways that worldview colors interactions with others (i.e. "...doesn't mean that you have to be doing protests ... It can be...how you...interact with others"). This seems to indicate an increased sense of self-awareness that she feels is necessary to be a feminist. The type of self-awareness she references has to do with keeping your own biases and prejudices in check in everyday interactions with others (i.e. "...treats all people equally"). She also seems to recognize how difficult it is to be able to overcome the internal biases we all hold and suggests that this might even make it impossible for

anyone to genuinely claim a feminist identity (i.e. “I don’t think any of us can ever be feminists *truly*...”).

Like in our first interview, I asked Hope if she identified as a feminist. Her response supported and expanded upon her definition of feminism. She shared,

**I think I’m on my way to being a feminist.** So yeah, yes. (laughs) I’m getting there. I’m getting there. (laughs) **I don’t think anyone is ever fully a feminist.** I think **we all have our own little stereotypes** and um...bias, prejudice. I think that there are **always these subtle biases and prejudices that creep in just because we are human** and we are not going to see everyone equally regardless of how hard we try. I think that there’s still going to be...**something there that we have to work on at all times.**

Her response to this question expanded on her definition of feminism placing a much heavier emphasis on the importance of acknowledging personal biases than she initially focused on in our interview conducted before the unit began. Although it seemed that she did identify as a feminist (i.e. “...I’m getting there”). There is hesitation in her claim to this identity because as she puts it, “I don’t think anyone is every *fully* a feminist.” She recognizes that everyone has biases (i.e. we all have our own little...bias...) and that despite our best efforts it is extremely difficult to overcome such deep seeded thoughts and beliefs (i.e. “... something...that we have to work on at all times”). It is interesting to note that she seemed to place the blame for these biases on the state of being human (i.e. “...because we are human”) rather than focusing on the ways in which society factors and values play a role in shaping such thoughts. It is also

interesting that she felt she had to be completely unbiased in order to own this identity, as it seems no one can ever be fully free from personal bias.

It is apparent that through the experience of engaging in the unit on critical literacy and gender that Hope's understandings of critical literacy were expanded and challenged. This was clear in the ways that her definition changed from focusing on a few aspects of critical literacy to address all of them in some way or another. This was also evident in the ways her confidence in planning and asking critical literacy questions increased overtime as she implemented the unit. Additionally, her understandings of gender and feminism shifted as she engaged in self-reflection and became more self-aware of her own biases and stereotypes related to gender. Again, this was clear in her definition of the term that became much more detailed and nuanced after she engaged in the unit. It was also obvious in her identity as a feminist and descriptions of why she felt the way she did about identifying with this term. The evidence shared here help to support these findings and point to specific examples that illustrate the ways Hope changed in her understandings of critical literacy, gender, and feminism throughout the course of the unit. In the following section I share findings from research question 2b which focused on the ways the student's understandings of critical literacy related to gender shifted throughout the unit.

### **RQ2b: In What Ways Do Student Understandings of CL Related to Gender Shift During a Unit of Study?**

Two main themes emerged from the data related to research question 2b. These included increasing understandings of critical literacy and increasing understandings of gender. Within each of these main themes were\* several subthemes. Increasing

understandings of critical literacy included novice and nuanced understandings of critical literacy. Nuanced understandings included several subcategories that are also discussed and included the ways students used language of critical literacy, related critical literacy to social justice, defined it as a tool to challenge ideas, viewed it as a way to take action, and applied their new understandings. Increasing understandings of gender included broadening sexist viewpoints, articulating injustices, and shifting perspectives on gender. The evidence utilized throughout this section of the findings comes from initial and follow up student interviews, card sorts, and book sorts as well as from the focus group interview conducted with all six focus students. In the following pages, I share findings related to each of the main themes introduced here.

**Increasing Understandings of Critical Literacy.** Student understandings of critical literacy were influenced by their participation in the critical literacy unit and seemed to be on a continuum. Their ability to define, apply, and express their views on using critical literacy moved from novice to more nuanced over the course of the unit. This was clear in their descriptions of critical literacy as well as their feelings about applying such practices while reading. In the sections below I provide evidence of the ways student understandings of critical literacy increased over the course of the implementation of the unit and beyond.

*Novice Understandings.* Initially student descriptions of critical literacy were limited. When asked if they felt it was important to ask critical literacy questions while reading many had very simple one word answers such as “yes” or “I think so.” This was also the case when asked how they felt about asking such questions while reading. Their

responses also indicated misconceptions about what critical literacy is and what it means to apply it. When asked, *In reading class what you're going to be doing is learning to ask questions about text such as who has the power in the text, whose voices are heard, who's represented, and who's not represented. How would you feel about reading a text and asking questions like that? Do you think it's important?* I have bolded key phrases across the student responses that indicate ways the students thought similarly to their peers and that get at the heart of their understanding of this concept. Student responses included:

**I feel good.** I think it's important because **you need to understand the text.**

~Nick [Initial Interview, 1/13/16]

I would **feel good about it** because right now when we read the book *Esperanza Rising* there's like more questions and it **helps me realize more stuff about the book.**

~Isabella [Initial Interview, 1/6/16]

These responses indicate a lack of experience with and understanding of critical literacy and its purposes. Both Nick and Isabella express that they “feel good” about asking critical literacy questions-. This response is very much surface level and does not indicate a deep understanding of what it means to engage in critical literacy. They also both focus on critical literacy as a way to “understand the text” or “realize more stuff about the book.” These responses indicate that students connect answering questions with comprehension as they have traditionally experienced it—focused on things like main idea and details rather than questioning power structures and oppressive systems. Other student's responses included,

I would feel like asking the questions to be a good way... because if you ask questions then **you'll learn more about the book and yourself as a reader**. So, if you don't ask questions **you won't even know what the plot might be** in the book.

~Ricardo [Initial Interview, 1/13/16]

I actually enjoy it because you get to say what you think so other people can see **what you think** so that they can **understand who you are as a reader** and what you understand.

~Emma [Initial Interview, 1/13/16]

Ricardo and Emma focus on critical literacy being important to learning about “yourself as a reader” and understanding “what you think.” Although these responses are a bit more sophisticated than the previous two in that they seem to view the purpose of critical literacy as a way to focus on themselves as readers, they still clearly do not understand this concept. There is not mention of using critical literacy as a way to interrogate texts or question power and privilege and there is no mention of using it as a way to take on a critical lens related to gender. Rather these students focus on using critical literacy as a way to gain insight into “what you understand” and things like “plot.” Another student provided the following response to the interview question,

That's what I like about reading it's like **when you get into strong subjects about like the voices that we have** and stuff like that. I think it's really, really important about that. Because **nobody will make it better if you don't give out your voice**. If you just keep thinking to yourself “this is horrible” **you have to say something so it stops happening**.

~Angelene [Initial Interview, 1/6/16]

Unlike the other students, Angelene's response seems to encompass the most sophisticated definition of critical literacy despite still having some gaps in understanding

its full meaning. Angelene’s response focuses on readers’ “voices” which indicates that she has a basic understanding that critical literacy has to do with interrogating texts using multiple viewpoints. Additionally, she suggests that critical literacy is a way to “make things better” but in order to do so readers “have to say something.” This seems to indicate a connection between asking critical literacy questions and speaking up for injustice, which shows she has some understanding of the idea of highlighting voices that have been silenced and using one’s voice to take action to promote social justice. However, her thinking still lacks a clear link between critical literacy and questioning power in texts.

Each of these examples shows that students held novice understandings of the definition and purpose of critical literacy before they engaged in the unit. There were clear differences in these initial definitions compared to those students gave to the same question after the unit ended as I will illustrate in the next section.

*Nuanced Understandings.* Evidence suggests that students’ understandings became more nuanced over the course of time. When asked again how they felt asking critical literacy questions and whether they thought asking such questions was important, they mentioned the ways they could use critical literacy as a way to think about gender and as a tool to challenge texts. They also began to use the language of critical literacy in their responses to this question—something they did not do prior to the implementation of the unit. In their responses, I have bolded some of the key phrases that indicate student understandings of critical literacy. The responses shared below are all taken from

follow up interviews with students which were conducted between the first and second week of April, 2016.

*Use Language of Critical Literacy.* Students began to use the language of critical literacy in their definitions after the unit ended. For example, Ricardo shared, “I think it was pretty good because we were asked some questions that **could help us in knowing which gender is being marginalized or has the more power.**” Here he uses language associated with critical literacy such as “marginalized” and “power.” Similarly, Emma also used terms associated with critical literacy in her response saying, “**you get to find out what happens when you don’t have power or what happens when you have too much power.**” She also focused on ideas of “power.” These are terms that Hope taught students during the unit and used on a regular basis as she fostered engagement in critical literacy. Ricardo and Emma use these terms on their own, without being prompted to do so, and in a setting where they did not have access to bulletin boards or anchor charts that featured these terms. They retained them after the unit, used them correctly in their responses, and associated them with what it meant to use critical literacy. This is not something that was evident in the first descriptions of critical literacy that students provided prior to the implementation of the unit.

*Relate Critical Literacy to Social Justice.* Students also began to relate critical literacy to social justice issues, particularly in terms of gender. For example, in his response Ricardo explained that critical literacy increased his awareness of power related to gender. He said, “The man kind of has more power sometimes. So, it was really good because it was **getting to know how [men and women] were being treated due to their**

**gender.”** Emma also focused on the ways critical literacy increased her awareness of gender inequity. She shared, “I found out that **girls sometimes have more power than men but mainly men have more power over girls.**” Both of these students emphasized the relationship critical literacy has to understanding issues of social justice. They specifically focused on this in terms of gender and power. Emma took this a step further by focusing not just on power but also on the marginalized voices of female characters, using *Cinderella* as an example. She reflected, “**you really find out [Cinderella’s] ... voice wasn’t heard. If you didn’t ask [critical literacy] questions you would probably just skim through the book...** You’d be like ‘well that was a great book.’” In this extension of her definition she offered insight into the way critical literacy can help readers increase their awareness about social justice issues, particularly as they relate to gender inequity.

*Define Critical Literacy as a Tool to Challenge Ideas.* In follow up interviews, students defined critical literacy as a tool to challenge ideas, such as those in texts or in their everyday lives. Isabella did this in her response stating, “...it’s just not black and white. **There’s more to it.**” Here she seems to recognize that there are messages in texts that go beyond what is on the surface indicating that critical literacy is a way to uncover and challenge them. Students often included the ways critical literacy offered a platform for challenging ideas specifically related to gender in their responses. Emma, for example, shared her thoughts, “if you do [ask yourself critical literacy questions] you understand that **[girls not having a voice] is wrong, this shouldn’t happen....**” Here Emma challenged ideas from the text *Cinderella*, sharing her own belief about the

message the text sent as unacceptable. She used this as an example to explain that critical literacy was a way for her, and other reader, to both recognize and challenge ideas related to gender inequity. Angelene extends Emma's ideas even further by focusing specifically on challenging the authority of not just texts but the authors who perpetuate ideas of inequity. In her explanation of critical literacy, she shared, "you find out...**what is the true reason why the author wrote it and what was their motivation behind it.**

Without it...you're just thinking about what's happening but not what it's *really* about."

In her response Angelene emphasizes the ways critical literacy can be used as a tool to challenge the author and the underlying meanings or messages that they include in texts.

These are much more sophisticated explanations of critical literacy than those students provided during initial interviews.

*View Critical Literacy as a Way to Take Action.* Several students indicated that critical literacy opened up spaces to take action against social injustices as part of their follow up interviews. Nick, for example, explained, "you can use it in real life...**You can stand up for something you believe in.**" Nick's explanation of critical literacy focused on the ways it connected to his everyday world and indicated that it had the potential to empower readers to take action by standing up for what they believe in. This is very different from his initial interview in which he simply indicated that he felt "good" about using critical literacy as it shows he understands the positive impact reading with this lens can have on readers. Additionally, Emma shared, "...**you get to go out yourself and challenge those things.**" This also indicated an understanding that critical literacy can empower readers to take action against ideas and practices they

disagree with or find inequitable. This is a much deeper understanding of critical literacy than she shared in her initial interview where she focused more on learning “who you are as a reader.”

These responses demonstrate that after participating in the unit of study, students’ understandings of critical literacy shifted from novice to nuanced as their definitions became more detailed and much more clearly related to concepts of critical literacy such as marginalization, silenced voices, power, and taking action.

*Apply New Understandings.* Beyond simply answering questions during our interviews, students demonstrated increased understandings of critical literacy during the focus group session. The excerpts below show that students could not only share their new understandings, definitions, and thoughts on critical literacy when they were one-on-one with me but more importantly they were able to articulate and *apply* these ideas while engaged in discussion with peers. In the excerpt below students engage in a conversation focused on reading and gender inequity with very little guidance or interjection from the researcher. Specifically, they were responding to the following question: *In what ways, do you think reading and writing can be used as a tool to help overcome injustices such as gender discrimination?*

**Emma:** Reading is power.

**Researcher:** What do you mean by that?

**Emma:** Reading gives you power because you can learn more about the world and truly be able to stand up for yourself. It’s like back in like the 1700’s – 1800’s to a little bit of the early 1900’s, slavery, if you taught a slave to read you went to jail. It’s almost like if women couldn’t read what’s the point. With Malala, she couldn’t go to school and everyone

said ‘oh don’t teach a woman to read.’ It’s just like we’re the slaves of education. We’re being deprived and it’s an honor for many kids to go to school when many of their ancestors couldn’t go to school. Three of us are girls here and some of our ancestors might not even have been able to read or write because they were seen almost as slaves. They were deprived of their education just like slaves were deprived of education and they were deprived of worker’s rights too.

**Nick:** I agree because while I was doing my social justice paper I read this article about that women work harder but they get paid less.

**Isabella:** The slaves couldn’t read because they didn’t want them to figure out what was really happening in the world that they were living in. So, the White men thought that if the slaves could read then they would have more power over them. So, they didn’t let them read at all.

**Angelene:** Now a day’s women want to continue their education but they don’t have the opportunity because someone says they can’t.

Here it appears that after completing the unit of study students began to see reading as something more than an activity they did for fun or something they were required to do in school—which is how many of them described reading during our initial interviews. Students begin to describe reading in ways related to critical literacy in terms of power and privilege (i.e. “Reading is power,” and “...they didn’t want them to figure out what was really happening in the world”). They take this a step further by discussing how these concepts are rooted in history and inequitable sociopolitical systems (i.e. “Three of us are girls here and some of our ancestors might not even have been able to read or write...,” and “White men thought...they would have more power over them”). They also talk about reading in terms of a tool that provides empowerment, to both themselves as readers and to marginalized populations, and a way to push back against systems of injustice related to gender (i.e. “you can learn more about the world and truly

be able to stand up for yourself”). This critical conversation helps to support the assertion that students were not only able to articulate the ways their understandings of critical literacy shifted but also apply these more sophisticated understandings when engaged in discussion with peers.

Each of the examples provided in the sections above demonstrate the ways student’s definitions of critical literacy shifted from novice to nuanced during a unit of study focused on critical literacy and gender. Specifically, students were able to use the language of critical literacy in their definitions, relate critical literacy to social justice, define it as a tool to challenge ideas, view it as a way to take action, and apply these new understandings with peers. These ideas remained with students beyond the conclusion of the unit as the unit ended in March 2016 and the follow up interviews and focus group did not occur until April and May, 2016. This indicates that students maintained ideas and understandings related to critical literacy well beyond the time they spent engaged in the unit on critical literacy and gender.

**Increasing Understandings of Gender.** Student understandings of issues related to gender also changed throughout the course of the unit. The experiences they had in class learning about gender inequities seemed to impact their thinking in several ways. In the paragraphs below I share three main themes that emerged from the data related to the ways student perspectives shifted during the unit of study. These themes included the students broadened sexist viewpoints, articulated injustices, and shifted perspectives on gender.

***Broaden Viewpoints on Gender.*** By engaging in the unit on critical literacy, students broadened their own viewpoints on gender with respect to ideas of gender norms, roles, and expectations. This was particularly apparent in the book sort data where students' opinions of which books were "boys' books" and which were "girl's books" changed after the unit concluded. Book sort data is presented in Appendix I and discussed further in the paragraphs below.

Students completed a book sort before and after the unit. After students completed the sorts they were asked to reflect on the ways in which they sorted the books. Before the unit students' sorts and reflections were frequently rooted in sexist viewpoints, gender stereotypes, and binary thinking. Below are some examples that support this idea. I have bolded parts of their responses to highlight the aspects that indicate stereotypical thinking in terms of gender.

Only **boys like boys' books from their perspective** and **girls like woman perspectives in their books.**

~Ricardo [Initial Book Sort, 2/12/16]

The **male [books] are more like boyish...** Because you know like in [*Knights of the Lunch Table*] **they liked rock bands.**

~Nick [Initial Book Sort, 1/28/16]

In *Twister on Tuesday*, **the boy is really smart**, he's older than his sister and **he's always trying to protect her** like that **typical older brother...** In *Knights of the Lunch Table* the boys do their own thing. **They're stereotypical boys.**

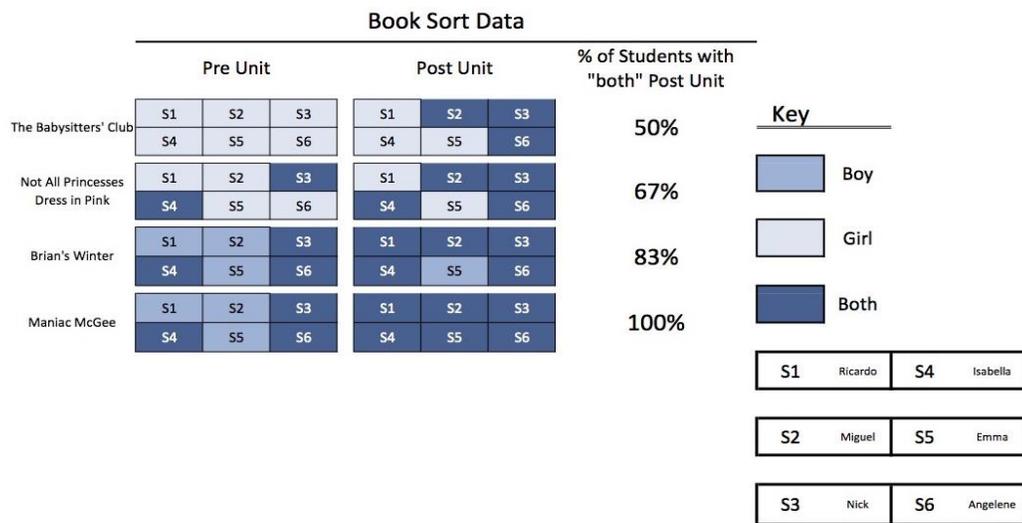
~Emma [Initial Book Sort, 1/28/16]

In these examples, students seem to maintain sexist viewpoints when thinking about reading and gender. They tend to place limitations upon which books are intended for girls and which books are intended for boys (i.e. “boys like boys’ books...girls like woman perspectives in their books,” “male [books] are more like boyish”). There is also evidence that students use notions of gender stereotypes to describe and draw conclusions about male and female characters in the books used in the book sort activity (i.e. “they liked rock bands,” “the boy is really smart,” “he’s always trying to protect her...typical older brother,” “They’re stereotypical boys”). Students based their book placements on these ideas, drawing upon binary and stereotypical thinking.

This was also ap-parent in the ways students chose to sort some of the books (See Figure 7). For example, three out of the six students placed *Manic McGee* in the books for boys’ category citing that the main character is a boy and the cover seems to show him running which students associated with a boys’ activity. Students had a similar reaction to *Brian’s Winter* with three of the six students deeming it a boys’ book because there is an axe pictured on the cover and “girls don’t use axes.” Students had similar reactions to books they viewed as books for girls. For example, all six students placed *The Babysitters’ Club* in the books for girl’s category justifying their choice with explanations like “mostly girls take care of babies” and “they do really girly things...even boys that would read both types of books, I don’t think they would read this.” Similarly, four of the six placed *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* under the books for girl’s category claiming that boys would not read this book because of the title and the cover illustration. The decisions students made, such as those described here, during the

initial book sorts indicated that they were not engaging in critical literacy and instead using stereotypical viewpoints to make such decisions.

**Figure 7. Book Sort Data**



However, there was evidence that students began to broaden their viewpoints on gender (e.g. gender norms, roles, and expectations) after participating in the unit of study, often changing their mind about the ways in which they had sorted items during the card and book sorts. This was clear in follow up interviews, the focus group discussion, and responses students provided during the card and book sort reflections. During the focus group, which occurred after the unit had ended, students were shown an example of the way one of their peers completed the card and book sorts. They were asked to reflect on what they noticed about the pre-completed sorts. Students noted that the sorts indicated stereotypical views of men and women and were asked to infer how they believed the

student who completed the sort may have viewed gender stereotypes in relation to reading.

**Miguel:** He has a problem with girls.

**Researcher:** What do you mean by that?

**Miguel:** Because he just put everything with the picture of a girl he put on the girl's side. Like *Ruby Bridges* and *All Princesses Wear Pink* he put under the girls.

**Angelene:** Especially [*Not All Princesses Dress in Pink*], there were some boys in our class that liked it.

In this example students were able to see that their peer was not engaging in critical literacy and instead was relying on gender stereotypes related to reading to make decisions about how to sort the books. This seemed to indicate to Miguel that the student held what might be considered sexist views about girls and possibly viewed books with female characters as negative (i.e. "He has a problem with girls") because of the way the student decided to sort the books (i.e. "everything with the picture of a girl he put on the girl's side"). Angelene's comment about *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* provided support for why she felt this student was giving in to stereotypical viewpoints that were untrue by providing a real-life example that she experienced in which boys challenged such stereotypes (i.e. "there were some boys in our class that liked it"). These two students who themselves had placed *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* in the books for girl's category during their initial book sort sessions were now engaged in a discussion about why this decision was based in sexist views of reading and gender. Both Miguel and Angelene in their book sort reflections that were completed privately prior to the

focus group interaction changed their placement of this book to the books for both girls and boys' category. Their decision to change the book category and their discussion in the focus group illustrated that after the unit they had broadened their own viewpoints with regard to gender and reading preferences.

After some additional discussion surrounding the pre-completed book and card sorts, several students determined that binary thinking about gender was not something they agreed with. They challenged the ideas represented in the pre-completed sort in terms of gender and reading preferences. Below are several comments that support the idea that students had broadened their own viewpoints on gender norms, roles, and expectations after the unit. As before, I highlighted key phrases in their responses but this time focused on the ways their thinking indicated nonbinary views.

I think **there shouldn't be a girls or boys' column...instead of all three of these it should be like the theme**, who's reading it and who's it about. The theme of Not all Princesses Wear Pink is that girls can break gender stereotypes. **The Girl with a Brave Heart is about a girl but boys and girls can read it and the theme of it is for everybody.**

~Nick [Focus Group Interview, 5/5/16]

I agree with Nick because **maybe some people want to know the lesson of this story...The Girl with the Brave Heart, maybe it could show to always be determined to reach your destiny.**

~Ricardo [Focus Group Interview, 5/5/16]

The boys' comments in these examples demonstrate that their thinking had become more open to ideas of gender in relation- to reading. When initially asked to complete the book sort both boys used all three columns: books for boys, books for girls,

books for both girls and boys. However, during the focus group both agreed that these columns should not even have been options because they put reading preferences on a gender binary that both students had come to disagree with (i.e. “there shouldn’t be a girls or boys’ column...,” “The Girl with a Brave Heart is about a girl but boys and girls can read it and the theme of it is for everybody”). Nick and Ricardo’s broadened viewpoints allowed them to not only question reading preferences based on gender but to come up with a solution for how to change the activity so as to make it more inclusive by suggesting that books be selected based on theme and providing specific examples of what that might look like (i.e. “instead of all three of these it should be like the theme,” “maybe some people want to know the lesson of this story...maybe it could show to always be determined to reach your destiny”).

To bring closure to the focus group conversation, students were asked, *If you could speak with this student what might you say to them?* Again, student responses illustrated that they had broadened their viewpoints on gender norms, roles, and expectations since participating in the unit. Below are some of the students’ responses to this question with key phrases appearing in bold font.

**We all bring gender stereotypes** in our own way.

~Nick [Focus Group Interview, [5/5/16]

I would tell them to **look deep inside your heart**, to look what you have done. Look at this, **this is not right**.

~Ricardo [Focus Group Interview, [5/5/16]

One thing I would have to tell them if you ever show them this is that they need to **open their eyes and really see who they truly are** and who everyone else truly is. They **need to realize that there's no such thing as a boy and men thing**. There's **no such thing as a girl or women thing**. **It's all together**.

~Emma [Focus Group Interview, [5/5/16]

Here students demonstrated recognition of personal bias and stereotypical viewpoints, as is the case with Nick's comment (i.e. "We all bring gender stereotypes in our own way"). By including himself in this comment it seemed to show he recognized that he too had personal biases that may have colored the way he thought about the sorts initially—indicating that he had broadened his previously held stereotypical viewpoints. It also seemed to indicate a level of understanding that this student did not purposefully intend to offend girls in their placement of the books or cards. Emma and Ricardo recognized the importance of self-reflection in overcoming stereotypical and binary viewpoints as is apparent in their suggestions for this student to "look deep inside your heart" and "open their eyes and see who they truly are." Ricardo, who at one point insinuated that boys only like books written from boys' perspectives and girls only like books written from girls' perspectives had come to recognize that this way of thinking "is not right." Emma furthered this with her comments challenging binary thinking in terms of gender and reading "there's no such thing as a boy and men thing...as a girl or women thing...It's all together." These statements indicate each of these students were able to broaden their viewpoints on gender norms, roles, and expectations.

In addition to comments made during follow up interviews and the focus group conversation, students displayed growth in their ability to broaden their viewpoints in

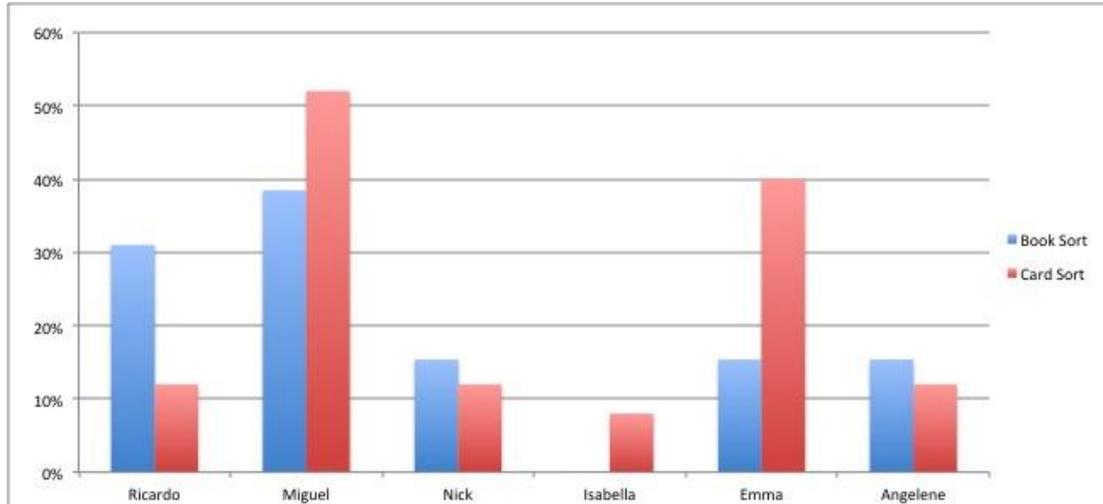
relation to reading and gender when they completed their card and book sort reflections. Figure 8 shows the percentage of increase in student decisions to change cards and books they originally placed in the “boys” or “girls” categories to the “both” category. Figure 9 shows a comparison of the changes students made in the book and card sorts. During card and book sort reflection interviews students were asked to look at the way they had originally completed each sort and decide if they still agreed with their original placement of cards and books. They were then allowed to make changes to their sorts. All changes that were made indicate a change in placement from a “boys” or “girls” category to the “both” category. All students made changes to their card sort data and all but Isabella made changes to their book sort data. The only book Isabella did not place in the both category during her initial book sort was *The Babysitters’ Club* and she decided to leave this book in the “books for girls” category during her sort reflection. Change increases ranged from 8 percent to 52 percent of cards being moved in to the “both” category and from 15 percent to 38 percent of books being moved to the “both” category. Miguel and Ricardo made the most changes in their book sort reflection with 31 and 38 percent increases to the books they placed in the “both” category. Emma and Miguel had the most changes in their card sort reflection with 40 and 52 percent increases to the books they placed in the “both” category. The changes students made indicated that their understanding of critical literacy and gender shifted after they completed the unit. They were able to use critical literacy to challenge, not only the gender stereotypes in the texts they read in and out of class, but their own viewpoints, biases, and stereotypes related to gender as is demonstrated in the examples provided in this section. It is important to note

that during the focus group, which took place on my last day of data collection, students were asked if they could redo their sorts at that time how would they place the cards and books. All students decided that all books and cards should be in the “both” category.

**Figure 8. Book & Card Sort Percentage Changed to “Both”**

	Book Sort	Card Sort
Ricardo	31%	12%
Miguel	38%	52%
Nick	15%	12%
Isabella	0%	8%
Emma	15%	40%
Angelene	15%	12%

**Figure 9. Comparison of Book & Card Sort, Changes to “Both”**



*Articulate Injustices.* Students increased their ability to articulate injustices throughout the unit. This was apparent as they expressed increased feelings of frustration with injustices related to gender as the unit progressed and they became more familiar with how to engage in critical literacy as a way to address issues of gender inequity.

Students articulated injustices through their descriptions of feeling sad, angry, and frustrated when peers, media, and texts displayed gender inequity. Often students used the term “unfair” to describe situations that seemed to them to be unjust. These feelings were expressed privately during interviews and publicly in front of their classmates.

Before the unit began these feelings were not often observed and if they were they were expressed with less intensity. Students did not seem to take issue with the ways boys and girls are represented in texts. For example, in my initial interview with Nick he made the comment that girls are represented as “creative” and they like to “hang out with other girls” in the books he read. When asked how he felt about this his response was “Um...okay.” When asked the same question about boys he said they are represented as “adventurous” and “heroic” which he liked because he could “image what they’re doing.” His responses to these questions did not indicate that he was engaging in critical literacy or thinking about gender in a way that was challenging the ideas, values, or messages texts send.

Angelene had a slightly more critical response, but still lacked a sense of frustration, when talking about the ways boys and girls are represented in texts. In her initial interview, she said that girls are represented as “cleaning” and “doing laundry.” She admitted that she “didn’t like that” but it’s just something girls “have to learn to be okay with.” Additionally, she described boys as being represented as “mighty,” “strong,” and capable of “doing anything.” She reflected on this and shared with a bit more frustration and articulation of injustices, “I don’t really think it’s fair...it’s kind of like they’re a different species like we can’t do anything. We’re just the people who stand

behind and just watch. I don't think that's supposed to happen." Although Angelene clearly did not agree with the way male and female characters were portrayed her responses lacked intensity and confidence in her ability to challenge these ideas. This is particularly true when she said girls just "have to learn to be okay with it." This comment seems to indicate that she does not feel girls have enough power to make a change. It's spoken in a passive voice and tone. This is also true of her comment about women having to "stand behind and just watch." Even though this seemed to have a bit more intensity, she still ended with a more passive voice (i.e. "I don't think that's supposed to happen").

During and after the unit students began to better articulate their feelings about injustice and displayed increased feelings of frustration in terms of gender inequity found in the texts they were exposed to. For example, during the unit Hope taught a lesson using texts that focused on the 1967 Boston Marathon in which Katherine Switzer entered the race and was physically attacked by the race coordinator due to her gender. When asked to reflect on the unit as a whole, Miguel focused in on this lesson and how it made him feel. He said, "I feel sad, not sad but kind of mad because...women couldn't race." Miguel worked to find the right word to describe how he was feeling, but he recognized that an injustice had occurred against women based on their gender and this upset him. The fact that this lesson and the feelings he had during it were what stood out to him indicates that his feelings of frustration had increased, as he had not mentioned any similar feelings during his initial interview. Miguel articulated these feelings again

during his book sort reflection. When asked how he felt about the way girls are represented in the texts he read he shared that he felt,

...frustrated. Because every book I read about girls, they have a problem...In some books...when there's only boys everything goes just fine.

~Miguel [Book Sort Reflection, [4/29/16]

Here Miguel articulated feelings of frustration with the way female and male characters were represented in the texts he read (i.e. "every book I read about girls, they have a problem...when there's only boys everything goes just fine"). These were not feelings he expressed prior to the unit when reflecting on the way girls and boys were represented in texts. Similarly, Nick, described increased feelings of injustice after the unit. When compared with his responses during our initial interview, which were shared above, it is clear that his ability to articulate injustices related to gender inequity became much more apparent after he participated in the unit of study.

**Nick:** A long time ago it might have been like um, they might have been like slaves or like the female slaves were looked at for...labor, like to give birth.

**Researcher:** How do you feel about the way that they're represented?

**Nick:** I don't feel good about that because today they are still used for that kind of stuff but I don't really like it because it's unfair. I'm doing the girls education thing in my social justice paper...fifty-three percent of the people that don't go to school are women.

**Researcher:** How do you feel about that?

**Nick:** I feel it's really mean because people, a lot of people don't have education but most of them are just because they're girls.

This response is quite different from his original observations that girls are represented as “creative” and him feeling “okay” with that representation. Here Nick referenced the way women, emphasizing enslaved women, had been represented throughout history as having one purpose (i.e. “to give birth”). He shares that when thinking about this he experienced negative feelings (i.e. “I don’t feel good about that...,” “I don’t really like it...,” “it’s unfair...”). He then used an example from his social justice paper (i.e. “fifty-three percent of the people that don’t go to school are women”) to support his response and again shared how this fact stirred feelings of frustration for him (i.e. “it’s really mean...”). He emphasized that this seemed unfair specifically because of the impact it had on girls. Nick had become much more skilled at articulating his thoughts about injustices related to gender inequities after participating in the unit of study.

Emma also articulated clear feelings of increased frustration in relation to issues of gender after the critical literacy unit ended. During her book sort reflection she reflected on the way male and female characters were represented in the texts she had read in and out of class. Whereas other students focused mostly on their frustrations with the way female characters were represented, Emma also articulated her feelings of frustration about male characters. Below is an excerpt from her book sort reflection interview where Emma shared how she felt about the way female characters were represented.

**Emma:** I don’t feel like it’s fair because I feel that girls should be treated the same as boys or have the same expectations...they’re supposed to be

like boys' like sports, why can't that be a scenario with a girl? I don't think it's fair that boys have higher expectations...like sporty things, mud, getting dirty whereas girls, their stereotypes are like you have to be clean, you have to like clothes...I just think that they should be like on the same level.

**Researcher:** So, what have you noticed about the way boys and men are represented in the text that you have read.

**Emma:** I think I've said a million times that they have stereotypes too but they're more like...opposites and I don't think that's fair because a boy can be like the same as a girl if he wanted to.

Here Emma articulated her frustrations with injustices in both the way boys and girls were represented in texts, emphasizing in both responses "I don't think that's fair." Her tone when talking about these frustrations became almost angry, especially when providing examples of specific ways books limit girls by writing about them using stereotypes (i.e. "I don't think it's fair that boys have higher expectations..."). By asking a rhetorical question (i.e. "why can't that be a scenario with a girl?") her feelings of frustration really seemed to show the intensity with which she felt this way.

With all of the student examples provided here, it became clearer that feelings of frustration about injustices related to gender increased over time as students participated in the unit of study. By engaging in critical literacy practices focused on gender it seems students experienced feelings about such issues that they had not previously experienced. They were better able to articulate these feelings and the injustices that invoked them after the unit ended.

***Shift Perspectives on Gender.*** By engaging in the critical literacy unit students demonstrated shifts in their perspectives on gender. This theme encompasses how

students initially enacted or perpetuated stereotypes and then moved to resist them. When given space to talk about gender stereotypes students shared personal experiences with them. Students began to resist stereotypes and/or know when others, such as characters in texts were doing so. They began to display awareness of gender stereotypes present in their own lives, books, and media. Evidence for this theme was particularly obvious in the card sort data, which can be found in Appendix H. Student experiences during the critical literacy unit also shaped their perspectives on feminism including their definition of the word and their identification of self and others as such, which has also been included in this theme.

Before the unit began students completed a card sort in which they sorted adjectives in to one of three categories: boys/men, girls/women, or both boy/men and girls/women. Adjectives were taken from children's books that described male or female characters using these terms and from previous research focused on children's literature and gender. Although most students began by placing the majority of adjectives under the "both" category indicating that many had not internalized some of the gender stereotypes portrayed in children's literature, there were several findings with regard to gender stereotypes that came out of this data that are worth noting. For example, the majority of the students (four out of six) described boys and men as being foolish (See Figure 10). Ricardo, Nick, Emma, and Angelene all placed this term under the "boys/men" category during their initial card sorts. Students ranged in their explanations from pointing to examples of men or boys in their own lives that displayed this characteristic (i.e. "I have a friend who's like really, really foolish") to engaging in binary

thinking (i.e. “Girls are not really foolish. They’re smarter than that. I have to put it in the boys [category]”) to making blanket statements about boys or men in general (i.e. “Men are always foolish,” “A lot of boys are really naïve and don’t know what’s going on around them”). These explanations demonstrate ways students, both boys and girls, seemed to have internalized this negative stereotype about men.

In other cases, students were displaying a belief in gender stereotypes but were divided in their connection of certain stereotypes of men versus women. For example, the majority of students (four out of six) did not place the term fierce under the “both” category when they completed the card sort before the unit (See Figure 10). Ricardo and Nick placed this term under the boys/men category and two placed it under the girls/women category. Ricardo decided to place the term fierce under the boys’ category because as he put it, “they are sometimes violent too and like with the fights that they all start, the bullying and all that stuff.” Whereas Miguel and Emma chose to place it under the “girls/women” category because “girls stand up for each other” and “they’re independent.” These examples indicated that this stereotype had been interpreted differently among these four students. It seems that when applied to boys and men students associate the term with negative characteristics (i.e. “they are sometime violent...like with the fights that they all start, the bullying”). Yet, when students apply this term to girls and women it took on a more positive connotation (i.e. “girls standup for each other,” and “they’re independent”). Like with the term foolish, students had internalized stereotypes regarding the idea of what it means to be fierce before the start of the critical literacy unit.

**Figure 10. Card Sort Data for “Foolish” and “Fierce”**

Card Sort Data							
	Pre Unit			Post Unit			% of Students with "both" Post Unit
Fierce	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Foolish	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	

Key	
	Boy
	Girl
	Both

S1	Ricardo	S4	Isabella
S2	Miguel	S5	Emma
S3	Nick	S6	Angelene

After the unit, it became clear that students shifted their perspectives on gender, particularly with regard to gender stereotypes. They learned how to recognize gender stereotypes when others displayed them or when they were included in texts they read. This was clear in a response Ricardo provided during his card sort reflection. He stated, “...both genders...share some of the same character traits...Sometimes they’re weak, sometimes they’re strong, sometimes they’re inventors, sometimes they’re brave.” In this statement Ricardo illustrated how his perspectives on gender shifted after the unit ended. When he first completed the card sort he originally placed seven cards in the boys/men or girls/women categories. By the time he completed it again, after the conclusion of the unit, he only had four cards placed in the binary categories. This indicated a twelve

percent increase in the amount of cards he placed in the “both” category after the unit—his perspectives on gender had shifted. He decided terms like gullible, foolish, and greedy no longer belonged in the binary categories but instead could be placed under the “both” category.

Although all students showed at least an eight percent increase in the number of cards they placed in the “both” category between the first and second card sort sessions, Miguel and Emma had the highest increase in the percent of cards placed in the “both” category (See Figure 8 above). Miguel had a fifty-two percent increase in the number of cards he placed in the “both” category. This was the highest increase among all six focus students. He tended to reference examples of people he knew in his own life to determine the new placement of his cards. He decided terms such as athlete, police officer, sensitive, and worthy were no longer binary terms (See Figure 11). Emma had a forty percent increase. She removed words such as athlete, beautiful, baker, pilot, and weak from the binary categories (See Figure 12). Additionally, during the focus group interview when reflecting on the way a peer had completed the card sort, Emma came to the following conclusion:

I do not know how I didn't realize this. There shouldn't be a specific girl and boy column because all of them can go in both. Boys can be whatever they want; girls can be whatever they want. Everybody has their own personality.

This interaction made it clear that Emma shifted her perspectives of gender. She went from being comfortable placing cards in binary categories prior to the start of the

unit to changing many of her original placements to the “both” category to finally wanting to do away with the binary categories altogether (i.e. “There shouldn’t be a boy and a girl column because all of them can go in both”). She takes this shift in perspective a step further by concluding that there should be infinite possibilities for how to enact one’s gender (i.e. “Boys can be whatever they want; girls can be whatever they want.”). Ricardo also demonstrated a shift in perspective on gender in his follow up statement to Emma. He captures the essence of her point with the following comment, “The limit is limitless for any gender. Any gender can be anything they want.” The changes in their card sort placements demonstrated how students’ perspectives on gender shifted pre-and post-unit implementation.

**Figure 11. Sample of Miguel’s Card Sort Data**

<b>Miguel</b>		
<b>Word</b>	<b>Pre Unit</b>	<b>Post Unit</b>
Athlete	Boy	Both
Police Officer	Girl	Both
Baker	Boy	Both
Sweet	Boy	Both
Sensitive	Boy	Both
Worthy	Girl	Both
Little	Girl	Both
Sad	Boy	Both
Fierce	Boy	Both
Big	Girl	Both
Foolish	Girl	Both
Maid	Girl	Both
Gullible	Girl	Both

**Figure 12. Sample of Emma’s Card Sort Data**

Emma		
Word	Pre Unit	Post Unit
Athlete	Girl	Both
Beautiful	Boy	Both
News Reporter	Boy	Both
Baker	Boy	Both
Sensitive	Boy	Both
Pilot	Girl	Both
Weak	Girl	Both
Inventor	Girl	Both
Fierce	Boy	Both
Maid	Boy	Both

*Shift Perspectives on Feminism.* In addition to the ways students’ perspectives of gender shifted, they also took on new views of feminism. During initial interviews students were asked about their experiences with the term, their definition of, and whether or not they self-identified as a feminist. Before the unit not a single student could come up with a definition for feminism. Most said they had never heard the word. However, during the unit students were exposed to the idea of feminism. This exposure took several forms but one was through the novel study using *The Hope Chest* text. Several conversations occurred surrounding the content of the novel that naturally provided a space for Hope and the students to talk about feminism. For example, the following interaction took place during a read aloud of the book in which a male character, Mr. Martin, was discussed.

**Hope:** What about him do they like? What makes him different?

**Emma:** He believes women are important.

**Fernando:** He wants women to get the right to vote.

**Hope:** HE himself is a feminist. What is a feminist?

**Isabella:** Someone who believes in equal rights for women.

**Hope:** Just women?

**Isabella:** And men.

**Ricardo:** Feminists want equal rights for men, women, kids, African Americans.

**Emma:** For everybody.

This interaction demonstrates that students developed a fairly solid understanding of the term feminist throughout the unit. They captured several important nuances of the definition of a feminist through this conversation, determining that a feminist “believes women are important,” “want equal rights for men, women, kids, African Americans”—“for everybody.” This was quite different from their initial interviews in which none of the students could provide a definition of the term. Exposure to texts such as *The Hope Chest* and opportunities to engage in discussion such as the one shared above provided students a space to be able to shift their perspectives and understandings of gender and gender related topics such as feminism. This was also clear in follow interviews during which all students were able to provide a definition of feminism once the unit had ended. Table 4 below provides the definition several focus students gave for the term feminism during their follow up interview.

**Table 4. Student Definitions of Feminism.**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Response to <i>What is a feminist?</i></b>	<b>Response to <i>What do feminists do?</i></b>
Ricardo	I'd say a person who supports both men and women to be equal.	[They work] together to a goal so they don't start fighting again.
Nick	A feminist is someone who stands up for unequal rights.	They standup and they protest.
Isabella	A feminist is a person who stands up for women's rights, for everybody's rights mostly. Not for just women but for men's rights too. For everyone to be equal.	Some sports still don't let women play international or national, actually career ones. So, a feminist might try to change that and help support girls to do a sport that they want not that the world says you can't do.
Emma	A feminist is somebody who believes a woman can do whatever she wants to do... who believes a woman has power...who believes a woman can do anything a man can do...who believes in rights for women...who believes that women's roles shouldn't be in the house...who believes all women are equal or all people are equal.	N/A

These definitions of a feminist and descriptions of what feminists do illustrate the ways student perspectives on feminism shifted throughout the unit of study. Student responses to this question during the follow-up interview are especially important when considering the fact that before the unit not a single student could provide a definition of the term. However, their definitions provided during the follow up interviews indicate they understood the meaning of the term (i.e. “a person who supports both men and

women to be equal” and “...believes all women...or all people are equal”). They also developed understandings of what feminists might do (i.e. “They stand up and they protest”). Several answers focused in on the idea of taking action against injustice and working toward social change as part of their explanation (i.e. “a feminist might try to change that and help support girls...”). Students were able to articulate these ideas without support or assistance from the researcher.

After the unit ended students were also more likely, yet still hesitant to identify as a feminist. Below are some of the responses students gave when asked if they identified as feminists.

I guess. Because I do want men and women to get a long together to work toward a goal.

~Ricardo [Follow Up Interview, 4/7/16]

Not yet. I’m still trying to learn how to be a feminist because I’m still in the between trying to learn how to be a feminist and what it is to be a feminist. I’m trying to be like that because before this happened...I was more traditional...I was just like a stereotype too. So now I’m...trying not to be like a stereotypical [person]. I try to be more of a feminist too.

~Isabella [Follow Up Interview, 4/19/16]

I don’t know...I don’t really do anything to stick up for anything unless if my writing counts. The writing where you’re in class, the social justice and something and like my topic about social justice and how you can fix that.

~Angelene [Follow Up Interview, 4/19/16]

Here, although students understood what a feminist is, they seem to think that they have to take more significant actions in order to identify as one themselves (i.e. “I’m

still trying to learn how to be a feminist,” “I don’t really do anything to stick up for anything”). Their answers to this question contained tones of doubt and uncertainty as to whether or not they identify as feminists (i.e. “I guess,” and “I don’t know”). They also seemed to worry, as Isabella does, that in order to confidently identify as a feminist they have to avoid falling in to any “stereotypical” categories. Before the unit began none of the students identified as feminists in large part because they were unfamiliar with the meaning of the word. However, after participating in the unit of study related to critical literacy and gender their perspectives on feminism changed as is evident in these examples.

The findings related to this research question indicated that student understandings of critical literacy increased as they participated in the unit of study. As student understandings moved from novice to nuanced, they were able to more clearly explain critical literacy and its purposes. They were also able to use the language of critical literacy, relate it to social justice issues, define it as a tool to challenge idea, and view it as a way to take action. Evidence suggested that students were also able to apply this knowledge as the unit progressed and maintain these understandings even after the unit concluded. Student understandings of gender also increased during the unit of study, as was apparent from the data. As discussed in this chapter, students broadened their viewpoints on gender, articulated injustices, and shifted their perspectives on gender as a result of participating in the unit. Data to help support each of these themes was provided and illustrated the ways each theme manifested throughout this study.

This chapter provided evidence to support findings related to research questions 2a and 2b, both of which focused on the changes in thinking about critical literacy and gender that occurred among the teacher and the students, respectively. Findings from research question 2a indicated that Hope's understandings of critical literacy increased as she worked to plan and implement the unit in the ways she defined this approach to instruction and the questions she asked. Additionally, her perspectives of gender shifted as she engaged in reflection and became more self-aware. Findings related to research question 2b were summarized in the paragraph above and focused on the ways student understandings of critical literacy increased and ideas of gender shifted. These findings extend the findings from questions 1a and 1b as they indicate ways their thinking changed because of the ways they used and engaged with critical literacy as described in the previous chapter. In the following section I share findings related to research question three, which focused on factors that enhanced and inhibited the implementation of the unit of study.

CHAPTER VII  
FINDINGS PART III

This chapter provides evidence for research question 3 which focused on the factors that enhanced and inhibited the ability of Hope to use critical literacy with her students to address issues of gender inequity. The findings presented here are important to consider because they provide insight into the practical ways teachers can implement this approach to literacy instruction. They also provide insight into the obstacles teachers might face when implementing this approach and ideas for troubleshooting such obstacles.

**RQ3: What Factors Enhance or Inhibit the Ability of a Fifth Grade Teacher to Use Critical Literacy to Address Issues of Gender Inequity with Her Students?**

Three main themes emerged from the data related to research question 2. These included: factors that enhanced the use of critical literacy, factors that inhibited the use of critical literacy, and factors that both enhanced and inhibited the use of critical literacy practices in Hope's classroom. Each of these main themes had several subthemes. Before sharing evidence for each of these main themes, I provide definitions of what I mean by each theme. Within these definitions I also describe the subthemes that have been included within each theme.

The first subtheme was *factors that enhanced use of critical literacy*. Factors that enhanced Hope's ability to use critical literacy practices with her students included

anything that allowed her to plan and implement such practices. These included Hope's *leadership qualities* among her team and in the eyes of both school and district level administration. Another factor that enhanced her ability to use critical literacy with students was the *support from her teammates and support personnel* such as the reading specialist and librarian. These factors enhanced her ability to use critical literacy with her students through providing support, building Hope's confidence, and providing space for Hope to explore ideas related to social justice and critical literacy.

The second subtheme was *factors that inhibited use of critical literacy*. Factors that inhibited Hope's ability to use critical literacy practices with her students were those that kept her from having meaningful conversations with students and/or incorporating critical literacy into her lessons. The subthemes related to this main theme included Hope's *learning curve* related to critical literacy and gender, *time*, and issues of *discomfort* on the part of Hope and/or her students. These factors inhibited Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students in several ways including her knowledge and understanding of when and how to ask critical literacy questions and awareness of equity issues related to gender, lack of time to plan as thoroughly as she would like, lack of time during the school day to fully engage in critical conversations, and discomfort surrounding certain topics.

The final subtheme was *factors that both enhanced and inhibited use of critical literacy*. There was one factor that both enhanced and inhibited Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students. This included *administration* both at the school and district levels. This factor at times provided opportunities for Hope to plan and

implement critical literacy practices. At other times this factor created hurdles and barriers to her ability to use critical literacy practices in her classroom.

In the following sections I provide evidence in the form of examples from interviews with Hope and fieldnotes I took during observations to support each of these themes.

**Factors that Enhanced use of Critical Literacy.** As mentioned in the section above, there were two main factors that enhanced Hope's ability plan, implement, and use in critical literacy with her fifth grade students. These included her role as leader and the support she received from her teammates as well as other support personnel.

***Leadership Qualities.*** In many ways Hope was a leader both on her grade level team and within the broader school community. Her teammates and administration alike looked to her to take on leadership roles—something Hope often embraced. She had been asked to take on the role of team leader for a second year in a row and during an initial interview shared with me that she did willingly. Her responsibilities in this role included coordinating field trips, hosting planning session in her classroom, organizing grade level events, and delegating which fifth grade team members would take responsibility for planning each subject.

It was also evident that the principal viewed Hope as a leader who had the ability to help students succeed on standardized tests. During an informal interview, Hope informed me that she had been asked to work with students during grade level wide differentiated guided reading groups who were performing just below grade level. She shared that this decision had been made because administrators believed she had the

instructional skills to help this group of students achieve grade level standards on benchmark and end of grade testing based on her previous performance. She explained that this group of students was viewed as particularly important when it came to standardized testing because as she put it they could, “make or break” the schools overall scores.

Additionally, later in the year the curriculum coordinator from the district office encouraged Hope to apply for the county’s leadership academy. Hope followed this advice and was accepted. She shared with me her excitement over the news and that she was particularly looking forward to attending because she had convinced one of her teammates to apply so they would be able to attend together. During this same conversation, Hope expressed her excitement for working with researchers, such as myself, and wanted to know how she could continue to participate in research projects. She felt that this was a way to continue to grow as a teacher because as she put it, it “adds life to teaching.” Her enthusiasm for both attending the leadership academy and working with researchers indicated that she seemed to continuously want to improve upon her teaching practices and did so by seeking out additional opportunities for learning. Neither of these things were required by her county, yet Hope sought them out as professional development opportunities. This is evidence that she had leadership qualities beyond those that were required of her.

I provide these examples to show that there were multiple ways Hope was seen as a leader in her school. This offered Hope a platform to engage in critical literacy with her students as she had the respect of administration and her peers. The way Hope worked as

a leader with her team allowed her to plan for critical literacy lessons focused on gender even after the unit had ended. For example, the following interaction occurred during a planning session with her fifth grade teammates:

**Ms. Drakos:** We need a writing piece.

**Hope:** I think it would be a good idea to do the same one as last year about social change so we can tie it in to the unit on gender.

**Ms. Hernandez:** I agree, the kids really seemed to like it last year.

**Hope:** It'd be cool if we had a tea where students can share their writing about social change with parents.

**Ms. Hernandez:** Yeah, like a coffee house. We can call it, "Student lead coffee house."

**Hope:** I can ask Ms. Suarez if we can push it back to April 19<sup>th</sup> so the kids can have more time.

**Ms. Hernandez:** It can be spoken word poetry style.

**Hope:** We can make it a competition.

**Ms. Drako:** Yeah, I like that. All the fifth graders can vote on the best paper.

**Hope:** We can make it part of the end of year award ceremony. Whoever wins can get an award—maybe something like the "social justice super star" or the "social activism" award.

This conversation occurred during a weekly planning meeting that Hope coordinated with the fifth grade team. The teachers met in Hope's classroom. They each brought resources for planning with them and Hope provided the space and additional resources as well as keeping the team focused on the task at hand—planning the English Language Arts lessons the team would teach during the next nine-week period. Here Hope worked as a leader to encourage the team to focus on planning lessons related to

gender and critical literacy (i.e. “I think it would be a good idea to do the same one as last year about social change so we can tie it in to the unit on gender”). This suggestion is a way she planned to provide space for her students to engage in taking action and promoting social justice as the writing they would be doing focused on ways they could apply what they had learned to write about a social justice issue they would like to help change. Her idea to allow students to share their papers with their parents seems to be her way of providing an authentic audience for student writing which in turn will offer a space for them to raise awareness about social justice issues that are important to them. In this example, she takes this idea a step further by connecting it back to critical literacy and suggesting it be an award focused specifically on social justice and activism (i.e. [we can call it the] ‘social justice super star’ or the ‘social activism’ award”). Ultimately Hope and her teammates saw this idea through, had their students complete the writing assignment, organized a time for students to present to parents as well as the rising class of fifth grade students, and presented the “social activism” award at the end of year ceremony to a student, Maria, in who just so happened to be in Hope’s class.

Another example of how Hope acted as a leader, enhancing her ability to use critical literacy with her students, was during the school wide literacy celebration week for Dr. Seuss’ birthday. Teachers were asked to decorate their classroom door for literacy week. At the end of the week each class would have the opportunity to parade around the school and view the door decorations on display from Kindergarten through fifth grade. Hope suggested to the rest of the fifth grade team that they focus on gender and critical literacy and they all agreed to this idea. Each teacher would decorate their

door focusing on the idea of getting the rest of the school to think about ways to challenge gender stereotypes. Each teacher agreed to have the same title displayed above her door. During a discussion with her teammates they debated on what exactly the title should be. Below is a brief excerpt from that discussion:

**Hope:** How about, “We challenge you to break gender stereotypes!”

**Ms. Drako:** Maybe we should use an easier word besides stereotypes.

**Ms. Hernandez:** How about gender roles?

**Hope:** I don’t know, I feel like if we are challenging [fifth graders] to use [the phrase] “gender stereotypes” then we should challenge everyone.

This excerpt demonstrates how Hope was able to use her role as team leader to encourage her teammates to support ideas related to critical literacy and use them with their own students. She was able to take the lead on the literacy celebration week door decoration idea and get the others to agree to focus on challenging the rest of the school to break gender stereotypes (i.e. “How about, ‘We challenge you to break gender stereotypes!’”). Her effort to maintain high expectations for all students and staff, not just her fifth grade students, is apparent in her emphasis on using language related to critical literacy and gender (i.e. “I feel like if we are challenging [fifth graders] to use [the phrase] “gender stereotypes” then we should challenge everyone”). Not only is she taking on a leadership role with her team, she is also acting as a leader in terms of how she is thinking about extending ideas of how to use critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes with the entire school.

This continued throughout the literacy celebration week. For example, one of the days' teachers and students were encouraged to dress like their favorite book character. Hope coordinated with the other fifth grade teachers and focused on the book *Not All Princesses Wear Pink*. Each teacher on the team dressed up using this book as inspiration. Hope dressed as a runner, something she was passionate about in her life outside of school as was apparent by the dozen or so race medals she sported around her neck. Ms. Hernandez was a construction worker, as was clear by her hardhat and tool belt. Like Hope, this was something she felt connected to from her life experiences—before becoming a teacher she worked part time alongside her father and brother in the family construction business. Ms. Cardoza dressed as a soccer player, decked out in cleats and a jersey, which she had worn during her days as a center forward in college. The fourth teammate, Ms. Drakos was absent on this day but had also planned to participate. Hope suggested and organized this idea but all of the teachers were immediately on board and expressed enthusiasm to participate. They also all worked with their students to decorate their classroom doors in coordination with this theme.

Another example that demonstrates how Hope was seen as a leader by her teammates, which enhanced her and her peers' ability to use critical literacy came up during a planning meeting. This example illustrates the ways Hope seems to influence her teammates' views on critical literacy and gender through her leadership.

**Ms. Hernandez:** P.S. You guys have totally tainted my view of the entire world and it gets irritating sometimes.

**Hope,** through laughter: That’s what Brooke did to me last year!

**Ms. Hernandez:** I was watching the kids’ choice awards with [my daughter] last night and Rob Gronkowski from the New England Patriots was one of the presenters...and you know they have to read the prompts or whatever, and he’s like, “Yeah, I’m excited too. I’m excited about this big orange football.” Acting like [he was] stupid, like he thought the blimp was a football. And I’m [thinking], “How is that not perpetuating stereotypes?!” Just because he plays football he has to be dumb?!

This interaction shows how Hope was able to influence her teammates’ views on critical literacy and gender. By having the support of her peers, they were able to engage in conversations related to challenging gender stereotypes during team planning sessions. These kinds of shared thoughts about their own growth as people and as educators provided a platform for Hope to continue such conversations and connect them to planning lessons that used critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes with her students.

*Support from Teammates and Colleagues.* Additionally, without the support of her teammates and support personnel, such as Ms. Murphy—the reading specialist, Hope may not have been as successful in implementing the unit as she was. This was apparent during several whole class lessons where Ms. Murphy interjected to support Hope and her students in using critical literacy. For example, during a discussion in which Hope asked students to reflect on a list of historical figures the class brainstormed, Ms. Murphy helped support Hope through the lesson by asking clarifying questions and interjecting

when it became difficult for Hope to continue using critical literacy with the students.

Below is an excerpt from the lesson,

**Hope:** Can you think of a time in history when credit was documented by and for men?

*Students stare at Hope with blank faces...There is a long moment of silence.*

**Hope** looks at me and then Ms. Murphy: I don't know what questions to ask. I think a lot of it is they are not focused today.

**Ms. Murphy** jumps in: Can you guys think of a period in history, not a specific event, but a period in history where you would guess that men and women played equal roles in that period in history or they both playing important roles in that period of history? It doesn't have to be one specific event.

**Emma:** In the 1800s and early 1900s women worked in the household but a lot of them were fighting for rights while the men were out scoffing them.

**Ms. Murphy:** Ok, so during the time when women were working for the right to vote?

**Emma:** Yeah.

In this first part of the lesson, Hope struggled to come up with questions to ask students that engage them in critical conversation as is apparent by their "blank faces" and "long moment of silence." She felt comfortable enough to admit this both in front of the students and the other adults in the room, including myself and the reading specialist, and ask for assistance (i.e. "I don't know what questions to ask"). Ms. Murphy was able to jump in, ask a few questions and get the conversation going (i.e. "Can you guys think of a period in history...?"). Here Hope and Ms. Murphy seem to switch roles with Ms.

Murphey taking the lead as facilitator and Hope acting as another supportive adult in the room. The lesson continued with Ms. Murphy's assistance,

**Ms. Murphy:** So, during that time there was a lot of underground women's movements.

**Hope:** Ooo, she just said a word that might help you!

**Ms. Murphy:** Underground?

**Emma:** Underground railroad.

**Hope:** Yeah, keep going.

**Emma:** Underground railroad...Harriett Tubman. She was a woman slave. Women and slaves were seen as lower at that time so a lot of people didn't expect her to be something big but she actually saved a ton of people.

**Hope:** Do you think there were other women involved in that?

Students call out: Yes.

**Hope:** Do we ever read about them?

**Miguel:** No, she took the credit.

**Ms. Murphy:** It's not that she took the credit it's just that she's the only one we ever hear about.

**Hope:** Does that mean no one else was doing it?

**Miguel:** No, you just never heard their names.

In this part of the lesson, Hope seemed to have started to find her way after Ms. Murphy got the conversation started. Initially she just began to involve herself again by giving Emma a "clue" about where to go next (i.e. ". she just said a word that might help you") and then encouraging her to continue with her thinking (i.e. "Yeah, keep going"). She then asked a question related to critical literacy and gender (i.e. "Do you think other women were involved in that?"). This seemed to indicate that she was regaining her

confidence, as the lesson was progressing and thus able to come up with questions to help guide student thinking without the assistance she needed just a few minutes before. However, Ms. Murphy continued to offer support, again switching roles as Hope took the lead by asking questions (i.e. “Do we ever read about them?” “Does that mean no one else was doing it?”) and Ms. Murphy offering support and clarification as needed (“It’s not that she took the credit”). The support demonstrated in this section of the lesson, and the previous, show how Ms. Murphy helped Hope overcome a point in her lesson where she was stuck, however this became even more powerful in the last part of the lesson where Hope was able to extend the conversation even further.

**Hope:** Now think about all the other people we associate with the civil war. Most of them are what?

**Several students call out:** Men.

**Hope:** Think of some people involved during the civil war.

**Miguel:** Abraham Lincoln.

**Hope:** What was he?

**Miguel:** President.

**Hope:** What else?

**Emma:** Male.

**Hope:** What kind of male?

**Emma:** A powerful male.

**Hope:** Keep going.

**Emma:** White.

**Hope:** A white male. Ok, who else in history do you learn about that was a white male in power?

[Several students provide examples including, George Washington, Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, and Benjamin Franklin.]

**Hope** then asks: Why is that a problem?

**Fernando:** Because they aren't thinking of others as equals.

**Hope:** Who is they?

**Fernando:** White men.

Ms. Murphy's support of Hope during this lesson, and others like it, enhanced Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students to challenge gender stereotypes. What started out as a moment where learning was stalled between Hope and her students turned in to a rich conversation in large part because Ms. Murphy was able to offer Hope support. This allowed Hope to continue gain confidence in her ability to continue with the lesson and ask questions to engage the students in a critical conversation about issues of gender, race, and power (i.e. "...who else in history...was a white male in power?" and "Why is that a problem?").

Additionally, Hope recognized that the support of her teammates played an important role in her, and her colleagues', ability to use critical literacy with students. This was clear in her responses to questions during our final interview together where she was asked specifically to reflect on her interactions with the rest of the fifth grade team throughout the planning and implementation of the unit. Below is how she responded when asked, How do you think, if at all, doing this unit shaped the way you work with your team?

Oh, gosh, miles. I think that my team became more open-minded. Like Drako is one that, she's not quite as liberal I guess as Hernandez and

myself and Cardoza are, she's more conservative and I think teaching this kind of stuff makes her uncomfortable. I have noticed with her this year that she's more open-minded and into using different resources that sometimes put her out of her comfort zone as a teacher. If she hadn't been on board with everything it would have made it harder to do the unit. I mean, I still would have done it, but it was just easier having everyone do it. I think by planning it all together we were able to bring all of our ideas together and empower one another...

In this response, Hope made it clear that she felt supported by her teammates, even those that may have been resistant to implement critical literacy in their classrooms (i.e. "I think that my team became more open-minded..."). She recognized that without the support of her fellow fifth grade teachers implementing a unit on critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes would have been difficult (i.e. "If she hadn't been on board...it would have made it harder to do the unit..."). By having the support of her team, Hope was provided a space to learn and grow as a teacher in implementing critical literacy practices with her students and addressing issues of social justice (i.e. "...we were able to bring all of our ideas together and empower one another..."). It was through this experience of sharing, co-planning, valuing others' experiences, and ultimately empowering one another that Hope was able to find the support she needed to use critical literacy with her students as a way to challenge gender stereotypes. The confidence she had in her team to continue to offer this support was an important part of her use of and plans to continue to use critical literacy practices with her students. This was apparent during our final interview as well. When asked if Hope and her team planned to implement the unit again next year, she was quick to respond with confidence: "Yes. We'll always all want to do it."

**Factors that Inhibited use of Critical Literacy.** There were also several factors that seemed to inhibit Hope's ability to plan, implement, and engage in critical literacy with her students. Hope, being only somewhat familiar with the technical terms of critical literacy, experienced a learning curve that at times lead to missed opportunities to engage in critical literacy and misconceptions left uncorrected. She also experienced a learning curve when it came to current and historical events related to gender inequity, which impacted her ability to use critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes. Time was another factor that limited Hope in her use of critical literacy practices. Feelings of discomfort that Hope experienced or worked to avoid such as fear of retaliation by parents or administration and discomfort with content impacted Hope's ability to engage in critical literacy. These factors are discussed further in the sections below.

***Learning Curve.*** Although I had observed Hope using critical literacy prior to the start of the unit and administrators described her as someone who used critical literacy in her classroom, she had not been formally trained in such practices nor had she read practitioner books or articles on the topic. She also had not attended any kind of professional development on the topic. The critical literacy practices she incorporated in to her classroom prior to my work with her were largely focused on issues of social injustice related to race, religion, and immigration through her selection of children's literature (i.e. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, Number the Stars, and Esperanza Rising*). There was very little focus on issues of gender or explicit teaching of critical literacy practices occurring in her classroom. She had not taken any courses related to women's and gender studies during her time as an undergraduate student nor had she taken any

since. This meant that when implementing the critical literacy unit focused on gender inequity Hope experienced a learning curve that posed some challenges related to her ability to implement critical literacy to question gender stereotypes. For example, during several lessons I observed Hope missed opportunities to use critical literacy with students as a way to talk about gender inequity. Below are a series of examples throughout my time in Hope's classroom that demonstrate such missed opportunities.

During a critical literacy lesson on traditional fairytales, Silvia makes the following comment during the class discussion, "People say that men aren't supposed to cry. If something bad happens to them they will think they can't cry." This is a breakthrough moment toward the beginning of the whole class discussion but rather than emphasizing what Silvia has just said, Hope dismisses the comment and instead asks students to "Go back to talking about hard work." This example demonstrates Hope's learning curve in using critical literacy in her classroom as she was still learning to balance managing class discussion, focusing on moments during discussion that could have been used to focus on gender stereotypes, and asking critical literacy questions.

Another time, during a read aloud of *The Hope Chest*, Hope read a section of a chapter that described the roles of the mother and father in the book. In the section the father is described as being domineering and the mother as being controlled and silenced. At one point Hope read the line, "Mother seemed to disappear." Immediately she commented, almost to herself, "interesting." This was the extent of her focus on this section of the text that very clearly could have led to a discussion about gender stereotypes. This is another missed opportunity to use critical literacy to challenge

gender stereotypes. She does not explain why she finds this interesting or why the students should find it interesting.

Later during the unit, she read aloud another section of the novel she again misses an opportunity to use critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes. She makes the following comment, “Well that’s interesting. Grandma left more money to Stephen. Money is for education for male vs. marriage for females.” Although in this case she explained her own thinking about the situation and how it related to gender inequity she did not engage the students but instead continued reading. In some cases, these missed opportunities could be due to time constraints but in others it seems that Hope herself may not have known what critical literacy questions to ask or how to get students to think about the content of the novel.

In our follow up interview Hope discussed her learning curve with me, specifically focusing on her lack of understanding of gender and women’s rights issues—past and present. Her comments during the interview indicated that she recognized that although she had made growth since the previous school year when she participated in the pilot study, she still had more to learn.

...the discomfort for me was...more of the lack of knowledge that I had for gender and feminism. Just because I myself had not researched or looked fully into what’s going on out there...But, um that was just the piece for me where I would be like “alright [Brooke] help me out, I don’t know what I’m talking about.” So, it was more the content that was a little challenging, not knowing what I was teaching more than what I was teaching about. But since we did our thing last year I’ve actually joined a lot of [groups] on Facebook and Instagram. I’ve followed lots of groups that have to do with women’s rights and feminism. I’m still learning, but I think that there is still a stereotype associated with feminism and just

women's rights in general. I know that there are a lot of things that women are still not granted rights for. Pay is one of those things. I think politics and sports—sports are a big one for me.... I think just respect in general.

Hope recognized that she experienced a learning curve that interfered with her ability to talk about gender stereotypes (i.e. “It was more of the lack of knowledge that I had...”). She also was aware that there were times when she needed assistance with these topics (i.e. “I would be like ‘alright [Brooke] help me out...”). She described this experience as being challenging, not because she felt uncomfortable engaging in critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity, but because she was not familiar with current or historical events and issues related to gender inequity (i.e. “So it was more the content that was a little challenging...”). Despite these challenges related to her own understanding she worked to minimize her learning curve by becoming more aware of gender related social justice issues (i.e. “...joined a lot of groups.... that have to do with women's rights...”). She made an effort to keep up with current events related to gender through social media outlets but also recognized that there was still more for her to learn and understand about such issues (i.e. “I'm still learning...”). She also worked to demonstrate how her understanding of gender related issues had grown by sharing specific examples of things she had learned more about since making such efforts (i.e. “...there are a lot of things that women are still not granted rights for...”). Thus, although she was aware that there were gaps in her knowledge of gender related issues and critical literacy practices, Hope's learning curve was a factor that inhibited her from

being able to use critical literacy practices to address issues of gender inequity with her students, for example, by creating space for missed opportunities.

*Time.* Time was another factor that inhibited Hope's ability to use critical literacy practices with her students. Although Hope worked to merge standards with critical literacy, select literacy materials that dealt with topics related to gender inequity, and engage students in critical conversations about such topics, there were demands on her instructional time that made it challenging to do so. Like most teachers, Hope had to deal with staying on the daily schedule the school had set for her, which included making sure her students were dismissed to specials classes at a specific time, she also had to make time for preparing students for end of grade testing, and she had to find a balance between how long she allowed students to engage in conversations related to critical literacy and how long she spent working in guided reading groups with them. Time was something Hope seemed to struggle with on a daily basis, often ending lessons without a sense of closure, making on the spot decisions to cut critical conversations short, and exuding a sense of anxiety through her fast pace during instruction. Below are several examples in which time was an issue:

*Fieldnotes, 2/12/16*

After teaching a lesson on alternative perspectives using several different articles and sources focused on the 1967 Boston Marathon, Hope debates out loud about what to do next. She is worried about time. She is trying to stay on pace with the other teachers. She decides her class won't read the article about Bobbi Gibbs—another female runner in the Boston Marathon.

*Fieldnotes, 2/23/16*

During a read aloud of *The Hope Chest*, Hope reads a section that references “foreign born radicals” and Emma says, “That reminds me of *Esperanza Rising*.” Instead of asking Emma to explain her comment, Hope says, “You’re making connections but I have to move on I’m watching the time and freaking out.” A little while later as students were packing up for dismissal, Hope says to me: “I wanted to ask her why but we were out of time and I still had to go over their homework.”

In two other situations while reading the same book, Hope worried that her students were behind and would not have time to finish everything because of guided reading. These examples demonstrate that time inhibited Hope’s ability to use critical literacy with her students in several ways. First, a lack of time forced Hope to make decisions about the materials students were and were not exposed to (i.e. She decides her class won’t read the article...). Students missed the opportunity to learn about an alternative female perspective related to the Boston Marathon lessons. Additionally, lack of time made it so that Hope did not feel she could engage students in critical literacy practices in a meaningful way as was the case when Emma attempted to make a connection to a previously read text. Hope recognized this as a factor that was inhibiting her ability to use critical literacy with students (i.e. “I wanted to ask her why but we were out of time...”). Lastly, lack of time and Hope’s urgency to get students to complete assignments impacted their ability to fully think through ideas as was the case when Hope had to rush students to finish writing down their thoughts about how characters were being marginalized (i.e. ... “Oh no we’re behind. Hurry!”).

Hope openly discussed her frustrations with the amount of time she had during her English Language Arts block. For example, during our final interview she reflected

on the ways time inhibited her ability to use critical literacy with students. When asked directly what factors she felt interfered with her effort to incorporate critical literacy in her classroom she responded,

Time. Because in order to have meaningful conversations you've got to have time to delve deeply into what's in their brains. You have to help them sort through it. You don't want to do it for them. You don't want to say what they're thinking; you want to ask them questions that get them to that type of questioning...but there has to be time to get them there.

Here Hope openly admits that time is an issue for her, specifically when it comes to using critical literacy. She recognizes that this approach to literacy instruction is one in which teachers need time to ask the right kinds of questions that will lead to critical conversations (i.e. ...there has to be time to get them there) and students need time to process and respond in order to make meaningful connections (i.e. "...in order to have meaningful conversations you've got to have time..."). She emphasizes the importance of time throughout her comment, coming back to it as the end as a reminder of just how critical a role time plays in using critical literacy in the classroom.

***Discomfort.*** Feelings of discomfort, on the part of the teacher, were another factor that seemed to inhibit Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students. This was clear during observations I conducted in her classroom as well as in anecdotes she shared with me during formal and informal interviews. For example, at times, Hope experienced discomfort related to gender issues during lessons I observed. This was apparent during an observation I conducted in which she was reading and discussing the poem, *And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou, with her students. Right before she began the

lesson she informally shared with me her plans to read the poem as students got settled below is what occurred during our conversation and the lesson:

During this brief conversation, she shared her feelings about a specific line in the poem that reads, “*Does my sexiness upset you?*” She shared, “I don’t want to read that word (sexiness). I don’t want to do or say anything that will get me in trouble.” She proceeded with the lesson and as she read the poem to students she came to the word “sexiness” and said aloud, “Oh God, I didn’t want to read this.” She decided on the spot to change the word to “hotness” instead, despite the fact that students had a copy of the poem in front of them and could read the word themselves. Later as they discussed the poem as a group one student referenced the line from the poem that Hope was experiencing discomfort with. As Hope worked to address what the student shared she said, “He had a really good quote with that word [i.e. sexiness].”

Here Hope’s discomfort seems to come from fear of retaliation from administration (i.e. “I don’t want to...say anything that will get me in trouble”). Despite her discomfort she decided to continue to use the poem with the class but changed the word in the poem from “sexiness” to “hotness.” However, when it came time to discuss the poem with students she avoided asking critical literacy questions that would draw students’ attention to that line in the poem. Instead of engaging in a critical conversation about the quote one student shared related to that stanza, Hope made a simple observation, again avoided saying the word, and moved on (i.e. “He had a really good quote with that word”). Her discomfort kept her from engaging in critical literacy regarding gender in this example.

Additionally, during several interviews Hope expressed sentiments related to discomfort. She often cited fear of retaliation from parents as a concern related to using

critical literacy to discuss issues of gender. In our initial interview, I asked Hope about her experiences with and understanding of gender fluidity. Specifically, I asked her how she would feel talking to students about gender in this way. She explained that she would feel “uncomfortable” and then provided the following anecdote:

I opened this today. *She holds up a poster she received in the mail that explains the difference between gender and sexual identity.* It has the word sex on it but it’s talking about sexual orientation, gender identity, sex and then gender expression. It came from the website Teaching Tolerance. I subscribed to it last year. So, I thought about hanging it up but it just makes me uncomfortable. Well it would not make me uncomfortable for my sake, it would make me uncomfortable for [the students’] sake and for their parents. I don’t think, I think most parents would not like us talking to [the students] about those things. It doesn’t, the conversation itself doesn’t make me uncomfortable, it’s the reaction to the conversation that makes me uncomfortable.

Here Hope admits that she is uncomfortable talking about gender identity and fluidity with her students (i.e. “...it just makes me uncomfortable”). She explains that her main reason for hesitating to engage in such discussion and use resources such as the poster she received from [teachingtolerance.org](http://teachingtolerance.org) was not her own feelings of discomfort about the topic, but rather fear of retaliation from parents (i.e. “...most parents would not like us talking...about those things;” “...it’s the reaction to the conversation that makes me uncomfortable”). This inhibited her ability to have conversations related to critical literacy and gender in that she decided not to use the poster as a resource and avoided the conversation altogether.

During our final interview, I asked Hope to share her feelings about talking with students about issues of gender inequity and ideas of gender and sexual identity now that

she had completed the unit. Again, in her response she focused on the discomfort it caused her when thinking about retaliation from parents. She said,

There are certain things I'm comfortable with and there are certain things I'm not. I think that society put those limitations in my head or it's just my own insecurities.... Everything goes back to parents. It's not the kids....it doesn't make *me* uncomfortable. But as a teacher what's going on in my mind? Parents. That you know, that may be one of those factors that comes in with critical literacy that you constantly have to think about, the parents....it's one thing to empower [the students] to talk about what they feel about things and to give them those guiding questions but I feel like when I start to put my own voice into their thoughts ...that might be where we step over the line a little bit....I have to be careful, there's a fine line between educating [the students] about being open minded and losing my job. Honestly I walk that line all the time.

Hope's response demonstrates the role feelings of discomfort played in her ability to use critical literacy with students. She opened up about the thoughts that go through her mind as she plans critical literacy lessons and decides which topics are appropriate for her to cover, admitting that parent reactions influence her decisions (i.e. "...what's going on in my mind? Parents."). She recognized the value in teaching students through a critical literacy lens ("So, it's one thing to empower [the students] to talk about what they feel about things and to give them those guiding questions..."). However, she also experiences discomfort and uncertainty about either purposefully or accidentally sharing her own views with students on topics related to social justice (i.e. "...when I start to put my own voice...that might be where we step over the line a little bit"). In addition to discomfort in thinking about parent reactions she also expresses anxiety about how discussing such topics could impact her livelihood (i.e. "...I have to be careful...losing

my job”). It is clear that despite experiencing these feelings of discomfort she was also open to working through them and having the courage to use critical literacy with her students at a level she did feel comfortable with (i.e. “... walk that line all the time”).

It is important to note that although Hope explicitly recognized that talking about certain topics, including gender stereotypes, made her uncomfortable she was determined to overcome her own feelings of discomfort in order to incorporate critical literacy and social justice into her classroom. Her dedication to using critical literacy despite feelings of discomfort was clear in a response she gave in our final interview. She shared,

I try to, even if it is uncomfortable, to plan lessons [focused on social justice issues]. Talking about gender stereotypes with them is still uncomfortable. It's still asking them questions like is that okay? Or why do you think that and so and so thinks this? Where does that come from? Who has the power? That's uncomfortable to have that conversation with them. I still [include] it in [my lessons] because I think that they learn more because of it. Because they were challenged and pushed to think from different perspectives. I think it would be an injustice not to plan these kinds of lessons just because it makes me uncomfortable.

Here Hope focused specifically on the idea that asking critical literacy questions in relation to gender stereotypes made her uncomfortable (i.e. “Talking about gender stereotypes with them is still uncomfortable...”). Despite these feelings she shared her commitment to taking on critical literacy perspectives with her students to challenge gender stereotypes (“I try to, even if it is uncomfortable, to plan lessons...”). She recognized the value in teaching with a critical literacy lens (i.e. “...they learn more because of it...”) and emphasized that what students gain from the experience of learning through this lens takes precedence over her own feelings of discomfort (“...an injustice

not to plan these kinds of lessons just because it makes me uncomfortable”). Thus, although feelings of discomfort at times inhibited Hope’s ability to use critical literacy with her students to challenge gender stereotypes she still worked to implement these practices at her comfort level.

**Factors that Both Enhanced and Inhibited Use of Critical Literacy.** One factor emerged from the data that at times enhanced and at others inhibited Hope's ability to plan, implement, or engage in critical literacy with her students. This included the views, perceived and/or expressed, and actions of administration. In this section I provide evidence of the ways Hope’s school and district administration enhanced and inhibited her ability to use critical literacy with her students to challenge gender stereotypes. I have organized this section in to two subsections, one addressing ways administration enhanced and one addressing ways they inhibited her instructional practices related to critical literacy.

***Administration.*** The administration at the school and district level had nothing but compliments to share about Hope. The county level curriculum facilitator for elementary schools was the person who initially recommended Hope to participate in this study. She described her as an exemplar teacher and offered a lot of praise about what she had seen in Hope’s classroom. She also encouraged Hope to apply for the leadership academy that the county offered because she thought she would be a good fit for the program. Additionally, Hope’s principal often praised her in our sporadic and brief conversations. Hope received the positive feedback from the principal both informally and on formal evaluations. She also received the highest marks on her formal evaluation.

It was clear to me that administration had faith in Hope's abilities as a teacher and viewed her as a leader on her team and in her school. They supported and encouraged her participation in this study.

For example, the principal, Ms. Suarez, showed enthusiasm for the unit several times. One day as I was conducting an observation during the English Language Arts Block Ms. Suarez walked in Hope's classroom. She had a book with her that was written by a local author. The theme of the book was "be yourself" and the principal shared with us that the author is openly gay. Ms. Suarez explained that she wanted to stop by to lend Hope the book in case she wanted to read it to students during the critical literacy unit and even suggested that perhaps the author could visit Wilcox as part of the career fair the fifth grade team had organized to help break gender stereotypes. Hope expressed her excitement about the idea and thanked Ms. Suarez for sharing the book with her. This interaction indicated that Hope's principal supported the unit as she provided this resource specifically for the unit on critical literacy. It also seemed that she was aware of the importance of not just the critical literacy piece of the unit but also the gender piece as she made it a point to emphasize that the author of the book was openly gay. In this way, administration enhanced Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students to challenge gender stereotypes by providing resources and support to Hope and her teammates.

Additionally, when asked directly during our final interview what factors Hope felt enhanced her ability to use critical literacy with her students she talked about support from administration. She shared,

I think one factor that helped was support from my administration this year. They knew what it was, they weren't, it wasn't something that you know we had to explain to them or convince them to let us do. They were familiar with it. They knew it would be about critical literacy and gender. I remember last year there was a little bit of 'iffiness' on Ms. Suarez's part going into it but this year she was like "oh Brooke's here!" Even the career fair, it was widely accepted not just by Ms. Suarez but the whole school. The other teachers were like "oh cool, fifth grade's having their gender focused career fair"—it's like something that's been accepted and it's just become like the norm. I like that because it should be the norm that these kids are exposed to breaking gender stereotypes, especially when it comes to jobs. I thought that was cool.

Here Hope expressed how "support from [her] administration" regarding her participation in the study enhanced her ability to implement the unit on critical literacy and gender. She attributed this support to the fact that she had done something similar the year before when she participated in the pilot study, which allowed the principal to feel more comfortable with the idea (i.e. "They were familiar with it."). Hope also suggested that because administration was supportive of the fifth grade team it provided a space for the rest of the school to also offer support (i.e. "...it was widely accepted...the whole school.... it's just become like the norm"). This seemed to give Hope added confidence in her belief that critical literacy was an important part of not only her instructional practice, but also something that should be a part of the way all teachers approach literacy instruction (i.e. "...it should be the norm that these kids are exposed to breaking gender stereotypes..."). This level of support allowed Hope and the fifth grade team to implement the unit, incorporate it in to school wide events such as the literacy celebration week, and organize a fairly large event—the breaking gender stereotypes

career fair. In these ways support from administration enhanced Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students to challenge gender stereotypes.

Although administration did offer support for Hope which enhanced her ability to implement the unit, there were also actions they took that set a tone within the school that seemed to at times inhibit Hope's ability to use critical literacy. This became clear during the initial planning meeting for the unit. The fifth grade teachers, school and district curriculum facilitators, assistant principal, principal, and myself were all in attendance at the meeting. The curriculum facilitator from the county began the meeting by going over the standards that the team was expected to cover during the next nine-week period. As the conversation shifted and Hope began to talk about the ways in which they could merge the mandatory standards with the goals of the critical literacy unit, Ms. Suarez quickly reminded her and the rest of the team that the focus of instruction needed to remain on the standards. She said, "I don't want to see social studies or talk about social justice take over." After the meeting Hope shared with me her frustration at this comment calling it "ridiculous" and admitting that she would work to make sure she covered the standards she was required to cover while still using a critical literacy perspective. However, this comment by Ms. Suarez made right at the start of the planning meeting set the tone for the rest of the time the fifth grade teachers had together that afternoon. It seemed that the principal's warning halted their conversation. This inhibited Hope and the team's ability to openly engage in conversation, share ideas, and suggest resources related to using critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes with

their students as was apparent during planning sessions in which administrators were present versus those when they were not.

There were also several decisions made while Hope implemented the unit that inhibited her ability to use a critical literacy approach. For example, a little more than half way through the unit administration decided that the fifth grade team should restructure their English Language Arts block. Hope and her team were required to teach guided reading in a much more structured way than they had been up to that point. Each teacher would separate her students into four groups based on scores from the most recent benchmark tests, essentially leveling the students and placing them in homogenous groups. After engaging in a whole group lesson with their homerooms, the homogenous groups would be dismissed to meet with a different fifth grade teacher. Teachers would then focus their guided reading group instruction on the homogenous-leveled groupings, selecting texts that would address the specific areas of improvement the students needed to make. This inhibited Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students because it created a much more scheduled and rigid English Language Arts block. It caused her to rush through whole group lessons and left little time for her and the students to engage in the kind of critical conversations she felt were necessary to understand the complex social justice issues she addressed. This was not a decision that Hope and her team made; rather it came directly as a requirement from administration.

During several interviews Hope also expressed frustration with the ways she felt administration inhibited her ability to use critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes. For example, in our initial interview she provided a specific anecdote about how she had

to work diligently and almost fight with administration to allow her to take an approach to instruction that focused on social justice and incorporated critical literacy practices.

She shared,

...I pitched a fit in the beginning of the school year... We had a planning session before school started and we were planning our human rights unit and they gave us these things they had bought us and they said...just use it as a supplemental material. So...I took all of the lessons [and] replaced all the texts with other texts that go with human rights but still taught the reading piece of it. Then we went back to the meeting and they said I had to use the texts they provided. There was this one book about lizards and I'm sorry, there's no meaningful conversation with my students on lizards. There's just not.... They were like "but on the EOG they might have to read about lizards and blah, blah" but *I'm* not the EOG. I am the one preparing them take a test yes, but I'm also preparing them to be thinkers and if I'm going to teach something about comparing and contrasting structures of text I don't want to teach it about lizards.

In this example, it is clear that Hope was not feeling supported in her desire to use meaningful and authentic texts to engage students in critical literacy practices (i.e. "...I pitched a fit...;"). Instead, she felt that she was being forced to use materials that did not coincide with her vision for addressing issues of social justice despite her effort to make sure the materials she selected met the criteria for addressing the mandatory curriculum and standards (i.e. "...replaced all the text with other texts that go with human rights ...they said I had to use the texts they provided"). Hope's efforts were not being supported by administration and her professional judgment was not being trusted (i.e. "They were like "but on the EOG..." but *I'm* not the EOG"). She clearly felt that this was inhibiting her ability to use critical literacy with her students as she protested about having to use the book about lizards and emphasized that her job as a teacher went

beyond preparing students for standardized testing. As she put it— “I’m also preparing them to be thinkers”.

In our final interview, Hope reflected on the ways administration inhibited her ability to use critical literacy with her students. She shared,

That’s another thing that comes with teaching critical literacy is you have to prove to them that it does work and that you as a teacher are able to take the content they want you to teach and use it in a way to teach it meaningfully with critical literacy. Now I just need to get them to be convinced that it is the best way because it is. If we taught our kids, even from second grade, I mean even in kindergarten you can do it. All the way to fifth grade they would be amazing thinkers when they come to us.

Here Hope describes her frustrations with having to prove that critical literacy is a legitimate approach to instruction (i.e. “...you have to prove to them that it does work”). She suggests that administrators did not understand that teachers are professionals who are capable of teaching the standards and using critical literacy that these two things did not have to be an all or nothing, one or the other, approach but instead could be used in combination as a way to enhance each other (i.e. “...take the content...use it in a way to teach it meaningfully...”). The time and effort Hope had to spend on “convincing” her principal that critical literacy is “the best way” to teach took away time and energy she could have spent planning lessons. In these ways administration inhibited Hope’s ability to use critical literacy with her students.

In this chapter I have shared the ways administration at the school and county levels both enhanced and inhibited Hope’s ability to implement critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes. The following chapter provides a discussion of the

findings and implications these findings have for research and practice. I also provide final conclusions.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

~Margaret Mead

The quote above could be found on a large yellow poster at the front and center of Hope's classroom, hanging above the projector screen on the same wall that students faced each day as they sat on the carpet in a circle during their literacy block (See Figure 13). This quote and its purposeful placement seemed significant and powerful as I made note of it on my first day of observations in the Fall of 2015. It encompassed both Hope's mission as an educator and what lies at the heart of this study—a commitment to changing to the world one small group of thoughtful, committed individuals at a time. Hope and her students demonstrated that they were both thoughtful about gender inequity and committed to challenging gender stereotypes through critical literacy.

In the following pages, I share a summary, along with my interpretation, of the findings from this study. I then work to place the findings within the context of previous research shared in chapter three. From there I consider the implications of this study for theory, research, and practice. I end this chapter by sharing my final conclusions based on the findings of the study.

**Figure 13. Poster with Quote**



### **Summary & Interpretation of Findings**

In this section, I share summaries and interpretations of the findings related to the research questions that guided this study. As discussed in the findings chapter, each question had several main and subthemes that emerged from data analysis. These themes were arrived at through the use of data sources mentioned earlier including interviews, observations, book and card sorts, and a student focus group. This section is organized by research question beginning with RQ1a and ending with RQ3 followed by a discussion of the ways the findings from this fill gaps in the research on related topics.

**Research Question 1a.** The first research question, RQ1a, asked: In what ways does a fifth grade teacher use critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes in her

classroom? Data pertaining to this question revealed the ways Hope approached literacy instruction in her classroom. Hope was able to use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity with her students. This study confirms what previous researchers on critical literacy have suggested—teachers engage in critical literacy in a variety of ways (Behrman, 2006; Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Lewison et al., 2002). Hope did this through the dimensions that Lewison et al. (2002) proposed by disrupting the common place, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and less often taking action to promote social justice.

She also did this through reading supplemental texts, multiple texts about the same topic, and conducting student choice projects all of which are categories Behrman (2006) found to be ways teachers engage in critical literacy. The specific instructional moves that allowed Hope to use critical literacy with her students are important for several reasons. For example, Hope used literacy materials to engage students in critical conversations about gender. One way she did this was through the juxtaposition of traditional and nontraditional fairytales. This is important because students were able to question mainstream texts, something they are often not given the opportunity to do in most classroom settings (Au & Raphael, 2000; Flint & Lanman, 2012).

Additionally, like the Lewison et al. (2002) study, this study also indicates that teachers have the most difficult time enacting the fourth dimension—taking action to promote social justice. There was the least amount of evidence of Hope using this strategy. However, I would argue that in some ways Hope's decision to participate in this study and ask the types of questions she did can be viewed as a form of taking action

to promote social justice related to gender. This may indicate that Lewison and colleague's (2002) definition of what it means to take action to promote social justice needs to be adapted to include this kind of action. The instructional approaches Hope took in order to use critical literacy with her students have implications for practice. These will be discussed later in this section.

Furthermore, findings indicated that Hope was able to merge the standards she was required to teach with critical literacy practices. This finding helps to counter a criticism of critical literacy as reported by Guitierrez (2014). Guitierrez (2014) found that teachers were critical of this approach because it took away from teaching requirements, such as preparing students for formal assessments. This was not the case for Hope and her students. She was able to administer all required assessments and cover all required standards throughout the course of the eight-week unit by merging standards with critical literacy practices—indicating that it is possible for teachers to fulfill their duties when taking on this approach to instruction.

**Research Question 1b.** The second part of the first research question, RQ1b, asked: In what ways do fifth grade students engage in critical literacy to challenge gender inequity in their everyday lives? Parallel to the findings related to the teacher, students also engaged in critical literacy in terms of the four dimensions proposed by Lewison et al. (2002). Like with the teacher data, there were specific ways students engaged in critical literacy, however, the students did this in ways different than the teacher. The ways they engaged in critical literacy included making personal and real world

connections, taking risks, engaging in critical conversations, and unveiling hidden messages related to gender in the texts they read.

The findings related to critical conversations confirm what Meacham (2014) found—students engage in critical conversations and draw from personal experiences as ways to engage in critical literacy. This also adds to the research on critical conversations and critical literacy in that the study focused on elementary school students where as other studies have focused on older students, pre-service teachers, and practicing teachers (Lewison et al., 2002; Meacham, 2014; Schieble, 2012; Smith, 2001).

One important aspect of the data related to this question is the finding that students are better able to unveil hidden messages related to gender in the texts they read. Before the unit began, as was apparent from initial interviews, book sorts, and observations, students tended to give authority to the texts they read. This confirms what other researchers have found—students who are not taught to read using critical literacy strategies read “submissively” and give author’s authority (Franzak, 2006; Hall & Piazza, 2008). The findings from this study indicate that students began to question texts’ authority and identify hidden messages is important because it shows that students are able to extend their comprehension beyond the explicit ideas portrayed in texts. By doing this student were engaging in a form of higher order thinking that is more complex than simply answering comprehension questions. Learning how to apply critical literacy strategies was providing them the opportunity to engage in critical thinking about the world around them, the power structures that make up our society, and the sociopolitical

systems to which they belong. This is the kind of thinking needed in a democratic society—thinking that goes beyond selecting A, B, or C on a standardized test.

The findings from this question also extend research on children's literature and gender (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; McCabe et al., 2011; Roper & Clifton, 2013; Taylor, 2003). For example, students, rather than researchers, analyzed children's literature in terms of gender. This was done through the book sort activity and in the lessons where students analyzed traditional and nontraditional fairytales. In the student analysis of gender in the children's literature, students recognized the ways traditional fairytales perpetuated gender stereotypes confirming what previous researchers have found when conducting analysis themselves. As I mentioned in chapter three, the books children are exposed to are a reflection of the dominant culture and the values of the larger society or in other words are culturally, politically, and historically situated (Finders, 1997; Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002). Students confirmed this as they analyzed traditional fairytales such as *Cinderella*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*. During their analysis students recognized that the female characters in these classic stories were often silenced, devoid of power, and placed in positions of submission to male characters—themes that has run throughout history when it comes to women's voices, roles in society, and availability of choices. At the same time, they described male characters as heroic, powerful, active, and intelligent, again confirming what previous research on children's literature has claimed (Turner-Bowker, 1996; Weitzman, 1972). Students recognized the ways male and female characters were

portrayed in stereotypical roles confirming that children's literature tends to reinforce gender stereotypes (Weitzman et al., 1972; Turner-Bowker, 1996; McCabe et al., 2011).

Several studies where researchers analyzed children's books concluded that although there has been some progress toward gender equality in children's books improvement has not been significant (Louie, 2001; McCabe et al., 2011). The students in this study also confirmed this in their analysis of nontraditional children's literature such as *The Paper Bag Princess* and *Bubba the Cowboy Prince*. Students found that these texts simply switched gender stereotypes, giving more negative characteristics to male characters and more positive ones to female characters rather than actually addressing gender equality. This confirms what Davis (1984) argued—nonsexist books do not equate to gender equity in children's literature rather they simply switch the focus of negative gender stereotypes from female characters to male characters. This still perpetuates binary thinking and creates a culture of women vs. men, us vs. them. Students came to this conclusion through analysis of nontraditional fairytales and came to the conclusion rather than solving a problem simply created another one.

**Research Question 2a.** Research question two sought to answer: In what ways does the teacher understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study? The data related to this question focused on teacher understandings before and after the unit was implemented. Two main themes related to this data emerged and included the ways Hope's understandings of critical literacy increased and the ways her perspectives of gender shifted.

Like Freebody and Freiberg (2011) suggest, Hope required specific skills such as the ability to select texts that would create a platform for discussing gender inequity and knowing when to ask specific critical literacy questions. These skills and Hope's understanding of critical literacy developed on a continuum moving from novice to nuanced, confirming what researchers such as Lewison and colleagues (2002) and Au and Raphael (2000) found. It became clear that over time Hope gained a deeper understanding of critical literacy as was evidenced by her more complex definition of the term after the unit ended. This is important because it makes it apparent that teachers, even those who graduate from teacher education programs, have little understanding of this approach to literacy instruction yet have the potential to learn to implement it with guidance when committed to social justice education.

Additionally, Hope's comfort and confidence in using critical literacy strategies to discuss issues of gender inequity increased overtime as was clear in her questioning techniques and decreased reliance on assistance from the research and peers. This confirms another part of Freebody and Freiberg's (2011) findings—teachers are required to have specific pedagogical knowledge in order to be able to use critical literacy in their classrooms. For Hope this meant learning when and how to ask critical literacy questions. It also meant she had to increase her knowledge of women's history, and past and present issues related to gender inequity in order to apply the pedagogical knowledge necessary to foster critical literacy in her classroom. This shows that with practice teachers can (and do) become more skilled at taking on a critical literacy perspective.

It is also important to note the ways in which Hope's perspectives on gender shifted. She became more aware of her own biases and worked to combat them. This aligns with findings from research conducted by Hall and Piazza (2008). Teachers in their study concluded that understanding their own beliefs and biases were one way teachers could help students engage in critical literacy. In an increasingly diverse society where basic human rights are still being denied and debated, such as those of transgender and gender fluid individuals, it is essential that teachers and schools provide safe spaces for students who identify as such. Like the teachers in Hall and Piazza's (2008) study, by becoming increasingly aware of her own gender biases and stereotypes Hope started this process. She also did this in her effort to increase her awareness of current and historical events related to gender inequity. Through recognition of her own understandings, misconceptions, and biases related to gender Hope's own perspectives shifted. This was important in her journey to implementing a critical literacy approach in her classroom but it also indicated that this was more than just about an academic goal for her. It was also about her personal values. These shifts in perspective impacted both her in and out of school life and relationships, such as the books she read, clothes she bought, and ways in which she interacted with her daughter. This tie to personal values and beliefs seems to indicate that teachers need to hold certain viewpoints about issues of social justice in order to commit to implementing critical literacy practices in their classrooms. Again, these are important aspects of teaching in a democratic society. Critically aware teachers can help to develop the same awareness and skills in their students, as Hope was able to do.

**Research Question 2b.** The second part of research question two focused on the students. Specifically, this question asked: In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study? Two main themes emerged from the data and included the ways student understandings of critical literacy increased and the ways their understandings of gender increased.

Like with Hope, the students developed deeper and more complex understandings of critical literacy as the unit progressed. In particular, their understandings of the importance of asking critical literacy questions became more nuanced and at the same time broadened their viewpoints on gender norms and expectations. This seemed to connect to and confirm research that suggests that it is essential for students have a model of how to read from a critical stance in order to successfully engage in critical literacy (Lapp & Fisher, 2010; McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004). Without Hope's modeling of critical literacy practices students were not able to engage in such thinking. However, once they had been taught explicit ways to read a text with a critical lens they were able to do so on their own throughout the unit and after its conclusion.

This is important because, especially in a setting where a large majority of the students came from marginalized populations, students became empowered to speak up and have their voices heard—providing practical examples of how feminist pedagogy can be utilized by elementary school teachers to empower students. The unit also provided a space where dominant groups felt empowered to speak up for groups whose voices have traditionally been silenced—confirming previous research on critical literacy. As Norris and colleagues (2012) found, engaging in critical literacy practices helps students

understand people who are unlike themselves, particularly children from mainstream groups. This was apparent in responses from white, male students such as Nick and Colton who seemed to become advocates for marginalized groups, in this case girls and women.

In essence this type of thinking helps to create bridges between groups, forming allies between groups whose voices are heard and those who are not. This finding shows that students were able to develop an awareness of the way others have been treated throughout history, recognizing their own privilege along the way. This kind of thinking coming from ten and eleven year olds is powerful in that it has the potential to change the way future generations think about one another and the way they deal with conflict.

As student perspectives on gender shifted and they became increasingly frustrated with the gender stereotypes portrayed in the texts they were exposed to, they also became more skilled at articulating their feelings about gender inequity. This is important because it indicates that participation in the critical literacy unit provided a space for students to gain clarity in their thinking and become confident in their ability to express their opinions about issues related to gender inequity. By developing skills like this at an early age students will be better equipped to participate as active citizens in an ever-diversifying democratic society. This counters findings from previous research in which findings indicated that students, particularly those from mainstream groups, have resisted critical literacy practices that encourage them to examine their own perspective and beliefs (Janks, 1991; Hall & Piazza, 2008). The frustrations students expressed in this study were aimed at systems of oppression not at the teacher or peers for questioning

their viewpoints. This study also pushes back against research that suggests students might disengage from reading or feel that critical literacy takes away from the aesthetic aspects of reading (Gutierrez, 2014; Mission & Morgan, 2005). Students in this study, although they experienced increased feelings of frustration about systems of oppression and hidden messages authors sent, seemed to gain a sense of empowerment in their ability to choose books that sent the kinds of messages they wanted to read about. They also saw the value and importance of reading from critical literacy perspectives.

The findings from this question also confirm what Janks (2014) suggested--when taught how to read texts using critical, students have the potential to imagine possibilities for making a positive difference in the world. This was definitely true for this group of students as was apparent in the topics they chose to write about in their social justice papers at the end of the unit, such as girls' education and immigration rights. This was also apparent in their conversation during the focus group session where students talked about taking action and making change.

**Research Question 3.** The final research question addressed in this study asked: What factors enhance or inhibit the ability of a fifth grade teacher to use critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes with her students? Three themes emerged from this data including factors that enhanced, factors that inhibited, and factors that both enhanced and inhibited Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students to challenge gender stereotypes.

Findings from this question both confirm and contradict several claims made by previous researchers. First is the idea that teachers are hesitant to teach using this

approach because they are unsure of what critical literacy instruction looks like (Hall & Piazza, 2008; Lewison, Flint, & van Sluys, 2002; Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). This was something that at first inhibited Hope's ability to use critical literacy with her students, confirming these findings. However, with the support of school personnel and guidance from the researcher she was able to overcome this hesitation. Additionally, research has indicated that teachers worry that sociopolitical issues such as race, class, and gender are too controversial to discuss with students, particularly at the elementary school level where they may receive push back from parents who find these topics inappropriate (Au & Raphael, 2000; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Lewison, Flint, & van Sluys, 2002; Norris, Lucas, Prudhoe, 2012; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Hope confirmed that this was a concern for her as well, however, she felt strongly enough about the importance of this kind of work that she was willing to overcome these concerns and fears in order to expose her students to these topics and type of instruction.

A key aspect of formative design research is an emphasis on the practical ways theory can be utilized in classrooms by teachers and with students. The findings from this question are important because they help to address this part of the research design. Leadership skills provided Hope the space to implement the unit. Such skills opened the door for her to practice using a critical literacy approach to begin with by being recognized as a leader capable of handling herself as a professional by people who had the power to permit or deny her to participate in this study. She was also able to use her leadership skills to help guide her teammates through the unit itself, focusing them on the central goals, getting them to agree with curricular decisions, and involving them in

various aspects of the project. This is important because it indicates that an essential part of getting teachers to use critical literacy in their classrooms is having someone with leadership qualities willing to guide them through implementing such practices. This then led to support from Hope's teammates and other school personnel. This support provided Hope with encouragement and confidence to use critical literacy with her students.

It is also important to note factors that inhibited the ability of critical literacy to be used in this context. Having an understanding of these factors can help others to anticipate and plan for them when working to incorporate critical literacy in to their own classrooms. For example, Hope's learning curve at times inhibited her ability to use critical literacy. However, if other teachers are aware of the type of things they might encounter they can plan for them by reading additional practitioner books or seeking out other professional resources to help them overcome the gap in their knowledge about this practice. This is also true when dealing with discomfort related to topics that may be covered when using critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes. Additionally, it is important for teachers to know that although time can pose a problem, if they are committed to implementing such practices they can make it work by merging these concepts with the required standards and selecting materials that will both allow them to teach the skills they are required to while providing a platform for critical literacy discussions.

### **Contributions to Research, Practice, and Theory**

This study adds to previous research in several key ways. First, this research was designed to put theory in to practice which offered insight in to how teachers might take up this approach and what needs to be done to support this kind of instruction.

Additionally, this study focused on both the elementary teacher and her students whereas many studies that have addressed the use of critical literacy have done so with just teachers or with older students, such as those of college and high school age.

Furthermore, this study emphasized how critical literacy can be used to address issues of gender inequity. Finally, this study adds to literature on feminist theory in that it provides an example of how one teacher was able to take up feminist pedagogy to focus on issues raised by feminist theorists such as language.

One way this study contributes to research on critical literacy is that it puts theory in to practice through a formative experiment design. With this being an emerging approach, no studies to my knowledge have been conducted using a formative design at the time this study was implemented. This study adds to the research base on what such a study might look like when put in to practice in an authentic classroom setting. By taking this approach, this study provided insight into ways teachers can use critical literacy in their classrooms while still managing the demands of high stakes testing environments and the needs of their students. It also offered ideas related to ways researchers, teacher educators, administrators, and practitioners might troubleshoot some of the factors that inhibit teachers from using critical literacy with their students. Findings provided insight into the preparation teachers need to go through in order to foster critical literacy in their

classrooms. For example, they not only need to know how to engage in this approach to instruction with students, they need materials that will lend themselves to such instruction as well as preparation for how to deal with resistance from administration, colleagues, and parents. Additionally, because critical literacy was used in an authentic setting and instruction was planned in collaboration with the classroom teacher, this study helped point out workable instruction. Through deeper understanding of factors that enhanced the teacher's ability to use critical literacy, steps can be taken to provide support for such factors in other studies and classrooms. For example, by providing trainings for support personnel that focus on teaching them what critical literacy is, what it looks like when applied in literacy classrooms, and how they can support teachers in implementing this approach. Offering professional development opportunities focused on developing leadership skills is another step that can be taken. By helping teachers develop leadership skills such as those Hope utilized to bring her team together to implement the unit, educators may be more inclined to work with peers to implement similar practices.

Additionally, many of the studies on critical literacy focus on the ways in which teachers engage in such practices (Behram, 2006; Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Lewison et al. 2002). This study extends this research by focusing on both the ways the teacher and students used such practices, as did Meacham's (2014) study. However, Meacham (2014) focused on a high school teacher and his students whereas this study focused on an elementary school teacher and students. This is important because critics of critical literacy have pointed to the idea that younger students are incapable of applying critical literacy. They have also argued that topics, such as race, class, and gender discrimination

are inappropriate for students of this age to learn about or discuss. Additionally, some critics of this approach claim it can be done with younger students. However, this study provides insight in to the ways that students *were* able to engage in such practices. It helps point to strategies both teachers and students use to engage in conversations about topics such as systematic oppression, and gender based inequities.

Furthermore, this study contributes to research on critical literacy by emphasizing a focus on gender and on feminist theory by providing a platform to begin a conversation about gender fluidity with elementary aged students. Much of the research on critical literacy has focused on addressing issues of race (i.e. Bauer, 2011; Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014) and occasionally class with students (i.e. Jones, 2006). I found few examples of research that addressed how critical literacy can be used to focus on gender inequity with young students (i.e. Taber et al., 2013). However, the study conducted by Taber and colleagues was done during an afterschool program with four girls whereas this study was conducted during the regular school day, with an entire class of students made up of both boys and girls. By including both male and female students in this study, findings provide insight in to the ways not only girls come to think about gender inequity but the way boys do as well. This opened spaces for discussion about gender fluidity, challenging male gender stereotypes in addition to female gender stereotypes, and opportunities for dominant groups to use their privilege as a way to advocate for marginalized groups. This helped to address issues with research related to gender and feminist theory that has been criticized for not keeping up with “nonnormative genders” (Salamon, 2008). This is particularly true in elementary school classrooms where the

topic of gender fluidity remains taboo. Although this could be addressed further and more directly, this study was a way to begin to open up a space where gender, gender identity, norms and expectations were being attended to with young students.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature on feminist pedagogy. This study provided an example of how Hope, as an elementary school teacher, was able to take up a feminist pedagogy perspective as a way to address issues of gender inequity. Throughout the study she enacted many of the characteristics associated with feminist pedagogy including her focus on creating a space where all student voices were heard. She also took up feminist pedagogy as she empowered her students through consciousness raising. By having them engage in critiquing systems of oppression Hope was opening a space with young children to begin to push back against the systems they were a part of. Hope's awareness of the importance of the language she both used with students and encouraged students to use is another way she was working from a feminist pedagogy stance. Hope and students used language to critique texts, engage in self-reflection, and encourage a sense of change toward more equitable gender norms. These findings provide insight into ways elementary school teachers can use feminist pedagogy in their classrooms—a stance that is not common among this group of educators for fear of retaliation from administrators and parents, a concern Hope also expressed but worked through.

**Implications.** There are several implications that can be taken from this study. Findings from this study have the potential to alter the way we think about elementary school teachers and students and their ability to engage in critical literacy specifically as a

way to address issues of gender inequity. In this section I focus on the ways we might begin to think differently about these ideas by sharing implications related to research and practice.

**Research.** Although there are several implications for research that can be taken from the findings in this study, I have chosen to focus on three here. One way additional research related to this study could continue to add to the body of literature on critical literacy and gender would be to follow the students from a study like this one into their middle, high school, and college years. This kind of longitudinal study could provide insight into the ways students continue to utilize their understanding of critical literacy and gender throughout their schooling experiences. A study such as this could also follow students in and out of school to see the ways they use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity in their home and school lives. This could provide insight into what practices and ideas transfer as students grow and mature.

A second implication for research would be to conduct a similar study with additional participants either across the same or various grade levels. This would provide insight into the ways critical literacy can be used to address issues of gender inequity in various settings. It would help researchers to understand the ways in which a wider variety of teaching styles can be used to incorporate these practices. Studying how younger students engage in critical literacy to challenge gender stereotypes would also help to fill a gap in the literature as very little research has been done with young children and critical literacy. This is particularly true of using critical literacy with young children to challenge gender stereotypes.

A final implication for research would be to conduct additional studies using a formative design. Since this approach to research is still emerging there have been few studies conducted using this approach to research. There is much to be learned from this approach as it focuses on the practical application of theory and places an emphasis on determining what factors enhance or inhibit educational theories when put in to practice in authentic classroom settings. Additional studies using this design could provide important insight into other factors that impact the ability of teachers to use critical literacy with their students to challenge gender stereotypes.

*Practice.* Like with the implications for research, there are several implications for practice that can be taken from the findings of this study. I have chosen to focus on the three I find to be most important. These include implications about fostering critical conversations among students, implications for creating an environment where students feel safe to take risks, and implications for considering the significance of the ways student understandings of hidden messages in texts extend their comprehension.

As seen in the findings from this study, Hope worked to engage students in critical conversations focused on gender inequity and students were able to do so even once the unit had ended. This was an important part of the process of learning how to use critical literacy and challenge gender stereotypes. Hope did this by setting expectations for students during such conversations, reminding them to be sensitive and respectful of each other, and intervening if conversations became offensive. The types of questions she asked, often open-ended and requiring critical thinking also helped to foster such conversations. Students engaged in these types of conversations even after the unit ended

as was evidenced in the student focus group data. During the focus group, I provided students with an anchor chart of sentence starters such as “I agree with...because...” or “I respectfully disagree with...because....” These seemed to provide a guide for students as they worked to discuss issues of gender inequity during the focus group. The practices and strategies that allowed students to engage in critical conversations are things that teachers can take note of and begin to incorporate in to their own classrooms if they hope to engage students in similar conversations. Having a designated area, such as the carpeted area at the front of Hope’s classroom, where students are able to sit in a circle provides the space necessary for them to engage in conversations with each other. They are able to make eye contact with their peers. This format is also inviting in terms of creating an atmosphere where students feel comfortable to share their ideas. It also seems to have shifted the power structure between teacher and students where the focus was not always on the teacher as expert. Setting expectations early on, providing anchor charts with suggestions for how to add to or disagree with other’s ideas respectfully, and prohibiting students from sharing in hurtful or offensive comments are also important ways teachers can encourage critical conversations in their own classrooms.

Creating an environment where students feel comfortable to take risks will also aid in their ability to engage in critical conversations. Hope did this by valuing student individuality, for example for family curriculum night she focused on having students learn more about Egyptian culture as a way of creating an understanding and appreciation for Angelene’s family culture. She often praised students who were willing to go against what was popular and created an environment where students felt supported in their

choice to be different. Hope also did this by modeling for students what it looked like to critique texts and question the authority often given to authors. This allowed students to feel free to do the same. By providing additional examples of individuals, past and present, who also took risks such as Malala and Katherine Switzer, Hope afforded her students the opportunity to learn about risk takers who were seen as role models. Providing students with such role models and opportunities to discuss their experiences, opened up opportunities for students to explore the emotions, such as fear and doubt, experienced by such risk takers. It seems that having such opportunities provided students with the confidence to take risks themselves, knowing that they might experience similar feelings but that Hope's classroom was a safe space to do so. Hope also talked about students as a family. She often shared personal experiences and anecdotes from her own life and encouraged students to do the same. This allowed students to get to know each other beyond just an academic level. She also incorporated opportunities on a weekly, and often daily, basis where students could interact with their peers and get to know each other on a more personal level. She also created spaces where students were expected to complement each other and share why they were grateful to know share the classroom experiences with their peers. These are all strategies that other teachers could use as a way to encourage risk taking in their own classrooms.

One finding that came out of the student data was engaging in critical literacy as a way to question issues of gender inequity allowed students to take away hidden messages authors were sending to readers such as the message that girls should be polite or boys

should be brave. These messages reflect the values and beliefs of dominant groups in our society and often perpetuate oppressive practices and marginalization of minority groups. These conclusions that students were able to draw on their own with guiding questions from the teacher actually extended student comprehension. They were no longer simply regurgitating what happened in the texts they read, they were thinking more critically and determining additional messages being sent to readers. This is an important implication for teachers, particularly those wanting to take on a social justice perspective. Critical literacy practices are one way students were able to do this kind of work as readers. In our world of media saturation where students are constantly bombarded with advertisements and messages related to gender, it is important that they have opportunities to practice using critical literacy to identify and critique these messages. Teachers can do this by offering students the opportunity to discover hidden messages in texts. This kind of practice can help to create more responsible citizens. Teaching students to identify hidden messages in texts will also allow teachers to empower students, particularly those such as young girls and boys who might be most impacted by these messages, to determine if these are messages they agree with. It provides students with opportunities to learn how to practice being a part of a democratic society where they will have to make decisions about who and how they want to lead their lives and the contributions they want to make as citizens. The findings from this study suggest that it is important for teachers to help students learn how to identify hidden messages in texts and can do so through the use of critical literacy practices.

**Final Conclusions.** Although much of the implementation of the unit went well, before concluding I would like to share a few things that did not go as planned. First, with two weeks remaining in the eight-week unit, Hope began implementing guided reading in the very structured way her administration was requiring which took up a large chunk of time that she was previously dedicating to the unit. This made it so that she was not able to finish the novel study. She chose to continue with the last three chapters as a read aloud, fitting in a few minutes of reading aloud to students where she could throughout the school day and moving on to covering the ELA standards she was required to teach in the for the final quarter of the school year. Additionally, due to time constraints and a direct request not to “focus on social studies” during the ELA block students did not have a chance to critique the social studies text to the extent that Hope and I would have liked—something we were able to do during the pilot study. Finally, Hope and I planned to feature an equal number of male and female guest speakers for the career fair focused on challenging gender stereotypes that we organized as a culminating activity at the end of the unit. Although we had a fairly large turnout of female guest speakers, we were only able to get a commitment from one male—an elementary school teacher. Therefore, we were not able to provide the variety of perspectives that we would have liked during this aspect of the unit. Despite these issues, the goal of using critical literacy with students to address issues of gender inequity was met as is evidenced in the data provided throughout this paper.

This study used a formative design approach to explore the ways teachers and students in a fifth grade classroom use critical literacy as a way to challenge issues of

gender inequity. Both the teacher and her students were able to engage in such practices, which lead to increased understandings of critical literacy practices and shifts in perspectives on gender. The data also provided insight into the factors that enhanced and inhibited the teacher's ability to use critical literacy. These findings indicate that even young students are capable of recognizing and analyzing the inequities present in their everyday worlds. The fact that gender inequity continues to plague our society and world with issues such as unequal pay for equal work and gender based violence, it is clear that students who will play a key role in the future status of gender equality learn how to use critical literacy as a way to challenge notions of power and privilege in terms of gender.

Further investigation of how teachers and students can do this successfully in the realm of education where the focus tends to be on preparing students to take standardized tests rather than become critically aware thinkers and citizens of a democratic society is needed. As a teacher educator, I plan to do this in my work with aspiring teachers—something they do not get enough practice with in teacher education programs across the country. In the opening pages of this dissertation I shared a quote from Emma Watson (2014) and it seems appropriate to return to it now. Despite the gravity of her assertion—“There is no country in the world where girls and women are equal to their male counterparts”—the findings from this study provide hope that future generations of children will no longer live in a world where Ms. Watson's statement holds true. Or as Emma put it, in a world where “...there's no such thing as a boy and men thing. There's no such thing as a girl or women thing. It's all together.”

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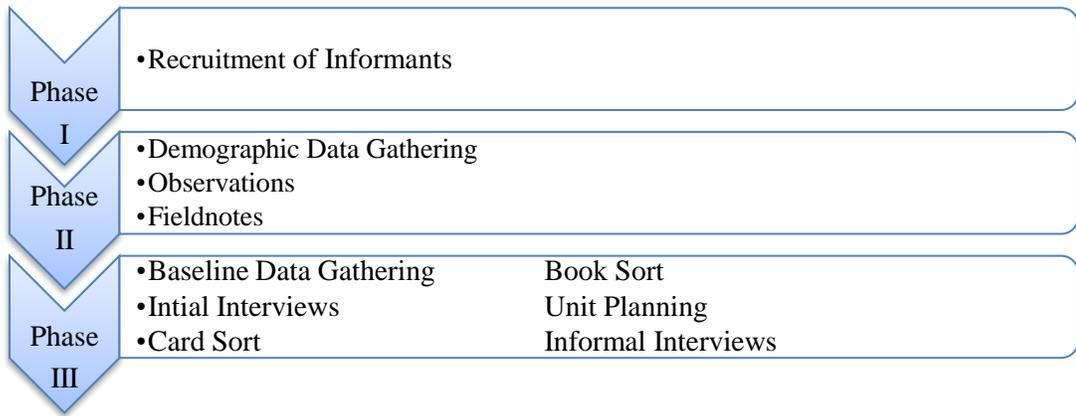
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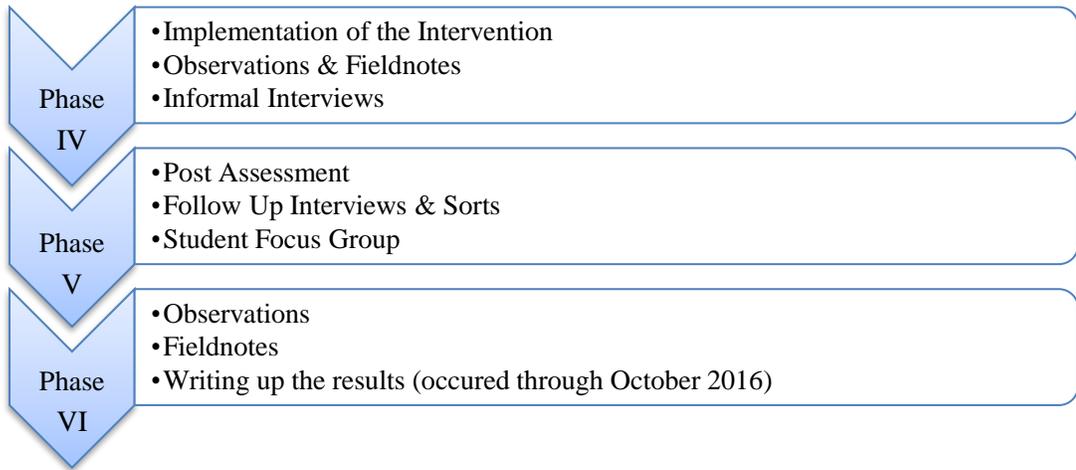
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APPENDIX A  
RESEARCH DESIGN PHASES

**Phases of the Study: September 2015-January 2016**



**Phases of the Study: January 2016-April 2016**



## APPENDIX B

### DATA COLLECTION TIMELINE & MANAGEMENT PLAN

	<b>Sept.-Dec.</b>	<b>Dec.-Jan.</b>	<b>Jan.-Mar.</b>	<b>Mar.-May</b>	<b>Jun.-Jul.</b>	<b>Aug.-Sept.</b>	<b>Oct.</b>
	2015	2015-2016	2016	2016	2016	2016	2016
Teacher Interviews	X	X	X	X			
Unit Planning Sessions		X	X				
Unit Implementation			X				
Student Interviews	X	X	X	X			
Student Card Sort			X	X			
Student Book Sort			X	X			
Student Focus Group				X			
Observations	X	X	X	X			
Data Analysis	X	X	X	X	X		
Write Up Findings					X	X	X

APPENDIX C

DATA COLLECTION CROSSWALK

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Planning Sessions</b>	<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Card Sort</b>	<b>Book Sort</b>
1a. In what ways does a fifth grade teacher use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity in her classroom?	X	X	X			
1b. In what ways do fifth grade students engage in critical literacy to challenge gender inequity in their everyday lives?	X	X				
2a. In what ways does the teacher understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?	X	X	X			
2b. In what ways do student understandings of critical literacy related to gender shift during a unit of study?	X	X		X	X	X

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Planning Sessions</b>	<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Card Sort</b>	<b>Book Sort</b>
3. What factors enhance or inhibit the ability of a fifth grade teacher to use critical literacy to address issues of gender inequity with her students?	X	X	X			

APPENDIX D

OBSERVATION/FIELDNOTE PROTOCOL

<b>Background Information</b>		
Date: Teacher(s):		Time: Students:
Dimensions of critical literacy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disrupting the common place</li> <li>• Focusing on sociopolitical issues</li> <li>• Interrogating multiple viewpoints</li> <li>• Taking action and promoting social justice</li> </ul>		Critical literacy components to look for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk about language as oppressive</li> <li>• Talk about language as empowering</li> <li>• Power Relationships</li> <li>• Social Change</li> </ul>
<b>Time Stamp</b>	<b>Descriptive Notes</b>	<b>Reflective Notes</b>

## APPENDIX E

### TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Interview Steps:**

1. Greet Teacher
2. Develop Rapport
3. Begin Interview
4. Thank participant for their help

#### **Developing Rapport Questions:**

- How is your school year going?
- Do you have any fun plans for the weekend?

#### **Initial Instructions:**

Thank you for agreeing to help me with my project. Today I want to ask you a few questions that will help me better understand how teachers use literacy to engage students in dialogue that challenges traditional gender positions.

*[Bring out tape recorder]*

In order to help me remember what you say today, I would like to record our conversation. Is it okay with you if I record what we talk about?

*[Press record, state interview title, date, & participant name]*

### **Part I: Initial Interview**

#### **Demographic Questions**

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How many years have you taught at this school? In this grade level?
3. What other grade levels have you taught?
4. What degree(s) do you hold?
5. What teaching certification(s) do you hold?

#### **Reflexivity Questions**

1. How, if at all, do you think your personal life experiences influence your instruction?
  - a. How does your gender influence your instruction?
  - b. How does your race influence your instruction?

2. Why have you chosen to incorporate critical literacy into your instruction in the past? This year?
3. How has your view/understanding of critical literacy instruction changed since we concluded the unit on gender last year?

### **Critical Literacy Questions:**

1. What does the term critical literacy mean to you?
2. I'd like to share with you one definition of critical literacy that I am using as a focus of my study. Stephanie Jones describes critical literacy as a perspective some teachers use to challenge students to reconsider the world and ask if the status quo is socially just (2006). When teaching literacy through this perspective, students may be asked to answer questions about a text such as: what kind of world is normal or privileged in this text, who and what is not represented in this text, whose interest does this text serve, and in what ways can this text be challenged.
  - a. With this definition in mind, what are your experiences with teaching using a critical literacy perspective?
  - b. How do/would you feel about asking students to read a text and ask these kinds of questions?
3. How, if at all, do you think the experience of teaching reading using a critical lens is/would be similar or different than teaching without it?
4. What do you think the benefits of teaching literacy using a critical lens might be?
5. What do you think the challenges of teaching literacy using a critical lens might be?
6. What are some ways you have used critical literacy to foster dialogue among your students this year?
7. What factors enhance your ability to teach using a critical literacy perspective?
8. What factors inhibit your ability to teach using a critical literacy perspective?

### **Gender Role Questions:**

1. From your perspective, what does it mean to be a 5<sup>th</sup> grade girl? A 5<sup>th</sup> grade boy?
2. What are traditional gender roles for women? Men?
3. What are your experiences with students enacting or resisting traditional gender roles in the classroom?
4. How, if at all, do you challenge traditional gender roles in your classroom?
5. What do you know about people that identify as transgender or gender fluid? (Provide definition if necessary).
  - a. How would you feel about talking to students about gender in this way?
  - b. Have you encountered any students that might identify as a different gender than they were assigned at birth? If so, how did you handle that experience? If not, how do you think you might handle that experience?

### **Feminism Questions:**

1. What does it mean to you to be a feminist?
  - a. Describe a feminist. What do they do? What do they look like? What visual comes to mind when you think about a feminist?
2. What has been your experience with teaching about feminism?
  - a. Do you/have you ever taught from a feminist lens?
  - b. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?
  - c. If not, what might that look like in your classroom?
3. What have been your experiences with learning about feminism?
  - a. Have you ever learned about feminism in school? What class(es)? What was taught?
4. Do you consider yourself a feminist?
  - a. Is there anyone in your life that has had an influence on your views of feminism? Can you say more about that?
5. Do you know anyone who openly adopts a feminist view?
  - a. If so, who?
  - b. How do you know they are a feminist?

### **Closing:**

Before we finish our interview, is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

Ok, we're done. Thank you for helping me with this today! Your time is much appreciated!

*[Stop tape recorder]*

## **Part II: Follow Up Interview**

### **Critical Literacy Unit Questions:**

1. Can you share your reflections on the CL and gender unit?
  - a. What went well?
  - b. What was challenging for you as a teacher?
  - c. What was challenging for your students?
  - d. What was your favorite part of the unit? Why?
  - e. What was your least favorite part of the unit? Why?
  - f. What would you do differently if you were to do this unit again?
  - g. What would you want to do keep the same if you were to do this unit again?
2. What factors enhanced your ability to teach using a critical literacy perspective to challenge gender stereotypes during this unit?
3. What factors inhibited your ability to teach using a critical literacy perspective to challenge gender stereotypes during this unit?

4. What advice would you give to other teachers who might want to incorporate a critical literacy perspective in to their classrooms?

Now I'm going to ask you some of the same or similar questions that I asked in our initial interview.

### **Reflexivity Questions**

1. How, if at all, do you think your personal life experiences influenced your instruction during the critical literacy and gender unit?
  - a. How did your gender influence your instruction?
  - b. How did your race influence your instruction?
2. How has your view/understanding of critical literacy instruction changed since we started this unit on critical literacy and gender?

### **Critical Literacy Questions:**

1. What does the term critical literacy mean to you?
2. How, if at all, do you think the experience of teaching reading using a critical lens is similar or different than teaching without it?
3. What do you think the benefits of teaching literacy using a critical lens are?
4. What do you think the challenges of teaching literacy using a critical lens are?

### **Gender Role Questions:**

1. From your perspective, what does it mean to be a 5<sup>th</sup> grade girl? A 5<sup>th</sup> grade boy?
  - a. In what ways is your perspective similar to or different from your perspective before the unit on gender?
2. What are traditional gender roles for women? Men?
3. How, if at all, did you challenge traditional gender roles in your classroom during the unit on gender?
4. What do you know about people that identify as transgender or gender fluid? (Provide definition if necessary).
  - a. How would you feel about talking to students about gender in this way?
    - i. Is this similar to or different from how you felt before the unit on gender?
  - b. Have you encountered any students that might identify as a different gender than they were assigned at birth? If so, how did you handle that experience? If not, how do you think you might handle that experience?

### **Feminism Questions:**

1. What does it mean to you to be a feminist?
  - a. Describe a feminist. What do they do? What do they look like? What visual comes to mind when you think about a feminist?

2. What has been your experience with teaching about feminism during the unit on gender?
3. What have been your experiences with learning about feminism during the unit on gender?
4. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
5. Do you know anyone who openly adopts a feminist view?
  - a. If so, who?
  - b. How do you know they are a feminist?
6. How, if at all do you think your responses to these questions are similar to or different from the answers you gave during the initial interview?

**Closing:**

Before we finish our interview, is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

Ok, we're done. Thank you for helping me with this today! Your time is much appreciated!

*[Stop tape recorder]*

## APPENDIX F

### STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (INCLUDING BOOK & CARD SORT)

#### **Interview Steps:**

5. Greet Student
6. Develop Rapport
7. Begin Interview
8. Thank student for their help

#### **Developing Rapport Questions:**

- How is your school year going?
- What do you think about fifth grade so far?
- Do you have any fun weekend plans?

#### **Initial Instructions:**

Thank you for agreeing to help me with my project. Today I want to ask you a few questions that will help me better understand elementary students' experiences with reading critically and how girls' and boys' are represented in texts.

*[Bring out tape recorder]*

In order to help me remember what you say today, I would like to record our conversation. Is it okay with you if I record what we talk about?

*[Press record, state interview title, date, & student name]*

### **Part I—Initial Interview**

#### **Demographic Information**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your family?
  - a. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Older/younger? How many?
  - b. Who do you live with?
2. How many years have you attended this school?
3. Describe yourself as a student.
  - a. Favorite subject? Least favorite subject?

#### **Reading Practices Questions:**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about what you like to read?
  - a. What are you reading right now?
  - b. What was the last book you read?

2. What do you like about reading?
  - a. Is there anything you dislike about reading?
3. How would you describe yourself as a reader?
  - a. Is reading something that you do well or is it challenging?
  - b. Can you say a little bit more about that?

### **Critical Literacy Questions:**

In English Language Arts class, will be learning to ask questions about texts such as who has the power in this text, whose voices are heard in this text, who and what is not represented in this text.

1. How would you feel about reading a text and asking these kinds of questions?
  - a. Do you think it's important? Why or why not?
2. Have you recently read any books where a girl was the main character? Can you say a little bit more about that?
3. Describe what you have noticed about the way girls are represented in the texts you've read in class or on your own.
  - a. How do you feel about the ways girls are represented in some of the texts you've read?
4. Describe what you have noticed about the way boys are represented in the texts you've read in class or on your own.
  - a. How do you feel about the ways boys are represented in some of the texts you've read?
5. Is there a particular text you've read either in class or on your own that stands out to you when thinking about the ways girls are represented?
  - a. If so, what text?
  - b. Why does it stand out to you?

### **Gender Role Questions:**

1. Describe what it means to be a girl. How is this different than being a boy?
2. How, if at all, do you think school experiences are different for girls and boys?
3. Finish this sentence: "The best thing about being a girl is..."
4. Finish this sentence: "The worst thing about being a girl is..."
5. What kinds of things do the girls/women do in your family?
  - a. What are three words you would use to describe the girls/women in your family?
6. What kinds of things do the boys/men do in your family?
  - a. What are three words you would use to describe the boys/men in your family?
7. What career do you see yourself doing when you grow up?
  - a. Would this be different if you were a boy? Why or why not?

### **Feminism Questions:**

In English Language Arts class, your teacher has been focusing on the topic of feminism.

1. Describe a feminist. What does it mean to be a feminist? What does a feminist look like? What do they do?
2. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
3. Do you know anyone who is a feminist?
  - a. If so, who?
  - b. How do you know they are a feminist?

### **Part II—Card Sort**

#### **Card Sort:**

*[Bring out index cards with gender roles listed]*

I would like you to complete an activity that will help me better understand elementary students' ideas about the roles boys and girls take on.

On these cards, I have listed several activities or roles you mentioned during part one of our interview, as well as activities or roles others have mentioned. I would like you to sort these cards into the following headings: *Boys Roles or Activities*, *Girls Roles or Activities*, or *Both Boy and Girl Roles or Activities*.

*[Read cards to student]*

Please place each card under one of the headings provided. After you place a card under a heading please explain why you chose to place it there. For example, this card says *child*, I would place this card under the heading *Both Boy and Girl Roles or Activities* because both boys and girls are children.

Do you have any questions about what I would like you to do?

*[After student finishes card sort]*

1. Looking at the way you sorted these cards, are there any roles or activities that you placed under the heading *Boys Roles or Activities* that you wish were *Girls Roles or Activities*?
  - a. Which ones? Why?
2. Are there any roles or activities that you placed under the heading *Girls Roles or Activities* that you wish were *Boys Roles or Activities*?
  - a. Which ones? Why?
3. Of the cards, you placed under the *Girls Roles or Activities* heading which, if any, do you do?
  - a. Which ones do the women/girls in your life do?

### Part III—Book Sort

#### **Book Sort:**

*[Bring out books and index cards with headings]*

I would like you to complete an activity that will help me better understand elementary students' ideas about the ways boys and girls think.

Here I have a stack of books that I found in your classroom library. I would like you to sort these books into the following headings: *Books for Boys, Books for Girls, or Books for Boys or Girls*

Please read the title of the book out loud, browse through a few of the pages, and then place each book under one of the headings provided. After you place a book under a heading please explain why you chose to place it there.

Do you have any questions about what I would like you to do?

*[After student finishes book sort]*

1. Looking at the books in each of the stacks that you sorted them in to, is there anything that stands out to you?
  - a. What do you notice about the books under the heading “books for girls”?
  - b. What do you notice about the books under the heading “books for boys”?
2. Which of these books have you read?
  - a. What did you think of the book? Did you like it? Why or why not?
3. How would you describe the female characters in the book(s) we have here that you've read?
  - a. Do these characters remind you of anyone you know in your life?
4. How would you describe the male characters in the book(s) we have here that you've read?
  - a. Do these characters remind you of anyone you know in your life?

#### **Closing:**

Before we finish out interview, is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

Ok, we're done. Thank you for helping me with this today! Your time is much appreciated!

*[Stop tape recorder]*

## Part IV—Follow Up Interview

### **Reading Practices Questions:**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about what you like to read?
  - a. What are you reading right now?
  - b. What was the last book you read?
2. What do you like about reading?
  - a. Is there anything you dislike about reading?
3. How would you describe yourself as a reader?
  - a. Is reading something that you do well or is it challenging?
  - b. Can you say a little bit more about that?

### **Critical Literacy Questions:**

In English Language Arts class, you have been learning how to read critically. You've been learning to ask questions about texts such as who has the power in this text, whose voices are heard in this text, who and what is not represented in this text.

1. How do you feel about reading a text and asking these kinds of questions?
  - a. Do you think it's important? Why or why not?
2. Describe the experience of reading a text and thinking about these questions.
  - a. How is it different from reading a text without thinking about them?
3. What did you think about the critical literacy and gender unit?
4. Have you recently read any books where a girl was the main character? Can you say a little bit more about that?
5. Describe what you have noticed about the way girls are represented in the texts you've read in class or on your own.
  - a. How do you feel about the ways girls are represented in some of the texts you've read?
6. Describe what you have noticed about the way boys are represented in the texts you've read in class or on your own.
  - a. How do you feel about the ways boys are represented in some of the texts you've read?
7. Is there a particular text you've read either in class or on your own that stands out to you when thinking about the ways girls are represented?
  - a. If so, what text?
  - b. Why does it stand out to you?

### **Gender Role Questions:**

1. Describe what it means to be a girl. How is this different than being a boy?
2. How, if at all, do you think school experiences are different for girls and boys?
3. Finish this sentence: "The best thing about being a girl is..."

4. Finish this sentence: “The worst thing about being a girl is...”
5. What kinds of things do the girls/women do in your family?
  - a. What are three words you would use to describe the girls/women in your family?
6. What kinds of things do the boys/men do in your family?
  - a. What are three words you would use to describe the boys/men in your family?
7. What career do you see yourself doing when you grow up?
  - a. Would this be different if you were a boy? Why or why not?

**Feminism Questions:**

In English Language Arts class, your teacher has been focusing on the topic of feminism.

1. Describe a feminist. What does it mean to be a feminist? What does a feminist look like? What do they do?
2. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
3. Do you know anyone who is a feminist?
  - a. If so, who?
  - b. How do you know they are a feminist?
4. How do you think your answers to the questions in this interview are similar to or different from the first time I asked you these questions a few weeks ago?

**Closing:**

Before we finish out interview, is there anything else you’d like to share with me?

Ok, we’re done. Thank you for helping me with this today! Your time is much appreciated!

*[Stop tape recorder]*

APPENDIX G  
A PRIORI CODES

<b>A Priori Codes</b> <b>(Lewison, Flint, &amp; Van Sluys, 2002)</b>				
	<b>Disrupting the Common Place</b>	<b>Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints</b>	<b>Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues</b>	<b>Taking Action &amp; Promoting Social Justice</b>
<b>Description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interrogates texts</li> <li>- Includes popular culture &amp; media</li> <li>- Develops language of critique (i.e. builds vocabulary related to oppression)</li> <li>- Develops language of hope (i.e. focuses on possibility of change)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uses multiple voices to interrogate texts</li> <li>- Draws attention to voices that have been silenced</li> <li>- Makes difference visible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focuses on issues of race, class, gender</li> <li>- Challenges sociopolitical systems</li> <li>- Uses literacy to engage in politics of everyday life</li> <li>- Uses literacy to question unequal power relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Challenges and redefines cultural borders</li> <li>- Uses language to exercise power</li> <li>- Uses language to exercise privilege</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher Example</b>	<p>Asked questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Where in history have you experienced or seen someone being marginalized?</li> <li>- What message does this send to girls? Is that a problem?</li> </ul>	<p>Engaged in conversations such as:</p> <p>T: Would Violet's parents think Myrtle is the "wrong kind of person?"</p> <p>S: Yes.</p> <p>T: Why?</p> <p>S: She's African American</p>	<p>Asked questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- White women could vote in 1930, black women in 1994. Why do you think that is?</li> <li>- Do you think women have the right to vote in every country today?</li> </ul>	<p>Created spaces such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Instagraffiti" bulletin board with rotating current event articles. Used &amp; encourages students to use hash tags (i.e. #socialjustice, #speakout, #change)</li> </ul>

	<b>Disrupting the Common Place</b>	<b>Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints</b>	<b>Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues</b>	<b>Taking Action &amp; Promoting Social Justice</b>
<b>Student Example</b>	<p>Made comments such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In movies, every girl cares about her appearance and I don't think that's what makes her happy...Like in Mean Girls they marginalized the girl who didn't dress all fancy</li> </ul>	<p>Made comments such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I also think that's wrong because there are stereotypes for boys that they're supposed to be big and manly.</li> <li>- It's important for everyone's voice to be heard so we can know how they are feeling.</li> </ul>	<p>Made comments such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- You don't have a lot of power because you're not a white man.</li> <li>- People say I shouldn't wear pink because I'm a boy, but I still wear it.</li> </ul>	<p>Created a display during literacy week that read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We challenge you to question gender stereotypes!</li> <li>- Placed books around door for other students to read with a sign that read: More books to challenge your thoughts on gender</li> </ul>

# APPENDIX H

## CARD SORT DATA

Card Sort Data							
	Pre Unit			Post Unit			% of Students with "both" Post Unit
Frightened	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Athlete	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Powerful	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Beautiful	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	67%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Strong	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Police Officer	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Parent	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
News Reporter	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Baker	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Sweet	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Sensitive	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Pilot	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Kind	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Weak	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Inventor	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Brave	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Worthy	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Little	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Sad	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Fierce	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Big	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Greedy	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Foolish	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Maid	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	
Gullible	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6	

**Key**

	Boy
	Girl
	Both

S1	Ricardo	S4	Isabella
S2	Miguel	S5	Emma
S3	Nick	S6	Angelene

# APPENDIX I

## BOOK SORT DATA

		Book Sort Data						
		Pre Unit			Post Unit			% of Students with "both" Post Unit
Tuck Everlasting	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Island of the Blue Dolphins	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Twister on Tuesday	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Lightning	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
The Girl with a Brave Heart	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
The Babysitters' Club	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	50%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Rumpelstiltskin's Daughter	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	67%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Not All Princesses Dress in Pink	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	67%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
The Story of Ruby Bridges	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Brian's Winter	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Maniac McGee	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	100%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Knights of the Lunch Table	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	50%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		
Lebron James	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	83%	
	S4	S5	S6	S4	S5	S6		

Key	
	Boy
	Girl
	Both

S1	Ricardo	S4	Isabella
S2	Miguel	S5	Emma
S3	Nick	S6	Angelene