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Exploring the *Messiness* of Critical Literacy:  
Disclosing the Unexpected Contradictions and Searching for Meaning

by  
Barbara Pollard

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Education at the  
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Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2011

2011 Barbara Pollard

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Disclosing the Unexpected Contradictions and Searching for Meaning

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

## ABSTRACT

This study utilizes a particular application of a critical literacy program, as a means to eventually alleviate achievement gaps and alter the structure of class inequity. The study is based on the conceptual idea that perhaps one hope that society has in changing systemic inequalities and attending to various social justice issues is presenting the issues to students when they are very young and impressionable. Instead of allowing mainstream culture to dictate unfair norms and practices by simply abiding to the status quo, this study suggests that schools should aim to be the vehicle for transformational change by cultivating critical thinkers who can socially analyze current aspects of society and become active proponents of change. The ideas in this study support the overall premise that a critical literacy approach will enable poor and working-class students to become more aware of the power of *their* own voice, words, and actions. However, upon putting this critical literacy theory into practice, the researcher was faced with many contradictions and tensions that are explored and discussed in the results section of this paper. The results were unanticipated and were founded, to a large extent, on a continuous self-reflexive practice by the researcher.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my children Addison and Gavin Pollard. In their life journey of intellectual growth, may they be well educated by way of formal schooling, but more importantly, may they be intrinsically inspired to pursue knowledge that is above and beyond what is offered to satisfy their own personal “why” questions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my amazing advisor, Dr. Christopher Greig, whose kindness, patience and generosity have been invaluable to me. Chris, your humble brilliance did not go unnoticed and is held in the highest regard. You have truly been a mentor worth emulating. As was confirmed during this collaborative research venture, and as I suspect you knew all along:

The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires. ~William A. Ward

Chris, I sincerely thank you for *inspiring* me to pursue a “deeper” knowledge, one which has provided me with an ever enduring touchstone experience of what “teaching and learning” could and should be. You have truly been the ideal advisor!

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My sincere gratitude also extends to my husband Kevin, and my two young children, Addison and Gavin. Without their loving support, this venture would not have been possible. Thank you for being patient with me when my time was consumed with meeting assignment deadlines, and

while my mind was a bit scattered from lack of sleep. I am indebted to my husband Kevin who has extended himself beyond anything I had anticipated. Kevin, I sincerely want to thank you for all the times you willingly and single-handedly entertained our children so that I could focus on reading and writing. I realize they are very busy and spirited little people that can, at times, be very energy consuming. Please know that I appreciate and adore your nurturing parental disposition and feel blessed to have such a supportive family.

I cannot forget to mention the gracious and indispensable help of my mom who has given up many of her weekends to take care of my children so that I could pursue my studies or get caught up with other responsibilities that were postponed due to my studies. Mom, you have truly been an angel, and there is no way I could have graduated when I did if you were not around to help when things were overwhelming. And to my dad, who passed away four years ago, your spirit lives on as your love of books, passion to acquire diverse knowledge through reading, and your consistent emphasis on the importance of higher educational pursuits have greatly contributed to who I am and what I value. I sincerely thank you for always encouraging me to “push” for more.



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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

“How do schools fail students from working poor and working class backgrounds?”

Unfortunately, this question is rarely addressed within educational settings despite the research findings that convincingly show that childhood social economic status (SES) is the single strongest predictor of educational attainment (Levin, 2007). For over forty years, researchers have shown that almost all of the varied measures of educational outcomes, such as years of education completed, grades earned, referrals to special education, early reading achievement and discipline and behaviour problems are strongly correlated with family income (Bylsma & Shannon, 2002; Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2006; Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2005). Other significant life outcomes such as health status, life expectancy, criminal activity, propensity to political involvement, among others, are also linked with childhood SES (Levin, 2007). Low SES students, their families, teachers, educational administrators, and policy makers, need to acknowledge the far-reaching and comprehensive negative impact of structural class inequities in order to begin to collectively negotiate potential solutions.

Ontario’s Ministry of Education (OME) (2009) has acknowledged the persistent academic gaps in student achievement. In an attempt to address the social inequities that contribute to these academic gaps, the OME has mandated an action plan titled, “Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.” This document is intended to help teachers strive to achieve equitable and inclusive education within classrooms where all students are supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning (OME, 2009). Part of the student success strategy within this plan revolves around understanding, identifying,

and eliminating, the discriminatory biases and systemic barriers that limit student intellectual growth and their potential to fully contribute to society (OME, 2009).

A critical literacy program which aims to increase the “critical consciousness” of the existing social inequities, may be one way to gradually achieve the prescribed goals depicted in Ontario’s Equity and Inclusivity strategy. Creating liberating teaching practices depends on whether or not our teaching practices position students in ways that enable them to critique, understand, and politically negotiate their educational environments, which is essentially what critical literacy is meant to facilitate (Giroux, 1992).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative, participatory action research study is to explore the process of implementing a critical literacy pedagogy as a means to prompt grade five students to actively examine dominant ideologies and “taken-for-granted” cultural views that may work to limit and flatten their lives in order to create new visions of their social worlds, and realize the possibility of acting as agents of change.

### **Research Questions**

The central question addressed in this research:

- a) How do grade five students, within a low SES school, respond to a critical literacy program?

The sub questions:

- a.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language shapes identity?



- b.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language constructs cultural discourse?
- c.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language supports or disrupts the status quo?
- d.) How will the process of a critical literacy program engage students to reflect on multiple viewpoints and contradictory perspectives?
- e.) How will the process of a critical literacy program encourage students to take social action in an attempt to resist or change existing discourses?

Before describing life outcomes herein, it is important to note that throughout this study, and within the relevant research, one may find many exceptions to the general findings that have been made about social class. For example, many working class families do have positive life experiences and their life outcomes do not adhere to the claims made in research. Despite the macro trends, not all working class, working poor children underachieve in school. Some working class children do very well academically and, in fact move on to become doctors, lawyers and even graduate students. This acknowledgement, then, will hopefully prevent the reader from being misled into stereotyping individuals based on their social class.

Understanding and responding to the relationship between SES and academic outcomes is especially complex when considering that other significant life outcomes are also directly related with childhood SES (Levin, 2006). For example, it is important to acknowledge that students coming from working class or impoverished backgrounds are more likely to experience a myriad of negative life circumstances as compared to their mainstream peers. Children in chronic poverty are more likely to experience physical, sexual, or emotional victimization by the age of 17 (CCL, 2006). When investigating 6-11 year olds, low income was considerably predictive of

emotional difficulties; psychiatric disorders; conduct problems; behavioural disorders; and resistance to school authorities (CCL, 2006). In terms of physical health, compared to middle class youth, low SES youth smoke more; are less physically active and have higher obesity rates; have more sick days; contract sexually transmitted diseases at a rate three times higher; in the lowest SES areas, experience teen motherhood at a rate three times higher; and assess their own physical health more negatively and have less access to doctors (CCL, 2006). This research implies that the macro-structured class inequities create real and, and in some cases, astonishing barriers to academic achievement.

The 2009 economic recession, coupled with the increasingly weak government social safety nets have further intensified the problem of poverty for certain populations (da Silva, 2009). The intersection of class, race, and gender has been shown to intensify social inequities and must be further examined in the context of poverty (CCL, 2006; OME, 2009; Levin, 2006; Byslma & Shannon, 2002). It is important to note that women are the poorest of the poor, especially women raising children in lone-parent families (Townson, 2009). Children in single female head households are five times more likely to be poor than those in two-parent families (Townson, 2009). Furthermore, women are also among the poorest of the poor within Canada's most vulnerable populations: Aboriginal people, people from racialized communities, recent immigrants, and persons with disabilities (Townson, 2009). Within this context, Canadian policies have consistently failed to acknowledge and respond to the double and triple disadvantages that occur when class, race, and gender intersect. Although all Canadian citizens, other than the upper class, have seen a considerable decrease in real income, it seems as though a women's right to an adequate standard of living has been severely neglected by policy makers.

Although the relationship between low SES and educational underachievement is well established, the factors that contribute to causing this achievement gap remain unclear. Unfortunately, one of the most common explanations for the persistency of class inequities draws from deficit theories. For example, Payne (2003) argues that teachers must understand how “cultural poverty” works to disadvantage poor children in the context of academic achievement. Payne (2003) then asserts that if teachers use strategies that counteract the negative characteristics that the “culture of poverty” brings with it, they may be successful at getting under privileged students to learn. Similarly, many educators and administrators resort to deficit theories to explain the academic underachievement experienced by disadvantaged students. For example, within the Canadian tracking system, students with low SES backgrounds are perceived to be less academically inclined as compared to their middle and upper class, and as a result are disproportionately enrolled in vocational programs (Caro, 2009). Deficit theories emphasize that low SES students lack the cultural mainstream values required for academic success. As a result, policy makers and school administrators promote the idea that low SES students, as well as other nonmainstream groups such as ethnic and racial minorities, must be “fixed” to fit the system (Flessa, 2007). In other words, the implicit message from this perspective seems to be that existing achievement gaps could be lessened if all low SES students assimilate the ‘right’ values, and by ‘right’ values I mean to say mainstream, middle-class and Anglo-Protestant values.

Deficit thinking is problematic because it blames the low SES student and their families for academic underachievement and resorts to unwarranted and biased assumptions about the causes of educational outcomes (Flessa, 2007). Deficit thinking reduces all the social and economic advantages and disadvantages one can secure to the individual. In addition, and of equal significance, this line of thinking fails to examine the institutional and systemic barriers facing

many nonmainstream students. More specifically, class inequity and its restrictive consequence for low SES students is rarely questioned by society in general and students in particular (Luke & Freebody, 1997). This, in and of itself, is a serious problem which restricts academic achievement and the possibility of real social mobility for low SES students. Sociologists, economists, and historians have long been sceptical of the popular held-belief that schools have the power to counterbalance the structural inequities and the ability to break the cycle of inter-generational working class and lower class status (Anyon, 2005; Katz, 1995; Rothstein, 2004). The societal myth of social mobility for all, which ignores structural understandings of class, must be brought to both the teacher's and the student's awareness if there is to be any hope for real change (Caro, 2009).

Educational researchers emphasize that the persistent and pervasive educational disparity between low SES students and middle class students clearly justifies a comprehensive intervention at both the micro level of in-school strategies and at the macro level of provincial and federal policy changes (Anyon, 2005; Flessa, 2007; Levin, 2006; OME, 2005; Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007). For example, Anyon (2005) stresses that macro-economic policies that aim to significantly improve problematic areas such as low-wage work, unemployment, inadequate housing and living conditions are required in countering the negative effects of low SES on education.

These macro-level policies should be considered essential in a government strategy for creating equitable environments within districts and schools (Anyon, 2005). Along the same lines, one must also consider that the academic underachievement experienced in school, by students from low SES backgrounds, is substantially shaped by forces that lie outside of the school setting (Levin, 2006). Thus, while it is important to understand and improve in-school

reforms, it is equally as important to connect these reforms to the broader socio-political contexts. The systemic structural inequities, such as inadequate income and housing, and the sharp decreases in available social services, must also be addressed and acknowledged as contributing to the problem of academic underachievement (Gaskel, Levin, Lawson, & Pollock, 2007).

Unfortunately, current educational, provincial and federal policies do not seem to acknowledge, nor attempt to address, how the broader socio-political contexts implicate student achievement (Levin, 2006). In order to create truly democratic and equitable classrooms, it is essential that the underlying systemic structural conditions, such as the larger social and economic contexts are recognized as shaping educational discourse (Levin, 2006). Teachers can begin to make a difference by participating in social criticism, and by purposefully integrating the issues of inequity and social justice into their teaching practices. One way we can move forward in creating democratic classrooms, is by deliberately raising student awareness of the underlying systemic structural conditions through critical literacy.

Critical literacy, as a theoretical framework and in pedagogical practice, explicitly recognizes the political nature of schools and the role of power and privilege in perpetuating inequitable structures and practices (Shor, 1999). It teaches students to realize how their lives are shaped and affected by these larger social systems. By explicitly exposing students to the benefits of critical literacy they can begin to understand how unquestioned and legitimized power differentials shape the multitude of information that they are exposed to daily (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Furthermore, critical literacy also introduces new ways of presenting the curriculum which connects school experiences with real life experiences that occur outside of the classroom (Shor, 1999).

The development of critical literacy encourages students to question issues of power. More specifically, students are prompted to explicitly explore the disparities that are constructed and re-constructed on an ongoing basis through class, race, and gender relations (Shor, 1999). Becoming critically literate means that students have mastered the ability to read and critique messages in a wide variety of texts in order to better understand whose knowledge is being privileged (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). For example, by reflecting on a *series of questions* such as, “How is the understanding of the text influenced by your background?” low SES students will explicitly come to recognize that mainstream texts often fail to account for their personal background histories and experiences. Through this process, students will understand that white, middle class, mainstream values are overemphasized in literature and media texts without being systematically questioned or critically examined (Luke & Freebody, 1999). This orientation toward developing a ‘critical stance,’ will help students to critique and form their own judgements about this reality and begin to see the benefits and the necessity to acknowledge and legitimize multiple cultural perspectives. Essentially, teachers who endorse critical literacy, demonstrate how to evaluate the function language plays in the social construction of the self (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). When students become critically literate, they can understand the parts they play in the world, make sense of experiences, and discover personal ways of becoming agents of change (Shor, 1999).

### **Definitions**

Before we get started, let me start with definitions for the purpose of understanding what this study means when referring to *literacy*, *multiple literacies*, *critical literacy*, and the *achievement gap*. It is commonplace among today’s educators to recognize that definitions for literacy are always in flux. From an historical perspective, Kleeck and Schuele (2010) have cited the

dramatic changes in terms of how widespread literacy has been and how literacy skills were defined:

During the 1400's, only males and the very wealthy were taught to read as access to print resources were limited. Then, the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, promoted universal literacy, with the goal that everyone could read the scriptures in their own language. Soon after, the invention of the printing press made the goal of universal literacy a realistic possibility. During the 1600's, functional literacy (i.e., the level of literacy needed to function in a society) consisted of only the ability to read. With the advent of compulsory learning, during the early 1900's, teachers were responsible for teaching all children to read *and* write. Functional literacy eventually evolved and moved beyond literal meaning, to interpret texts, and to use writing not simply to record, but to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and explain. Clearly, in the last few decades, technology has redefined dramatically what it means to be literate in North America. (p. 341)

As we can see, the concept of literacy has continually evolved, however, until most recently, literacy was always defined as a concrete set of skills that people manipulate and use (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). In contemporary times, many linguists, anthropologists, educators, and social theorists no longer accept the traditional concept, rather they argue that literacy is about the values people associate with various acts. However, there are also many current literacy theorists that view literacy as the basic ability to read and write. In sharp contrast, critical pedagogues and other researchers, emphasize literacy is not just about linguistics, it is also a social and political practice that limits or creates a range of possibilities for who people become as literate beings (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). For example, mainstream texts,

which often promote middle class culture and values, offer very limited ways of “being.” This limited representation of the world, works to flatten and narrow all children’s lives. Building a counter-power through critical literacy, would allow low SES students, as well as other nonmainstream groups such as ethnic and racialized minorities, to legitimize and validate their lived experiences. A critical stance in the classroom empowers students to explore questions such as, "What choices have been made in the creation of the text?" and thereafter students may actively resist and challenge the mainstream texts and messages and explicitly construct their own views (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

*Multiple literacy* is an emerging type of literacy that aims to encourage children to read the world and self. (Lotherington, Sotoudeh, Holland, & Zentena, 2008). Though multiple literacy is extensive in scope, a specific example of a multiliteracy project would include a grassroots response to the suppression of community languages resulting from an exclusive curricular focus on English and French. In creating a third space for multilingual literacy, the teacher would have taught and promoted language awareness, appreciation of multilingualism and multiculturalism, and pride in community languages (Lotherington, Sotoudeh, Holland, & Zentena, 2008). Such a multiliteracy project is considered to be a huge step forward in developing equitable opportunities for all learners and for language maintenance in the classroom. Supporting minority-language students in their literacy learning can be attributed to practices and perspectives that challenge the assumptions of the deficit model. (Lotherington, Sotoudeh, Holland, & Zentena, 2008).

*Critical Literacy* is an often contested term (Powell, 2001). There is no one simple definition nor is there an accepted generic or universal critical literacy pedagogy. However, it is possible to identify some basic assumptions and key goals of an effective critical literacy



practice. Firstly, one must assume that literacy is a social and cultural construction; the functions and uses of literacy are never neutral or innocent; that the meanings constructed in text are ideological and involved in producing, reproducing and maintaining arrangements of power which are unequal (Powell, 2001). For example, working class characters, girls, boys, and ethnic and racial minorities, are often portrayed in stereotypical ways within literature and the media and when these stereotypes are unquestioned, they become taken-for-granted models whose legitimacy and existence are reinforced (Asner, 2007).

Another important aspect of critical literacy is that it moves beyond simply creating an awareness of social inequities, and aims to lead students and teachers to take action that will facilitate transformational change (Shor, 1999). In the process of questioning the status quo, and becoming aware of the power of their own voice, words, and actions, students may increasingly become agents of their own destiny (Shor, 1999).

From a historical perspective, the critical literacy instructional approach stems from the Marxist critical pedagogy that advocates the adoption of “critical” perspectives toward texts (Beck, 2005). Critical literacy further developed with the formation of the Frankfurt School of critical theory that promotes the idea that emancipation is possible if citizens became aware of how their social and political contexts advantage some groups, while disadvantaging other groups, identifying and critiquing these oppressive structures, and seeing themselves as agents who can transform these dominating and authoritative systems (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). Paulo Freire is most known for bringing critical literacy to education (Freire, 2000). Freire developed a revolutionary pedagogy that shared reading and writing with illiterate peasants. His problem-solving approach was used during conversations to develop his students’ power to use language as an aid to thinking (Freire, 2000). Freire (2000) was very careful to approach the students as

equals and encouraged them to see for themselves the inequities that they were surrounded by. He wanted his students to reflect on these insights, debate them, and create further insights. In this dialectical manner, Freire's pedagogy had the potential to raise his students' consciousness, which was the first phase of transformational change (Freire, 2000).

Contemporary critical literacy theorists emphasize the need to examine and bring forth issues of social injustice and inequalities. These critical theorists assert that unequal power relationships are legitimized and unquestioned and it is the powerful groups who generally decide what truths are to be privileged (Beck, 2005; Blackburn, 2000; Collins, 1998; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Krammer-Dahl, 2001). As a result, government institutions such as schools, support dominating ideologies and further perpetuate the status quo (Beck, 2005). More specifically, within schools, only certain knowledge is legitimized, thus excluding groups who are unable to contribute to the process of the authentication of that knowledge. Beck (2005) suggests that contemporary critical literacy applies the tenets of critical social theory to the educational paradigm and then aims to examine how schools reproduce inequality and justice.

The major criticism of critical literacy is its impractical application in the classroom. There does not seem to be a concrete base of research to suggest how critical literacy can be implemented into the classroom setting (Collins, 1998; Blackburn 2000; Krammer-Dahl, 2001). However, critical literacy theorists generally all agree that critical literacy is an instructional approach that focuses on encouraging students to read the world, and the word, by analyzing both discourses and texts within and outside of the classroom (Luke & Freebody, 1997). It is important to emphasize that throughout this study, critical literacy is utilized and emphasized within a Language Arts context. However, a critical literacy instructional approach can, and

ideally should be utilized across all subject areas and should be applied in social contexts outside of school as well as inside of school.

*The Achievement Gap* refers to the educational disparity experienced by low SES children, ethnic minorities, English language learners, aboriginal students, and students with special needs, as compared to mainstream middle and upper class students (OME, 2009). In order to maintain a reasonable scope for this study, the emphasis will be placed on the achievement gap between socioeconomically disadvantaged students (lower class, working poor, and the working class) and socioeconomically advantaged students (middle and upper classes).

*Social Economic Status versus Social Class:* Within the context of discussing social class, it is also important to note that the terms social economic status (SES) and class are often used interchangeably within research literature. However, the concepts are not conceptually equivalent (Pope & Arthur, 2009). SES stratifies individuals within society by acknowledging both social and economic dimensions. Indicators of SES, such as income, occupation, and education level are generally quantifiable and easily measured. The relationship of SES and class becomes confused because the components of SES are the premise on which class hierarchies are created (Pope & Arthur, 2009). However, class is distinctly different than SES in that, like other cultural variables such as ethnicity and gender, as it implies particular relationships between social groups that may be characterized by disparity, discrimination, power, and exploitation. Individuals encounter privilege or adversity based on their class membership (Pope & Arthur, 2009). Throughout this discussion, the term low SES will be used to refer to the position of individuals whose lives are affected by socioeconomic disparity.

### **Background and Context: Canada's Traditional Stratification of Social Class**

It is also important to discuss and define social class, as this concept does not seem to be consistently and clearly established in the research literature. Individuals and families are stratified into a social class based on the criteria of income, wealth, education, and *power*. However, since it is difficult to accurately measure education and power, most sociologists seem to use income as the main criteria for stratification (Macionis & Gerber, 1999). It is important to note that stratifying class based on income only, distracts our attention from the power differentials and class struggles that exist between and among social classes (Camfield, 2011). The criteria of “power” refers to the relational process between people and capital. Typically, those who own the capital, or the means of production of goods and services, hold power over those who do not (Camfield, 2011). The following traditional stratification system for social class, as depicted by Macionis and Gerber (1999), is presented in order to help the reader attain a general sense of our Canadian class structure based solely on wealth and income. The information thereafter illustrates the most recent changes that have occurred within this structure.

*The Upper-Upper Class:* About 1% belongs to an upper-upper class distinguished primarily by wealth, or, "old money."

*The Upper Class:* About 3-5% of Canadians fall into this class. Much of their wealth is inherited. These students go to private schools and they exercise great power in occupational positions.

*The Lower-Upper Class:* The remaining 2-4% fall into the lower-upper class and depend more on earnings than inherited wealth. They are mostly "nouveau riche."

*The Upper-Middle Class:* About 15% of the population fits into this category. This category includes families with incomes of around \$100,000 earned from upper managerial or professional fields.

*The Middle Class:* Approximately 40-50% of the Canadian population falls into this category. Because of its size, it has tremendous influence on patterns of Canadian culture. This category includes families that work in less prestigious white-collar occupations or highly skilled blue-collar jobs with incomes around \$75, 000.

*The Lower-Middle Class:* Typically, this category includes families that work in blue-collar jobs with incomes around \$50, 000.

*The Working Class:* This class comprises about 20% of the population and has lower incomes than the lower-middle class and virtually no accumulated wealth. Their jobs provide less personal satisfaction.

*The Lower Class:* The remaining 15% of the population is identified as lower class and working poor. Many lower class families are supported entirely by unemployment and mental and physical disability payments. They generally reside in less desirable neighbourhoods and are often racially or ethnically distinct. Their children are often resigned to living the same hopeless lives of their parents.

*Working Poor:* The working poor usually have full-time or part-time jobs, however, their income is roughly the same as those who receive welfare assistance. These families earn incomes that are insufficient to cover necessities like food, shelter, and clothing. The disadvantaged social contexts of the working poor overlap with that of lower class families.

This study frequently refers to the term “low SES students” which is meant to represent students from the working poor, and the working class as defined in the section above. It is important to note that the degree of disparity in educational outcomes becomes greater as income levels decrease (CCL, 2006). Therefore, students from lower class and working poor families will likely experience the sharpest degree of educational disparity (CCL, 2006).

## **Neo-Liberalism and Social Class**

The traditional stratification of social class based solely on wealth and income, as illustrated above, has been strongly affected by the emergence and adoption of neoliberal economic policies by western governments including Canada. Neoliberalism refers to a set of social and economic policies and practices that support the expansion of a free market while eliminating the expansion of social services and programs and eroding those that already exist (Rogers, Mosley, Folkes, 2009). The neoliberal approach emphasizes the market-place, competition, deregulation and privatization and puts the onus for success and/or failure on the individual. While being trapped by this mindset, one is not encouraged to acknowledge the systemic disadvantages that largely affect the individuals' ability to access opportunities. Also, within the context of education, neo-liberalism has emphasized increased 'accountability', uniform standards, and a "back to basics" focus on learning (Rogers, Mosley, Folkes, 2009). According to Sears (2008), the neoliberal project of slashing social programs and deregulating the economy while increasing the repressive power of the state has had serious implications for working class populations. In light of the neoliberal project, working class people, including children, are living with ever-greater insecurity and more are facing poverty with ever fewer resources. At the same time, consumer rights and individualism are prioritized above and beyond addressing the class inequities that exist and critically examining how power works to advantage some and not others (Carr, 2008).

Recent research provides an adequate description of how the current economical and political contexts are maintaining and perpetuating an alarming income gap between the upper class and the rest of society (Yalnizyan, 2007). Historically, governments in market-based economies such as Canada, base their policy making strategies on the state of the economy such that if there is

economic growth, all citizens experience the prosperity of wealth (Haves, 2010). Over the last two decades, this has not been the case. Regardless of Canada's economic growth, the income gap between the upper class and the rest of Canadian families raising children is growing at a faster rate than ever before (Gordon, 2010).

The financial surplus of Canada's "well-to-do" economy is being distributed disproportionately to a select few upper class families (Yalnizyan, 2007). For example, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has revealed that in 1998, the average pay of Canada's top 100 CEOs was \$3.5 million. By 2007, this had tripled, to \$10.4 million (Haves, 2010). While at the same time, their respective working-class employees received income increases \$33,000 to \$40,000, which was not even enough to keep pace with inflation (Haves, 2010). Furthermore, the majority of Canadian families are working many more hours, but their financial status remains the same or lessens in terms of earned income, compared to families a generation ago (Yalnizyan, 2007). For instance, the median earnings of Canadians employed on a full-time basis for a full year increased from \$41,348 in 1980 to \$41,401 in 2005 (Haves, 2010). Therefore, after 25 years of work, the "average" Canadian income increased by a mere \$53 per year.

To further illustrate the change in social class structure, consider that Canadians in the bottom 10 percent of the income spectrum are working as many weeks a year as they did in the late 1970s, but the maximum earnings of workers at the bottom have fallen significantly, from \$15,000 to \$11,000" (Yalnizyan, 2007). These trends are creating a new phenomenon in income distribution in Canada which is not brought into the mainstream media nor popular culture discourse. Rather, mainstream media and popular culture are dominated by the rhetoric of neoliberal politics. Therefore, without very much outcry nor resistance from the general public, a very small minority of people who comprise the upper classes are getting wealthier and sources

reveal that they are self-servingly controlling the direction of macroeconomic government policies (da Silva, 2009). The Canadian federal government's neoliberal policy agenda continues to sustain the disparity of income between the upper class and the rest of society and has created an unhealthy democratic nation in which the elites have acquired and maintained the power to extract high salaries and ward off tax increases at the expense of the financial well-being of the rest of society (da Silva, 2009; Gordon, 2010).

Within Ontario, the working class, lower class, and working poor have been severely affected by the increasing income gap between the upper class and the rest of society. The poorest 6.5% of Ontario's population which receive social assistance have seen no increase in welfare benefits in real dollars. It is staggering to consider that in terms of purchasing power, today's current welfare benefits are as low now as in 1967 (Campaign 2000, 2010). Statistics Canada indicates that in 2008, 1.6 million or 12.5% of people in Ontario lived in poverty (Low Income Measure After-Tax). The child poverty rate was 15.2% (1 in 8 children) in 2008, although due to the recession, these rates will be much higher in 2010 (Campaign 2000, 2010). It is also important to highlight that in 2008, 30% of all poor children in Ontario lived in *working poor* families, where at least one parent was working the equivalent of a full time full year job. However, the working poor did not earn enough to mobilize the family above the poverty line (Campaign 2000, 2010).

The concept of "social mobility" also deserves to be further elaborated as the problematic reality of social *immobility* for low SES students has formed the platform for this study. Over 50 years ago John Porter (1965) noted that, within modern industrial societies, education has been held to be one of the most vital social functions in forming a creative, prosperous, and healthy society. Unfortunately, Canada's creative potential has not and cannot be fully realized when



educational outcomes are unevenly distributed through the class structure. The social barriers to equal educational opportunity and *social mobility* have been built into the developing Canadian social structure. The most obvious social barrier is the inequality of income and wealth (Porter, 1965). Lower class families are significantly disadvantaged in pursuing higher education as it always has been prohibitively expensive. In addition, lower income children generally leave school at an earlier age to find employment (Porter, 1965).

## **Conclusion**

The social barrier of income inequality seems to be more severe in current society as research has shown a clear trend toward increasing inequality within the most advanced and rich nations of the world (Social Stratification, 2006). Structured around neo-liberal economic policies that emphasize deregulation and the privatization of public goods, coupled with a strict adherence to the principles of free enterprise, a new Canadian social structure has been created in which the upper class is getting increasingly more wealthy, the middle class is working more and earning less, and the lower class and poorest families continue to experience increasing economic disparity as real wages fall below the poverty line (Yalnizyan, 2007). A society with a rigid class structure of occupational inheritance is not compatible with the existence of an egalitarian educational system which is flexible and equally available to all. A democratic educational system would ensure individual access to educational resources and employment that is determined by ability, rather than social class. Sometime ago, John Porter (1965) while reflecting on social class in Canada, remarked that societies that refuse to remove the social barrier to educational opportunity fall short to the democratic ideal and diminish society's most valuable resource-human talent. Critical literacy may have the potential to legitimate and value the wide array of "diverse" human talent that currently remains uninspired within educational institutions.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews the relevant literature relating to social class and education. The review is divided into three sections. The first section of the literature review examines the issues associated with children from low SES backgrounds and educational underachievement. The second section will provide the reader with a sense of what critical literacy is and what it aims to accomplish. The third section examines the current educational and political climate and suggests how the conceptual goals of critical literacy can be aligned with some potentially effective steps toward addressing the frequently unexamined issue of class inequity.

#### **Causes Contributing to the Academic Achievement Gap Between Low SES Students and Middle and Upper SES Students**

The body of literature on social class and educational outcomes is substantial, however, the comprehensive and complex factors that contribute to low SES student underachievement are only occasionally acknowledged. In fact, as cited in Caro (2009), the notion of meritocracy (i.e., the ability to work hard to earn credentials) and social mobility (i.e., the ability to move from one social class to another) insists we are a classless nation or promotes that if SES is a reality, it does not have any dire long term consequence because formal education and higher learning allegedly provide ample opportunity for the working class to transcend their original circumstances. In reality, individual ingenuity and hard work may enable a select few working class individuals to secure the rewards of higher education, this is not generally true. As evidenced by repeated research results, the majority of children from poor and working class backgrounds are profoundly disadvantaged compared to their middle and upper class counterparts in terms of educational achievement (CCL, 2006). The disparity in educational

achievement between low SES and middle/upper SES students is frequently referred to as the “achievement gap” within both, the research and professional literature. Thus, this paper will utilize the term “achievement gap” as it places poverty and its association with educational underachievement in a broader social context by making comparisons with the middle and upper class educational attainments.

Since the 1966 Coleman report, researchers have claimed that outside of school factors such as family influence and economic status have a greater impact on student academic achievement than any other variable (Flessa, 2007). This rationale supports the notion that poverty originates outside of schools and therefore must be addressed and resolved at the macro level. Anyon (2005) strongly emphasizes that macro-economic policies and practices must be implemented to counter the negative effects of low SES on education. Macro-level policies should be considered essential in a government strategy for creating equitable environments within districts and schools. Within the Canadian context, provinces have the means to use federal funds as seen necessary. Ideally, a portion of these funds should be allocated in ways that aid to reduce the structural inequities that contribute to student underachievement. Anyon (2005) stresses that educational policy-makers and practitioners can and should acknowledge and act on the powerful effects of low SES, low-wage work, unemployment and inadequate housing segregation. Like other researchers, Anyon (2005) has argued that macroeconomic policies have a real potential to positively affect the educational outcomes of low SES children. Educational policies alone are simply not enough in this regard. From this perspective, the heavy reliance on in-school reforms that focus only on the symptoms of structural inequity, are flawed and cannot be expected to remedy the issue of educational underachievement by low SES students.

Rather, Gaskel, Levin, Lawson, & Pollock (2007) emphasize that the relationship between social class and educational outcomes must be comprehensively analyzed in a broader context. The academic underachievement experienced in school, by students from low SES backgrounds, is substantially shaped by forces that lie outside of the school setting. Thus, while it is important to understand and document changes within schools and school board districts, it is equally important to connect those changes to broader contexts. By doing so, we can begin to ask critical questions such as who holds political power, related social services such as housing, what is happening in the economy, and demographic and migration patterns, among others (Gaskel, Levin, Lawson, & Pollock, 2007). Complementary to other studies, Gaskel, Levin, Lawson, and Pollock (2007) assert that micro level changes, such as the individual efforts of students, parents, and teachers, will not have significant effects on the persistent and pervasive relationship between low SES children and educational outcomes without changes at the structural level. In light of this, scholars should perhaps usefully focus their attention on examining and suggesting comprehensive government policies that address the intersection of low SES student achievement and structural inequities.

Current reports from Ontario's Ministry of Education, which have examined the detrimental risk factors associated with low SES, state that in-school educational reforms may not succeed because they are episodic, they address the symptoms rather than the causes, and they are not systemic (OME, 2005). Nonetheless and contrary to their own view of potential effective strategies, the recommended programs and several of the implemented policies, implicitly target teachers, students and parents as contributing to the circumstance of social inequity and thus seem to support the notion that they must be held responsible in freeing themselves from the cycle of underachievement and social immobility. Within the OME's (2005) recommended

strategies, there seems to exist an undertone of “fixing” the child and the parent as a means for economically disadvantaged students to achieve academic success. For example, the OME stresses that there are factors that mediate the outcome of poverty and academic achievement. One of these mediating factors was parental involvement. Therefore, a report prepared for the OME (2005) emphasized that teachers need to encourage parents to support their children by: providing extra academic resources for children at home; ensuring a quiet place to study at home; and becoming more involved checking student’s homework frequently; and learning to openly communicate with and be part of the school community. The impetus behind these reforms seems to be to acculturate students and parents with low SES backgrounds to middle-class culture. Rather than focusing efforts on changing schools to accommodate differences, these policies use difference to marginalize and disadvantage some students.

### **Micro-level Factors Associated with the Achievement Gap**

According to Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, and Lipton (2000) one reason that the achievement gap is so disparate and heavily entrenched within society is that schools have been mostly complicit in preserving the status quo. The historic marginalization of economically disadvantaged students has served to benefit middle and upper class mainstream students and families while simultaneously ignoring the needs of low income and minority students. If students became more aware of these unjust circumstances and the ways that they are personally affected by social inequity, they may be prompted to become active agents of gradual change. It is important to note that the concept of middle class normativity seems to be a taken- for-granted construct that is generally not questioned or closely examined, especially by those who are disadvantaged by it the most. By way of default, when low SES students and their families do not take the

appropriate steps of discussing, reflecting on, and addressing the issue of class inequity, the status quo of social stratification is further perpetuated.

The normative culture of the school places poor children at risk by privileging the developmental expressions more likely to be nurtured among white middle class children (Flessa, 2007). In the process, the developmental expressions exhibited by poor minority children are marginalized and lower teacher expectations prompt these children to underachieve academically. Some researchers conclude that this factor alone is the cause of lower tracking placements and therefore schools, and not poverty, cause low SES students to be at a higher risk of being placed in special education classes (Caro, 2009).

Other researchers have found that despite the strong relationship between social class and educational underachievement, low SES children achieve at a higher rate when they sense that their classrooms and schools as caring environments and also feel a genuine connection between their community and their classrooms and schools (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995). The research proponents of this rationale state that by developing an attachment to the community, the students become motivated to abide by its norms and values. Therefore, the sense of community is viewed as a process which enhances acculturation of students to new and more mainstream values (Battistich et. al., 1995). Here we can directly see how mainstream middle-class normativity is a taken-for-granted educational structure in which “other” ways of being, in this particular case being a low SES student, are insidiously devalued and removed from being developed and nourished.

### **Proponents of In-School Reforms as Means to Reduce the Achievement Gaps**

Other research has shown that some schools have been successful in resisting the relationship between low SES and academic underachievement by implementing a combination of effective

curricular programs and providing the essential human resource investments (Flessa, 2007).

From this perspective, micro level variables are believed to be effective in changing the SES and academic outcome pattern. The “Effective Schools” movement, a body of research literature that focuses solely on within-school remedies that provide “rich opportunities to learn,” has most recently resurfaced in the current realm of educational reform (Flessa, 2007).

The “effective school” philosophy, which was also the impetus behind school reforms in the 1970’s, is worthy of further elaboration as this seems to be the most current strategy embraced by educational reforms and is the driving force behind current province wide educational reform initiatives (Flessa, 2007). Proponents of this view argue that schools can alter the patterns associated with low SES and schooling outcomes if the teaching staff within schools exhibit the correct “belief system” (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2005). This approach is based on the premise that students will succeed if their respective teachers do not blame or find excuses for student underachievement. Rather, principals and teachers are prompted to continuously focus on providing solutions to help *all* students achieve regardless of background factors such as social class. The research literature refers to this approach as the “no excuse” philosophy for underachievement (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2005).

The effective school literature has identified the following correlates which seem to break the low achievement patterns for poor students: clearly stated mission statement; safe and orderly climate for learning; high expectations of school staff and students; opportunities to learn and student time-on-task; instructional leadership exhibited by principals and teachers; frequent evaluations of student progress; and positive relationships between parents and school staff (Taylor, 2002). These principles have been identified as a set of discrete skills and behaviours that can be replicated across schools and defy the deterministic relationship between poverty and

underachievement. These in-school approaches are based on the premise that student social class is not the only determinant of achievement and therefore attention should be directed at what can be done in schools to remedy this situation. Again, proof positive that the current direction of educational reforms are focusing solely on inside-school solutions, without acknowledging or remediating the negative effects of the macro-level factors, in an attempt to resolve the current achievement gaps.

### **The Macro/Micro Debate Re-examined**

The tension between the opposing and prescribed causes of poverty have resulted in what is known as the macro/micro debate (Flessa, 2007). Currently, educational researchers (Levin, 2007; Flessa, 2007; Levin & Riffel, 2000) are strongly advising that educational policy and reform initiatives must avoid the traditional dichotomy of inside versus outside school factors because they lead to the false belief that schools can either do everything or nothing to alleviate the issue of poverty and student outcomes. The view of this research study, as well as the contemporary views of other recent research, take the position that educational reforms should stress the importance of school initiatives while placing these initiatives in the context of other mutually supportive macro level social policies.

### **Deficit Theories and the Labelling Dilemma**

In attempting to reduce the achievement gap between low SES and middle and upper class students, researchers have examined the various causes of academic underachievement. As mentioned previously, some researchers have focused on macro level structural problems such as the economy and the oppressive nature of capitalism. Other researchers have investigated the cultural and personal explanations that seemingly largely attribute to underachievement and social immobility. Lewis' (1969) "culture of poverty" thesis argued that poverty is a subculture



with its own way of life and rationale which is passed to future generations. His research argues that poverty has more to do with people's culture than with structural or economic societal causes. American educator, Ruby Payne (1996) has also viewed the "culture of poverty" as the main cause contributing to the cycle of generational poverty. Payne, whose work has had a presence within the two Windsor Boards' of Education, argues that poor families have particular cultural habits that distinguish them from the middle class and stresses that teachers must address the "cognitive deficits" caused by the culture of poverty. In order to acculturate low SES students into the middle-class values and norms, Payne urges that teachers must understand the hidden rules of each social class.

The explanations by Payne (1996) are heavily relied on a deficit framework to explain the inequality in academic outcomes. Deficit frameworks, in the context of achievement gaps, focus on what impoverished students, families, and communities are lacking. They also implicitly suggest that poor students should be "fixed" by the schools, which unfortunately leaves aside an analysis of the structural origins of poverty.

Historically, low SES students have been stereotyped as having psychological traits that seem to prevent working class students from attaining middle-class status. Several researchers have long claimed that the faulty personal characteristics possessed by the poor must be improved if they are to achieve in the academic realm. Deficit frameworks are problematic in that they presume that what happens in middle-class schooling institutions is virtuous and that what happens in poor communities is in need of rescuing (Flessa, 2007).

Katz (1995) summarized the historically entrenched notion of "fixing" the poor in the following paragraph:

As a strategy, improving poor people consistently has awarded education

a starring role. Of all options, education has shone as the preferred solutions for the social problems by compensating for inadequate parenting, shaping values and attitudes, molding character, and imparting useful skills. Added to its other assignments, improving poor people has given American education an extraordinary –indeed, impossible-load, which is one reason why with regularity since the third quarter of the nineteenth century critics have alleged the failure of public schools. As the history of education shows, improving poor people not only has misdiagnosed the issue; it also time and again has deflected attention from their structural origins and from the difficult and uncomfortable responses they require. (p. 4)

Overlooking the fact that children from impoverished and working-class backgrounds are “different” will not aid in making these differences go away, although, recognizing these differences presumes the risk of attaching negative labels to all children with a low SES background. Once negative labels are constructed, teachers are likely to attach negative expectations from labelled children. Minow (1990) has defined this circumstance as “the dilemma of difference.” She cautions that educators have the power to label groups other than mainstream middle class as “different” and the various labels justify a different approach or treatment. However, in emphasizing an individual’s or group’s difference, in a world where difference may have negative implications, teachers may inadvertently strengthen the difference and the negative outcomes related to that difference. In considering the potential negative outcome of emphasizing difference and labelling students, policy reformers and educators must envision and create policies and practices that are sensitive to the needs of the poor students

while at the same time, avoid describing these students and their families one dimensionally (Flessa, 2007).

Problematically, “deficit discourse” is dominant within the literature on SES and educational outcomes (Flessa, 2007). Furthermore, the current body of literature in this area frequently uses the label “at risk” to define the student’s social and economic background that exist outside of the school. The “at risk” label therefore implies that the issue of underachievement is attributable to the “culture of poverty” that is entrenched in poor communities and families. This negatively impacts the efforts of in-school initiatives as the message absorbed is that schools did not cause poverty, the students have brought it onto themselves, therefore schools should not be responsible for resolving this issue. Here we see the historically applied “blame the victim” approach, as Katz (1995) has described, resurfacing in current and up-to-date literature.

### **Framing the Achievement Gap Within a Canadian Context**

Most of the North American literature on SES and schooling describes the experience of students and families within American educational institutions (Flessa, McKay, & Parker, 2010). At the same time, international studies emphasize the significant differences between geographical areas in terms of educational achievement, child well-being, and policy practices (Levin, 2000). In light of this, more Canadian research is needed in order to accurately present the issue of the achievement gap, and to formulate and recommend potential strategies and policies which would be effective within a Canadian context. Therefore, in order to better serve the students and communities affected by SES within Canada, it is important that researchers contextualize the issues surrounding the achievement gap within Canada’s social, educational and political landscape.

A very significant point that is worth noting at this juncture, and one that is consistent regardless of which jurisdiction students reside in, is the *double and triple disadvantages* that occur when low SES interacts with other inherited minority group characteristics. For example, *poor native aboriginal* youth appear to be *especially vulnerable* to underachievement compared to poor non-aboriginals (CCL, 2006). Furthermore, the contributing underachievement risks experienced by various minority groups are exacerbated by low SES backgrounds (CCL, 2006). In light of this compounding effect, the information on SES and educational outcomes could be extrapolated to lower SES minority groups with amplified negative consequences.

In considering that there are significant levels of child poverty and diversity within the two million children in Ontario's public schools, the documented double and triple disadvantages that occur when poverty intersects with other variables such as race, gender and sexuality is pertinent in the realm of informing policy and educational practices. Twenty seven percent of Ontario's population was born outside of Canada, 20% of the population is a visible minority, and this number is much higher in Toronto and the surrounding area. Furthermore, Campaign 2010, a respected advocacy groups calculates that one in six children in Ontario currently lives in poverty (Campaign, 2010). Nonetheless, Ontario's system wide model of school change does not seem to incorporate any new strategies that focus on reducing poverty, alleviating the achievement gap, or addressing the double and triple disadvantages that a significant amount of students are faced with.

The SES and achievement connection has been shown to be systematic and predictable in nature, and there appears to be a consistent pattern between the degree of low SES and educational outcomes. The literature refers to the relationship between family SES and academic achievement as a *socioeconomic gradient* because it is gradual and increases across the range of

SES (Caro, 2009). For example, researchers have shown that children in persistently poor welfare-dependent living circumstances, have a 228% risk of academic failure by grade six, compared to children who have never been poor (CCL, 2006). Students from working class families have a 59% risk of academic underachievement by grade six compared to their mainstream peers. Other research has shown that grade six students' scores in reading, writing, mathematics, and science, moderately increase at every ascending level of family SES (CCL, 2006). The mere circumstance of not having the financial means necessary to make ends meet, obviously negatively effects children and families in ways that are beyond studying and documenting by research.

### **Current Educational and Political Contexts within Ontario**

Over the past five years, Ontario has been committed to system-wide model of school change (Flessa, Mckay, & Parker, 2010). This movement revolves around the monitoring of academic goals through rigorous standardized testing in grades, 3, 6, 9, &10. This testing-centric accountability system has created a tightly coupled policy role for the ministry and the school boards, and their respective schools and classrooms (Flessa, Mckay, & Parker, 2010). Opponents of accountability testing-centric systems emphasize that the pressure boards, schools, and teachers face to produce acceptable test results creates a reductionist and test-driven curriculum which imparts low level skills and is anchored in a rote style of mechanical learning (Valenzuela, 2001). In addition, and just as important, testing-centric educational environments promote a uniform and objectivist way of learning and knowing, thereby alienating other legitimate ways of knowing and learning (Valenzuela, 2001). One must question if the significant financial funds put forth to standardized testing are justified.

It seems as though Ontario's current policy climate supports a system-wide mastery of discrete skill sets and therefore is focusing on the content of curriculum without leaving any room for examining and incorporating context. The context includes where students are from, where they are at, how they experience phenomena, and the myriad of issues that frame their life experience (Carr, 2008). While it is important that students learn some common curriculum, they also need to learn how to be, how to relate, and how to critically examine and understand the society that they are a part of. Freire (2000) cautions that a focus on content without context can lead to a "banking model" of education in which students are seen as empty vessels that must be filled with knowledge in a unilateral learning process. The concept of "banking education" as described by Freire (2000) and the accountability testing-centric school wide system in Ontario are not only compatible with one another, they also are rooted in, fostered, and perpetuated by a neoliberal agenda which is in the hands of a small minority of elite individuals. The ideal accountability system would aim to overhaul the enduring structural problems that are the root cause of the enduring educational inequities (Valenzuela, 2001).

The neoliberal approach emphasizes a culture that is market-driven, competition and standards based, stresses uniformity and a "back to the basics" focus on learning (Carr, 2008). The neoliberal powers at work, that aim to reinforce and maintain the status quo of social stratification among other entrenched unjust ideologies, must be critically examined and scrutinized by students, teachers, and society in general. In order to resist the normative values that privilege one way of being -white, male, middle-class, European origin, heterosexual, and Christian- teachers and students must be able to openly discuss these issues and begin to validate and encourage multiple ways of being (Carr, 2008). In considering these realities, this study

asserts that curriculum content is more appropriate, relevant and engaging when it is contextualized, and when it considers the needs and realities of all students.

Some positive movement by the OME, in the direction of acknowledging the importance of context, is reflected in the currently released document “Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.” This document does describes a vision for creating an equitable and inclusive education system in Ontario in which: all students, parents, and other members of the schools community are welcomed and respected; and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning (OME, 2009).

One key goal of the plan is to reduce the gaps in student achievement and the overall goal is to understand, identify, and eliminate, the discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society (OME, 2009). A critical literacy program, based on Freire’s (2000) notion of “problem-posing education,” may well be one way to gradually achieve many of the goals set out in Ontario’s Equity and Inclusivity strategy. Giroux (1992) advocates for the real possibility of emancipatory learning by positioning students in ways that enable them to critique, understand, and politically negotiate their educational environments. Thus far, the OME mandated strategy seems to be a philosophy awaiting to be put into practice.

### **Positioning Critical Literacy as Instrumental in Achieving Equity**

In addressing the issue of the SES achievement gap, educational policies must consider both micro and macro factors and how these two are intertwined. One way to conceptualize this approach is to think of schools as “open” systems where educational outcomes are shaped based on what occurs within schools and on circumstances and living experiences that occur outside of schools (Scott, 1998). Levin and Riffel (2000) have suggested that in Ontario, neither school

board trustees nor OME leaders, have viewed schools as “open” systems in which the student’s social context is considered and implicated in educational policies. Levin and Riffel (2000) have found that key actors within boards frequently underestimated the prevalence and importance of SES within school districts. These district perspectives may have been affected by the fact that there were no pressure groups advocating for low SES as a being a main issue within boards (Levin & Riffel, 2000). Also, low SES students and their families have less access to the resources necessary for effective political work. The underachievement of low SES students has received very little attention in the political realm of education despite all of the evidence that justifies a need for serious political intervention.

Levin and Riffel (2000) suggest three reasons why Canadian school districts have not been more active on the issue of SES and academic achievement. Firstly, educators see SES as a mandate to be dealt with outside of the schools. Secondly, school boards lack a sense of strategy as to how to address low SES (e.g. How can schools tackle the issue of family income or inadequate housing?). Thirdly, there is a lack of political pressure on school districts to address the issue of SES and underachievement. Within this context, a critical literacy application has the potential to involve students in consciousness-raising activities that will perhaps make them more aware of the pervasive class inequity that has negatively affected their educational outcomes. An effective critical literacy may also enable students to use the power of their own voices and actions to *publicly* resist the dominant ideology of class stratification, and perhaps gain the justified political attention needed to create change.

### **A Description of Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is a platform for assisting people in their quest to legitimate and be proud of their own personal ways of “being” and “living,” while resisting mainstream norms and a



pressure to conform. In order to achieve this quest, Freire (2000) states that students and teachers will have to engage in a risk-taking praxis (practice that is based on theory) which challenges limiting situations and explores new possibilities. Freire (2000) strongly proposes that students should not be mere receptacles of information but rather they should aim to become ever-changing agents that transcend the prescribed limits set by society. Education is viewed as a mutually informing process of problem-posing relevant to the situated lives of the learner (Freire, 2000). Freire (2000) continuously emphasizes that in order to reach this end, meaningful dialogue between students and teachers is essential.

Powell (2001) also describes critical literacy as a *social process* that involves communication with others across time and space. A strong and equitable democratic society must foster oral and written communication. As emphasized by Powell (2001) a democratic state is at risk when there is divisiveness between individuals and when groups fail to interact and communicate with one another. Powell (2001) emphasizes that whenever groups cannot communicate freely across the lines of class, religion, or race, they move on to withdrawing from connection, isolating themselves, and view themselves as exclusive. When this occurs, democracy is severely endangered. Equity and democracy are often used interchangeably within the context of critical literacy research as both equity and democracy give rise to the struggle to give power to *all* the people within a society. The authority to govern a society should not be bestowed to special interest groups, the wealthiest members of society, or historically dominant social groups (Powell, 2001). In equitable classrooms and democratic societies, all people should be involved in the decision-making processes that affect their destinies.

Shor (1999) describes critical literacy as essential in challenging the status quo by forming an attitude towards history and dreaming of a new society against the power now in power. He

suggests that within the context of critical literacy, words have the ability to rethink worlds. Shor (1999) urges us to consider how we have been shaped by the words we use and encounter. He proclaims that the use of language is a social force that constructs us. Therefore, teachers and students should critically engage in an on-going dialogue which examines oppositional discourses in an attempt to recreate ourselves and our culture (Shor, 1999). The design of a language arts program is not simply an educational venture, but rather, a political act that either perpetuates the survival of inequitable power structures or seeks to replace these inequities with alternative and just narratives (Shor, 1999). In order to become critically literate, students and teachers must examine their continuous personal development from the perspective of dominant and multiple discourses which direct our actions and shape our view of the world (Shor, 1999).

#### The Three Tenets of Critical Literacy as a Guide for Teacher and Student Facilitation

The research literature that describes critical literacy has an overarching theme of facilitating individual empowerment by directly confronting societal issues of power and dominance. The main goal of critical pedagogy is to promote and ultimately achieve a truly democratic society by consciously creating a more just and equitable community (Powell, 2001). In order to successfully implement critical literacy pedagogy, teachers and students must be keenly attuned to the following three vitally essential underlying tenets.

*First Tenet:* Literacy instruction can never be neutral. In alignment with this tenet, Powell (2001) urges that teachers must reflect on the important decisions they make in terms of what is taught and how it is taught. Teachers must acknowledge that these decisions are based on what they perceive as being literate behaviour in a given context. For example, traditional instructional approaches define literacy as a series of discrete skills that can be codified, transmitted, and mastered by students. Once a student has acquired these skills, they are deemed as literate

(Powell, 2001). This type of traditional language learning context is problematic in that literacy instruction becomes mechanical and objective. This approach disenfranchises the social and cultural aspects of literacy and fails to promote creativity and critical dialogue from students. Powell (2001) emphasizes that teachers must also be aware that the choice of texts and literature is also a political decision especially in light of the fact that most text books and literature pieces are mono-cultural and represent mainstream knowledge. The traditional skill-based language approach and the use of traditional texts functions to control, marginalize, and silence low SES students. Overall, this tenet urges teachers to seriously consider that knowledge acquisition is controlled through the selected teaching approach and the use of selected curriculum resources (Powell, 2001).

*Second Tenet:* Critical literacy is consistent with a strong democracy that requires equity and shared decision-making power (Powell, 2001). When working within the framework of this tenet, students and teachers learn how power operates to promote particular interests over others through unjust practices such as denigrating subdominant populations and cultures. The students are encouraged to evaluate the status of the dominant cultural knowledge, language, and experiences (Powell, 2001). Students are also made aware of the dominant group tactics which promote the subtle yet powerful message of superiority and inferiority which becomes part of the taken-for-granted world view. This tenet also encourages the students and teachers to consider all sides of an issue in the decision-making process, especially the views of those who have been traditionally and currently marginalized and silenced. When the students read and listen to narratives of persons whose life experiences and views differ from their own, they become aware of the various unfair struggles that low SES populations endure (Powell, 2001). Furthermore, the

messages in mainstream texts can be dissected by the students and the voiceless populations can finally take a critical stance on issues they feel powerless over.

*Third Tenet:* Literacy instruction can empower students and teachers and lead to transformative action (Powell, 2001). Guided by this premise, teachers and students realize that the skill based model of language assumes that literacy is neutral as where critical literacy is consciously political and purposefully aims to address issues of injustice and inequity (Powell, 2001). The class is encouraged to not only intellectually react to the issues at hand, but also to take action. Therefore, the role of critical literacy goes beyond providing authentic and relevant purposes for reading and writing as it encourages action for societal transformation. In essence, the students are learning how powerful critical literacy can be and how it can assist them in making positive changes in inequitable circumstances (Powell, 2001).

As exemplified in the sections above, an *effective* critical literacy language approach can potentially become a strong tool in creating an awareness of the social inequities that students have not examined, questioned or resisted. Research has shown that “teacher educators” are frustrated by their attempts to engage students in discussions around issues of marginalization, discrimination, oppression, and equity. They found that the majority of the students in their classes, who had been raised in mainstream society, are unaware of these issues (Jewett, 2007). Critical literacy teachers are also faced with their own personal challenges of teaching by praxis and achieving the goals of empowerment and social action aimed at transformative change. Research has shown that teachers enrolled in critical literacy workshops are hesitant to voice their personal opinions, resistant to responding to critique, and generally uncomfortable with discussing issues of social justice and equity (Jewett, 2007). The struggle for many teachers will be to reappraise their own identities by reflecting on all the internalized voices, unconsciously

absorbed by dominant ideologies that have shaped who they are and what they believe (Jewett, 2007). Powell (2001) urges that each of us examine our own assumptions, modelling a way of thinking and learning for our students. As critical educators, our commitment to illumination requires that we acknowledge our own bias when critiquing and that we examine our own deeply held ideological assumptions. In doing so, we must also be willing to accept the fact that in our final analysis, we may be wrong (Tinberg, 2001).

In addition, we have an obligation to present students with an *opportunity* to ponder over and struggle with social issues and then help them to address these issues (Tinberg, 2001). Shor (1999) reminds us that in the process of a critical literacy practice, teachers must often listen to students longer than they would ideally like. However, by giving students free rein in the classroom, the discussions become extremely valuable as the students take ownership of the conversations and activity at hand. This process may become inefficient at times and is usually very time-consuming (Alford, 2002). Nonetheless, when it goes well it energizes the entire class and ensures that the students become active participants versus passive spectators (Tinberg, 2001). Shor (1999) urges teachers to remember that critical literacy grows out of the experiences of those who develop it and express it, and like all things authentic and meaningful it is well worth the mess and inconvenience. This is yet another aspect of critical literacy that must be acknowledged by teachers. Educators should ideally be given ample time, support, resources, and the freedom to choose the appropriate literature to create the ideal learning environment which supports the goals of critical literacy.

## **Conclusion**

An *effective* critical literacy pedagogy may potentially prove to be a very useful tool in reducing the achievement gap between low SES and mainstream majority students. One of the

most important aspects of educational reform is the historical lack of attention to the most important single determinant of educational outcomes – the socioeconomic status of children (Levin & Riffel, 2000). In order to implement an effective critical literacy approach, teachers may have to plan for flexibility in terms of time required to complete literacy lessons and projects and be willing to accept the tension and discomfort that may become a prominent reality within the context of political dialogue that is opposed to mainstream ideologies.

The realistic setbacks and challenges of utilizing a critical literacy pedagogy must also be acknowledged by both teachers and students. As emphasized by Shor (1999) disturbing the mainstream socialization of students and teachers by engaging classrooms in a critical literacy pedagogy is far from easy, transparent, or risk-free. The process of critical literacy is unpredictable, often filled with contentious surprises, resistances, and breakthroughs (Shor, 1999). The unjust social forces and structures that need to be questioned are very old, deeply entrenched, amazingly complex, and often too complicated to be adequately addressed, not to mention resolved, throughout the course of a school year (Shor, 1999). Nonetheless, studies have shown that a large majority of students who engaged in an effective critical literacy process, have gained a very valuable insight into the severity, pervasiveness, and structural roots of inequalities (Martin, 2008). They became deeply sceptical of dominant discourses that justified inequities and showed a willingness to rectify unjust conditions through collective action against governments (Martin, 2008). Class polarization, corporate domination, and poverty were the specific issues that students felt strongly about and understandably so in light of the unjust impact they have on the working class.

Many researchers have agreed that educational institutions reproduce the social inequities and dominant ideologies within society. Within the realm of language instruction, there seems to

exist a high degree of controlling initiatives (e.g. standardized testing and accountability, and teacher modification) and this process may be reasonably interpreted as using language instruction to maintain the status quo (Shor,1999). However, critical pedagogy has provided students with an open and safe place for learning about societal inequities, and then more importantly, questioning the status quo (Shor, 1999). Within this context, low SES students are urged to become agents of their destiny as Shor (1999) emphasizes, human agency is rarely erased, even in the most controlled settings. As low SES students become more aware of the power of *their* own voice, words, and actions, they should begin to feel connected with, rather than alienated from, their respective educational experience. Therefore, the purposeful design of an authentically engaging classroom environment creates the potential for academic success. In addition, critical literacy pedagogy enables low SES students to develop the necessary social capital needed to navigate through the societal system that seems to limit their academic and career potential (Martin, 2008). If schools were to successfully implement a critical literacy approach, educational institutions may become the vehicle for societal transformation as they become places where students and teachers can freely speak and act critically to change themselves and the world.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This particular application of a critical literacy program, as a means to eventually alleviate achievement gaps and alter the structure of class inequity, is based on the conceptual idea that perhaps one hope that society has in changing systemic inequalities and attending to various social justice issues is presenting the issues to students when they are very young and impressionable. Instead of allowing mainstream culture to dictate unfair norms and practices by simply abiding to the status quo, this study suggests that schools should aim to be the vehicle for transformational change by cultivating critical thinkers who can socially analyze current aspects of society and become active proponents of change.

#### **Purposeful Sampling**

When I approached the Catholic school Board's superintendent about pursuing my study, he initially seemed very helpful and cooperative. I do believe that he intended to assist me in suggesting a potential school to work with, however, when the time came to discuss which school would be most compatible with the research, a major board related issue had unexpectedly surfaced, which he needed to resolve. Due to my own personal time-line constraints revolving around completing the research, I made numerous phone calls and visits to the school board in an attempt to connect with someone who could help me move the research process forward. Finally, one of the receptionists at the board scheduled a meeting for me with another board superintendent. It so happened that this school board superintendent was very eager to help me locate a compatible school as she was completely on board with critical pedagogy and firmly believed in the need to address the social inequities that exist within schools. Thus, this school board superintendent recommended a classroom that met the specified



criteria of being a low SES and high needs school, which was most suited to the critical literacy program aims. In regards to the process of recruiting a classroom to work with, I made a prearranged appointment to meet the principal that was at the school that was recommended by the school board superintendent. I then approached that school's principal and classroom teacher to seek their consent. The principal and teacher approached did consent. Once the principal and teacher consented to participate in the study, they were given a recruitment informational letter and consent form. I then discussed the details of the study and answered any questions that the principal and teacher had at that time. Due to time and resource constraints, only one school and one classroom was selected to participate in the four week study.

### **The School and Context of the Research Site**

The study was carried out in an elementary school that was situated in a low SES neighbourhood and was designated as a “high needs” school by the affiliated school board. The grade 4/5 classroom consisted of 28 children with rich and culturally diverse backgrounds, and was characterized, by both the principal and the classroom teacher, as the most challenging group of students within the school. The student body was composed of 21 boys and 7 girls, 15 grade 5's and 13 grade 4's. Five of the students were on academic “Individual Educational Plans” (i.e., modified educational program that meets the “individualized” academic needs of the student and is usually implemented if the student has been tested to be performing two grades below specified subject areas, or if the student has been identified as gifted in specified subject areas) and 7 students had accommodations logs (i.e., adjustments made to the student’s learning program but the students is still working at the enrolled grade level). Two of the accommodations focused on issues of behaviour, and techniques for managing those behaviours. The teacher had mentioned that these behavioural issues had negatively impacted their ability to

remain focused on schoolwork. Furthermore, the teacher had stated, with strong conviction, that there are several other students who should have IEP's, or at minimum, accommodations logs, but have not been assessed. Within the class, as per the teacher's description, 6 of the students produced work that reflected level 1, 12 of the student's academic work reflected a level 2, and 10 of the student's were evaluated at producing work that was in the level 3 range, and only 3 of the student's academic work meet the criteria to meet the levels of 3 and 4. Within Ontario's educational context, the teacher would assign a student a level 1 if that student did not meet more than half of the required learning expectations and criteria set for a subject area or a specific assignment. On the other end of the evaluative spectrum, a level 4 is justified when the student meets all of the learning expectations and criteria specified for a certain subject area of specific assignment and when that student produces work that is above and beyond the explicit learning expectations.

According to the classroom teacher, the students needed constant reminders to stay on task. The ability to focus during teaching time and work periods was stated by the teacher as being a major issue for this group. The group really struggled with tasks that require sustained mental effort, like a CASI reading test or anything else that might be longer than a single page. As described by the teacher, many of the students were intimidated by larger tasks or assignments and some have a tendency to shut down completely. Six students frequently did not finish work, or did not attempt to start many of the assigned tasks.

The group was an inquisitive group that liked to talk and ask questions, however, they did get side-tracked very quickly. As mentioned by the teacher, and observed by me, there were many strong and spirited personalities in this group. The teacher had found that sometimes this created a great classroom dynamic, and at other times it had led to many conflicts throughout the school

year within the classroom and the school yard. Getting along and treating each other properly has been an emphasized goal and focus for many of the students. In fact, the school board's behavioural specialist had visited the class for 45 minutes each week to discuss the "character building traits" that revolved around establishing positive friendships.

The classroom teacher, and the various EA's that came in and out of the classroom on a regular basis, were compassionate and high quality educators who really strived to keep the students on task with their academic pursuits. The students were constantly reminded of the expectations and rules for listening and working, and had, it seemed for the most part, uniformly adapted to these expectations. A very important part of the school community, was the "back-on-track" room. When students were uncooperative with the specified classroom or school rules and practices, they were sent to "back-on-track" to deal with the issues at hand. When I arrived to the classroom each morning to work with the students, at least one student was sent to the "back-on-track" classroom before I had arrived that morning for something that occurred the day before. Physical fighting, verbal assaults, and uncooperative work habits were the main reasons why students were sent to "back-on-track." There were only two instances, where a student was sent to "back-on-track" while I was working with the class. Therefore, even though I did not observe the many circumstances that justified a "back-on-track" visit, this program seemed like a highly used space.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized Stinger's (1999) "Participatory Action Research Model" (PAR) and Stinger's (1999) "Action Research Interacting Spiral Model" as a framework to carry out the study. PAR takes a social and community orientation and focuses on research that contributes to emancipation and transforming oppressive societal structures (Stinger, 1999). PAR has a distinct

ideological foundation which shapes the direction of inquiry, data collection, and the intent and outcomes of the inquiry. For instance, PAR studies address various social issues that constrain the lives of students and educators with the aim of implementing an action plan that will assist in resolving these issues (Creswell, 2002). This method of research seems to be the most compatible in studying the central question and sub-questions in this study.

I purposefully selected the classroom sample of grade four and five students in order to effectively explore the central phenomena in question. Initially, I had hoped to work with a straight grade five classroom because I had become accustomed with the relevant curriculum and with the range of social and intellectual development for this age group upon previously teaching this grade for a consecutive three years. I felt comfortable with the idea of discussing issues of gender, race, and social class somewhat explicitly, with ten old students, as I had become familiar with their maturity level and their ability to reason about abstract issues.

In collaboration with students, I attempted to co-create and facilitate a critical literacy program that aimed to reposition the grade five students as critical inquirers of language in order to help students analyze textual and social practices. The critical literacy program was taught consecutively over a four week period. I made daily visits and worked directly with the students from 9:00am until 10:25am, of which was their first recess time. Usually during recess, and occasionally after recess, I conducted focus group interviews which included three to five students and were fifteen to twenty minutes in length. Again, it is important to emphasize that throughout the duration of the study, I took on the role of the teacher and the researcher, while facilitating the critical literacy program.

Since PAR is a dynamic and evolving process that requires the collaboration of participants, and requires that the researcher spiral back and forth between reflection, data collection, and

action, I attempted to firstly get a sense of what the students were like before formally deciding on which preselected resources (i.e., a series of lesson plan ideas and preselected texts) I would initially draw from and utilize. This starting point for further inquiry was meant for students to bring their voices and identities into a collaborative process of curriculum design and inquiry and will allow students to explore the possibilities of agency and change. As we will see in the “Results” and “Discussion Section” student collaboration was rarely utilized.

## **Methods**

Throughout the study, I took the “role of a participant observer” as identified by Spradley (1980). As Spradley (1980) suggests, becoming engaged in the activities at the research site offered an ideal opportunity to observe and document the actions and responses of the participants. Because it is difficult to take notes while participating, Spradley (1980) recommends writing down the observations after leaving the research site, as it is too difficult to observe and make notes simultaneously. In light of this, daily field notes were kept in order to document the format of each daily lesson and the perceived key events that occurred during each daily lesson. This was done immediately after each visit was completed. The field notes also included a description of the physical environment (e.g., are the students sitting in rows, groups, or pairs, number of students and so on) in order to provide some contextual background for the study. The field notes were revisited to aid in the data-analysis and the contextual description of the classroom/research site, at the very end of the study.

Focus group were used to document student insights on the issues of gender, race, and class, as portrayed in the texts that were read and discussed, and to gauge whether students were acquiring “critical text analyst” skills. Both semi-structured and open-ended questions were used during the focus group sessions. Lincoln and Denzin (2000) assert that focus groups are unique

and important modes of collective inquiry where theory, research, pedagogy, and politics converge. Thus, focus groups provided a democratic research *and* teaching method which aimed to increase the student's voice by encouraging personal and political opinions on the issue of social inequity. The focus group conversations were later transcribed and coded with the intention of finding broad and connecting themes. Merton (1996) emphasizes that focus groups are essential when the researcher strategically "focuses" on interview prompts that will generate themes that are relevant to the researcher. Therefore, the focus group sessions enabled me to capture the students' responses, on the issues of social inequity in real time and space within the context of a face-to-face personal interaction.

During the end of the first week and thereafter, students were orally invited to join a group interview. This came to be known as the "Invitation to Small Group Discussion" activity. Students who volunteered were assigned to a focus group. The researcher attempted to place a few expressive and extroverted students together with a few less orally expressive and introverted students in order to attempt to create a group dynamic that was neither overpowering in dialogue nor non-contributing. All students who volunteered to participate had an opportunity to be in a focus group at least once. The nature/kind of questions during the focus group were explained to the students before they were asked to volunteer so that they knew what kind of questions to anticipate during the focus group session. The purpose of the focus group session was to re-iterate the same questions posed during the class discussions. The semi-structured and open-ended questions pertained to the readings and/or short films viewed.

All the focus group work carried out within the same week, included the same questions in regards to the same material read or viewed in class that week. In other words, the same questions discussed during the class lessons, were reiterated during the focus group sessions. The

students' participation was completely voluntary. All students were reminded that they may stop the interview process when they wish and they that they did not have to answer any of the question if they so chose. The focus group did not exceed 5 students and was not less than 3 students. The questions asked during the focus group sessions were the same questions asked during the guided reading lessons, which are the applied critical literacy tools that were taught throughout the program. The researcher refrained from debating about any forthcoming views and withheld any judgment in regards to responses.

The focus group sessions were held in the corner of the classroom at a round table that accommodated 6 individuals. I was courteous with the respondents and thanked them for participating when the focus group session was completed. The focus group interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, verified, and deleted thereafter.

## **Procedures**

The students were asked to fill out a pre and post questionnaire which included open ended questions (Appendix A). This same questionnaire was also administered at the end of the four week critical literacy program. A series of nonmainstream and mainstream texts were read (Appendix B), and only on the fourth day, two nonmainstream films were viewed (e.g., the films explicitly portrayed Walt Disney gender stereotypes). The students were given the opportunity to discuss the issues of gender, race, and class as portrayed in the texts and films using a critical lens. The students were taught a series of critical literacy tools and were prompted to apply and continuously rehearse their critical lens using these tools (e.g., a series of questions such as: Whose voice is missing from this text/film message?) (Appendix C). I collected three sets of assignments that included the students' written responses to the texts that were read and had been discussed in class. By the end of the first week, semi-structured and open-ended questions were

asked during focus group interview to explore the students' development of critical text analyst skills. During the second, third, and fourth week, two to three focus groups were conducted with students who volunteered to participate. All of the focus group interviews were conducted after the lessons were completed and were usually about 15 minutes in length.

After conducting the focus groups, I would leave the classroom setting and take detailed field notes which described the overall format and perceived outcome of the lesson for that day. In addition, I recorded any conversations that stood out and documented any reflective ideas that were relevant. The teacher's feedback and general comments were also documented when relevant. These field notes provided the basis for planning the lesson for the next day. Upon completing the field notes, and reflecting on what direction the next day's lesson should take, I developed a lesson plan for the next day which prescribed a general outline of which books were to be read and which critical questions we would focus on. Also, the field notes provided an opportunity to elaborate on certain aspects of the previous day's lesson as needed. For example, if I noted that a student made a comment that was very relevant to the next lesson, I would write this comment into the next day's lesson and use it to elaborate or expand on a relevant point. Throughout the duration of my time with the students, I would often refer to the CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) to scan over which criteria we had covered and made a conscious effort to incorporate the areas of this framework that seemed underdeveloped.

### **Data Collection**

The pre and post questionnaire served as a means to evaluate whether students' awareness of the relevant issues discussed had evolved over the course of the study. The Pre questionnaire was also used as a way to assess where the students, as a group and individually, stood in terms of previous knowledge on the specified topics. The pre and post questionnaire was administered and collected at the very beginning of the study, and at the very end of the study. The other



sources of data collected from students were three CL assignments. These assignments contained the students' personal responses to the class discussions that were based on the texts viewed or read and the application of the critical literacy tools taught and discussed in class. The data collection also included the student's name, gender, and age.

The focus group sessions were audio taped and used as data to be analyzed. The parental consent forms and assent forms had asked the parents and the participants for permission in collecting the students' response assignments for research purposes. Audio consent forms were used to ask the parents and the participants for permission in using the audio taped discussions for research purposes. Twenty six out of twenty seven students submitted all the necessary consent forms which indicated that their parents have consented to allowing their child to participate in the study. The one child who did not submit a signed parental consent form still participated in the study, but his assignments were not collected, nor did he fill out a questionnaire or participate in the focus group sessions.

### **Data Analysis**

Lewison, Van Sluys, and Flint, (2006) emphasize that researchers need to utilize multiple perspectives and adopt more than a one discipline-related stance (i.e., textual, cultural, and social) when engaging in literacy research. These researchers stress that understanding literacy and research as situated social practice suggest that researchers should attend to local meanings as well as the direct influence of larger social systems, due to the fact that possible meanings are contextually and systematically studied. In other words, researchers should acknowledge the complex relations among texts, participants, events, and cultural contexts. This study has incorporated this rationale in studying literacy by using two different approaches of data analysis

on the same database: 1.) Grounded theory (Glaser, 1992) and, 2.) existing critical literacy frameworks (Christensen, 2004; Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006; Luke and Freebody, 1997).

The procedures of grounded theory provided the study with an interpretive, yet rigorous and disciplined process for generating emerging concepts and investigating the relationships between them (Creswell, 2002). The three-level process of coding, axial coding, and selective coding were employed to develop a general theory to fit the data when examining the focus group transcripts. Also, the Glaserian (1992) technique for developing a grounded theory emphasizes the use of multiple data sources when describing emerging themes as a way to further validate and justify the created categories and properties of this process theory. Therefore, I utilized the whole data set (e.g., field notes, written student responses, pre and post questionnaire, and focus group interview transcripts) to aid in formulating a grounded theory.

From a critical literacy framework, the Luke and Freebody (1997) four resource model enabled me to initially explore the student's literacy practices in terms of text analysis ability. More specifically, the students' text analyst skills and practices (critical insight) were further examined using the Lewison, Van Sluys, and Flint (2006) four dimension critical literacy framework. A "directed content analysis" as described by Mayring (2000), was carried out on the data using the pre-existing CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). In other words, this study used a prior existing theoretical framework that depicted which phenomena should be coded and categorized within the context of implementing a critical literacy practice. The goal in this section of the data analysis was to identify and categorize all instances of a particular phenomena by reading over the transcripts and other relevant data and highlighting, and then categorizing passages, using the predetermined codes of the existing CL framework

(Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006). This “directed content analysis” aims to use a structured and deductive process to categorize the presented data (Mayring, 2000).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Critical literacy is about politicizing the classroom (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1999). The process of making the critical literacy classroom a political one does not come with a prewritten script. Discussing differences such as race, gender, and class requires the teacher to be extremely sensitive to the potential difficulties that may arise. Within this context, I was continuously prepared to stop any discussions that were hurtful or disrespectful, in order to protect the students as individuals, at the expense of further examining certain issues of language and power (Jewett, 2007). It was of utmost importance that throughout the duration of this study, I continuously attempted to create a safe space for open discussion of problematic social issues, while at the same time, acknowledging that discussions may produce anxiety and tension. Also, I was constantly focused on presenting multiple perspectives of the issues discussed while maintaining a neutral stance on the issues. Students were encouraged to examine the issues from multiple perspectives and form their own judgments and opinions. Furthermore, the research database, which included student documents and conversations, was kept confidential by assigning alternate names to the participants before the data analysis procedures.

Another ethical consideration underlying the study is the research that shows many critical literacy teachers find that students are cynical and demotivated after learning about social problems (Jewett, 2007). In response, this critical literacy program attempted to ensure that there is a conscious and directed emphasis on providing a classroom discourse that focuses on hope, change, and the possible reality of agency. Students were prompted to deconstruct and

reconstruct stereotypes based on gender, race, and class, and to share their personal visions of a just and fair world.

Also, it is worth mentioning, the “student risk” associated with conducting focus groups. The major ethical issue to consider when engaging in this method of research is the possibility of over-disclosure of personal information by the participants, especially when the research topic may be emotionally laden or a sensitive issue. Over-disclosure was also a concern because I could not ensure strict and absolute confidentiality due to the fact that I did not have control over what the students disclose after they leave the focus group. Also, over-disclosure of information may have serious ethical and legal implications if the participant discloses that he/she is physically or sexually abused by another individual, or if the child discloses that he/she intends to harm himself/herself or discloses other information of this nature and shows a very high stress level or emotional reaction and perhaps needs further counselling.

These ethical risks were mitigated by monitoring the degree of stress or emotional reactions of the focus groups participants and being ready to intervene and stop the discussion when necessary. Furthermore, the participants were reminded that their responses are voluntary and that they do not have to answer the questions if they so chose. Also, the focus group participants were debriefed before the focus group session started and this ensured that I told the participants that absolute confidentiality could not be guaranteed and that they did not have to answer the questions if they felt uncomfortable and could withdraw from the focus group at any point in time with absolutely no repercussions. In addition, a clearly stated and planned protocol was established before the study had started so that I was ready to adhere to this action plan if a student did disclose that he/she was intending to harm themselves or others, or had been sexually or physically abused.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

#### **Data Analysis: Results for the Critical Literacy Framework “Direct Content Analysis”**

The Critical Literacy (CL) framework (See Appendix D) (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) used for data analysis is, and should continue to be, interpreted with caution and speculation. From the onset of the research, the CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) for data analysis seemed rational, legitimate, and most importantly, essential. From a mechanical way of theorizing, one may conclude from the outset, that there was indeed evidence that the students in the classroom have become critical text analysts. And perhaps, as some students seemed to have shown their ability to apply some of the skills across contexts, one may assume that they have internalized the ability to critically examine how gender, race, and class were portrayed in texts.

This type of data analysis seems to fit well within the framework of an outcome-based learning environment that is focused on observable and measurable learning expectations. These learning expectations can be tracked, and documented and the degree of successful knowledge attainment of each student, supposedly, becomes evident. The degree of knowledge transmission is evidenced by each student by way of test scores or leveled assignments. Perhaps I eagerly gravitated towards this CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) as it closely resembled what I was used to—a type of curriculum that I could download and then feel empowered by the belief that I had accomplished the mission that I had deliberately planned in the first place.

The researchers that recommend using this CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) should perhaps emphasize that in the process of collecting data, the teacher/researcher should remain keenly aware of *how* the students are meeting the CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) criteria. Is the teacher putting information in the student's head and then are the students simply regurgitating the information back to the teacher during discussions and on assignments and/or evaluations? If we are to use a CL framework, and truly endorse a CL pedagogy, we must encourage the students to *find their own way* to meeting *some* of the criteria mentioned. Knowledge should be constructed by the students, not the teacher. If using this CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) as a guide, it would be essential to continuously reflect on "how, within the CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006), was the students' knowledge created?" In closely examining the process of how the CL program unfolded, one may be able to better ensure that both questions and answers were carefully crafted and examined by the students of who also managed to come up with their own conclusions and opinions on some of the issues *chosen by them*.

The students' written assignments, a pre and post questionnaire (See Appendix C), the researchers' daily field notes, and three hours worth of focus group interview transcripts, were examined and categorized within the prescribed CL Framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) using a "directed content analysis" procedure as described by Mayring (2000). After classifying students' responses throughout the CL program, it appears that many of the students have met the criteria for becoming a critical text analyst. The chart below illustrates the CL Framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) and depicts the categorization of observable and documented student responses which have met the criteria of becoming a critical text analyst. This CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) illustrates a summarized version of the

data analysis. Also, the focus group questions, class discussions and assignments explicitly revolved around the issues of gender inequity, racial discrimination, and class inequity as implicated in the texts that were read in the classroom.

## **Data Analysis: Directed Content Analysis for the Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy Framework**

### **Disrupting the Common Place**

Broadly, within this section, critical literacy is conceptualized as seeing the “everyday” through new lenses. More specifically, the data was categorized using the following predetermined codes as specified by this section of the framework: How is language studied in order to reveal how: a.) Language shapes identity, b.) language constructs cultural discourse and, c.) language support or disrupt the status quo? For this area of analysis, I have summarised the main themes that evolved under these predetermined codes, and provide a few supporting student examples.

Throughout the duration of the study, the students’ responses indicated that they had developed an implicit understanding of how language shapes identity. For example, the students’ responses indicated that they understood that stereotypes, based on gender, race, and class, are prevalent in texts and are often unquestioned and naturalized as “normative ways of being.” *Therefore, a theme that emerged was the student’s ability to understand that texts influence our ways of “being.”* The following statements, extracted from a focus group transcript illustrate one example of this new “awareness.”

Josh        Most people stereotype, but they really don’t realize it.

Mrs. P. Okay, can you give me an example?

Josh Like uhm . . . . In like you showed us clips of Disney. All girls have to have long hair. All princesses have long hair, long dresses, mostly blond hair and they have to look good. And then there always has to be a prince to fall into their hands and live happily ever after.

Josh I think that more little, little kids think yeah like in grade two believe that one day too they'll become like Cinderedna, have a carriage, go to the ball.

Mrs. P. Cinderella you mean right?

Josh Yeah Cinderella and go to the ball and all that.

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

Throughout the study, the students also seemed to implicitly, and in some cases explicitly understand how language constructs cultural discourse. For example, the students seemed to realize that the majority of texts showed dominant ways of "being" and "living" and that these messages "brainwash" small children on how to "be" and how "they should live their lives."



*Therefore, another theme that emerged is the understanding that stereotypes “brainwash” everybody on “how to be.”* The following examples convey this understanding.

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

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

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

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

Mrs. P. It’s one story right?

Sandra IT’S LIKE- IT’S LIKE UHM, IT’S LIKE A Disney theme. All you have to do is watch and watch and watch it. And you think you have to be like that. And all you are going to do is read and read and read about one book like that and

then you hold a book and you read Tight Times and then you realize okay, my life doesn't revolve around money. I'm more like.. loves around my family than more than just money.

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

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

Caleb      If boys play with dolls you shouldn't tease them about it  
                 cause then they won't feel good about themselves and they'll

think that the only thing is that they have to do all boy things  
and not what they really want to do.

The following is an example taken from the field notes.

Sonya        “It is not true that girls don’t like gross things like blood and  
bugs. I touched a real pheasant’s heart when my uncle took it out of the  
pheasant. I also play with bugs and don’t think they are gross.”

The following conversation further illustrates this theme.

Don        They even made a stereotyping movie in my mom’s house  
called White Men Can’t Jump.

Mrs. P.    Uhum.

Don        They’re just stereotyping by looking at him. Oh, Oh white  
people can’t jump.

Mrs. P.    Uhum. So what do you mean? Can you explain that a  
little more?

Don        Uhm . . . . .

Mrs. P.    How is that stereotyping?

Don        Because you don’t even know like if you haven’t seen him  
do anything. How would you know that they can’t even  
jump?

Mrs. P.    Uhum, and is it true that white people can’t jump or white  
people can’t play basketball?

Don        No cause I’ve seen Liam jump and he’s white.

Don           It was really the first books I heard that a black- a black person got something good. Because most of the time in books and movies all the *good* things that *happen* mostly happen to the white people. And that blacks really aren't- Don't really get anything that good.

Mrs. P.       Okay and- Okay good. And that does happen on T.V. a lot too. And- and a lot of stories you read. Do you think-

Don           And it makes me feel bad because I'm a- I'm part black so really it makes me feel bad because *not everything* is about *white people*. And that's mostly what everything has is a lot of white people.

Mrs. P.       Uhummm. And do you think that's fair?

Don           It's not *fair*.

Mrs. P.       No it's not fair. So can you specify why you think it's not fair?

Don           I think it's not fair because they're acting like white people are the only race like in the world and that nothing else can trump that.

### **Considering Multiple Viewpoints**

This dimension of the framework emphasizes that critical literacy should include learning opportunities that enable students to understand experience and texts from our own perspective

and the viewpoints of others, and to consider these various perspective concurrently. More specifically, the predetermined codes as specified by this section include: How does critical literacy engage students in the process of: a.) Reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives, b.) interrogating texts by asking questions such as “Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?” and, c.) paying attention to and seeking out the voices of those who have been silenced and marginalized and making difference visible. In the following section, I have summarised the main themes that evolved under these overlapping predetermined codes, and provide a few supporting student examples.

The students did show an ability to reflect on multiple and contradictory perspectives. The students were presented with the opportunity to directly compare mainstream texts that portrayed stereotypical characters and/or stereotypical ways of “being” and “living” based on gender, race, and class, to that of nonmainstream texts which resisted the portrayal of these stereotypes and featured multiple ways of “being” and “living.” In comparing, examining, discussing, and questioning the legitimacy of these differing, and often contradictory viewpoints, *a common theme that emerged, was students showing an explicit and implicit awareness of the fact that there are many viewpoints and perspectives that are silenced and not portrayed in most of the circulated texts shared and read within the school or home setting.* The following example illustrates this theme.

Mrs. P.      Okay that could be privilege too. Okay let’s go to the books that we read today. So we read Louise Say Please and we read Fly Away Home. So let’s talk about the differences between the two. So in Louise Say Please whose voices

were present?

Ryan Uhm white families, upper, middle and uhm that's it. Uhm class and white culture. And uhm that's basically it.

Mrs. P. Okay those were the voices that were present in the book. What about in *Fly Away Home*? Whose voice was present in *Fly Away*-

Don OH one family. Uhm in the airport there was a couple other people who were different races. Uhm there were- There were like uhm a working poor well they were homeless. So they were working, but they were still homeless because uhm cause their dad couldn't afford the rent for their apartment.

Taking it a step further within this theme, the students were able to stipulate “who benefits” from reading nonmainstream and mainstream texts and seemingly had shown an understanding that some readers benefit more from certain perspectives, in certain texts. The following example exemplifies this point.

Mrs. P. Okay so what? Do working class people benefit also? How? How do poor people and working class people benefit from reading *Tight Times*?

Don Because they can look and read that book and then say that's really me- That's me and I'm not the only person who lives

like that.

Mrs. P.     Okay *good*. They're relating.

Dion        Also working class people because they can picture themselves in the book and say that's me. That's my life. Then they can look at that book and they can see, sometimes they can see further down in the book and then- And then they can figure out a solution to ah have a better life.

The students were given many opportunities to interrogate texts by asking questions such as, "Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?" When reading and comparing nonmainstream and mainstream texts, the students were able to easily, though mechanically, answer the following "assigned" critical literacy questions: "Whose voices do you think are heard, and whose voices do you think are missing?" For example, the answers on written assignments included a repetition of the following, "white people, black people, Asian people, rich people, poor people, and the homeless." There were very few students that were able to independently expand on some of the issues we discussed in class. Most of the students had answers that seemed memorized from the discussion we had in class. *So a common theme that emerged was the students' ability to identify whose voice was missing and present in texts, however, this was done in a rote and mechanical way.* The following statement illustrates a typical student response within this theme.

Guy        There's- The voices that are present are uhm a white family. Uhm working poor- Well working- Well I don't know how to explain it, but their dad is working, but they're also-

They're homeless so it would be put together as working-poor homeless.

The following conversation further exemplifies this theme.

Don Ah the working class, the homeless and the poor.

Mrs. P. Okay their voice is not present in that story can you explain a little more why you know that?

Don Ah I know that because it doesn't like in Something Beautiful, it doesn't show anybody- Well it doesn't show anyone playing in a box or a shelter that they had to make because they didn't have a house. And it didn't show anybody like. . Like uhm like with all cut up clothes and scratches on and that looked like- That looked like they were never safe or anything.

### **Focusing on the Sociopolitical**

Broadly, this section of the framework emphasizes that our teaching practices do not bring an awareness to the sociopolitical systems that we belong to and frequently does not address how these sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language intersect and are inseparable from our teaching practices. More specifically, the data was categorized using the following predetermined codes as specified by this section of the framework: Critical literacy is seen as: a.) Attempting to understand the sociopolitical to which we belong and, b.) challenging the unquestioned legitimacy of power relationships by studying the relationship between language and power. For this dimension of the framework, I have summarised the main themes that evolved under these predetermined codes, and provide a few supporting student examples.



In an attempt to assist the students in understanding the sociopolitical system to which we belong, the concept of “social class” was explicitly taught to students and thereafter, it seemed that the students were better able to see how class was implicated in the texts that we read. This enabled the class to move beyond the personal and to begin to understand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong. *A theme that developed in this dimension was the students’ ability to use language that identified the different classes and as a result, the students acquired a “class consciousness” that they did not have before.* To illustrate this point, we turn to the student responses on the pre and post questionnaire.

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

money.” Although most responses varied, almost all of the students indicated that social class was not a “life choice.”

The students were especially interested in the stories we read about the homeless and the working poor and seemed to be very engaged in the conversations that pursued after the reading of each story. They were able to identify various scenarios as to who benefits from reading stories about the poor and the working class, although the prominent answer seemed to be that poor people benefit because they can see themselves in the story and not feel so alone, and that rich people may benefit because they may come to understand how poor people live and they may want to help them in some way (e.g., give money to food banks, homeless shelters, and help in repairing the destruction of homes during natural disasters). *As a result, one of the main themes that emerged was the students’ ability to point out the differences between social classes, in terms of which family had more money, more options, and more privileges.* Within this theme, the differences between each social class was made explicitly visible. The following student examples illustrate this point.

Roy           The upper classes have more privileges than the lower classes.

Mrs. P.       Can you give me an example Roy?

Roy           Well like Ryan said that you can just move it away ah. Like make money. The owners of the business, they can fire people and hire, but uhm the lower classes like uhm working-class they can really do anything. They can try their best to get hired, but the middle class they have like

more choices or jobs to go to.

Mrs. P. And would you be able to describe what that upper class person is like?

Guy Yeap.

Mrs. P. What would you say?

Guy Well I would say that they have a big house. They have uhm some power. Uhm I would guess that they had a very good education.

Mrs. P. Good. And what about a middle class person? What would you say they were like?

Guy Like me.

Mrs. P. Okay. What about a working class person?

Guy Uhhh, I would say. . . I just need a second to think about that. . . . I would think that they wouldn't have the best education like others. Maybe they didn't go to university or ah they would have a little, little amount of power.

Also, within this theme, it seemed as though the students had made great strides in terms of becoming more consciously aware of our social class system and how it impacts our “ways of being.” The following statement illustrates the students’ responses within this theme.

Mrs. Okay do you think that the people in Tight Times-

P. The boy in Tight Times do you think his privileges were different than Olivia's privileges?

All kids

Mrs. How were they different?

P.

Don Because uhm the boy in Tight Times got to go and sit out on the porch and Olivia got to go to the beach and she got *big* privileges.

Mrs. So a big privilege in Olivia would be like what?

P.

Don Like ah- Like going to a place. Like going to a highly populated place.

Mrs. Okay so travelling may be a privilege right. With a

P. family- an upper class family?

Kirk It's kind of the same thing. Like ah. . Like when his in Tight Times he has only like one privilege to get the cat and Olivia they get a lot of privileges.

Mrs. Okay? Can you name some of those privileges in

P. Olivia?

Kirk            Yeah. Going to the museum, reading books all the time, uhm being. . they spent time with her mother-

Mrs.            Uhummm

P.

Cam            Going to the beach.

Kirk            And they have some family time too. . In Tough Times he really only has one privilege to get the cat.

Mrs.            Okay that seems like the one privilege he has right?

P.              Now is having a dog and a cat a privilege to Olivia?

Cam            Yes

Don            No not really.

Cam            Not really.

Class conversation such as the one above, occurred when the class read stories contrasting mainstream and nonmainstream ways of “being” and “living,” and were asked to compare these stories. For example, the story “Tight Times” featured the life of a working class family, which was directly compared to another story entitled “Olivia,” which featured the life of an upper class family. From our class discussions, and in response to my leading questions, a few students seemed to understand that mainstream books represent the “white” middle-class “voice” and “ways of being” and that working class, working poor, impoverished, and homeless “voices” and “ways of being” were rarely, if ever, represented in texts.

### **Taking Action**

This dimension of the framework emphasizes that in order to take informed action against oppression or to promote social justice one must have understood and gained perspectives from the other three dimensions. More specifically, the data was categorized using the following predetermined codes as specified by this section of the framework: Critical literacy is used to achieve social justice by: 1.) Using language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question practices of privilege and injustice, 2.) using diverse forms of language as cultural resources and realizing how social action can change existing discourses and, 3.) by encouraging students to be border crossers in order to understand others. For this dimension of analysis, I have summarised the main themes that emerged under these predetermined codes, and provide a few supporting student examples.

The data provided several examples of how students used language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question the practices of privilege and social injustice. *A common theme that evolved in this dimension was the students' ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the stereotypes associated with gender, race, and social class.* For example, students reflected on whether or not the homeless are at fault for their circumstance. The class posed various scenarios of why a homeless person may have become homeless and the tendency was not to blame the homeless person for their circumstance. Furthermore, on the post questionnaire, about half of the students said that homeless people were not totally responsible for their circumstance, as they may have lost their job and all of their money or may have become sick, addicted to drugs or gambling. Almost all of the students said that we should help the homeless people by giving them money or donating to shelters or food banks. The following student examples further illustrates this point.

Mrs. P. Uhummm, and what if I asked you about homeless people and

asked you: Is it a homeless person's fault for being homeless? What do you think about that? Whose fault is it? If they're homeless, whose fault is it?

Toni Well if you're homeless I- You would have to listen to the story because then you'd understand whose fault it was.

Mrs. P. That's right and what do a lot of people do in terms of homeless people?

Toni Instead of uhm listening to the story. Okay it's your fault, *deal with it. Find a job.*

The following conversation further emphasizes this theme.

Todd Uhm, I learned that moving people to the wrong category could be messing up the human race.

Mrs. P. Okay are you talking about stereotyping? Okay so you're not talking about class necessarily? You're talking about stereotyping right? And how does stereotyping mess up that human race?

Todd Ah if we put girls into a category where they only have to do one thing and boys have to do one thing, then- Then no one is going to be unique.

Mrs. P. Okay-

Todd That's stereotyping.

Mrs. P. Absolutely. What else did you learn that sticks out in your

mind? . . . What else did you learn?

Maggie I'm- I'm not sure if that's uhm what he was saying? Uhm if you say that girls have to play with girl toys and boys have to play with- with boy toys, that's stereotyping. And you shouldn't uhm . . .

Mrs. P. Okay and what about- What do you remember specifically? Do you remember one class more than the other?

Cam Ruling class because like they're at the very top. They rule companies. Uhm they get to boss people around. They have a lot of money and they get more privileges than other- Other classes.

Mrs. P. Okay good so you said the word *privileges*. What does the word privilege mean?

Cam Like ah you get a chance to do something with- You get to go to a friend's house after school. That's a privilege. When you get to do something it's a privilege.

Mrs. P. Okay so what privileges do the ruling class-

Cam They get to own a company. Get a lot of money and *fire people*.

Mrs. P. Okay *good*. So you think firing people is a privilege?

All kids No.

Guy Uhm maybe to them it would be a privilege, but to us it kind of wouldn't be a privilege because that's not very nice, but



sometimes they have to do it to make more money.

Mrs. P. Okay and do you think that's fair?

Guy Well uhm not really. I think that they should just- If there was too much people and they had to fire some people and hire they should make like a bigger building.

Mrs. P. Okay good.

Guy So there would be less homeless people. Then they would also get more money and then they would be better.

Students were encouraged to be border crossers in order to understand others. The class read several nonmainstream books, which they either personally related to, or had realized the value of seeing and understanding the different ways of “being” and “living.” *Therefore, another theme that evolved was the students’ ability to cross cultural borders and gain a better understanding of “other” ways of “being” and “living.”* For example, the following classroom activity illustrates how students became border crossers and were better able to understand others.

The students were encouraged to bring in books that had personal meaning to them, and that they wanted to share with the class. One student, who had same-sex parents, brought in her book that portrayed various ways of “being” and “living” as a family. The book was entitled , “Families are Different.” She discussed her story and explained why the book was meaningful to her. The students then discussed their own personal stories of how their own families are different in various ways. Another student brought in a book entitled, “What is Adoption.” She also told the class about her adoption story and revealed how the book had helped her in dealing with some of the tensions that she faced during the adoption process.

When responding to the question, “Who benefits from this book?” the students responded that both adopted and non-adopted benefit from this book because the adopted reader can see him/herself in the book and the non-adopted could learn more about what it means to be adopted and what it feels like. There were many such opportunities for the class to discuss, who benefits, after reading a variety of nonmainstream texts of which I supplied. The students’ responses seemed to show that the students did cross cultural borders and gained a better understanding of the different ways of living and being. The following student examples further illustrate this theme.

Mrs. P. Why do people make fun? Why do people maybe not accept different names?

Katy Because-

Guy Because maybe they never heard a name like that. And they only have one name and if they were put in that position they would feel bad.

Mrs. P. Uhummm.

Lucas Maybe they’ve never been to the country where those names are used in.

Mrs. P. That’s right. So there are people who kind of make fun of those names. What do you guys think about this? People who make fun of the names it’s because they’re different right?

All kids *Yeah.*

Mrs. P. Is it fair to make someone feel bad because they are

different?

All kids *No.*

Mrs. P. Or because they have a different name?

All kids *No.*

Mrs. P. Do you think it's fair that all these people in the classroom and even those in the school have to change their names so that they don't feel bad? Is that fair?

Guy Well it's up to their choice, but it's not fair because-

Mrs. P. IT'S NOT FAIR because why?

Guy Because you should be thankful of your name. Well some people's names- Not everybody's, but some peoples their name actually comes from their grandparents and that's something to be proud about.

Cory Uhm, in Let's Talk About Race, the message was ah- ah inside we're all the same. We all look the same. And-

Mrs. P. Good, that was the message.

Roy And in Let's Talk About Race, I think the message he used like different kinds of people to send the message that if you make fun of people then there's really not point of it because you guys are just the same like- like your just the people under your skin and all. The ways he said it.

Don I think the message in Let's Talk About Race, is ah . uhm . . you think- you think we're all different- we're all different

on the outside but inside we're all the same.

Mrs. P. Okay.

Liam The message in Let's Talk About Race could have been if someone says that their better than you because of our race that isn't true. And we don't include our skin.

Mrs. P. Good uhm

Tavis In talk about race I know that people usually think that if somebody is different from them that usually they can't hang around with them or anything like that. That's not true because pretty much we all are the same. We're just from different places.

Mrs. P. Uhum, and what do you think about the one part that I said that's my favorite part when the author makes you judge how do you say my race is better than yours when you don't even know my name? What did that make you think of?

Tavis You have no idea what you are talking about.

Mrs. P. And why not?

Tavis Because if you don't know their name and you think that you know their race you really don't know what you are talking about.

Mrs. P. That's right and why not. So you don't know their name, so what else don't you know?

Don You don't know their personality just by looking at them.

You can't tell like what they like- What they are or like look at Cory I would just say he's a kid in St. Anne. He's white. I think he would have some friends. So, but some people might go above and beyond. Go beyond the subject and say lots of different things.

Tavin Lots of lies about-

The following comments also illustrate this theme.

Don If there was more books that had different cultures I think stereotyping would come down a little bit because people would start buying those books and then all those authors who would be making one race would say why is this. And then they'd understand it more. Like in this book. And then they would understand that it's important to make books..

Maggie To make books about *ONE RACE*. Because the only two cultures you ever really hear in books is black and white.

As a result of the above analysis, there is no doubt in my mind that the students became more “consciously” aware of stereotypes based on gender, race, and class. Nonetheless, I cannot attest to the depth of this awareness. Many of the students’ responses were mechanical in nature, and it was often difficult for me to figure out if they were merely responding with what “I” wanted to hear. Ideally, I would like to believe that after concluding my work with the students, they will continue to “question” the “normative” discourses that oppress “other” ways of being and living, especially as this pertains to issues of gender, race, and class. There were a few incidences that would support this transpiring. For instance, on the post questionnaire, in

response to the question, “Do you ever think about your own social class?” one student answered, “I never really thought about my social class very deeply until you came and taught us a lot more about it.” It is in the recollecting events such as this, that a small part of me has faith that the “critical questioning” will continue to blossom. However, for the most part, I remain sceptical.

Once again, it is important to note, that the researchers who suggested this CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) for data analysis have suggested that the same framework for data analysis may and should be used as a guide in order to construct a CL program that adheres to the prescribed tenets. Before I started the research, this seemed like a great idea. I unconsciously had a new and improved curriculum to follow, a desirable outcome to guide me through the messiness of CL. This CL framework, for data analysis, replaced the old curriculum with a new and *supposedly* liberating one, and at the same time, left me unintentionally trapped in my traditional pedagogical mode of teaching—simply transmitting the curriculum. I feel compelled to emphasize this to the readers who are about to venture off on a similar research path. Perhaps the upfront and honest retelling of the contradictions and tensions that I faced throughout this study may actually assist another researcher in their “messy” experience with critical pedagogy.

### **Data Analysis-Using Grounded Theory to Describe the Process of the Critical Literacy Program**

The above mentioned CL framework for data analysis directed me to utilize a mechanical functionalist account of how things work, or do not work. It guided me through the concrete and pragmatic task of documenting criteria which would show evidence that the students have

learned how to become critical text analysts. Interestingly, this mechanical mode of theorizing parallels the traditional teaching discourse, which objectifies the teaching experience as following a prescribed “map.” Within this “mapped” discourse, the teacher uncritically follows a preordained path that is already organized and complete, and is provided with all of the essential truths. The fact that this “teaching map” is historically contingent, socially constructed, and has fallen prey to cultural determinism remains unquestioned and thus insignificant within this mechanical mode of theorizing (Britzman, 1991).

In stark contrast, this next section of the data-analysis has enabled me to search for meaning by interpreting how the CL program was constructed through a critical lens. The opportunity to ponder over my data and research experience, within this interpretive and constructive mode of theorizing, has revealed how I have embraced, what Britzman (1991) has described as, the cultural myths of what it means to be a teacher, and how I have *begun* to struggle with resisting this taken-for-granted view of teaching and learning. For four weeks, I had pushed students to acknowledge, deconstruct, and reconstruct stereotypes as related to issues of gender, race, and class. While working with the students, and upon reflecting on my data and my experience, I had realized that *I* desperately needed to acknowledge the traditional “teacher stereotypes” that had been imposed on me, and begin the serious self-reflexive work of deconstruction and reconstruction. This was truly an “aha” moment for me.

### **Self-Reflexive Section**

Throughout the duration of this study, I became keenly aware of the *wide gap* that exists between *talking* and *reading* about critical literacy pedagogy, and attempting to “*live out*” and actually *practice* critical literacy pedagogy. My *active* classroom research experience has, to a

large extent, enabled me to make this statement with strong conviction. My research attempt at implementing a critical literacy practice had provided an opportunity for me to embark on a continuous “reflexive practice” which in turn enabled me to more fully understand how my mind and body had been deeply ingrained with the dominant cultural and traditional style of teaching and learning. For example, as this study evolved, certain ideologies -such as “authoritarian pedagogies”- which I had repeatedly come across in my readings, began to take on real meaning when I was able to “experience” their presence in the classroom *only when* attempting to resist their complex and forceful influence.

The point that I am trying to make is that upon venturing into the classroom to pursue this research, I was not prepared to resist or challenge the dominant educational transmission-style of pedagogy-which is antithetical to critical pedagogy- as I had not really understood the stronghold that this authoritarian discourse had on me. I believe the most valuable part of this study is premised on my experience of shifting epistemological views, which was only possible by venturing to put “critical literacy pedagogy” into practice, failing at this attempt, and then engaging in a “self-reflexive” practice to examine “why” my attempts had failed. As a result, the “reflexive practice” component of this thesis emerged unexpectedly, and I had not initially predicted that it would have impacted the research results to the extent that it has.

With this being noted, research does indicate that a “self reflexive practice” plays a very important part within this type of exploratory research. For example, Strong-Wilson (2004) explains that the value of reflexive practice is premised on the philosophical tradition that emphasizes that thinking is not separate from action, but rather is integrally tied to it. More specifically, within the context of education, and especially while learning to teach, Dunne



(1997) argues that the process of “prhonesis,” which is thought in action, should replace “techne,” which is thought before action. This confirms my observation that reading about critical literacy practices does not have the same ability to produce the kind of deeper understanding that occurs when actively attempting to “live out” critical literacy practices. Being in the spirit of “constructing knowledge” as of late, I will venture to nuance the saying, “easier said than done” and add, “easier read than done,” to describe the complex relationship between critical theory and the application of this theory into a teaching practice.

Another major revelation that occurred while engaged in the “active” teaching phase of this study, was how I had previously positioned myself and the students in regards to our epistemological perspective of knowledge attainment. Knowledge, as perceived in many traditional classrooms, was *not* something that was created by the students nor the teacher, rather it was a set of unquestioned, and arbitrarily chosen facts that were mechanically imposed by the teacher onto the students. In *unconsciously* utilizing this epistemological perspective of “procedural knowledge,”-which is more fully explained in the “discussion” section- I had disempowered myself and my students from the ability to create liberating classrooms which are founded on the principles of “knowledge construction.” *At this juncture*, a very personal and complex shift of epistemological perspectives had transpired and this shift strengthened the value and justification of my own observations that stemmed from my “reflexive practice.” Let me attempt to explain. I began to internalize and deeply understand the value of the epistemological perspective of “knowledge construction.” As a result, I started to view the students’ and my own subjective and contextual ways of being and knowing as more valid and essential, in the process of transformation, then ever before. This is why I stress the importance of the “self reflexive” component of this study.

To unravel some of the complexity of my own personal experience, as described above, I have presented the reader with the following research based explanations of “personal epistemological shifts,” as this process was an integral part of this research. Dunne (1997) explains that being in a situation calls for interacting, interacting generates knowledge and over time, that knowledge will lead to better teaching experiences. As a result, one’s teaching experience may be shaped and continuously improved by *constructing one’s subjective knowledge* through a reflexive practice. Therefore, reflexive practice should be intimately connected to our daily teaching practice (Dunne, 1997). As this study unfolded, it became clear that a large portion of the findings and conclusions had organically evolved from a continuous self-reflexive practice. Forbes (2008) concisely summarizes this process by emphasizing the following:

“...in transformative moments of thought, the self continually remakes itself as it makes its current knowledge positions and identifications permeable. Within the fluxes and trajectories of this reflexive inquiry I explore the ruptures and shifts by which, through a specifically epistemologically oriented reflexive approach, the functions and effects of the of the unitary concept of the “stable self” that had been caught and accepted in previous ways of producing knowledge are re-examined, called into question and subverted.” (p. 450)

This type of epistemological reflexivity, which was undertaken throughout the duration of the whole study, directly influenced important changes in my own “ways of knowing and being.” The insights gained through searching for meaning by way of reflexive practice, has also reaffirmed how vital the dialogical relationship between students and teachers is in establishing a

liberating learning and teaching environment that empowers students to be inquisitive knowledge seekers. The grounded theory, presented in the “discussion” section, elaborates on this claim as well as other significant aspects of this research experience. It is important for the reader to keep in mind that the grounded theory would not have evolved as it did, without the “self reflexive” practice that continuously took place throughout this study.

### ***A Brief Synopsis of “How I Use to Be” and “How I Think I Have Changed”***

I use to pride myself on being a “*stable*” individual and teacher that valued the character traits of hard work, discipline, and always “being your best” and the journey to “becoming” this “*stable*” person was largely contributed to my overexposure of self-help books during my early twenties. I truly believed that I was “self-made” and that the trajectory of my life was completely dependent on my actions and inactions. If this was true for me, it must be true for everyone else, so I thought. Hence, I had been oblivious to how my world view, which was shaped by an epistemology of “procedural knowledge” *in the best of times*, had been engulfed by the neoliberal agenda of free enterprise and individualism, and the ideological freedom to live and create your own life, which is also tagged with the ideological individual freedom and taken-for-granted ability to solve your own problems.

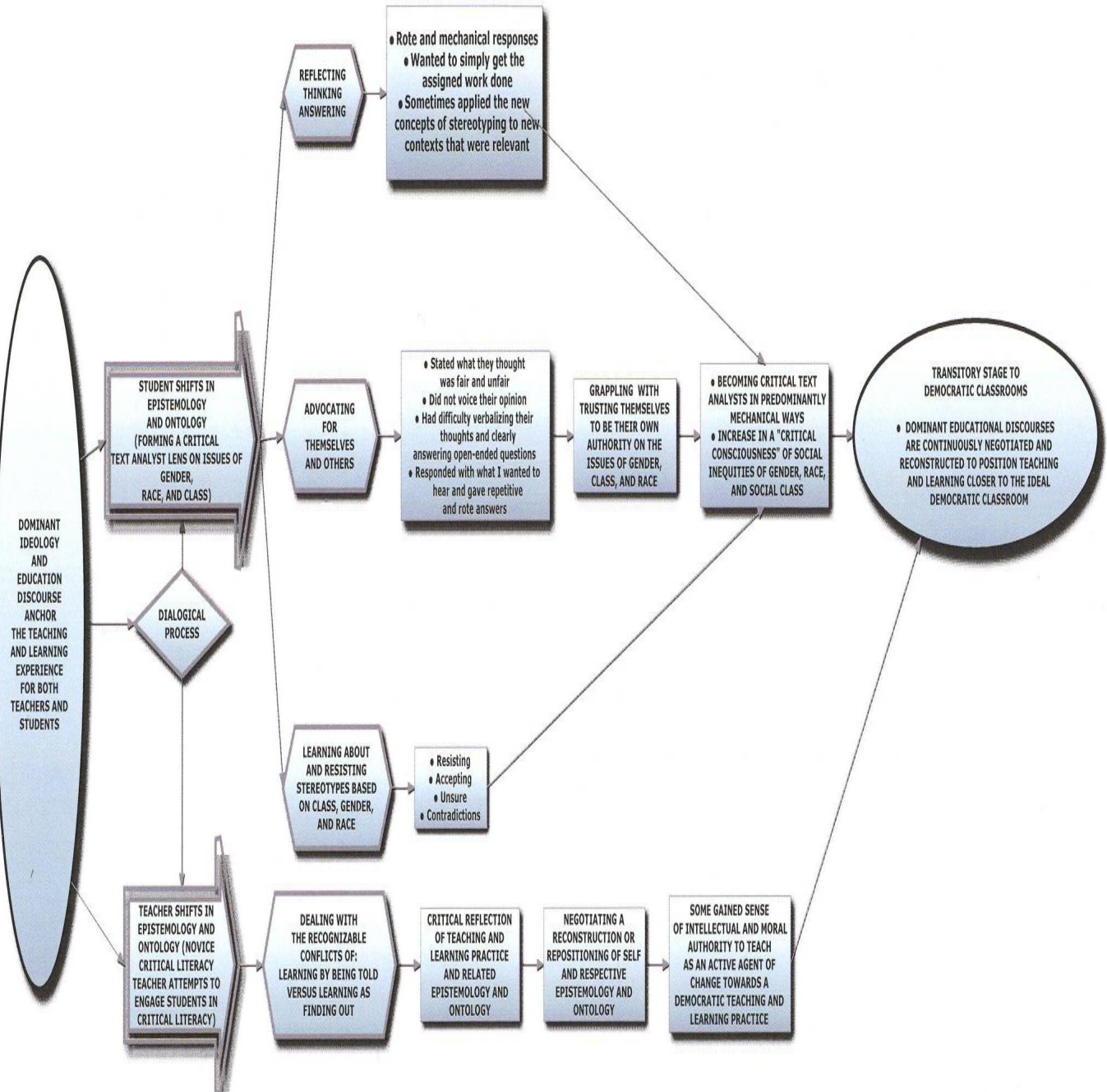
Throughout this thesis research, I have been able to counteract some of these false and deeply ingrained beliefs, by coming to realize that our society is inequitably structured and dominated by a hegemonic culture that suppresses a consideration and understanding of why things are the way they are, and what must be done for things to be otherwise (Britzman, 1991). In having the opportunity to actually “construct my own knowledge,” it seems as though my world view has shifted and I have become, an empowered “learner” and “teacher.” By the way, this “shifting” of

epistemology was largely influenced to my “outstanding” thesis advisor, who really was the first teacher that I had ever encountered that entrusted me with this kind of learning. I can only hope, that one day, I will be in a position to present this gift to students of my own.

## **Grounded Theory**

Immediately following, Figure 1.0 illustrates the process of “How the CL program unfolded?” and the discussion below answers “Why it unfolded in such a way?” This theory was developed using the Glaserian (1992) method of grounded theory, and the data set included three hours worth of transcribed focus group interviews, daily field notes, students’ assignments, and the students’ responses on a pre and post questionnaire. The theory described herein also directly answers the main research question in this study: How do grade five students, in a low SES school, respond to a CL program? Each section of the theory is described in the discussion section.

Figure 1.0 The process showing how the Critical Literacy program unfolded.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The discussion section will focus on explaining the process of how the critical literacy classroom experience unfolded by explaining the grounded theory, and thus will address the main question in this study: How do grade five students, within a low SES school, respond to a critical literacy program? The answers to the sub-questions were extrapolated from the CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006), and are summarized towards the end of this section.

So first, we will start by describing some of the sections from diagram 1.0, as this diagram presents a visual depiction of the process of the CL teaching and learning experience. However, since there is a dialogical relationship between the teacher and the student within this theory, it is difficult to separate sections into teacher and student experiences, so I have combined the student experiences within the sections that also describe the teaching experience. As I discuss each section, I refer to the titled corresponding shapes as depicted in the visual representation of Figure 1.0.

It is important to note, that the disconnected shapes that visually suggest a distinct phenomena, were not in fact isolated from one another, but rather were all interrelated and overlapping within the CL teaching and learning experience. Part of the challenge of this study was to disentangle all of these elements in order to provide the reader with an understanding of how the process unfolded. In reality, the process was much more intricate than depicted in the illustration, however, it was necessary to present the phenomena as “disentangled” in order to further elaborate on certain aspects of the varying experiences.

## **The Anchors of Dominant Educational Discourse**

The very left hand side of the diagram, which is a sideways ellipse, represents the state of current dominant educational discourse. It is pertinent to acknowledge that this research has been situated, better yet and more accurately, anchored, within the broader context of education. Though a discussion on educational discourses should not be reduced to a few key points, but rather, should be acknowledged as being a complex entity that is in continuous flux, it would be impossible to examine all the perplexities of this discourse within this thesis. Therefore, while acknowledging this complexity, for the purpose of this theory, we will examine a few prominent issues within the current dominant educational discourse that are relevant to this particular theory.

Firstly, Ontario's educational policy documents seem to accurately describe the current focus and purpose of schools. These documents emphasize an outcome-based learning environment which offers a very narrow scope of learning, limits and controls the potential vision of teachers and learners, and does not acknowledge the range of diversity and ecology within classrooms (Strong-Wilson, 2004). Although the documents specified for the elementary schools claim the need for a holistic approach to teaching and learning, they provide lists of overall and specific "expectations" that students are required to reach. The issue of accountability and standardized testing further stress the ultimate priority of downloading the curriculum onto students.

Ontario's educational policy documents fail to acknowledge the meaningful experiences of either learners or teachers, and responds superficially to the diversity and ecology of students (Strong-Wilson, 2004). Also, and detrimentally, these educational policies form an internal contradiction that imposes a rigid, lock-step system upon an integrative vision of teaching and

learning that is meaningful and engaging. Within this dominant educational discourse, knowledge is not constructed by the students, but rather the curriculum is transmitted from the teacher to the student and is often absorbed as the taken-for-granted “essential truth,” which is not to be questioned nor critically examined (Britzman, 1991 :Segall, 2002). In effect, many teachers and students work within a “factory like model” wherein teachers input the facts, as prescribed by the curriculum, and the students provide these inputs as their outputs in the form of papers and tests (Britzman, 1991). These descriptions seem to mirror the context of the school and classroom of where I was conducting the research, and that of my own previous teaching practice, although I realize that this may not be the case for all schools.

### **The Shifting Epistemological and Ontological Views of Both, the Novice Critical Literacy Teacher and Students as a Dialogical Process**

The two thick arrows represent the shifting epistemological and ontological views of both, the novice critical literacy teacher and of the grade five students. The relationship between the two is described as a dialogical process (as depicted by the diamond) in which the actions of either party intervenes in complex ways and affects one another. Since this research was premised on tenets of participatory action research, conscious efforts were made to respond to the needs and actions of the students throughout the process, and to intentionally implement and tailor critical literacy theory into the teaching practice as much as possible. Britzman (1991) points out that socialization is not simply what happens to people as they move through a set of experiences. Rather, especially in the context of teaching, it is also necessary to think about *what students make happen, because of what happens to them* (Britzman, 1991). The Ontario curriculum does not emphasize learning that is dialogic, nor does it acknowledge the complex negotiations that



occur among people as part of the consequences of learning. The relationships between learners and teachers are not simply linear in nature, leading to single specified outcomes, but rather, are responsive to and shaped by feedback. An ideal and democratic vision and description of curriculum should take into account these complex and recursive processes in education (Strong-Wilson, 2004).

### **Dealing with the Recognizable Conflicts**

The bottom hexagon represents an important “part of the process” where I was forced to deal with some conflicts within my teaching practice. The dialogical process of teaching and learning seem to be at least partly observable and *somewhat* measurable. For example, one key observation that exemplifies this dialogical relationship and caused a conflict for me taking on the role as a CL teacher, was that rote and mechanical teaching (which included the downloading of the criteria that could be regurgitated to produce evidence of becoming a “critical text analyst” as specified in the CL framework) produced rote answers and mechanical understanding. This observation was a true surprise to me, as I was aware that rote questions would lead to rote answers, and had *anticipated* using Freire’s (2000) problem posing method as my main tool of teaching. From this point on, I attempted to make a conscious effort to apply a reflexive practice when examining the dialogical relationship between the teacher and the students, and I was determined to resist and to refashion this dominant “factory model” of educational discourse. The realization that critical literacy is most definitely, “easier read than done” really began to hit home.

As a result of my continuous struggle to teach in a liberating fashion in which students were encouraged to self-generate knowledge, one of the main outcomes of this entire study, was

identifying and acknowledging the epistemological conflicts of “*learning by being told*” versus “*learning by finding out*.” From the outset, this realization seems rather simplistic and easily correctable. However, upon further examination, it has opened up a very complex can of worms of which has made me cringe over and over again while examining my data, as I have come to realize that many aspects of the critical literacy practice that I implemented are antithetical to critical pedagogy. However, and thankfully, the concept of “cultural determinism” has allowed me, to at least partially, forgive myself, while the social constructivist lens has given me the hope to *begin* the journey of negotiating the reconstruction of my own “teaching identity” which will hopefully have a positive impact on my teaching practice. Of equal importance, the social constructivist lens has also enabled me to *attempt* to grapple with a new epistemology which deeply values the “construction of knowledge.” This epistemology contradicts and is opposed to the dominant educational practice of simply transmitting, taken-for-granted knowledge from the teacher to the students (downloading the facts and accepting them as the “essential truths”). Let me elaborate in the following two sections.

### **Pedagogic Habitus and Cultural Myths**

In reflecting on my CL teaching practice, which consisted of: Moving forward with an agenda to aid students in becoming critical text analysts via my CL literacy framework (my new and improved curriculum); my compulsive nature of putting the answers in the student’s head; asking leading questions which were sure to elicit the response I was intending; and continuously positively reinforcing the answers that I wanted to hear; I started to realize that something was wrong with my teaching approach and that my good intentions and a passionate desire to make a difference did not aid in achieving the liberating pedagogy that I had strived for. The reality was

that I had contradicted many of the democratic ideals that I had planned to integrate into this teaching experience.

In my search for an explanation, I had come across some research that suggested that a teacher's "literate" habitus fundamentally effects how she or he will go about teaching literacy (Janks, 2000). Bourdieu (1991) uses the term "habitus" to explain our deeply ingrained and unconscious ways of being. These internalized schemas embody our beliefs, values and ways of being and doing things. These embodied ways of being are very resistant to change (Bourdieu, 1991). Changing our pedagogic habitus and ingraining a new one, requires meticulous and constant attention, as our old habits are just below the surface. As Janks (2000) explains below, just as our habitus is difficult to change, so too, is it difficult to change our "pedagogic habitus":

Our pedagogic habitus is formed by years spent in school as students, by the teachers who taught us, the books we have read, the education departments and schools we have worked in and the colleagues we have worked with. It is embodied in the way we talk to children, where we position ourselves in the classroom, how we stand, what we do with our eyes, and how we expect our students to comport themselves. Our embodied practices are bound up with ingrained beliefs about education and what we value in students. We have to want to change and we have to work at it. (p. 201)

From my own experience throughout this research, it seemed as though transforming one's pedagogic habitus may be a lengthy process that requires an ongoing commitment to change and that long-term commitment needs to be fuelled by valuing the outcome of that change. In this case, the eventual outcome would be creating a teaching and learning practice that reflects the liberating aspects of a critical pedagogy and embraces democratic ideals. With this goal intact,

the difficult journey of pedagogical transformation became something that I wanted to “live” and “experience” and not just theorize and talk about.

During the third and fourth week within the classroom, I worked hard to make conscious changes in my teaching and learning practice. I *frequently* found myself abruptly discontinuing my sentences mid-way through speaking as I suddenly realized that I was about to give answers away, put my agenda in the student’s head, or positively reinforce the answers that I wanted to hear. Instead, I attempted to use Freire’s (2000) “problem posing” method of learning in a very conscious and almost forceful way. I had to constantly focus on my new agenda, which was to transfer power and control away from myself and entrust it to the students so that they may grapple with constructing *their own* knowledge. So for example, when the students would come up to me and ask, “Mrs. is this what you were looking for?” in regards to their answers to the assigned critical literacy questions, my response was, “I want to know what *you* think, and remember there are no right or wrong answers.”

While observing how the students reacted to this change in expectations, it seemed as though they often resisted taking on this power and control. They struggled with trusting themselves to be their own authority on issues of gender, race, and class equity. The students wanted to be told what to do, and then their aim was to do the assigned task as quickly as possible. Also, they seemed to want the answers rather than finding the answers on their own, and they often asked for confirmation or reassurance of what they had wrote within their assignments. The value seemed to be in simply getting the work done versus valuing and being engaged in the process of constructing *their own* knowledge. What could I expect, their school life had been *anchored* in a “banking style” of education and it seemed that their “student identity” and “school related

habitus” reflected this reality. It seemed that they also would need an extended period of time to transform their “oppressed student identity” into one that values choice, exploration, and educational experiences that are valuable and meaningful to them. The disappointing reality seemed to be that this type of transformation would only be possible if the students were immersed in a *continuous* educational experience that emphasized and encouraged the values and democratic pedagogical practices that espoused *their own* “construction of knowledge.”

In further researching and reflecting on the many “why” questions that I grappled with, I came across some research that became pivotal in my search for meaning. Britzman’s (1991) work on the “naturalized” cultural myths that teachers often incorporate into their own “teaching” identity was a major revelation. I had never realized the extent of which my own “teaching identity” was socially constructed. Britzman (1991) explains that due to the mass experience with public education, teaching has become one of the most familiar professions within our culture. Due to this overexposure, certain prescribed teaching orientations and dispositions tend to dominate our thinking, and legitimate and naturalize specific teaching practices. Therefore, pedagogy is not founded on the production of knowledge, but rather on public image. This public teaching image prescribes that: 1.) Everything that happens in the classroom depends on the teacher, 2.) the teacher is the expert and, 3.) the teacher is self-made (Britzman, 1991). I will briefly explain each cultural myth, as these dramatically impacted my epistemological perspectives.

### **The “Three Teaching Cultural Myths”**

The first cultural myth, “everything depends on the teacher” is premised on the “normative” cultural expectation within compulsory education that the teacher must establish control of the

classroom or there will be no learning, and if the teacher does not control the students, the students will control the teacher (Britzman, 1991). Therefore, the students' learning is viewed as a product of social control. This pressure to control impacts both, the style of teaching practice *and it constructs views about knowledge and the knower* (Britzman, 1991). Again, this was a key realization for me while carrying out this study. The institutional mandate to control students so that they can learn, had forced me to practice a pedagogy that transmitted knowledge rather than acknowledging or exploring teaching practices that produce knowledge and examine our relationship to it. Critical literacy pedagogy is founded on the premise that *students are not just learners, rather, they arrive in the classroom already knowledgeable*. This essential point is disregarded, when teachers play out the role of an institutional authority figure and unilaterally control the students and the learning. This explains my experience in the classroom during this study, although, I was not completely aware of this at the time.

The second cultural myth, "the teacher is expert" is premised on yet another "normative" cultural expectation that "good" teachers must know *how to teach* and be *highly informed on the curriculum* that they are teaching. "Teaching methods" are applied like recipes in a "methods-as-end discourse," and prevent the teachers, like myself, to understand how methodology can work against itself (Britzman, 1991). In regards to the pressure to know everything, teachers often feel compelled to be certain with their knowledge and in effect present information as facts not to be questioned. Therefore, while "living" out this myth, knowledge is reduced to the immediate problem of knowing the answers and transmitting these answers. Likewise, teachers who master the curriculum are perceived as highly competent and skilled, however, in reality this type of knowledge is confined to multiple years of textbook usage and re-iteration. "The teacher is expert" myth distracts us from realizing that knowledge is a construct that can be

deconstructed and transformed by the learner (Britzman, 1991). In addition, it prevents us from critically questioning and exploring how we come to know, how we learn, and how we are taught.

The final cultural myth, “teachers are self-made” brings our attention to the notion that we really believe that our teaching is a product of our own experience, our own unique process of “learning how to teach,” and that we develop our own self-directed teaching “styles” without any outside influences. The myth that teachers “make themselves” directs us into an essentialist discourse that devalues reflecting on “how we come to know” and in essence, we ignore the historical forces and institutional structures that shape our teaching identity (Britzman, 1991). The “we are self-made” beliefs alienate us from the reality that our pedagogy is highly influenced by complex social interactions, school cultures, and the larger social world. This myth exaggerates the role of personal autonomy within teaching and encourages a stance of anti-intellectualism (Britzman, 1991).

All three of these entrenched teaching personas contradict the tenets of critical pedagogy, reaffirm a false sense of power by the teacher, and are antithetical to creating democratic classrooms that acknowledge the oppressive inequities of gender, race, and class. Astonishingly, these three teaching myths had been acculturated into the fabric of my being. The one positive thing that I can say at this point, is that I have acknowledged the issues of gender, race, and class as these issues have formed the foundation of my study. But again, good intentions and a passion to make a difference, do not guarantee real and meaningful change. Rather, as I am finding in my search for meaning, the construction of knowledge has the potential to mobilize the power needed to create individual change. The *collective* construction of knowledge, would then seem to have the potential to transform the structural inequities that are so heavily entrenched.

The first myth, everything that happens in the classroom depends on the teacher, creates a binary between students and teachers and de-emphasizes the subjective examination of the vital dialogical relationship between students and teachers. The second myth, teacher is the expert, legitimates the dominant transmission-style of pedagogy and does not realize the value in the subjective construction of knowledge. The third myth, teacher is self-made, distracts us from understanding that our teaching identity is historically contingent and, to a large extent is, socially constructed. All of these myths blur and obscure our ability to search for meaning and to negotiate, deconstruct and reconstruct, our teaching identities and teaching practices. In turn, we neglect to address the abundant social inequities and then attempt to transform the oppressive dominant educational discourses into democratically based institutions that value the construction of knowledge by all of its citizens.

Simply advising a teacher to “know themselves well and be aware of their biases” before they engage in an attempt to endorse critical pedagogy, which by the way, this advice is ubiquitous in all of the critical literacy studies, is an understatement to put it mildly. The subjective search for meaning, for the *novice* critical pedagogue should be an intense process, which warrants a deep understanding of how “educational discourses” and “personal identities” are historically contingent, socially constructed, and embedded with “naturalized” hegemonic overtones of power. As Giroux (1988) has emphasized, teachers must take a responsible role in shaping the purposes and conditions of schooling by continuously raising serious questions about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what larger goals are they striving to achieve.

I will admit that I still have a lot to learn, although one thing I can say for sure is that, I will have greater power over what I want to learn and how I want to learn it, and I will attempt to do



my best to facilitate this “freedom of learning” to my students. Giroux (1985) points out that teachers should themselves engage in the process of becoming transformed intellectuals if they are to premise their critical pedagogy on educating students that are active and critical citizens. I do believe that I have taken one step forward into the journey of transformation by disclosing the tensions that I have encountered. Dealing with these tensions through reflexivity has led me to shift epistemological perspectives on many levels. Hopefully, this thesis may assist someone else in their own subjective search for meaning when struggling within the paradigm of contradictions.

### **Critical Reflection of My Own Learning and Teaching**

The first square at the bottom of the diagram represents my own critical reflection of my critical literacy teaching practice. In my personal attempt to make sense of why my critical literacy teaching practice presented me with all sorts of tensions and contradictions, I have opened up a mental space for modifying my previous “stable” and “predictable” teaching identity. Teaching, it *now* seems to me, should not be an “objective” role that one can step into, and then attempt, at all costs, to live up to the “public image” of a good teacher. Rather than focusing on the “how” of teaching, teachers should continually question “why” do we teach the way we do. In beginning a “subjective” search to the “why” questions, I have realized how orientations to power, knowledge, and teaching identity intersect and have far reaching implications for our teaching practices, our students, and our society.

For example, as Britzman (1991) has pointed out, the repressive model of teacher identity prescribes that teachers constrain their subjectivity to assume an objective persona. Within this realm, the teacher’s identity and the teacher’s role become one of the same. However, and as I

have come to personally experience, a teacher's identity, and the culturally prescribed teacher's role does not have to be one of the same. This is where many of the contradictions and tensions occur. To further elaborate, roles are about functions, and functions can be prescribed, but identity cannot. Identity requires consent, and can be socially negotiated (Britzman, 1991). Acknowledging and acting on this gained perspective, seems to have broken the cycle of blindly following the preordained path of "teaching" and has made me deeply think about what I truly value about learning and teaching.

### **Negotiating a Reconstruction or Repositioning of Teacher Identity and Teaching Practice (second square at the bottom of the diagram)**

If I want to truly empower students, it is essential that I continue to reflect on my teaching practice, and make a committed effort to deconstruct and reconstruct both, my teaching identity and teaching practice. During this study, I have realized the incredible value in establishing a teaching practice that is founded on the epistemological perspective of "constructed knowledge" as opposed to the epistemological perspective of "receiving knowledge." The latter epistemology supports a transmission-style of pedagogy which seems to have dominated our educational systems. The epistemology of "receiving knowledge" implicitly cultivates passivity and conformity which is antithetical to agency and the social transformation needed to create an equitable and democratic society (Roosevelt, 1998).

Also, it is important to note, that certain epistemological perspectives, or varied ways of knowing, are complexly shaped by multiple intersecting factors, such as our gender, race, social class, schooling, community, and families, and different epistemologies produce varied forms of power and empowerment (Belenky et. al,1986). Belenky et. al (1986) refers to five types of

constructed epistemologies: 1.) Silence-an epistemological stance that takes on unintelligence and silence and is subject to think and act in accordance with external authorities, 2.) Received Knowledge-an epistemology that endorses the ability to receive knowledge and reproduce knowledge from a higher authority, but cannot create knowledge on their own, 3.) Subjective Knowledge-a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited, 4.) Procedural Knowledge-an epistemology that values and invests in learning and applies objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge and, 5.) Constructed Knowledge-an epistemological perspective that views knowledge as contextual, and has the ability to experience the creation of knowledge, and values both the subjective and objective strategies for knowing. Our ability to position ourselves in the world, make sense of our world, theorize and act to intervene in these circumstances are contingent upon which of these epistemological views of knowledge we practice and endorse (Belenky et. al, 1996). Therefore, ways of knowing are intricately related to relations of power. Here we can see how knowledge, power, and identity intersect to create our life trajectories and experiences. Again, one can see how vitally important it is to see the value of promoting the epistemology of “constructive knowledge” within classrooms, as this form of knowledge truly sets the stage for individual empowerment and potential transformational change.

### **Feeling Some Sense of Earned Intellectual and Moral Authority to Teach**

The third square at the bottom of the diagram reflects this area. This component of the theory espouses yet another newly gained epistemological stance. Firstly, it is necessary to explain the difference between being “authoritarian” and being an “authority” within the classroom, and how this implicated the construction of the critical literacy program. The term “authority” in the

context of teaching and critical pedagogy, can be categorized as an “empowering type of authority,” or a “repressive type of authority” (Gore, 1993).

An “empowering type of authority” is endorsed by the “true” critical pedagogue in order to empower students with teaching practices that are liberating, with the intention to transform society. The “repressive type of authority,” which is more closely associated with authoritarianism, is enacted in the dominant style of transmission pedagogy, where the teacher is viewed as “all powerful” and “all knowing” and controls all the aspects of learning (Gore, 1993). Herein is where my tensions also surfaced during this study. I frequently had discussions with my thesis advisor about explicit and implicit teaching, and had questioned when and if, one was more justified over the other. My teaching practice mostly reflected a “repressive style type of authority” which was evidenced by the fact that, *I had imposed my agenda*, of “becoming critical text analysts and creating an awareness of the inequities of gender, race, and class,” onto the students. This was what *I* truly felt was important for the students to learn and I was determined to teach this to them. What I had realized by the end of the study, was that I had downloaded my own curriculum onto the students, at the expense of guiding them to “construct their own knowledge,” finding their own voice, and leading them to a path of liberation.

So where do we go from here? This was a question I pondered about for a while, until I came across some research that emphasizes that the fundamental task of, learning to teach, and forming a strong teaching identity, is directly founded on *earning* “intellectual and moral authority”(Roosevelt, 1998). Intellectual and moral authority are *earned* when one is committed to the process of continually “*learning to teach well.*” In our commitment to teach well, Roosevelt (1998) suggests we become active agents that recognize the multitude of conflicts and

contradictions that surface in our teaching realities, and it is in our continuous struggle to resolve these contradictions and conflicts that earns us the “moral and intellectual authority” to teach. As Britzman (1991) concisely emphasizes:

Indeed, negotiating among what may seem to be conflicting visions, disparaging considerations, and contesting interpretations about social practice and teacher’s identity is part of the hidden work of learning to teach. This unmapped territory, then, must be chartered in ways that can permit a double consciousness of how systemic constraints become lived as individual dilemmas. (p. 3)

The felt sense of duty and responsibility that is present in our desire to “teach well,” will push us to negotiate external educational mandates, affirm, reject, or challenge certain meanings and ways of being, and critically examine our orientations to power and control (Roosevelt, 1998). It is this self-reflective examination, meaningful reconstruction of our practices, and constant justification of what we are teaching, how are we teaching, and why are we teaching this way, that earns us the “moral and intellectual authority to teach” (Roosevelt, 1998). Roosevelt (1998) has shed some positive light on my personal experience with implementing a critical literacy program. In disclosing the personal conflicts that I faced throughout this study and in my decision to be completely transparent, there does seem to be at least some gained sense of a “moral and intellectual authority to teach.” I do believe that I have come to a place in my “learning about teaching,” in which I have become, at least a bit better, “intellectually” positioned to carry forward in teaching critical literacy in a more “liberating” way. In terms of “moral authority,” I do believe that I will continue to be committed in my journey to “teaching

well,” however, the sense of duty to “teach well” has now moved beyond “having good intentions” and “wanting to make a difference.”

### **Transitory Stage to Developing a Democratic Classroom**

Throughout this study, I have been forward about the fact that I did not create the critical literacy teaching and learning experience that I had anticipated. However, I also have come to realize that I had, from the beginning, unintentionally set myself up for failure, in my naive and reductionist thinking. I believed that I could simply download a critical literacy agenda onto the students and at the end of it all, I could claim that my mission was accomplished. As you have seen, my attempt as a critical pedagogue, has brought to the forefront, the complexities of critical pedagogy, and has implicated my epistemological perspectives of knowledge, power, and identity in very significant ways. Although, I cannot assert that I have created a liberating teaching environment, I do believe that the failed attempt, and the “constructive” learning that occurred during the messiness of the process, has created an “initial transitory space,” that has moved my teaching practice away from the dominant transmission-style of pedagogy (left ellipse in diagram 1.0) and all that it entails, towards the *real potential* of constructing a truly democratic teaching practice (right ellipse in diagram 1.0). Hence, the ellipse on the very right of diagram 1.0 resembles this “transitory space.”

### **The Key Findings for Subquestions**

Here is a summarized version of the key findings for the subquestions which were extrapolated from the existing CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) extensively discussed in the “Results” section:

1.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language shapes identity? The students learned that stereotypes, based on gender, race, and class, are prevalent in texts and are often unquestioned and naturalized as “normative ways of being.” This was evident in our conversations when students frequently made reference to the fact that children can be “brainwashed” by these “normative” stereotypes by believing that we must conform to the messages and expectations of these stereotypes.

2.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language constructs cultural discourse? The students also seemed to understand that some authors intentionally resist the traditional gendered, raced, and class stereotypes by using non-stereotypical characters, settings, and plots as a way to show the reader that there is more than one way of being. The students seemed to realize that the majority of texts show dominant ways of “being” and “living” and that these messages “brainwash” small children on how to “be” and how “they should live their lives.” As a result, the students also became aware of how stereotypical characters often limit and restrict “other ways of being” for those children that don’t fit in with dominant ways of being.

3.) How will the process of a critical literacy program enable students to understand how language supports or disrupts the status quo and, 4.) how will the process of a critical literacy program engage students to reflect on multiple viewpoints and contradictory perspectives? In comparing nonmainstream and mainstream texts, the students examined, discussed, and questioned the legitimacy of these differing, and often contradictory viewpoints. As a result, the students seemed to become aware of the fact that there are many viewpoints and perspectives that are silenced and not portrayed in most of the circulated texts shared and read within the school or home setting. The students were able to stipulate “who benefits” from reading

nonmainstream and mainstream texts and seemingly had shown an understanding that some readers benefit more from certain perspectives, in certain texts.

5.) How will the process of a critical literacy program encourage students to take social action in an attempt to resist or change existing discourses? Students were encouraged to be border crossers in order to understand others. The class read several nonmainstream books, which they either personally related to, or had realized the value of seeing and understanding the different ways of “being” and “living.” Nonmainstream ways of “being” and “living” were acknowledged, legitimated, and their associated stereotypes were deconstructed and reconstructed.

As mentioned previously, the CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006)) for data analysis directed me to utilize a mechanical functionalist account of how things work, or do not work. It guided me through the concrete and pragmatic task of documenting criteria which would show evidence that the students have learned how to become critical text analysts. I would like to emphasize yet again, that this CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) used for data analysis is, and should continue to be, interpreted with caution and speculation. One may conclude from the outset, that there was indeed evidence that the students in the classroom have become critical text analysts. However, within a critical literacy pedagogy context, the fundamental question that is not addressed in this section of the data analysis is “*how*” the students arrived at the responses that they had provided? What must be added in this particular analysis is a dimension that stipulates whether or not the students constructed their own knowledge, or whether their responses were simply regurgitated information that was imposed by the teacher, as is typically the case in dominant transmission-styles of pedagogy. I have been very transparent in the fact, that this section of the data-analysis should remain open to



speculation as most of the student responses were in fact mechanical in nature and their logic was frequently imposed by me.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

One of the major limitations of this study was taking on the role of both the teacher and the researcher. Initially, as suggested by Spradley (1980), taking on both roles simultaneously seemed like the ideal “insider” position which could result in gathering a more personal perspective of the events that occurred. However, playing out both of these roles in the classroom proved to be a very challenging task as it seemed too difficult to “teach” and “observe” at the same time. Teaching required my constant attention as my teaching practice was constantly tailored to meet the needs of both, individual students and the group at large. While being in the “moment” of helping individual students or engaging the group in discussions, I very likely missed out on many significant observations that may have been very revealing and relevant to the outcome of the study.

In addition, when playing the role of the researcher and attempting to accurately record what had transpired in the classroom by way of field notes, my mind sometimes could not recollect all of the pertinent details, as it seemed that so much had happened in a such a short period. I did my best to document all of the main events in a sequential format and I did make notes on the key statements and responses made by students, however, it seemed like some of my observations were lacking in detail. Thus, this study may have yielded a richer and deeper data set if the “teacher” role was carried out by one team member, while the “researcher” role was carried out by a second member of a research team. If each person played out one distinct role, then perhaps

each role could be better planned out and implemented, and as a result, a clearer and more accurate depiction of the experience could be created.

Another limitation that is common in similar critical literacy studies is the short time-frame available to carry out a critical literacy study. This particular classroom teacher was very generous with his time, and often accommodated my study when there were changes in the routine class schedules due to school-wide activities. However, there is only so much time a classroom teacher can realistically give up to a researcher, and researchers are also bounded by setting reasonable time-frames for conducting their research. Consequently, it was difficult for me to get to know all of the students personally and to build the level of rapport necessary for students to feel safe in discussing issues that are of a personal nature. Therefore, a four week critical literacy program may not have been long enough to establish the rapport required for the students to feel comfortable with being forthcoming with their personal experiences and opinions on the issues of gender, race, and class inequity.

Another aspect of this study that may have limited certain findings and conclusions is that it was conducted in only one classroom, within one school, and was limited to one city. It would be very interesting to examine if conducting a similar study within a new context, location, and/or culture, would yield similar results, or if the outcome would be different. This comparison is not plausible since the research was conducted in only “one” selected classroom.

One must also acknowledge that the process of facilitating students to become critically literate encourages students to explore language, literature, and recognize social justice issues in *various forms*. The one common theme observed within critical literacy lessons is that students are encouraged to examine the power relationships that are found in language and literature and realize that language is never neutral (Shor, 1999). *However, critical literacy looks different in*

*every classroom*, as it is based on specific student population needs, perspectives, and inquiries. Therefore, there is no universal formula for how teachers engage students in the mastery of critical literacy. As a result, this study does not attempt to present the novice critical pedagogue with a descriptive procedure for implementing critical literacy, nor does it guarantee a successful critical literacy practice.

Shor (1999) maintains that developing a pedagogy that includes critical literacy is an organic process that continually needs to be revisited and refined. In light of this, this study acknowledges the problem of generalizing results to other similar student populations. Nonetheless, the researcher suggests that this study may provide a deeper understanding of critical literacy practices and an effective starting point for other teachers interested in evolving their own critical literacy pedagogy. In addition, Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint (2006) have found that many critical literacy research publications do not present the reader with a detailed account of methodology. In light of this, this study may also help other participatory action researchers who seek to study critical literacy within the classroom setting.

### **Implications For Future Research**

Within Ontario's educational context, there has been a serious concern about the negative impact that results from the "lived" reality of gender, race, and social class inequity. For example, The "Roots of Youth Violence Report" (McMurtry & Curling, 2008) has emphasized that both, the severity and amount of youth violence is sharply increasing. The youth violence that occurs in some neighbourhoods and schools has been attributed to the severe and concentrated growing disadvantages (e.g., systemic racism, inequality, and poverty) between children. The changing demographics within Ontario, which include a high percent of "English Language Learners" must also be addressed in order to counter the increase in violence. This

group of students has not been given enough access to the necessary school support. The report stresses that Ontario has not placed an adequate focus on these concentrations of disadvantage. In addition, researchers have found that racism is increasingly becoming a more serious and entrenched problem because Ontario is not dealing with it. A large part of the problem is that these children are viewed as causing the problems versus being the victims of severe disadvantage. Overall, the report clarifies that significant new investments in education are not reaching many of the children who need the most help because long-identified barriers to learning are not being addressed.

Another contributing cause of youth violence is a lack of a “youth voice.” Disadvantaged and discriminated youth have always felt alienated from society and the alienation is reinforced when they do not have opportunities to be heard about the issues that directly impact their lives. This can lead to a negative concept of self, a greater distrust of authority, a sense of powerlessness and a sense of exclusion from the broader community. The absence of their voices in many areas of immediate importance to them sends a message of limited opportunity as well as excluding the youth perspective from many decisions. What further exacerbates the problem of alienation, is that many nonmainstream students do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Therefore, they do not experience the education system as personally relevant, and rather, they perceive their academic achievements, themselves and their families as less important to society.

Research has also justified the need to address issues of gender inequity within schools and within society at large. The “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls” (American Psychological Association, 2011) has documented the undeniable reality that women and young girls are sexualized in virtually every media, including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet and advertising. In

study after study, findings have indicated that women more often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner (e.g., dressed in revealing clothing, with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness) and are objectified (e.g., used as decorative objects or as body parts rather than a whole person). In addition, a narrow and unrealistic standard of physical beauty is heavily emphasized. These are the models of femininity presented for young girls to study and emulate. Cognitively, self-objectification has been repeatedly shown to detract from the ability to concentrate and focus one's attention, thus leading to impaired performance on mental activities such as mathematical computations or logical reasoning. All of these findings justify the need to address gender equity issues with school-aged children.

Public education and policy makers can and should address the issues of gender, race, and social class inequity by addressing root causes of these inequities. A good place to begin would be a comprehensive attempt to change the social attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate an attitude of "these children and families have caused their own problems" and begin to understand that these children are part of an inequitably structured society that advantages some groups over others. In order to be effective in this pursuit, public education initiatives need to encourage all community members to take an active role in *shifting social norms* to prevent and begin to eliminate the inequities based on gender, race, and social class. There needs to be a concerted effort to positively shape attitudes at an early age by promoting healthy, equal relationships among children and youth. There is an urgent need to teach critical skills in reading, viewing and consuming texts, focusing specifically on the power differentials that exist in society that blatantly benefit some groups over others.

Critical literacy is one school-based instructional approach that has the potential to: 1.) Increase an "awareness" of the issues of gender, race, and social class inequity and, 2.) give

students' a "voice" to speak freely about the issues that deeply affect their daily lives and, 3.) and to begin the process of changing the existing gendered, raced, and classed stereotypes that devalue "other" ways of "being" and create new societal "norms" that value difference. The critical literacy practice that I suggest in this study has the potential to address these issues.

As Janks (2010) points out, the acknowledgement and legitimation of the "differences" between discourses can be productive in that they can lead our society into new discourses which include alternative ways of being and encourage new social identities. Janks (2010) emphasizes that acknowledging and valuing diversity within schools could be key to making students form a new discourse by:

Making students feel at ease with continuous, intense change; comfortable with sharp differences of culture and social values met every day; [so that the] treat them as normal, as unremarkable and natural; above all, as an essential productive resource for innovation rather than as a cause for anxiety and anger. (p. 25)

The attempt to create equitable and inclusive classrooms, by utilizing a critical literacy pedagogy, will no doubt be a "messy" process as was experienced in this research study. However, one way to positively view the "messiness" is to appreciate the cultural collisions within this pedagogy as a driving force that enables us to remediate and represent our world. This is precisely what is needed to produce the creative energy that is vital in transformation and change (Janks, 2010). In order to begin this process of change, we must firstly bring a critical awareness to the issues of gender, race, and social class inequity. This study has attempted to achieve this goal and suggests that critical literacy pedagogy is complicated and needs to be fine tuned continuously. Nonetheless, we must all start somewhere, and this research suggests a starting place for the "novice" critical literacy teacher. The following section will address how

the research findings can be utilized and explored in future studies, and I make recommendations as to how certain aspects of this research can be improved on.

### Improving and Building on the CL Framework

This existing CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) did provide me with a sufficient amount of predetermined codes in terms of categorizing most of my data set. From here, I was able to develop at least two or three themes within each of the four CL critical literacy domains. These themes are illustrated in Figure 2.0.

*Table 2.0. The Themes Found in Each of the Four Domains of the CL Framework*

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

However, there were some sections of my data that did not fit into the predetermined codes and thus did not enable me to develop additional themes. For instance, there were a significant

amount of student responses that did not directly answer the critical literacy questions that I had asked, but rather these responses seemed to veer off into a completely unrelated topic. For example, when asking, “Who benefits from this text?” one student responded that her mom went to Banff and won’t be back until the end of the week. There were a few times during our focus group conversations that the dialogue seemed to get off topic. Therefore, perhaps a new predetermined code entitled, “Unrelated Responses” could be incorporated into this CL Framework. This would be a good way to keep track of how often the students digressed onto nonrelated topics, and perhaps after further examination, the initially coded nonrelated responses may be related once more contextual information on the students is gathered.

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

The predetermined code of “Contradictions” may also reveal how students struggle with resisting certain stereotypes. For example, in responding to the story “William’s Doll,” one of the students said that William should be allowed to play with dolls so that when he grows up, he will be a good dad and will be able to take care of his baby when the mom is not around. In discussing gender stereotypes, one student responded, “There are no such things as girl things, it



is just that more girls choose to do girl things.” The significant amount of contradictions in this study warranted a separate predetermined code for further themes to be developed in this area.

Furthermore, the newly developed themes (refer to chart above) created as a result of the utilizing the predetermined codes in the existing CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006) may be used as a new CL framework when working with students in the junior grades. The language used to describe these themes/predetermined codes are more practical and concrete for this age group and seem to lessen the abstraction that was present in the CL framework developed by Lewison, Van Sluys, and Flint (2006). A teacher may find this framework more straight forward and adaptable to his/her group of *junior* grade students. Personally, I found that using the term “stereotype” was productive with this age group as they have been exposed to this term and have applied it to other contexts. In addition to this CL framework, I would suggest that future researchers add the other predetermined codes suggested earlier, such as “No Opinion Voiced,” and “Contradictions.”

While utilizing this CL framework (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006), the focus for me became, *what the students will learn* at the expense of *how they will learn it*. Even though, I had planned on using Freire’s (2000) problem posing method of teaching and learning, many of the questions I had posed were leading questions, and if the students did not come forth with answers that fit with my notion of the correct answer, I often imposed what I wanted to hear. When the students did say what I wanted to hear, they were positively reinforced. In fact, the EA’s and the teachers in the classroom wanted, so kindly, to assist me in *my* agenda, that they imposed my message on the children when they were not able to produce answers themselves, when they struggled, or if their answers seemed off topic. I had the audacity to frown upon these interactions, while I had observed them occurring. In retrospect, I had no right to pass judgement

on these frequent occurrences, especially when my own actions paralleled this type of controlling and domineering teaching environment. My description of the personal struggle to teach in alignment with critical pedagogy, while at the same time using a CL framework for teaching and researching critical literacy, has been complicated and messy.

Therefore, the one thing that other future researchers should keep in mind, is to constantly self-check and student-check *how* the students are learning throughout the CL program. Are the students empowered to self-generate the knowledge by being prompted and explicitly taught only when necessary, or is the teacher imposing his/her agenda on the students in order to create the data results that are needed to fit the framework. This is significant, as within the context of critical literacy pedagogy, we must try to avoid a scenario of the “oppressed” teacher further “oppressing” the students by engaging in an authoritarian pedagogy and imposing his/her agenda onto the students.

Upon further thinking about all of the issues that I have encountered throughout this entire teaching and researching experience, another possible suggestion for future research would be to explore what would occur if the students were inspired to literally create their own “Framework” for learning and for sharing what they have learned with their classmates and the world. This would alleviate the problem of imposing an agenda and would certainly be aligned with teaching practices that are truly liberating and empowering to both the teacher and the student. The mere thought may initially seem frightening for most teachers, however, it would force us to give up the deeply ingrained control and truly resist the authoritarian pedagogy that we seem to be so wedded to.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

After closely examining all of the collected data, and drawing on other related research, it seems I have gained some deep insight into the real and challenging reality of transforming my previous traditional, pedagogical style of teaching-which, embarrassingly though admittedly, embraced the banking style of education- into a truly critical pedagogy. Even though I was completely aware of the fact, that Freire's (2000) "problem posing" mode of teaching and learning is a productive approach for fostering a teaching and learning environment that attempts to liberate students, deep within myself, there was an unconscious resistance to implement this style of pedagogy. My natural teaching inclinations of downloading the curriculum, taking control of the classroom, and my intent to save the children via *making them* aware of the issues of gender, race, and class, had taken over my mind and my body. In retrospect, it seems as if a strange and alien force had automatically and unconsciously surfaced while I stepped into the role of the "classroom teacher."

Despite the fact that, my intentions of fostering a classroom that was premised on the tenets of critical literacy, was clearly stipulated in my thesis and in my vision of *our* classroom practice, I often reverted to a traditional style of mechanical learning where *my* input was regurgitated by the students and ultimately became their output, as evidenced in many of our class discussions and written assignments. For example, in response to the question, "Who's voice is missing?" Most of the students responded with rote answers like, "Black families, native-aboriginals, Asian people, and homeless people were missing from the story." When asked, "Who benefits from this text?" most of the students responded with answers such as, "The upper class benefits

because they can see how poor people live and maybe they will try to help them,” or “Poor people will benefit because they can see themselves in the book and be able to relate.”

In retrospect, my pedagogic habitus was infiltrated with a taken-for-granted, deeply rooted, assertion of power and authority. Naturally, I was suppose to have the power, and of course all of the answers, as I was the “classroom teacher.” Upon reflecting on the research, I have realized this mindset has often been wrongfully *naturalized* and *unquestioned*, and consequently, in reality, it renders both the teacher and students powerless. Transmitting facts to students does not empower them, rather it perpetuates and legitimates a construction of knowledge that is restrictive, oppressive, and degrading. I use the term “degrading,” because it seems as though, within this paradigm, students are viewed as little robots that should be programmed to think in a certain way, and only about certain things. This type of educational process would perhaps create a very stable and predictable society, one which would conform to the established dominant ideologies and support and reproduce the unquestioned normative ways of being.

I don’t want dominant influences silently shaping my attempts at creating a learning environment that is empowering to the students. Take gender, for example. As Britzman asserts (1991), the public image of being a *female teacher* adheres to patriarchal conventions (e.g. women are viewed as classroom martyrs *or* as unintelligent) and notions of a unitary non-contradictory teaching identity. To further elaborate, a teacher’s role is viewed as predictable and objective and therefore immune to changing circumstances or incapable of intervening as they are not encouraged to be subjective- hence, how is the teacher suppose to encourage students to construct their own knowledge, when many teachers don’t value or attempt to construct their own subjective knowledge?

In order to attempt to resist the power of dominant ideologies, it seems as though we must confront how deeply they are carved within us, not just by merely reading about theories on resistance, but by attempting to put these theories into practice. Then, when we fail miserably, we may experience and better come to know how resilient these forces are, and hopefully become increasingly better prepared to reconceptualize our own “teaching identities” and our “teaching practices.” This transmission-style of teaching and learning seems to be “natural” and “normative” for many teachers and therefore, we can assume that most teachers are not accurately viewing their teaching and learning practices through a “critical lens.” In attempting to facilitate a critical literacy pedagogy, it is essential that we “practice what we preach” and begin to resist the dominant ideologies that reproduce the status quo and continue to oppress some groups at the expense of others.

My research experience with CL has led me to believe that one may talk and theorize about CL extensively, however, without attempting to put CL theory into practice, one may remain oblivious of how deeply entrenched the dominant ideologies are worked out within ourselves. With that being said, I am sure that there are many more teaching moments that I have had, and will continue to have, that seem “instinctive” in nature, although upon further reflection, I may realize that these supposed “instincts” are in fact further evidence of the powerful influence of internalized relations of power. Consequently, I may inadvertently glorify the dominance of a few (the teacher) and the oppression of many (the students). This cold and hard reality was difficult for me to face.

Many of my “aha” moments throughout this research experience brought me to a place of humility as I continued to own the fact that I had contradicted what I had set out to do. I

continuously found myself cringing as my data kept revealing my manipulative teaching approach. I had an agenda, the students were going to become critical text analysts, and I was going to show them the way. This became very apparent during the beginning of my third week with the children. At that point, I did make a very conscious effort to change my mode of teaching. And there was some progress during that time. However, I often caught myself beginning to tell the children what I wanted them to learn and think, and had to abruptly stop myself and make comments like, “I should not be telling you what I think, I would like to know what is in your head, and remember, there are no right or wrong answers.”

As well, I am not sure if I would have even realized my inclinations to teach traditionally so early in the process, had it not been for the very valuable conversations that I had with my thesis advisor, of whom it seems, embraces the value in the “construction of one’s own knowledge.” I am very grateful in having had the opportunity to work with my generous and supportive thesis advisor, who helped me grapple through the messiness of subjectively *constructing my own meaning, in my own way and on my own terms*. Any novice critical pedagogue could most definitely benefit from a mentor/advisor who consistently exemplifies through his/her own teaching practice, the values essential in establishing an empowering and democratic student – teacher relationship. Even though every so often, I just wanted to shout, just tell me what *you* mean and what *you* think I should know, I am now very glad that he refrained from doing so and am very aware of the valuable experience that resulted from “not being told the answers.”

In all my years of being a student and a teacher, my thesis advisor was the first person that I had the privilege to encounter that seemed to have a different teaching style, one of which really stood out amongst the rest of the learning environments that I had been involved with. Students

were empowered and engaged during his class and there was something within this teaching style that I was captivated by. The one thing that I know, for sure, about myself, is that I don't like being told what to do or how to think, and on a deeper level I must have known that this is precisely how I was teaching my students and that there was something inherently flawed with this teaching approach. In the same way that I don't like being told what to do or how to do it, I have come to see that students, if given the opportunity, would likely come to find that they prefer to learn in their own way, on their own terms, and would prefer to examine and explore questions that are meaningful to them, rather than being told what to learn and being explicitly shown how to learn it.

I have never trusted in the ability of the students to take control of their own learning. This was something I should have explored within the CL program immediately from the very beginning. In the process of "not trusting students," the students were, yet again, silenced in terms of not having a "voice" to explore and share the things that were really valuable and important to them and their lives. Furthermore, the students were never allowed to question what they have learned. They were not encouraged to search for their own answers that are meaningful within their own contexts, spaces, and times. This is precisely what the "construction of knowledge" entails, and it is this type of learning and teaching that is truly empowering to both the students and teachers. Learning to facilitate a critical pedagogy and establishing classroom practices that are founded on democratic principles, which require the epistemological perspective of "constructive knowledge," is directly related to understanding how one is positioned and responsive to particular orientations of power, knowledge, and identity. Teachers must acknowledge the authoritarian discourses that shape their "teaching identity" and thereafter begin to resist the ingrained cultural teaching myths that objectify the role of the teacher, and

thus render teachers powerless in the process of change and transformation. The common cultural saying, “let’s get real” has taken on a new meaningful paradigm for me. Perhaps by sharing my struggles in the process of “learning to teach well,” others may be inspired to begin and share their own subjective experience of “getting real” when they are in the midst of realizing that critical pedagogy is “easier read than done.”



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APPENDIX A: The Pre and Post Questionnaire

Student Pre-test and Post-test Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

1.) What is social class?

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2.) Do people choose the social class they belong to? Please explain your answer.

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3.) How does a poor person become poor?

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4.) Should people help the poor?

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5.) What can people do to help the poor?

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6.) Can you name a person from the upper class?

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If so, describe this upper class person. Explain what they look like, act like, and talk like:

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7.) Can you name a person from the middle class?

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If so, describe this middle class person. Explain what they look like, act like, and talk like:

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8.) Can you name a person from the working class?

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If so, describe this working class person. Explain what they look like, act like, and talk like:

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9.) Why are some people homeless?

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10.) Does a person's social class really matter to you?

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11.) Do you ever think about your own social class?

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12.) Do you compare your social class to that of others?

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13.) What does the word “stereotype” mean to you?

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14.) Do you believe that girls should wear pink and boys should wear blue?  
Explain why or why not.

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15.) Do you think that all girls should play with girl toys like dolls and that all boys should play boy toys, like trucks? Explain why or why not.

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16.) Do you believe that girls listen to instructions more than boys? Explain why or why not.

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17.) How do you think girls should act in school? Explain why you think so.

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18.) How do you think boys should act in school? Explain why you think so.

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19.) Based on your experience, please explain how girls play together at recess.

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20.) Based on your experience, please explain how boys play together at recess.

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21.) What does the term “racial discrimination” mean to you?

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22.) Are some cultures sometimes treated differently? Please explain.

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23.) Do you believe that all people, regardless of their race, culture, gender, and social class are treated the same?

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24.) Do you ever stop to think about an author’s story and question why the author wrote the story in a certain way?

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25.) What is meant by the term “point of view” and why is it important to think about the “point of view” when reading a book or watching T.V.? Please explain.

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26.) Do you believe that some “points of view” are more used in texts and media, more than others? Please explain your answer.

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27.) Have you ever read a story and rewritten it, so that it makes more sense to you? If so, explain why you did that and how it made you feel.

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28.) Do you ever want to be like any of the characters that you read about or see on T.V. Please explain which character and why you want to be like them?

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29.) Do you ever read a story and think, that is not the way my family is? Please explain.

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30.) Do you ever see messages in texts or the media and know right away that that the message does not include your “point of view”, or that it does not apply to you? Please explain your answer.

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31.) When your classmates and you read a story, with the teacher in small reading groups, do you think that everyone in the group hears the same message or thinks about the same things that you do? Please explain.

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## APPENDIX B: Sample List of Resources

### **Gender Equity Resources:**

Oliver Button is a Sissy  
Tomie dePaola

Cinder Edna  
Ellen Jackson, Kevin O'malley

Williams Doll  
Charlotte Zolotow and Willaim Pene Du Bois

Do Princesses Wear Hiking Boots?  
Carmela LaVigna Coyle , Mike Gordon , Carl Gordon

The Paper Bag Princess (Classic Munsch)  
Robert N. Munsch, Michael Martchenko

The Princess Knight  
Cornelia Funke, Kerstin Meyer

Anna Banana and Me  
Lenore Blegvad, Erik Blegvad

Boy, Can He Dance!  
Eileen Spinelli, Paul Yalowitz

### **Video Resources:**

Sexism, Strength and Dominance: Masculinity in Disney Films:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CWMct35oFY&feature=related>

Disney Effects on Society:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsy3BblcjCA>

### **Social Class Equity Resources:**

Lily and the Paper Man  
Rebecca Upjohn

The Lady in the Box  
Ann McGovern, Marni Backer



A Kids' Guide to Hunger & Homelessness: How to Take Action!  
Cathryn Berger Kaye M.A.

Fly Away Home  
Eve Bunting, Ronald Himler

A Day's Work  
Eve Bunting, Ronald Himler

Tight Times (Picture Puffins)  
Barbara Shook Hazen, Trina Schart Hyman

**Racial Stereotyping Resources:**

Back of the Bus  
Aaron Reynolds

Willie`s Not the Hugging Kind  
Joyce Durham Barrett

The Other Side  
Jacqueline Woodson

Amazing Grace  
Caroline Binch and Mary Hoffman

APPENDIX C: The series of “Critical Literacy” Questions that were used during the study

QUESTION SERIES #1:

Who authored this text?

Why did the author write this text?

Who benefits from this text?

What voices are being heard?

Whose voices are left out?

Is there another point of view?

How is gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, etc. portrayed in this text?

What if this story were told from the perspective of a different character?

How is the reader positioned in the text?

What are the design features of this text? Why were they included?

How does the message in the story relate to your own life?

QUESTION SERIES #2:

How is your understanding of the text influenced by your background?

How is the text influencing you, e.g., does the form of the text influence how you construct meaning?

How does the language in a text position you as reader, e.g., does the use of passive or active voice position you in a particular way?

What view of the world and what values does the text present?

What assumptions about your values and beliefs does the text make?

What perspectives are omitted?

Whose interests are served by the text?

### QUESTION SERIES #3:

Who were the ALLIES in the story/short film? Please explain why you think so.

Who were the BYSTANDERS in the story/film? Please explain why you think so.

Who were the TARGETS in the story/film? Please explain why you think so.

Who were the PERPETRATORS in the story/film? Please explain why you think so.

What character do you identify with and why?

Which character do you like the most and why?

Which character do you dislike the most and why?

How would you change the story ending?

How would you change the story plot?

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Description of the critical literacy tools for “Question Series #3”:

- **ALLIES**-those who help the targets in a situation where others are treated unfairly
- **BYSTANDERS**-do not exacerbate nor help
- **TARGETS**-are the individuals or groups to whom injustices are being targeted
- **PERPETRATORS**-direct verbal, physical, or social violence or injustices toward the targets

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### Four Dimension of Critical Literacy

#### **DISRUPTING THE COMMON PLACE**

Critical literacy is conceptualized as seeing the “everyday” through new lenses.

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

#### **CONSIDERING MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS**

Understanding experience and texts from our own perspective and the viewpoints of others, and to consider these various perspective concurrently.

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

#### **FOCUSING ON THE SOCIOPOLITICAL**

Examines how socio-political, power relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable from our teaching.

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

#### **TAKING ACTION**

In order to take informed action against oppression or to promote social justice, one must have understood and gained perspectives from the other three dimensions.

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

## VITA AUCTORIS

Barbara Pollard was born in Poland and immigrated to this country, with her parents, when she was two years old. She has one younger sister named Eva of whom she adores. Barbara is married to her loving husband Kevin Pollard and they have two very active and spirited young children. Her adventurous life journey as a female Canadian immigrant has encompassed both many challenging struggles and many celebratory accomplishments within an educational and social context. She has been immersed in a wide array of culturally diverse and rich experiences that have contributed to her passion in researching issues pertaining to the various social inequities of class, race, and gender. She has currently been accepted into the “PhD in Education” program at the University of Windsor and plans to continue exploring the areas of social inequity and how these issues are implicated within educational paradigms.