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Amy Michelle Geilman
Brigham Young University - Provo

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A Challenging and Rewarding Process: Implementing Critical Literacy

Instruction in a Middle School Classroom

Amy M. Geilman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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Master of Arts

Roni Jo Draper, Chair
Kendra Hall-Kenyon
James S. Jacobs

Department of Teacher Education

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

A Challenging and Rewarding Process: Implementing Critical Literacy

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This action research study focuses on a teacher's experiences while implementing critical literacy instruction in a seventh grade language arts class. Throughout the unit, a tension between teacher control and student autonomy emerged in three areas: discussion (teacher-directed and student-directed), curriculum (teacher choices and student choices), and student text comprehension (surface and critical). Finding the balance between teacher control and student autonomy was difficult. When these two elements were not balanced, the classroom experience for everyone was mediocre. When they were balanced correctly the entire classroom community had positive experiences that advanced student learning. Critical literacy instruction, though difficult to implement, was useful in helping students become literate, critical thinkers who can successfully participate in democratic society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Language arts teachers work to help students think deeply about texts and connect them to the world outside the classroom. While the core curriculum given to most teachers reflects that goal, the parts of the core tested are often restricted to a basic set of literacy abilities. In today's culture of high-stakes testing, there is so much pressure to increase test scores that language arts classes become focused on repeatedly practicing the limited set of skills included on those standardized tests. So even though the original goal of most teachers is to help students build the literacy skills needed to participate effectively in society, this objective is often set aside in favor of test preparation.

While the preparation of students for standardized tests has its good points, it does not do enough to meet the original and necessary goal: preparing students to participate in society effectively. Since good literacy skills are vital to that goal, literacy educators have a responsibility to guide students to do more than just complete their assignments. Students need to build the thinking and literacy skills that will prepare them to effectively participate in America's democratic way of life, which depends on a democratic exchange of ideas. Democratic, in this sense, does not refer to a political party but instead denotes the shared commitment of a group of people who work to create a society in which ideas and opinions about life can be discussed and debated. Dewey (1916) defines democracy as "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 83). Shared experience does not always lead to harmony, though. A dialogue about issues facing society must be nurtured in order to maintain a respectful exchange of ideas that allows for all opinions to be expressed. As Dewey (1916) suggests, "it is a matter of deliberate effort to sustain and extend" democracy (p. 84).

Education is vital to the continuation of this exchange because it is in schools that people learn the skills of literacy: reading, writing, discussion, and critical thinking. Literacy skills preserve democracy in at least two ways. First, American government depends upon citizens who can make informed choices as they vote (Dewey, 1916). The ability to understand another's point of view allows people to discern among candidates and proposed laws. Second, democracy must be characterized by "the widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities" (Dewey, 1916, p. 83). To handle the increasingly complex issues that arise in society, all voices should have a share in the conversation. Literacy is the way people get to join in the dialogue. They must be able to consider others' ideas and create their own.

In order to access and understand various points of view, people must be able to read, listen, and view from a critical perspective. They must think deeply about ideas presented to them, and then express their own thoughts to other people. Schools are charged with helping students to develop these abilities. Language arts teachers, in particular, are expected to guide students as they learn to find, comprehend, and critically analyze various types of text. The standardized tests discussed previously are meant to ensure that students have gained these skills. However, because the test scores have become so influential, the goal of preparing students to participate effectively in society has been moved to the background and the more immediate goal of increasing test scores has taken the foreground.

Statement of the Problem

It is the responsibility of literacy educators, even in a culture of high-stakes testing, to help students learn to read various types of text, analyze those writings, and then engage in a respectful but honest and open debate about the validity of the ideas offered. The discussion of

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text can lead to deeper understanding of other people and the societal issues facing the world. The success of individuals, and ultimately of democracy, is largely dependent on this process. While this type of teaching is expected of educators and is even taught in teacher preparation methods courses, the actual implementation of a critical literacy approach in the classroom is inconsistent and fragmented. Text has come to include a wide variety of forms of expression, including writing, speaking, performing, or creating objects: anything "that people generate or use to make meaning" (Wade & Moje, 2000, p. 610). Since this broad definition of text has increased the complexity of literacy, it has also amplified the complexity of literacy education.

Teaching students strategies and skills for understanding various types of text is nothing new. Much research supports the use of strategy instruction for building comprehension (e.g., Bakken, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1997; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Muth, 1987), and many practitioner resources provide guides for effective teaching of strategies (e.g., Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Tovani, 2000; Tovani, 2004). However, many teachers stop at this point, feeling that because they have given their students tools to understand text, their jobs are done. Students, though, need to engage with texts for authentic purposes that connect to the real world and provide opportunities to build the skills—comprehension of text, analysis of textual ideas, communication of individual ideas, and involvement in discussion—needed to participate in democracy.

This type of textual interaction is integral to a critical literacy approach to teaching. When students are taught to read this way, they think not only about the surface meaning of a text, but also about the "ways in which texts are constructed in social, political, and historical contexts" (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006, p. 44). Teachers urge students to examine the author's decisions when writing and then to consider how the author's choices affect readers' perceptions

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of the ideas presented (Bean & Moni, 2003). The analysis of a text, an author's intent, and a reader's response builds democratic thinking skills necessary in today's complex society.

Coupled with a critical literacy approach, the inquiry process—exploring a topic through reading various types of text, discussing those texts, and then expressing ideas learned from the experience—can provide the structure teachers need to guide students as they develop democratic literacy skills. Students can "come to understand that they are able to acquire knowledge they desire, in virtually any content domain," and they gain insight that "is empowering" (Kuhn, Black, Keselman, & Kaplan, 2000, p. 496).

While there is research that stresses the importance of critical literacy skills, there is not much literature directed at the actual implementation of critical literacy instruction in the classroom. In this age of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability, many teachers are reluctant to try something new—critical literacy instruction—and instead choose to focus on what they are familiar with—basic comprehension instruction. Consequently, much of critical literacy theory stays in the realm of theory instead of moving into the world of practical implementation.

This, however, can be changed. Teachers can themselves become researchers and document the process of infusing classroom curriculum with critical literacy, thereby expanding the educational community's understanding of what is needed to move critical literacy into the classroom. To do this, though, teacher-researchers must follow accepted educational research methods. Action research is just such a method.

Action research is a process that "enables [teachers] to reflect on [their] teaching in a systematic way" (Norton, 2009, p. 23). Teacher-researchers move through a cycle of steps to address an educational problem (Creswell, 2008). The names and number of steps in the cycle

vary depending on which action research model is being followed, but they consistently move an educator to identify an issue and work to understand it, figure out and implement a plan, and evaluate the effects of the implementation. Torbert (2001) names four phases that represent an effective action research cycle: *visioning* (an educator imagines the possibilities of what could happen), *strategizing* (the educator determines what to implement and creates lesson plans), *performing* (the educator implements the plan), and *assessing* (the educator analyzes what took place during the cycle). When individual teachers undertake an action research cycle and share it with others, they contribute to the educational community's understanding of what is really happening in schools. Teachers improve their own practice and help others to do the same. Using the action research process teacher-researchers can move critical literacy into the mainstream American classroom.

Research Purpose and Question

Combining critical literacy, inquiry, reading comprehension, and democratic discussion in one classroom is difficult and largely unexplored. Many questions arise. Can students be moved to a higher level of understanding and thinking while still covering the required curriculum? Is it possible to take these theoretical ideas and translate them into the practical world of day-to-day teaching? What is this process like? This study documents this complicated process, seeking to answer the following research question: What is the experience of a language arts teacher as she implements a classroom inquiry unit wherein students, through the lens of critical literacy, read and discuss various types of text to explore an idea?

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

As part of the first phase of the action research process, *visioning,* teachers need to explore educational theories, research studies, and position papers connected to their chosen study topic. Since I am choosing to study critical literacy and its implementation into a classroom, my visioning process began with building background knowledge about the topics connected to critical literacy. Therefore, I studied literacy and its historical standards, the teaching of comprehension strategies, critical literacy, democracy, discussion, inquiry in the classroom, and, finally, how all of those ideas relate to each other. This research provided me with a cohesive philosophical basis for putting critical literacy instruction into practice in the classroom. In this review of literature, I will examine each of these topics in depth.

Literacy and Its Beginnings

To understand where literacy is moving in the future, it is important to understand how it was viewed in the past. Resnick and Resnick (1977) assert that the criteria for being considered literate have changed over time; they have become more demanding as societies have evolved. A careful study of literacy and its beginnings supports this notion. During the Middle Ages, being literate meant one could read, write, and speak Latin, regardless of the actual language spoken by that person (Heath, 1991). Literacy was restricted, and even guarded, by the Church (Venezky, 1991). As time progressed, "society shifted from the reliance on memory to reliance on written records" (Venezky, 1991, p. 59). This development naturally extended the need for literacy: the ability to read and write.

In the years after 1300, it was more common to read and write in the language of the culture, and the vernacular gradually challenged the dominant use of Latin in church and government (Venezky, 1991). As the 15th century came to a close, the introduction of the

printing press brought an end to the reliance on scribes for replicating written documents and contributed to the spread of text throughout society (Heath, 1991).

Oral reading was the standard method for interpreting texts during this period and the measure of literacy was a person's ability to decipher the words on a page and state them out loud (Venezky, 1991). This emphasis on oral reading persisted throughout the subsequent centuries. Eventually, though, reading became more private, largely because the Protestant Reformation encouraged people to have a personal relationship with scripture (Venezky, 1991). Writing, however, was not expected, and literacy was a "passive activity" (Venezky, 1991, p. 49). The modern idea of empowerment through literacy did not exist.

In the 1830s educators and reformers started to recognize the need for comprehension instruction, instead of just thinking of comprehension as a byproduct of learning to say the words on the page (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). As understanding text became more important, writing gained significance too. By the end of the 19th century, literacy also included "the ability to write extended discourse, rather than merely provide a signature or engage in numerical calculations" (Heath, 1991, p. 4).

In the 20th century just being able to read aloud was no longer a sufficient goal for readers; they needed to read silently and understand a text (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). They were also expected to write (Venezky, 1991). Students who did not reach the higher levels of education were often classified as functionally literate, a term that had "come to mean the ability to read common texts such as newspapers and manuals and to use the information gained, usually to secure employment" (Resnick & Resnick, 1977, p. 383). Resnick and Resnick (1977) point out that while "the objectives of functional literacy may seem limited, yet this mass-literacy criterion is stronger than that of any earlier period of history" (p. 383). At the beginning

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of the century, as in other centuries, most literate people could read at about a fifth grade level. By the end of the 20ᵗʰ century, literate people were expected to read at a much higher level (Resnick & Resnick, 1977).

Indeed, the public began to expect more of literate individuals and literacy was recognized as complex and dynamic. Readers may have been highly literate (or capable) with one type of text, but not with another type of writing or in a different situation (Heath, 1991). To be literate during this time meant being able to apply new knowledge gained from text, being able to think deeply and critically, and being able to acquire new skills as the need arose (Heath, 1991).

Today, the literacy expectations of the latter half of the 20ᵗʰ century persist and have even been expanded. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the International Reading Association (IRA), all enumerate many criteria for literacy, which include utilizing difficult texts for complicated purposes that connect to reading and writing (Reading Performance-Level Descriptions, 2005; The NCTE Definition, 2008). These higher-level thinking processes involve more complex reasoning than literacy standards of previous centuries.

Clearly, over time, the criteria of being literate have increased. Accordingly, the demands on literacy educators have also increased. Since "literacy is a response to the needs of collective society" (Venezky, 1991, p. 47), educators must address literacy concerns in order to meet not only the ever-present demands of high-stakes testing, but also the elevated goal of preparing students to function in the larger democratic society. This can be a daunting task for language arts teachers, and even more intimidating for content-area teachers who focus on subjects other than language arts. To complicate matters even more, many teachers (of various subjects) resist

the idea of having to teach reading along with their content, largely because they believe that using literacy techniques will take away from their class time for covering state-mandated curriculum (McKenna & Robison, 1990). If however, teachers choose to incorporate literacy instruction into their curriculum, they are likely to do so by helping students to comprehend the required texts for the class. No matter the subject, this often means teaching reading strategies.

Teaching Comprehension through Strategies

Comprehension is pivotal to the use of text. If a reader can figure out the words on the page but cannot understand the meaning behind them, the text is useless. Because reading is complex (Dole et al., 1991), different types of text require different types of comprehension processes (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Effective readers employ a variety of strategies to understand writings, and they vary their strategy use based on the type of text being read. It follows, then, that a goal of educators (especially literacy educators) is to teach students how to become effective readers who are purposeful in their use of strategies.

In the past, reading was viewed as a passive act in which the reader utilized a set of subskills as he/she decoded the words he/she saw; comprehension was seen as a natural byproduct of decoding (Dole et al., 1991). Today, however, educators and researchers take a different, more active view of this procedure of understanding. Caverly, Mandeville, and Nicholson (1995) define comprehension as "an active process beginning before the reader engages the text, proceeding as the reader interacts with the text, and continuing after the reader has left the page" (p. 190). In other words, comprehension is an active process readers go through to build meaning from the words in front of them.

When comprehension is viewed as an active procedure, the reader becomes a constructor of meaning who integrates prior knowledge with new information (Dole et al., 1991). The most

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effective way to do this is through the use of strategies that "foster, monitor, regulate, and maintain comprehension" (Dole et al., 1991, p. 242). Because good readers tend to do this automatically, they do not recognize that they are being strategic in their reading. Struggling readers, on the other hand, do not use strategies and often do not know that they should be using them. They believe that all text is structured in the same way, regardless of the content. This keeps the meaning locked away inside the passage (Caverly, Mandeville, & Nicholson, 1995). Teaching kids to use strategies is recommended as a successful approach for teaching comprehension (Dole et al., 1991; Duke & Pearson, 2002).

Many reading strategies have been endorsed as effective. Dole, Duffy, Roehler, and Pearson (1991) suggest that determining importance, summarizing information, drawing inferences, generating questions, and monitoring comprehension are useful techniques. Duke and Pearson (2002) recommend making predictions about what will occur, thinking aloud about the text, examining text structure, creating visual representations of text, summarizing ideas, and asking and answering questions. Many other studies and textbooks advocate similar types of strategies. No matter what the combination of tactics suggested, teaching these methods successfully requires time, scaffolding, and support.

Teaching strategies to students is only one part of the instructional process. Many struggling readers, even after they have been given strategies to use, do not know when or how to apply them to text (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). To remedy this, students need to be taught not only the strategies, but also how to be strategic about using them. This "awareness and monitoring of one's comprehension processes" (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002, p. 249) is called metacognition and without it, readers cannot be considered skilled.

To foster metacognition, students need to be taught to match the correct strategies with specific types of text. Students at school most often read narrative and informational texts. Narrative text tells a story. Informational text presents facts and real-world ideas. Each type of text requires a unique approach for comprehension.

Educators are urged to help students access certain strategies that are particularly useful for the understanding of narratives. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) suggest that educators teach each strategy singly and allow students time to practice with that specific approach. Then, teachers can provide opportunities for students to learn to combine strategies in a way that is best suited for their purpose for reading. Effective strategies for comprehending stories include making connections from the text to previously-known information, asking questions before, during, and after reading, visualizing images from the story, and making inferences about what is happening in the minds and hearts of characters (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Students are also encouraged to predict what will happen next in the story, retell the story in their own words, and write about the narrative in order to more fully grasp the ideas within it (Tovani, 2000).

Some researchers and educators urge teaching frameworks for understanding narrative text. This involves giving students a pattern to follow when approaching a story. Frameworks are types of scaffolds. Scaffolding text involves creating aids for students to use when reading a story. The scaffold, or framework, guides students to the important, meaningful ideas within the narrative. As students become more experienced with navigating narrative text using the scaffold, the teacher gradually removes parts of the scaffold until students can work with the text without any framework at all. It is important to note that scaffolding is only truly effective when the framework is progressively removed. If the scaffold stays in place permanently, it becomes a crutch for the reader and independent comprehension is not developed (Thompson, 2008).

Informational text places different demands on the reader than narrative text does. This is largely because informational text does not fit into one structure as easily as narrative text. Informational text might fit a number of configurations, including "description, sequence, compare-contrast, problem-solution, and causation" (Williams et al., 2005, p. 538). With so many organizational patterns for informational text to follow, teachers are unable to provide one clear strategy for students to use with every expository piece of writing. Furthermore, most authors combine formats as they write, utilizing any structure that will help them present their information. Most text becomes a mixture of two or more configurations (Williams et al., 2005).

Informational text presents added difficulty because of "unfamiliar content, heavy concept load, technical vocabulary, long sentences, complex syntax, and a hierarchical pattern of main ideas" (Muth, 1987, p. 66). Because most informational text is presenting new concepts, readers frequently do not have enough background knowledge to enrich their understanding of the text. Often, the complex structure and the new content combine to confuse the reader.

There are many approaches to helping students comprehend informational text. Certain reading strategies lend themselves to expository text more than others, and educators are encouraged to explicitly teach these specific tactics. Some of these include activating and building background knowledge, asking questions while reading in order to clarify thinking, determining important ideas, visualizing the descriptions found within the text, and summarizing information (Tovani, 2004). Also, many educators and researchers agree that teaching students to recognize the features of the text, such as headings, subheadings, bold words, captions, and tables, charts, or graphs helps students identify important information (Tovani, 2004).

Besides encouraging the use of the strategies listed above, educators and researchers advocate teaching students to identify text structure (e.g., Bakken et al., 1997; Meyer & Poon,

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2001; Muth, 1987; Williams et al., 2005). Text structure is the organizational pattern the author uses to present ideas and information (Muth, 1987). Showing students how to recognize the pattern used by the author makes them more able to identify main ideas. They also can structure their memory of the text in the same way the author presented the information, resulting in higher performance on recall assessments (Bakken et al., 1997).

Of late, educators and researchers have seen gains in reading ability and comprehension by bringing multiple text types together. Students often need informational text to build background knowledge for narrative texts that they will read (Soalt, 2005). Without a broad enough understanding of a topic, students are not able to recognize themes and nuances within a story. Many teachers try to activate students' prior knowledge, but in some cases, students are so removed from the setting or characters within a story that they do not have any prior knowledge to draw upon (Boyd & Howe, 2006). For this reason, creating "units of study that contain fictional and informational books on the same topic" (Soalt, 2005, p. 680) can construct a more complete understanding in students' minds. Students can then push past a superficial knowledge of plot and move to a more complex, complete understanding of the text (Boyd & Howe, 2006). While this more complete understanding is what is called for by current curriculum and accompanying standardized tests, it does not push the students to the higher level of knowledge called for in today's democratic society. For that, teachers and students must move beyond the text on the page.

Critical Literacy

To increase comprehension to the next level of insight, readers need to consider the textual concepts within the larger context of society. Regardless of the type of text read, students need to recognize that along with presenting ideas about a topic, an author has a perspective that

informs his/her writing. This perspective shapes the author's interpretation and subsequent

representation of ideas (Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996). The recognition and

examination of an author's perspective and how it fits into the world is part of critical literacy.

Critical literacy is often confused with critical thinking. Lipman (1988) defines critical

thinking as "skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment" (p. 39). While critical

literacy does involve the deep consideration of ideas as described in Lipman's explanation, it

revolves around text in a way that critical thinking does not. This text can take any number of

forms, which might include print materials, films, songs, plays, or other types of communication,

but the text cannot be excluded from critical literacy.

Pinning down one firm definition of critical literacy, though, is difficult because the

theorists who study it tend to emphasize varying aspects of the perspective. However, a critical

literacy stance does consistently focus on understanding not just the text, but the social context

that surrounds the text, the author who created it, and the reader who studies it (e.g., Beck, 2005;

Delaney, 2007; Gruber & Boreen, 2003; Hagood, 2002; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006; Stahl et

al., 1996). For instance, Bean and Moni (2003) describe a class in which students studied a

Holocaust-based novel, then studied other texts about the Holocaust and wrote texts from three

distinct points of view in order to examine the novel's representation of this historical event.

Another example comes from Molden (2007), who tells of a strategy in which students read from

a history textbook and then consider what is missing in that text. Students can then research the

ways that the same event is represented in other texts to gain a deeper understanding.

Students who learn to analyze text from this type of critical perspective become "more

knowledgeable and aware of the texts that surround them" (Hagood, 2002, p. 248). They can

then evaluate the decisions made by producers of text and consider the ways that those decisions

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influence readers' opinions of the world (Bean & Moni, 2003; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006; Molden, 2007). This aspect of critical literacy—the thoughtful analysis of the relationship between the words of a text and the world in which it was created—comes from Friere's (1983) notion of "reading the world" (p. 5). Friere asserts that readers cannot fully comprehend the words written by others until they have learned to read, or find the meaning of, the world. Because "language and reality are dynamically intertwined" (Friere, 1983, p. 5), building a true understanding of either one depends on constantly seeking for the links between them.

The ideas of Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006) relate to those of Friere. They believe that critical literacy "requires that students…reflect on, discuss, and write about the insights that literature gives them about their world and their relationships to others" (p. 46). As students go through this process, they are "read[ing] the author" and themselves (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006, p. 52). Educators, then, face the challenge of helping students develop this ability to cultivate critical literacy.

In the classroom critical literacy must be nurtured and practiced. Luke (1995) argues "that reading instruction is not about skills but is about the construction of identity and social relations," so teachers must "teach and practice…critical literacy" (pp. 95-96). Educators must provide students with multiple sources of information to study the same issue (Delaney, 2007). Then teachers must guide students through the process of critically analyzing the text, the author's possible purposes for writing it, and the social context (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006). Also, students must be given the freedom to question, accept, or reject ideas without being told that they are wrong (Bean & Moni, 2003; Wolk, 2003). Luke, De Castell, and Luke (1983) contend that even though teachers regularly criticize ideas, especially those in textbooks, "students are not…entitled to criticize the school text" since they are not in the "appropriate and

sanctioned social group" (p. 119). Allowing students to criticize texts and an author's representation of ideas is often scary and disconcerting for teachers, but the benefits for students are impressive.

Democratic Discussion

Teachers of critical literacy work to build a specific type of classroom environment that places "emphasis on students' voices" (Beck, 2005, p. 394). To do this, teachers should recognize that students' prior experiences and knowledge are valuable and can build a foundation for "thoughtful exchanges with one another that will lead them to new and richer understandings of first personal, and later social, issues" (Beck, 2005, p. 394). This can be tricky because it is difficult for teachers to relinquish control of the direction of classroom discussions. However, when teachers "allow students to bring in their own literacies and their own perspectives," while still mediating the conversation, students gain a deeper understanding of the text and of themselves as readers (Gruber & Boreen, 2003, p. 12).

These critical literacy skills are necessary for living in and sustaining democracy. It is essential that students can understand others' points of view and express their own ideas in a constructive way. This type of discussion does not happen spontaneously. In fact, often when people discuss various viewpoints, the conversation quickly degenerates into a fight for power and not a passionate, yet respectful, exchange of ideas. Teachers of critical literacy have a responsibility to sustain democracy by teaching students how to discuss differing views in a useful way.

Many people have suggested ways to fulfill this responsibility. Counts (1939) posits that schools can support democracy by teaching students the "habits, dispositions, and loyalties" of democratic citizens (p. 16). These habits include a willingness to hear others' points of views and

consider them thoughtfully. This does not mean that students should be made to agree with all

the opinions expressed by others. In fact, agreeing with all views presented can be seen as

undemocratic. Englund (2000) believes that educational programs should teach deliberative

democracy "where individuals bring different perspectives to an on-going communication" (p.

306). Deliberative democracy cannot be taught when discussion and open communication do not

exist as an established pattern in a classroom.

Fairbanks (1998) points out that establishing this pattern in classrooms, however, is not

simple for teachers. "Classrooms that invite conversations and student inquiry become hectic

places" (p. 198), full of activity and questioning. Because teachers try to "present dilemmas of

community life" to build "social awareness," conflicts may arise (Fairbanks, 1998, p. 199).

Educators should teach students to listen to and present ideas respectfully, allowing all

viewpoints to be explored. Delpit (1988) acknowledges that this process is difficult. It relies

upon careful listening by those on both sides of an issue. She explains that the listening needed is

unique and

> requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see
>
> through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on
>
> hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as
>
> well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you
>
> are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is
>
> not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the
>
> only way to start the dialogue. (p. 297)

Educators are often wary of this because it can lead to uncomfortable exchanges. Indeed, they

need to be thoughtful and deliberate in their efforts so as not to push a personal agenda or step on

the beliefs of students and their parents. It can be done, though, when teachers acknowledge that they do not have all the answers and when they allow students to explore ideas thoughtfully.

Even though teachers and students may not have all the answers, the process of searching for them is valuable (Fairbanks, 1998). This can be hard to supervise. While there are many guides for teachers about comprehension and reading instruction, there is not a wealth of practitioner guidebooks about implementing and managing critical literacy approaches to education. Teachers can, however, find possible support by implementing a classroom inquiry format.

Inquiry in the Classroom

Critical literacy and inquiry are naturally connected. When a reader starts to question an author's viewpoint, he/she wants to find other positions about the same topic. This allows the reader to formulate his/her own perspective on an issue. Classrooms must become places of inquiry in which students can ask questions and seek answers.

Clifford and Marinucci (2008) assert that, "with ongoing mentoring and support over time, teachers develop the understanding that inquiry is much more than a teaching method—it is a way of being in the classroom, as well as in the world" (p. 676). This "way of being" includes understanding the features of inquiry and building a classroom atmosphere that supports them. Teachers "must be prepared for the unexpected" (Clifford & Marinucci, 2008, p. 680) that might arise when students seek answers to genuine questions. Because inquiry "evokes powerful, stimulating questions that lead to further questions" (Clifford & Marinucci, 2008, p. 677), teachers must relinquish control of the exact direction of classroom discussion and learning. This does not mean that teachers should ignore mandated curriculum or allow students to aimlessly

drift from topic to topic. Rather, by blending students' sincere questions with well-chosen texts, educators can create situations that meet both students' needs and the curricular demands.

Another feature of inquiry that must be accounted for is "the need for expertise beyond the school" (Clifford & Marinucci, 2008, p. 681). This is unnerving for teachers but can enrich discussion and learning in substantial way. Students and teachers both engage in searching for new ideas and perspectives, thus expanding the body of knowledge for all participants (Clifford & Marinucci, 2008). "Genuine inquiries demand that understanding develops in a public space in which each person's abilities, interest, perspectives, and talents help move everyone else's thinking forward" (Clifford & Marinucci, 2008, p. 680).

Finally, teachers must let go of their preset lesson plans. Learning goals and aims can be set in advance, but the methods for reaching those goals become fluid (Clifford & Marinucci, 2008). There are multiple paths for learning, and teachers who know their content areas well can find those pathways through students' questions and wonderings. Once this mindset is adopted, educators will see opportunities for learning in almost every situation presented within their classrooms.

Putting It All Together

All of these ideas are complex in their own right so putting them together presents a difficult task. However, after consideration, these ideas link together to create a powerful picture of what classroom instruction could be and what it could do for students. When teachers understand the history of literacy, they recognize that literacy demands are greater today than at any other time in history. This understanding reinforces the importance of literacy learning in school and then serves as the catalyst for teachers to improve and extend their classroom practice.

Critical literacy is a complicated concept that encompasses many other ideas. Before educators can teach with a critical literacy perspective, they must have a thorough knowledge of comprehension processes and how to teach comprehension skills. As illustrated previously, it is important to teach strategies that help readers to comprehend various texts as they read independently. Once students are able to access and understand many types of texts, they are ready to move to the more complex processes of critical literacy. Students learn not only to read and comprehend the words on a page, but to think deeply about text, considering the author's viewpoints and biases and weighing the ideas presented with their own beliefs.

To enhance this process, students should be given the opportunity to discuss textual ideas with others. During these discussions, students will not only examine texts from a critical perspective, but they will also come to understand others' points of view, thereby enriching their understanding of the texts. These discussions provide experience in responding to others ideas and defending their own. The inquiry education model provides a useful structure for classroom implementation, since it encourages independence and self-selection. Furthermore, students will be more likely to persist in this new, difficult method of reading (critical literacy) if they feel that they have control over at least part of their learning.

Undoubtedly, the critical literacy instruction described above will help students to develop the skills necessary for living successfully in democratic society. However, the fundamental skills that make up core curriculum are also embedded in this type of instruction. A student cannot analyze an author's intent without first clearly understanding what the author's words are saying. This type of instruction does not replace covering the core curriculum. Rather it enhances students' learning, pushing them to a deeper understanding.

Putting this into practice in a middle school classroom, however, is a messy and difficult process, filled with uncertainty about how students, parents, and administrators might react. It is a demanding type of teaching. Because teachers are under so much pressure to raise test scores, they become reluctant to implement such a complicated type of instruction, particularly when there is so little practitioner literature available to guide them.

Certainly teaching with a critical literacy approach has been attempted and documented, but not extensively. Social studies teachers often work to help students view historical events with a critical eye (e.g., Delaney, 2007; Stahl et al., 1996; Wolk, 2003), but only sometimes frame it as a critical literacy approach. Some reading teachers have tried to help students develop critical literacy (e.g., Bean & Moni, 2003; Beck, 2005; Gruber & Boreen; 2003; Hagood, 2002; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006; Lesley, 2001; Molden, 2007), but within the larger context of reading research, critical literacy research is poorly represented. Among practitioner literature, implementation of critical literacy instruction in a classroom is almost nonexistent. A teacher's perspective on this topic is sorely lacking in the available literature, so this study advances the educational community's understanding of what it takes to implement critical literacy instruction in today's classrooms.

Chapter 3: Method

Because this study is focused on the challenge of implementing critical literacy instruction in a middle school classroom, there are two main components that must be considered. First, the overall research purpose is to examine what occurred in the classroom, which requires the use of accepted educational research methods. The second component is the classroom instructional unit itself, which involves translating the literature described in Chapter 2 into actual classroom procedures. To complete this study, then, I worked to blend the two elements together. In this chapter I will explain the methods used for both parts of the study.

Design of the Research Study

This qualitative study primarily employs an action research approach. An action research study is designed to not only gather information about a school or other educational setting, but to also improve the methods of teaching and learning used there (Creswell, 2008). Because I am "seek[ing] to enhance the practice of education through the systematic study of a local problem" (Creswell, 2008, p. 599), my study is practical action research, which is "a small scale research project" that is "narrowly focus[ed] on a specific problem or issue, and is undertaken by individual teachers…within a school" (Creswell, 2008, p. 600).

Though action research is conducted on a small scale, the results of such research can be enlightening for many. Zeichner (2001) notes that as teachers conduct and share research, they contribute to the overall body of knowledge concerning teaching and learning. He also points out that teacher-researchers have a desire to understand and improve their own teaching and "contribute to greater equity and social justice in schooling and society" (p. 276).

The idea of teachers conducting research to inform classroom practice is not a new one. In the U.S., teacher research was proposed during the 1940s by Stephen Corey (Zeichner, 2001).

He believed that teachers could make more effective decisions if they "conducted research to determine the basis for their decisions" (Zeichner, 2001, p. 274). Corey's ideas about action research were not accepted by academic researchers, though, and the idea lost popularity. It would not resurface until the 1980s (Zeichner, 2001). Even though the action research movement waned in the U.S., it started to emerge in the U.K. and Australia, though in slightly varying forms. Eventually, the movement returned to the U.S. as part of a larger North American movement (Zeichner, 2001).

Even though action research has been practiced with variations, one consistent component has remained: completion of research through phases of a cycle. As discussed in the previous chapters, Torbert (2001) identifies four phases. First, the researcher begins with *visioning*. This takes place mostly in the mind of the investigator, who starts to imagine ideal modes and outcomes of instruction and sees the possibilities of what could happen. The second phase is *strategizing*, when he/she determines more fully what an idea for instruction would look in his/her particular classroom. Specific lesson goals and plans are created. Next, the teacher-researcher carries out the study by *performing*. Finally, after the study has been completed, the *assessing* phase allows for reflection about the process both teacher and students completed. This cycle can easily lead to another cycle because the assessment of the process will naturally lead to new ideas and goals.

This study is also influenced by the self-study research movement, which originated as "like-minded" university educators asked themselves "how their practice as teacher educators could be improved" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 14). These researchers believed that school improvement and reform hinged upon teachers' development of their pedagogical skills. As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) state, "Self-study points to a simple truth, that to study a practice

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is simultaneously to study self: a study of self-in-relation to other" (p. 14). It should not be assumed, however, that self-study research is mere reflection upon what occurred as an educator taught a class or carried out research. Rather it is a "disciplined and systematic inquiry into one's own teaching practice" (Zeichner, 1999, p. 11). While self-study is usually conducted by university educators who train preservice teachers, it can also be a useful tool for all teachers, no matter their teaching situation.

For this study I used the action research process as a structure for my research. I planned and implemented instruction in my classroom. I collected data about my students' work and concerning my experiences as their teacher. However, I also utilized self-study techniques as I collected and analyzed the data about my own experiences. Ultimately, the combination of these data, from my students' points of view and my own, provided a beneficial illustration of what occurred in my classroom during the study and gave me insight into my teaching practice that would be thought-provoking for any educator to read.

Context

In order to better understand what was occurring in my classroom, it is important to know a little about the school where I work. I teach seventh grade language arts at a middle school outside of Salt Lake City, Utah. The school serves a population of 962 seventh to ninth grade students. 73% are Caucasian, 20% are Hispanic, 2% are Pacific Islander, 2% are Asian, 1% are African American, and 2% are of other ethnicity. 18% of students are English language learners. The majority of these students come from homes in which Spanish is the primary language spoken. Other languages represented include Chinese, Vietnamese, Samoan, and Tongan.

The school is located in an area of middle to low socioeconomic status. 28.87% of students receive free lunch or breakfast and 7.741% of students receive reduced-price meals

through the Federal School Lunch Program. Summer lunch is also served to children in the community through a federal program that allows any child 18 or younger to eat breakfast or lunch for free. Each Monday through Friday during the summer when school is not in session, an average of 150 children are served breakfast and 300-380 come for lunch. Also, school boundaries include federally-assisted low-income housing and women's shelter.

Students experience a seven-period day at our school, and seventh grade students take a language arts class and a reading class that are blocked together. The students I teach have one period of English and one period of reading with the same peer group. Students are grouped into grade-level interdisciplinary teams. Teachers on these teams work to create cross-curricular units of study, reinforce skills throughout the school day, and build positive, mentoring relationships with the students on the team. Students arrive late to school one day a week to allow teachers planning time as teams and content-specific departments.

I taught the instructional unit to all of my students. However, for this study, I chose one class to participate in data collection. I asked for both students in this class and their parents to sign assent and consent forms (see Appendix A). Therefore, while all students participated in the unit, data were only collected from those who signed the forms.

Procedure for the Instructional Unit

The instructional unit I implemented is central to the research study. I planned this unit a little differently than my usual units, since I wanted to leave room to make changes in response to what my students needed. However, I needed to have a clear structure in place so that I had somewhere to start. I began by choosing a topic to study: friendship. All of the texts and discussion focused around friendship and how it affects daily life.

As described earlier, my students spend two class periods with me. Although I have a total of 90 minutes with them, we did not spend more than one hour per day working on this critical literacy unit. This was because I had other required curriculum to cover that did not connect to the unit, such as grammar instruction and the writing process. Also, I did not want the students to get too restless with what they were doing. The actual length of time we spent varied each day, but it ranged from 45-60 minutes.

I started teaching the unit in the middle of November and we finished in January. While this covers a couple of calendar months, we did not spend that entire time on the friendship unit. Holiday breaks, school activities, and other curriculum took up about half of that time. In the end, students worked on the friendship inquiry unit for the equivalent of about four and a half weeks, one class period per day. A detailed outline of the unit is included in Appendix B.

I incorporated large-group instruction and discussion with small-group discussion. We started out working as a class, and I taught lessons and led the discussions. From there, we moved to small-group work, and I took on a more advisory role. We came back together for one more large-group discussion at the end as a wrap-up activity. Students also worked individually twice during the unit: once to complete a reflection and once to create a culminating project. The bulk of time, however, was spent in small-group work.

Before beginning to work with text I taught about inquiry and asking questions. Then I introduced the topic of friendship. Is friendship an important part of life? How does friendship affect a person's life? What kinds of questions could we explore to learn more about questions? Students brainstormed questions they had about it and I recorded them on the board. After class I examined the list and narrowed it down to five overall guiding questions:

1. What makes a good friend?

2. What makes a bad friend?

3. What is the role of trust in a friendship?

4. What ruins friendships?

5. How do you choose friends?

During the next lesson we discussed textual inquiry. I focused on using various types of text to explore ideas connected to a topic and then discussing those ideas with others. I also introduced critical literacy: recognizing that authors and readers both bring points of view to a text. An author has a purpose for writing, and acknowledging that purpose can help readers to understand the text more clearly. Also, readers gain a deeper understanding when they recognize their own purposes for reading. I felt that this was the best place to start developing critical literacy skills in my seventh-grade students. I also brought in the idea of democratic discussion. I focused on the proper ways to respectfully discuss ideas with others, which is an important skill for citizens in our society.

The third day, I introduced the five guiding questions to the students. I gave each student a form to record possible resources for answering each question (see Appendix C), and we went to the library where students created lists of specific texts that might address our questions. These lists included fiction, nonfiction, poetry, comic books, and magazine articles. I used these lists as I pulled items from the library to use in our unit. I brought the items into the classroom throughout the unit. Texts included a variety of novels (e.g., *The Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, and *Holes* by Louis Sachar), poetry anthologies (e.g., *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls* by Noami Shihab Nye and *Swimming Upstream* by Kristine O'Connell George), picture books (e.g., *Daisy-Head Mayzie* by Dr. Seuss, *Woolbur* by Leslie Helakoski, *The Friend* by Sarah Stewart, and *The Story of Ruby*

Bridges by Robert Coles), news articles, magazine articles, comic books (e.g., *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Waterson and *Garfield* by Jim Davis), and essays (e.g., *A Mason-Dixon Memory* by Clifton Davis). Students also discussed movies as texts (e.g., *Toy Story, Harry Potter,* and *Ice Age*), although we did not watch any movies in class. Movies were included mainly because students were so excited about them and even reluctant students would participate in a discussion about a favorite movie. A longer list of texts is included in Appendix D.

At this point I created groups of students for small group work. I examined students' reading levels and considered their temperaments as I grouped students. I also created a reading guide for students to use throughout the unit. This guide was intended to act as a scaffold for group discussion (see Appendices E and F).

During our next large-group discussion we began studying a text using the reading guide I created. We read a nonfiction essay and used the reading guide to analyze it. This process took two class periods. This large-group, teacher-directed discussion was intended not only to begin our study of friendship, but also to help students understand how to use the reading guide and have effective discussions.

From this point students moved into small-group, student-directed work. During this part of the unit I got things started with the whole class and made a few reminders about effectively using the reading guide (which we had done as a class the previous two days), but students were in charge of their own learning. Over the next three weeks of instruction, students chose, read, and discussed various texts within their small groups. They moved through the texts by genres, spending one to three days on picture books, novels, magazine articles, newspaper articles, novels/movies, comic books, and poetry. Because I was not able to schedule the library for each day of small-group work, I brought the sources from the library into our classroom so students

could read and refer to them. As students worked in groups, I circulated through the room, monitoring discussions and answering questions. Just over halfway through this process, students completed an individual reflection about the unit to that point (see Appendix G).

After completing the textual inquiry, students, working with their groups, discussed each of the guiding questions, citing texts that addressed those questions and trying to answer each one. They recorded their ideas on a discussion record (see Appendix H). Throughout these small-group discussions, I circulated through the classroom, monitoring what was happening and helping when needed. The students, however, were in charge of choosing their texts and directing their discussions.

Finally, for a culminating project, students chose one question to focus on and used it to create a final project. Each student worked alone and had the freedom to choose any type of text to make their project. Students wrote stories, wrote poems, composed song lyrics, or created art to illustrate what they had learned.

Procedure for the Research Study

Since I studied the classroom implementation of the friendship inquiry unit, I created one procedure for the instructional unit and one procedure for studying that unit. Consequently, during this study, I moved through two different (although connected) processes at the same time. This fits with my dual role of being both a teacher and a researcher. While this was complicated, it made for a richer teaching experience and also a more meaningful experience as a researcher.

The research began with phase one of Torbert's (2001) action research cycle, *visioning,* before I had actually conceived the instruction unit. I researched literacy, comprehension, critical literacy, democratic discussion, and inquiry, which are described in Chapter 2. I moved through

phase two, *strategizing*, as I created this study and the instructional unit that is central to it. Phase three, *performing,* began when I implemented the unit in my class. The final phase, *assessing,* started while I was still in the third phase because I evaluated what occurred in class each day and used that information to adjust my instruction to meet the needs of my students. I conducted deep assessment in earnest after the unit was completed. It is important to remember that, as noted previously, while I went through each of the four phases of Torbert's action research cycle, they did overlap. In the following sections, I will describe my actions during each cycle in detail.

Phase one: Visioning. The visioning phase has been working in my mind for most of the eleven years I have been teaching language arts, but was sharpened in graduate school. As I discussed in the literature review, the reading I did about democracy, literacy, and the power of communication combined with my personal beliefs and led me to ponder about students' interactions with text and each other as they explore new ideas. It became clear that I wanted my students to actively engage with text and work to understand not only the surface elements, but also the nuances within pieces of writing. I also visualized students in groups having lively, meaningful discussions about the text and the issues presented. I wanted my students to explore new ideas, examine social issues, and connect readings to their own experiences. This inquiry would then lead to a greater understanding of the world and its people and would also enhance literacy skills. In short, I envisioned a classroom in which students could read about ideas, examine them, and form opinions about their validity.

Phase two: Strategizing. I knew that my vision of students exploring a topic through actively reading text, pondering the ideas within them, and conducting stimulating, profound discussions was an ideal for which to strive, not a reality that existed in the present. For this reason, phase two involved strategizing about how to enact within my classroom as much of my

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vision of inquiry and critical literacy as possible. As an experienced teacher, I knew that I my actions would greatly affect my students' actions in class. So, in order to achieve my goal of engaged literacy learning, I needed to examine myself as a teacher. To start, I asked a question: What is the experience of a language arts teacher as she implements a classroom inquiry unit wherein students, through the lens of critical literacy, read and discuss various types of text to explore an idea?

The next step was to create an inquiry unit aimed at building my students' critical literacy skills. As I constructed the unit, I recorded my thoughts, experiences, and decision-making processes in a journal. Right from the start I decided to create only a skeleton unit so that I could adjust my plans to meet the needs of my students as time passed. As described previously, the basic idea was for my students to thoughtfully explore an issue that would be meaningful to them. Rather than have groups of students exploring various topics, I chose to have the entire class focus on one issue: friendship. Having the whole class discuss one issue allowed for both large-group and small-group conversations. I deliberately chose a subject, friendship, which is less controversial than many critical literacy topics. My students are seventh graders and if the topic was too contentious, then our critical literacy focus would be overshadowed by the controversy, which would serve as a distraction to learning. With older students, a more controversial topic would be fine but for these beginning middle school students, a topic that is not objectionable but is still meaningful is more appropriate.

I wanted students to use a democratic inquiry process to examine friendship. As I already described, they would study various types of text, consider the ideas presented, and then discuss those ideas with their group members. These texts would include novels, personal essays, informational articles (from newspapers or magazines), poetry, and films. I decided to provide

texts in the classroom for convenience, but, in order to allow for choice, students would be able to find texts from other places also.

My goal was to guide students as they explored texts by teaching lessons about the nature of critical literacy, how to use and understand specific types of text, and how to engage in respectful discussion. In their groups, students would use a printed reading guide (as described earlier; see Appendix E) to help keep them on task and focus their conversations on critical literacy ideas. It should be noted that, in response to the needs of my students, I revised the reading guide as the unit progressed (see Appendix F). I also planned to have my students complete reflections (see Appendix G) about their progress and create a final creative project showcasing their personal views on friendship.

Phase three: Performing. During this phase, I implemented the unit of instruction in my class. It should be noted that because I was working to respond to the needs of my students as the unit progressed, this phase included some strategizing as well. Out of my three groups of students, I chose one class of students to participate in this study. I asked for both students and their parents to sign assent and consent forms. While all students participated in the unit, data were only collected from those who signed the forms. Students were assured that their reflection responses would not affect their grades and that their identities would be kept secret when the study was reported. Accordingly, any student names stated in this paper are pseudonyms.

Data collection occurred throughout the unit and came from both my perspective and my students' viewpoints. To collect data from my perspective, I kept a journal and chronicled classroom observations on anecdotal record forms. In my journal, I kept a record of the actions I took (both in planning and enacting the unit) and wrote down my thoughts about what was going on. I was careful to document any changes I made from my original plans, what I saw my

students doing, and my reactions to classroom activities. I used the anecdotal record forms (see Appendix I) to record observations of students groups as they were working. In addition, I used the forms to make comments about the quality of student group work

I also collected data from my students' points of view. As they read and discussed various types of text focusing on friendship, they analyzed and discussed the text either with the whole class or in their small groups. Reading guide assignments (see Appendices E and F) that were completed during this process became a main source of data. Additionally, I examined student reflections (see Appendix G) and discussion records (see Appendix H) for data. Even though I had intended to use students' final projects as a data source, they did not provide enough useful information to be a credible source. This is possibly because of the free-form nature of the projects. Many students completed projects that utilized art and other forms of expression that were not appropriate for such a text-based unit. This made it difficult to pull out concrete examples of the critical literacy processes I was searching for. For this reason, I excluded this source of data.

Phase four: Assessing. During this phase I examined the data collected to gain a deeper understanding of what occurred in my class. I followed Norton's (2009) seven-stage thematic analysis process:

1. Immersion
2. Generating categories
3. Deleting categories
4. Merging categories
5. Checking themes
6. Linking themes

7. Presenting your findings

During stage one, immersion, I separated my data sources into two groups: data from my point of view (my research journal and anecdotal record forms) and data from my students' points of view (their reading guides, discussion records, and reflection assignments). Then I read through each data source and made a list of the "general themes" that I noticed (Norton, 2009, p. 118). In stage two, I examined my data sources more carefully, "looking to generate as many categories as possible" (Norton, 2009, p. 119). I used a data analysis journal to do this. I listed categories in one column and examples of those categories in another column.

In stages three and four, I examined my data analysis journal and deleted categories that did not have enough evidence. When possible, I "[collapsed] as many of [the categories] as possible" so that I could "relabel them as themes" (Norton, 2009, p. 120). I ended up with four themes from my teacher data sources:

1. The overwhelming nature of implementing the unit

2. My high expectations

3. The effect of group dynamics on discussion

4. Balancing keeping control and letting it go

Analysis of student data sources revealed another four themes:

5. "Reading" the author

6. "Reading" themselves

7. The effect of group dynamics on quality of work

8. Student enjoyment of this unit

Then in stage five, I checked the themes by reexamining the data sources "alongside [the] list of themes" so that I could "revise them if necessary" (Norton, 2009, p. 121). I found my themes to be sound so I moved to the next stage.

During stage six, linking themes, I looked for relationships between the themes I had found. In doing this I found that the eight themes I identified converged into three larger categories: (a) discussion (teacher-directed and student-directed), (b) covering the curriculum (teacher choice and student choice), and (c) student learning (surface comprehension and deep, critical comprehension). The first category, discussion, contains themes three and seven, since those themes focus on how groups related with each other. The second category, covering the curriculum, includes themes one, two, and four, which is logical, considering that each of those themes center on my teaching decisions and processes. Themes five, six, and eight fit into the third category, student learning, since those themes center around student processes. By grouping the themes together I was able to better understand all of my data and create a clearer understanding of what occurred in my classroom.

Also, when I identified these three larger categories, one overall theme came to light: There is a tension that exists between teacher control and student autonomy. Upon examination, each one of the themes I had isolated connected back to the issue of control in some way. Each category encompassed a tension that revolved around control. For the first category, the tension exists between teacher-directed discussion and student-directed discussion. For the second category, the tension is found between teacher curricular choices and student curricular choices. The tension in the final category is found between students' surface comprehension of texts and their deep, critical comprehension of those same texts. I will explain each of these tensions and their categories in detail in Chapter 4, which completes the seventh stage of Norton's process.

Often, at this point, teachers would start the action research process over again. This is because the assessing stage usually leads to a new understanding of the issue being studied. This new perspective then generates new questions to investigate. For the purposes of this study, only the steps within the four phases listed above are included.

Limitations

This is a very personal study dealing with one teacher and a small group of students. For this reason, the results are not generalizable to all teachers and their students. However, further studies could use the themes that emerge in this research to survey a larger group of teachers and students.

Chapter 4: Results

One major theme surfaced during data analysis of this study: control. There is tension between teacher control and student autonomy, and managing that tension in order to positively impact the students' experience in class requires balance. For me, finding and maintaining the proper balance between these two classroom components was difficult but not impossible.

I found that there were three main areas in which tensions emerged: discussion (whole-class, teacher-directed and small-group, student-directed), covering the curriculum (teacher choice and student choice), and student learning (surface comprehension and deep, critical comprehension). In each of these areas, I struggled to find the right blend of directing classroom activities and student learning and allowing students the freedom to manage their own actions and studies. Sometimes the suitable balance eluded me, leading to mediocre experiences for my students and leaving me unsure of my role in the classroom. Other times, though, I found the correct balance between teacher control and student autonomy, leading to a positive experience for our entire classroom learning community.

In this chapter, I will sort the data collected during the study into the three areas of tension listed above, thereby illustrating how these tensions affected me and my students. For each area I will first discuss the tension from my point of view as the teacher. Then I will use student data to explain the students' perspectives on that subject. Finally, I will focus on my feelings about that tension.

Teacher-directed Discussion

My ideas. At the start of the unit I spent time teaching in a whole-class setting. This is a comfortable teaching routine for me and I know that I am good at whole-class instruction and directing a class discussion. I documented the process in my research journal. To begin, I

introduced the topic of inquiry. After defining the term, I asked students to brainstorm things about which people might inquire. During this discussion "many students [contributed]" and their comments were wide-ranging, covering many topics (Research Journal, December 2). This led me to believe that our lesson was going well. I was "pleased" with the lesson (Research Journal, December 2). I then steered the discussion to the types of questions used to spur on the inquiry process. We had previously covered two types of questions in class: thin questions that are simple and specific and thick questions that are complex and broad (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

Using our inquiry discussion and the concept of thick/thin questions as a foundation, I then asked students to brainstorm a list of questions they had about friendship. We did this as a group and much of the class contributed. I noted in my research journal that the conversation "went well, though by the end of the twenty-minute discussion, they were somewhat restless" (December 2). I went on to note that since our only introductory activity for the unit was a discussion, students lost focus. Even with that, though, my notes show that the students generated a large list of questions, which we then trimmed down by erasing any thin questions, since those do not work well for inquiry. In the end there were about twenty questions remaining. I felt "pleased with how it went" (Research Journal, December 2).

I evaluated the list of questions and chose five guiding questions for the unit. I noted in my research journal that "there were so many good questions brought up throughout the day, so it was hard to let some of them go. However, I think I have narrowed it to a good list" (December 2). The next lesson was to introduce the guiding questions and discuss textual inquiry and discussion. "I defined [text], for the purposes of this unit, as anything written down or that started out written down (such as TV programs, movies, or songs)" (Research Journal, December

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2). I explained the process of textual inquiry—bringing up a question, reading something, and discussing it—all for the purposes of learning new information or gaining a new perspective.

Next, I introduced the idea of critical literacy. I did not spend a long time discussing this, but I connected it to critical thinking—a term they know well—and tried to give them a sense of the deeper thinking required. We discussed democracy and the idea of being an informed citizen. To become that informed person, one must adopt a more critical stance about text and information presented. I especially spent time discussing how to recognize that an author has a point of view and that a reader does not have to agree with what an author thinks. "This seemed to be the best place to start when working to build critical literacy in my seventh graders" (Research Journal, December 7).

The final whole-class discussion occurred when I introduced the reading guides. We read an essay as a class and I steered them through the reading guide. This gave me a chance to model the discussion technique I wanted them to use. As we worked through it, I pointed out the types of questions that were "useful" in encouraging discussion and the proper ways to discuss ideas— especially when conflicting ideas emerge (Research Journal, December 8).

Student ideas. Analysis of the students' completed reading guides showed that the class covered critical literacy skills and ideas during the discussion. One student's assignment notes, "[the author] has strong beliefs," while another student wrote that the author wanted readers to "think about our actions and change" (Student Reading Guides, December 8). When examining the assignments, it would be easy to conclude that the students developed a deep understanding during our class conversation. I, the teacher, was in control of the learning and was able to set the pace for discussion, so we covered all of the topics I felt were important. However, by examining all assignments, I saw that the reading guides were very similar and that most students had

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written down one person's specific comment. The majority of the students did not generate their own ideas.

My feelings. During the whole-class discussions when I was directing the discussion, many students participated. I wrote in my research journal, "I was pleased with how it went. I think the kids are interested in the topic and it will be a good unit…I had many people contributing. I still had those who just sat there, but that is why we are mixing whole group and small group discussion" (December 8). There was energy in the room and students showed excitement for the upcoming inquiry unit. Even though I knew that some students had not participated during class, I still felt that there was learning going on. I did want to include all students, though, since my goal for this unit was not only to teach about inquiry and critical literacy but also to encourage independence by having students work autonomously.

Student-directed Discussion

My ideas. Small-group work was the way I chose to accomplish my goal of including more students in class discussion. After the positive start to the unit with what I deemed to be successful whole-group instruction, I was optimistic about how small-group, student-directed work would go. I worked to thoughtfully construct groups of students who would enrich each other's experiences with text. However, even with deliberate consideration, student groups displayed a mixture of positive and negative attributes that affected their work.

Student group composition. I knew going into this experience that student groups are successful when the teacher has planned the lesson well. So I carefully selected groups of students that I thought would work well together. I wanted to have students work each day with the same group of students so that they would be comfortable enough to get past the surface conversations and really dig deep into the text they were studying. I thought that one consistent

group would allow for that better than a lot of random groups created at the spur of the moment (Unit Planning, Chapter 3).

To select the groups, I studied reading level (as measured by the SRI) and considered what I had observed in class (e.g., work ethic, temperament, likes/dislikes, relationships with other students). I felt that I had created "good groups" of students that would work well together (Research Journal, December 7). Various factors contributed to each group working together successfully or not. Having a strong leader proved to be an important quality for successful groups. In my research journal, I noted that

> Groups that have a strong reader who is a leader do better with the critical literacy idea. If the strong reader in the group is silent, the weaker readers don't have the skills to think as critically as I would like. (January 4)

Also, the group's composition seemed to affect their pace, since some students naturally work faster or slower than others. As I noted repeatedly on anecdotal record forms and in my research journal, some groups "rushed through the assignments, just wanting to finish, while others worked so slowly they could not complete their work" (and also became very bored and off-task). Successful groups found a "good, steady pace" at which to work (Anecdotal Record Forms, December 9, December 15, December 16, January 4; Research Journal, December 9, December 15, December 16, December 17, January 4, January 5, January 7).

Student group dynamics. As students worked with their groups, I observed what they were doing and took notes. At the end of each day I reviewed my notes and recorded entries in my research journal. Students were also asked to reflect upon their group experience and learning. Analysis of these data sources revealed that the dynamics between the students in the groups affected the quality of group cooperation and thinking.

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Off-task behavior. Some groups were easily distracted and often got off task. Regularly, in my notes, I wrote observations such as "silly," "goofy," or "off task" (Anecdotal Record Forms, December 9, December 15, January 4; Research Journal, December 9, January 4). One day I even saw a group in which "some group members were so bothered" with distracted behavior "that they kept track of the number of off-task comments" (Anecdotal Record Form, December 15). Usually an entire group wasn't off task—at least one student was trying to pull people back to the assignment at hand. I noted on more than one record form that while students were sometimes successful at this, often they just gave up, giving in to the goofiness of the other group members (Anecdotal Record Forms, December 9, December 16, January 4).

As I noticed this off-task behavior I worked, as any teacher would, to guide students back to the task at hand. Often I was able to nudge them back to a discussion about the text. These groups then traded the negative, unfocused group dynamic for a positive one, created through cooperation and concentration on the task at hand. My notes stated that these groups could be focused, with each student "participating and helping" to complete the task (Anecdotal Record Form, December 9). Distractions need not permanently stop effective group work.

Little or no conversation. A strongly negative group dynamic was also created by a lack of discussion. I noticed that a couple of groups who were "focused" and "on-task," had "little discussion" (Anecdotal Record Form, December 9). Rather than dialogue increasing as time progressed, my subsequent notes state that the problem intensified and there was "very little conversation." The groups were "slow to move through questions," and "they [talked] to me more than each other" (Anecdotal Record Forms, December 15, December 16, January 4; Research Journal, January 4, January 19).

I tried to coax conversation from these students, but I could not seem to guide them into independent discussion. They spoke with me and answered my questions when I posed them, but they just stopped talking when I walked away. Without me constantly being there, conversation dwindled. Because I had to work with other groups too and could not just stay with these two groups of students, they continued in their "quiet" patterns, never emerging into more positive group dynamics (Anecdotal Record Forms, December 16, December 17, January 4). By the end of the unit one of these groups had even resorted to working individually although they sat together. They "did not even try" to discuss the texts they were reading (Anecdotal Record Form, January 4).

Animosity within groups. The third difficult group dynamic that emerged was a combative one. In one group, I observed one particular student taking over the group's work. He was bossy and loud, and the other students seemed to resent his behavior, though they kept that to themselves. This seemed to create a negative atmosphere that stifled discussion. This one student's bossiness stopped the other kids from "freely contributing" (Anecdotal Record Form, December 9). He asked questions but then answered them himself. Eventually, conversation was only happening because students "just [wanted] to finish" and get the work done (Anecdotal Record Forms, December 15, December 16). After noticing this happen more than once, I spoke to the student privately and we talked about how to work more effectively with a group. He agreed to work on allowing others to contribute to the discussion. This seemed to "improve" the group's experience, though this one student still had bossy tendencies (Anecdotal Record Form, January 4).

The other group that struggled with hostility towards each other was much more open about it. They fought with each other and treated other group members rudely. My notes

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repeatedly list the following difficulties, "don't work together well, Manuel interrupts, Eliot doesn't talk, Eliot is not working, more fighting, three group members keep speaking Spanish— thereby leaving out the one non-Spanish speaker" (Anecdotal Record Forms December 9, December 15, December 17, January 4; Research Journal, January 4). The fighting seemed to come from disagreements that arose during the discussion. Instead of working to compromise and come to a consensus, these students just stated their original ideas more loudly, leading to "yelling" (Anecdotal Record Form, December 16; Research Journal, January 4). While I was happy to see that students felt strongly about their opinions, these students seemed to lack the ability to discuss those ideas respectfully. I tried to mediate their disagreements, but was unable to stop the overall pattern of argument. I eventually resorted to just telling the kids to "stop fighting" (which I sometimes stated in a very loud voice) and moving to help another group (Anecdotal Record Form, January 4; Research Journal, January 4).

Effective groups. Despite the difficulties that arose, there were many class periods when student groups worked well together. Even though disagreements arose or students struggled to understand the text, they were able to work through their difficulties and have meaningful conversations. I observed (as noted on record forms or in my journal) students helping their fellow group members, clarifying ideas in the text and giving examples to illustrate ideas. Students also talked to me when they got stuck, "asking for clarification, discussion topics, or examples," thereby moving the discussion past stumbling blocks (Anecdotal Record Forms, December 9, December 15, December 16, January 4; Research Journal, December 16, January 4, January 5, January 6, January 7).

Student ideas. Because small-group work was the mode I used to offer students more autonomy, their reflections about what occurred in those groups provided an important

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perspective for this research. I observed what was happening, but students were actually involved in what was going on, directing the discussion. Their insights helped to round out the picture of what occurred in class.

   ***Student group dynamics*.** Students were asked to reflect on their groups and how well they worked together. Their comments supported my observations of small-group instruction and also helped to give a more complete picture of what was happening in the classroom. They noticed both difficulties and successes.

   Off-task behavior. Students commented on problems presented by group members who were distracted. Some group members became frustrated with such conduct. One student commented, "With my group, everyone gets distracted (and even I do), but it makes us get behind…so we don't finish what we were working on." Another student reflected that his group worked well when they were "paying attention" to their work. However, he noted, "most of the time we are messing around." Another student comment reflected the feelings of many students. "My group talks a lot and it's hard to keep them on task" (Student Reflection Assignments, December 21).

   Little or no conversation. Although loud, off-task behavior disrupted learning, students also recognized that the opposite type of behavior could cause problems. One student's comments illuminate this problem. She said, "My group is very quiet. We don't talk much so it's hard to talk about the book…I need more talking in my group." This student was struggling, unsuccessfully, to pull her group members into the conversation (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21).

   Animosity within groups. Students also understood that animosity and arguments caused trouble. Some groups fought with each other, creating awkward group dynamics and stopping

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meaningful work. When asked about her group's working relationship, one girl stated, "[We] fight a little bit. One person was always getting the book before we even decide what we want to read. This was a problem because we would all decide on a book while he was getting one and then we would argue with him for like five minutes and be behind" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21). This group was able to eventually learn to work together more effectively, as I noted previously.

The students in another group also recognized that fighting stopped them from working effectively. One student in this group stated, "It would be better if my group and me could get along and stop fighting." Another student said, "There is too much argument in my group" (Student Reflection Assignments, December 21). Even though the students saw the problem, however, they did not take steps to resolve it. When I tried to help them resolve their conflicts, I was met with grouchy stares and firm assertions that the problem came from the other group members. Since all four group members refused to compromise, the conflicts in this particular group were never resolved.

Effective groups. In contrast to the difficulties some groups faced, many students commented on the helpfulness of working in a group. One student said, "My group is working together pretty well. Sometimes we will have disagreements but we will eventually figure them out." Another student commented that their group helped each other, stating, "When one of us doesn't understand, we have a discussion so everyone knows what we are talking about." Students seemed to be able to work through things enough to "get things done," as one student put it, and that made the unit more meaningful and enjoyable for group members (Student Reflection Assignments, December 21).

My feelings. In middle school classrooms, it is important that the teacher have a firm handle on what is going on. Teachers must find the delicate balance between giving students choice so they feel empowered and maintaining a routine with established procedures so they do not get carried away and act crazily. Group work can be difficult because it requires giving away control but still monitoring what is happening. In my journal I recorded that I was "trying to give up control. Sometimes I micro-manage too much. It is a hard balance to strike, because I have to plan ahead, but I am trying to give them more autonomy on this project" (December 3).

I knew all of this going into this instructional unit and have had much experience with managing groups in a classroom. However, for this unit about friendship, I expected more from their group work than just finishing an assignment. Therefore, rather than just feeling good that students had completed a task, my emotions were up and down, either reflecting joy at the progress being made or disappointment that things were not going more smoothly. Managing what was meant to be autonomous group work proved difficult throughout the entire process. Sometimes I found the right balance and other times I did not.

At the start of the unit when we were in the library to make lists of possible texts to use for our inquiry, I found that right balance. My journal states, "The kids were pretty good about [making their lists]. I also thought they were creative. I gave them instructions and a few examples and then I let them go" (December 3). I also noted that the students put together a very long list. They were successful at finding possible sources.

As the unit progressed, however, I seemed to struggle more with managing the groups, probably because the students moved on to the more difficult task of discussing the texts. I wrote in my journal that "many of the students were off task or goofy" (December 9). I had the thought that I could "help each group by giving the other groups work to do individually and then

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focusing on one group at a time." I could walk them through the process in their small group. "This would help teach them how to work together" (December 9). I soon realized that this was an unrealistic plan because of time constraints and managing the rest of the groups so I never implemented this strategy. I also decided that it was not a good idea because students "would just learn to rely on me to lead the discussion" (Research Journal, December 10). I tried to circulate and help each group, but I noted in my journal that "monitoring these groups is kind of exhausting. The kids get off task (which I'm used to) or they start arguing. I will have to find a way to teach about discussing, not arguing" (December 9).

Before working in groups each day I did talk with the kids about good discussion, reminding them to talk and listen, not just argue. The problem with arguing seemed to continue, though, so I kept having to address it. One day, I recorded my concerns about this in my journal:

I worried today that I might have squelched discussion because I gave them a little lecture about being better group members. I have been so frustrated with group dynamics. I told them of the three main problems: one person sits there and does nothing, one person takes over, or they are unkind to each other and say that the others' ideas are stupid. This last one is really bothering the most. They are just not kind or respectful. (December 16)

For that day especially, my talk with the students seemed to help. My journal entry goes on to state that while "I worried that they would be reluctant to talk, [my reproof] seemed to have a good effect. They seemed more willing to be kind." This did not stop all of the problems though. Helping students discuss and disagree respectfully was a struggle throughout the entire unit.

Throughout my journal I document the up-and-down nature of this teaching experience. For example, on December 9, my journal states the "group work wasn't as good as I had hoped."

Then on December 16, I recorded that the students "seemed to have better discussions today." However, the very next day, on December 17, I wrote that group work "did not go as I envisioned." Groups were inconsistent in their quality of work, leaving me unsure of what to expect for the day and unsure of the best way to monitor discussions and help students. By January 6, though, I noted that "the kids did well today. They are in the groove and they were mostly on task." Things got better as the students and I gained more experience in this process.

Covering the Curriculum: Teacher Choice and Student Choice

My ideas. For this unit about friendship I wanted to allow for more student autonomy and choice than I often do in class. However, I still needed to cover the curriculum delineated by the state. This presented a tension that I had not dealt with much. Usually I decide exactly which texts to use as we move through the curriculum. For this critical literacy unit, as I recorded in my research journal, I was working to broaden the textual experience for students, which meant giving a range of text choices. An entry in my journal notes, "I had originally thought that I would pull all of the materials. I will pull materials and provide them in the classroom. However, I am going to let the kids make a list of sources first. I can supplement what they come up with" (Research Journal, December 1). This entry shows that I was trying to give away control of the text choices and subsequent discussion direction, which is not the usual plan in a middle school classroom and certainly not an approach that I was at ease with. To that end, I did not plan the details of the whole unit prior to instruction. My journal states,

> I had an outline, for sure, but I wanted to be responsive to the students so I have been
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> making specific plans as I go. I am not used to doing that. I am not sure how I feel about
>
> it. I am able to do what is necessary for them, but it is unsettling not knowing quite how
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> long things will take. (January 6)

I was working to find the balance between letting students take charge of the text and discussion while still keeping control of the overall lesson direction so that I could ensure curricular coverage. It was not comfortable and certainly did not come naturally to me.

I found that I needed help to figure out how to strike this balance between teacher and student control, but I was reluctant to ask for it. Asking for helped seemed to be just another way to give away control, which I was struggling with already. I built a barrier between me and my colleagues and professors when it came to this unit. I did break through this barrier at the start, though, to discuss with one colleague. I found that it was helpful to talk to the librarian at our school. She helped to increase the types of text I was considering. In my research journal I noted that "she thought about things I wouldn't have—using comic books like Calvin and Hobbes, the Peanuts books, and other texts that feature friends. We pulled some picture books, some biographies, and a few nonfiction sources" (November 9). Her input was helpful because it drew upon not only my experience, but also her even more extensive knowledge of print sources.

Flexible teaching. Along with allowing students to choose texts, during this unit, I wanted to be flexible in my instruction. I wanted to observe what was happening in the classroom, reflect upon those observations, and then change instruction in response to student needs. To that end, when I created this unit, I made an outline for instruction, but I did not plan it as thoroughly as I plan my other units. As I noted in my unit planning (see Chapter 3), this was to allow for changes to be made along the way. Right at the start of the unit, it became clear that a change needed to be made. Because the students were working independently in small groups with texts of their choosing, I wanted to make sure that there were clear guidelines for them to follow so that I could ensure coverage of the curriculum. The reading guide I created was intended to meet that need. It was designed by combining the ideas in Knickerbocker and

Rycik's (2006) Critical Response Frame and Bean and Moni's (2003) critical discussion prompts (Research Journal, December 7).

I was worried when I finished making the guide that the form was too long, and though it worked out nicely for the whole-class discussion, "we didn't make it all the way through" the guide in one class period (Research Journal, December 8). I was concerned that the form was too lengthy for small-group work. In my research journal, I noted the same concern after the first day of group work. I stated that

> group work wasn't as good as I had hoped…I am worried that their discussions will stay on the surface only. I also am worried about the length of the reading guide. I put so many questions on it hoping to spur discussion, but I think some of the groups are just mechanically working their way through the queries. I hope these are just first day problems. (December 9)

It soon became evident that the problem was not just a first-day issue. After the next two group-work experiences, I knew that I needed to shorten the reading guide. I wrote in my journal that I needed "to simplify the reading guide. It is long enough that the kids are not really discussing. They are just focusing on finishing" (Research Journal, December 15). While finishing the guide did provide opportunities for thought that fit into the state curriculum nicely, I was not satisfied that students were delving deep enough into the text. My journal entry goes on, "I am sure they are discussing, but I am not sure they are having quality discussions." The worry about finishing the whole assignment in the allotted time seemed to hinder more meaningful conversation. I noted, "I thought having questions for them to read and think about would help, and I still think it will, but I think maybe I have overdone it" (Research Journal, December 15).

In response to the needs of my students, I shortened the guide. After the next group discussion, my journal entry states,

> I think the shortened form helped. They seemed to have better discussions today and it didn't take so long to get through the form. I think they were able to talk more because the pressure of finishing the whole thing was gone. (December 16)

I was constantly questioning what would be the best design for students. I weighed options and made plans. One journal entry shows this process:

> I am trying to figure out how to approach this. I could just bring [texts] all in and let the kids go for whatever they like, but I am not sure that would work. Maybe it would be better to look at text by genre. (December 7).

The need for me to be flexible so that I can respond to the needs of my students has always been there, but for this type of learning, I found, the need was even greater.

I stayed with my decision to study texts by genre, but my journal shows other instances of changing my plans in order to facilitate effective autonomous work. One example from my research journal clearly illustrates the process of changing my original plans to better meet the needs of students. As noted previously, I questioned the length of the reading guide I had created for students. A series of journal entries shows how I responded to the difficulty students were having. First, I noticed a problem and thought about a possible cause for that problem. The reading guide was "long enough that we didn't make it all the way through, although my first class always takes longer to get things done, so I will have to see how it goes later" (Research Journal, December 8). Next, I paid closer attention to the issue to see if there really was a problem. After the day's work I noted, "I…am still worried about the length of the reading guide. I put so many questions on it hoping to spur discussion, but I think some of the groups are

just mechanically working their way through the queries" (Research Journal, December 9). I continued to monitor this issue during our next work day. Then, I could clearly see that a shorter reading guide would help groups work more effectively. I wrote, "I…need to simplify the reading guide. It is long enough that the kids are not really discussing. They are just focused on finishing" (Research Journal, December 15). In the end, after changing the guide, things went better. My December 16 entry states, "They seemed to have better discussions today." Facilitating autonomous group work required a lot of observing, pondering, and changing my plans. If the changes implemented had not helped, I would have made further adjustments to the reading guide.

    Planning. Just because I was trying to let my students work independently, I did not give up control of the curriculum. I needed them to work effectively so that the time was not wasted. This required a lot of planning. One entry in my journal clearly shows how lack of planning frustrated successful, focused, and relevant classroom activity. On December 17 students focused on poetry. I had previously gathered books of poetry so that students would have a wide selection of texts. I had not, however, looked through them to find appropriate poems. I assumed that students would do that in their groups as part of their autonomous work. My seventh graders, however, were not familiar enough with poetry to find the deeper meaning in many poems. In my journal, I recorded the difficulty of that day:

        This did not go as I envisioned. I was not able to move from group to group observing

        their discussions. Instead, I spent most of the time trying to find poems that would work.

        I just got a bunch of books from the library that I thought would work for this…Some

        groups had a really hard time finding poems about friendship. I could [see] the friendship

tie-in to poems…but without me pointing it out, they had a rough time finding it.

(December 17)

If I had planned more carefully for that day's work, I could have avoided the problematic situation. As it was, my students did not have the meaningful, focused discussion that I had intended.

The tension between my teacher control and student autonomy exists in many aspects of classroom practice for this unit. As the journal entries cited previously illustrate, my students and I had more success in class when I made thorough, yet flexible, plans. Also, our classroom experiences were better when I responded to what was happening in the class and made changes accordingly. This was difficult, and I felt unsteady. This is probably part of why I usually plan every detail including the texts we use. The tension between teacher control and student autonomy could be lessened or balanced, but it never went away. Again, the reading guides are a good example. "Without a guide to facilitate the discussion, the kids get off task, but with the guide, they often just try to rush through to finish" (Research Journal, January 7).

Student ideas. Even though the balance between teacher choice and student choice was hard for me to find, my research data support the notion that my students liked being in charge of their learning. Even when they worked with a group, they felt like they were given independence, probably because I was not guiding them through everything. One student commented, "I like that we get to work in a group" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21). This same idea emerged on many students' reflection assignments. Another student stated, "This was a pretty cool assignment because we actually got to talk" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21).

Students also responded positively to reading the various texts that they got to choose. One student pointed out, "I think this experience was kind of fun that we got to read different books" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21). Another student's statement reflected a common opinion. "I think [the unit] was fun because we got to read books we picked" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21). Students seemed unaware of my struggles with control. Rather, they positively responded to the autonomy I gave them.

My feelings. It is evident that throughout the course of planning and implementing this critical literacy unit, I found the process to be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. One entry from my journal states, "I don't know why, but it seems so overwhelming to do this. I have planned so many units before but this one is different" (November 22). I was surprised by my reaction. This process seemed like it should be familiar and routine because it incorporated group work (which I use in class a lot), various texts (which I use in class daily), and deep thinking (which I usually focus my instruction on). However, I was unsettled through most of the unit. I was also nervous because this unit was "for my thesis" November 22). This plus the reasons listed previously made me more apprehensive than I might otherwise have been. I was reluctant to ask for help because I did not want to appear incompetent, thereby giving away the control of my image as a teacher.

Changing things in the middle of a unit was not comfortable for me as a teacher. I often slow down or quicken my pace based on student needs, but I usually stick to my original plan and make changes after the unit is done, knowing I will implement them the following year. In my research journal I noted that not having that clear plan in place was difficult for me. "It is a little weird not having this entire unit planned out ahead of time. I had an outline, for sure, but I

wanted to responsive to the students so I have been making specific plans as I go…It is

unsettling not knowing quite how long things will take" (January 6).

Knowing that students value autonomy and implementing it in the classroom are two

different things. From the start, figuring out how to make this unit work was difficult. As I got

further into it, the difficulty became more apparent. My journal entries show this. On December

3, I noted that I was working "to give up control." This required finding a balance between what

I mandated and what students could choose to do. I recorded, "It is a hard balance to strike,

because I have to plan ahead, but I am trying to give them more autonomy" (Research Journal,

December 3). I actually found the process to be a little confusing. I found myself wondering how

to find the right balance between directing the classroom activities and letting students choose

for themselves. It was not easy, as my journal entries show. One entry states,

> The kids love having choice about what to read, though some of the groups were SLOW
>
> to actually pick a book. It is hard to balance between giving choice and mandating. I want
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> them to explore all types of text, but I also want them to engaged, which is more likely to
>
> happen with choice. Such a hard balance. (January 5).

As I thought about this more, though, I realized that part of the reason it was confusing was

because I was still trying to keep tight control. Instead, hard as it might be, I needed to let go a

little bit more and recognize that I could still guide the students while giving them choice. I just

would not be leading them step by step. Another entry shows my realization of this:

> I just have to let go of the control. That is the hardest part of trying to do this project. But,
>
> when I do, because there is a structure in place, some good things can happen. I just can't
>
> expect for students to suddenly be perfect. I also can't expect that they will have the

discussions I imagine. They need to have freedom to be themselves. (Research Journal,

January 19).

Letting go actually led to a much richer classroom experience for all of us, even though it was not the exact experience I had imagined during planning.

Student Learning: Surface Comprehension and Deep, Critical Comprehension

My ideas. As I have mentioned previously, during the planning phase of this unit I had certain expectations of what would occur. I imagined that students would think deeply and that discussions would be lively, as is noted in the visioning section of Chapter 3. In my class I regularly expect my students to work hard and do the best they can. However, I often guide them through assignments step by step. I usually feel that deep, critical comprehension will come as I point it out to my students. For it to be truly meaningful to students, though, they need to find critical understanding on their own. Therefore, this unit involved more autonomous student work than my usual lesson plans. Throughout my journal, I recorded my thoughts about what was happening in comparison with what I had expected. Journal entries clearly illustrate that the real classroom activities did not match the images I had in my mind.

After the first day of the unit when I was leading the discussion, I wrote, "I was pleased with how it went. I think the kids are interested in the topic and it will be a good unit" (Research Journal, December 2). This was familiar territory, with me leading the conversation and coaxing ideas out of students. As time progressed and students were working independently, though, I noted that

Group work wasn't as good as I had hoped. Many of the students were off task or

goofy…I circulated the room the whole time and that helped, but I am still worried that

their discussions will stay on the surface only. (Research Journal, December 9)

Later I recorded more frustration with the depth of students' thinking when I wrote, "they are just focused on finishing. I am sure they are discussing, but I am not sure they are having quality discussions" (December 15). I started to question what I was doing and what I was having the students do, largely because what was actually happening in class was not what I had envisioned. I felt frustrated and somewhat disappointed. In my journal I wrote that "one group that is dysfunctional is again struggling to finish. There is less outright fighting, but they are not working well. Some of the other groups are slow but still on task. One group is very silly" (January 4).

Interestingly the same journal entry also records some positive things that were happening in student groups. I saw that one "group [was] moving slowly, but they [were] actually discussing friendship and they [were] having many talks about the differences between boys and girls. They [seemed] to be grasping the critical literacy idea better than some of the other groups" (January 4). I had such a clear picture in my mind of what group work should look like that even though I saw evidence of the deep, critical comprehension that was occurring, I did not recognize it. In the same entry I noted that, even though groups might not always think deeply, they were all "learning to look at the author's purpose, which is so important. They [struggled] more with 'reading' themselves, but that could be a developmental thing" (January 4). Students were comprehending in a new, critical way; I just did not notice it.

As time passed, though, I started to let go of my preconceived notions of what should happen and then I could see the truly positive things that were happening. A subsequent journal entry states that "the kids did well today" (January 6). As I reflected upon group work throughout the entire unit, I could finally see that students were experiencing the text in a new way and adopting a more critical stance when they were reading. I wrote, "I think it went well

for many of the groups. They had meaningful discussions about the questions listed" (Research Journal, January 7).

My students were able to examine the text more critically than they had done before. They were able to think in new ways, just by following the reading guide and answering the questions I had listed. However, they did not take it and run with it as I had imagined they would. I noted that "a few of the groups struggled because they just wanted to get through it" (Research Journal, January 7). Students needed support and scaffolding to think deeply about a text, but too much guidance stopped them from working independently and learning to build those deep-thinking skills for themselves. In the end, because I had expected so much from their autonomous groups—lively discussions and a rich exchange of ideas, like you might see in an advanced high school class—I was slow to recognize that my students had actually made a huge leap forward in their abilities to comprehend text.

Student ideas. Students were able, faster than I was, to understand that they were learning to think deeply. They recognized that they were critically examining texts for ideas and making connections between them. One student wrote that "all the texts we read talked about what characteristics make a good friend. There were things like trust, standing up for others, and that skin color doesn't matter" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21). Another student recognized that "in all the books we read, we learned a lot of things, like how to trust" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21). They were expanding their ability to deeply and critically comprehend a text.

Students also noticed when distractions disrupted their thinking. One commented, "I think I'm learning some stuff but I think I can learn more if people will stop talking." Another said, "I think some people are getting off task, and I think we sometimes just put down an answer

to a question to get it done. We don't really think about it or talk about it" (Student Reflection Assignment, December 21). They could see that there was more to a text than they were getting, but without the support of their group members, they were unable to achieve a deeper sort of understanding.

During data analysis I gained understanding, much more clearly than I had during execution of the unit, of the ways in which my students improved their comprehension skills. Examination of the reading guides my students completed showed that they were able to grasp two important critical literacy concepts. Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006) contend that students should be able to "read the author" and "read" themselves (p. 52). Many of my students were able to do this.

Reading the author. When asked about the author's purpose for writing and the background experience the author brought to the piece, students gave insightful answers that demonstrated an ability to read the author. Comments included statements about the method an author might use for a specific genre, such as, "It is a newspaper, so she keeps her opinions out" (December 15). Also, students recognized that an author's gender might make a difference in writing, noting "Maybe if the author was a girl she might have changed the book and made it different," and "It matters that it's a girl" (December 17 and January 6).

Students illustrated that they considered an author's previous experiences through comments like, "[Her background] didn't influence [the article] at all," [The author] probably went through this in high school," "They care about civil rights," "Maybe she was writing about what happened to her when she was young," "He was a game designer so he likes things to be interesting," "He was a professor in mythology," and "He was probably bullied as a child" (December 10, December 15, December 16, December 17, January 6). One group was even able

to recognize that they, as readers, might not be able to make a solid inference about how the text was influenced by an author's experiences. They pointed out, "We don't think the text was influenced, [but] we don't have enough info" to tell (December 15).

Reading themselves. Some of my students also showed that they could read themselves. When asked about how their experiences, life situations, personalities, and points of view might have influenced their understanding of the text, they recognized that their unique backgrounds can impact comprehension of a text. For instance, students acknowledged that being assigned to read a text affected how they read it. One group stated that having an assignment "made us keep reading, most [of us] would never read" the text for pleasure (December 15). Another group admitted that they chose a text because "it was on top. We wouldn't have read it on our own" (December 15).

Students also understood that their previous experiences affected their understanding. One group noted that they understood a book differently than the author because they had "never been through segregation" (December 10). Another group stated, "If we were younger, we might just think the book was just for entertainment" (January 6). One other group mentioned that they had all been "made fun of," so they understood a picture book on a different level than other students (December 10).

A group of students even realized that their personalities affected their understanding and affinity for a text. They were reading a picture book about a young sheep who likes to do his own thing while the other sheep just want to do everything the same as their parents. This group wrote that they each responded to the book differently because "Melanie and Anthony would rather fit in. Rick and DaNae would rather be different" (December 10).

Even if students did not maintain the consistently deeper level of comprehension that I had anticipated from the unit, there were still moments of critical thinking. My fears about covering the curriculum subsided when I realized that this kind of thoughtful work was occurring. It seems to me that if my students are able to think deeply in the manner described above, then they are surely learning the basic comprehension skills delineated in the state core curriculum.

My feelings. My feelings about the quality of student work during this unit were both positive and negative and seemed to swing back and forth between the two extremes. As I previously explained, I did not see the type of critical thinking and deep discussion I had expected. This led to feelings of disappointment and doubt in both my abilities to guide students and the abilities of my students to comprehend critically. In one journal entry I describe my dissatisfaction with what was happening in class:

> Overall, I am discouraged with their group work. Some groups are unkind to each other and not really working together. There is tension and some kids just disengage. Others respond to the tension by taking over. Some groups are having so much fun that they are off-task so much of the time and they take forever to finish. Then, when they discuss, it seems rather superficial and sort of goofy. I am just discouraged that the longer we do this, the worse they seem to get at it. The time of year doesn't help, I know, but I still hoped it would go better than it is. (December 15)

The very next day, however, my feelings were more positive, after I had shortened the reading guide in response to the difficulty the students were having. "They seemed to have better discussions today and it didn't take so long to get through the form…Overall, it has been a better day" (December 16).

More disappointment came, though, as we moved through the unit. On our poetry day, when students were choosing poems to read and discuss, my feelings swerved from upbeat to downcast. I thought I had planned well enough for the day, but my journal notes that I had not. "This did not go as I envisioned. I was not able to move from group to group observing their discussions. Instead, I spent most of the time trying to find poems that would work" (December 17). I had not previously marked possible poems, so "the groups had a really hard time finding poems about friendship. I could [see] the friendship tie-in to poems they couldn't, but without me pointing it out, they had a rough time finding it." The difficulty in finding poems not only slowed down meaningful discussion, but it also led my students to feel frustrated. Because they were so irritated with the process of locating poems, when they did come across a suitable poem, they were not in the mood to discuss it. By the end of class we were all annoyed and argumentative, which did not lead to beneficial conversations.

In the end, though, my feelings had rebounded to a more optimistic place. I had let go of my unrealistic expectations, as is recorded in my research journal. I wrote that, even "though it hasn't worked out like I thought it would," it has still "been a good unit" (Research Journal, January 19). I further stated that

> Things don't ever turn out like you think they will when you teach. The kids are
> unpredictable, so you have to be prepared for that. When I let go of the idealized vision I
> had in my head, then I was able to see the good things that were happening. (January 19)

I was pleased with my class's contemplative "discussion (sometimes by students who don't often contribute), deep thinking about what a text says, and conversations about whether or not students agree with the author" (January 19). Stepping back and pondering what had actually happened in my class during the unit gave me a clearer view of the "good progress" my students

had made (Research Journal, January 19). Student growth was "the part that [was] most encouraging to me" (Research Journal, January 19). Although students did not advance to the lofty goals I had set, they still improved their abilities in a very meaningful way. Many were able "to critically think about what their opinions [were]" and evaluate what they had read honestly (Research Journal, January 19). They were able to improve not only their surface comprehension, as is called for in the state core curriculum, but also their critical comprehension skills which will help them in their lives, in or out of school.

Summary of Findings

During the implementation of this instructional unit there was tension between my need for teacher control and the necessity for student autonomy in order to nurture critical literacy skills. Finding and maintaining the proper balance between these two elements was difficult, but not unattainable. There were three main areas in which tensions emerged: discussion (teacher-directed and student-directed), covering the curriculum (teacher choice and student choice), and student learning (surface comprehension and deep, critical comprehension). In each of these areas I struggled to oversee classroom activities while still granting students the independence to manage their own actions and studies. When appropriate balance escaped me, my students had mediocre learning experiences and I was unsure of my role in the classroom. When, however, I hit upon the correct balance between teacher control and student autonomy, my students were able to cultivate critical literacy skills: reading a text, evaluating it for themselves, and discussing it with others.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

As part of Torbert's (2001) fourth phase of the action research process, *assessing,* it is important not only to analyze what occurred, but to also evaluate the process of implementing this unit in my classroom. To that end, after analyzing the data to find themes, I reached conclusions about what I learned and decided what I will do differently the next time I teach this type of unit. In this chapter I will discuss my conclusions, explain the changes I plan to make, and make recommendations for future research.

Action research, as McNiff and Whitehead (2002) posit, is not "a set of concrete steps," but is instead "a process of learning from experience, a dialectical interplay between practice, reflection and learning" (p. 14). Throughout the course of teaching and reflecting upon this unit I have learned a great deal about my students' abilities and even more about my practice as a teacher. The knowledge I gained will help me not only as I teach this unit (or ones similar to it), but will also improve my general instructional methods. In addition, my experience can provide insight for other teachers who want to teach with a critical literacy focus and researchers who study critical literacy instruction.

General Conclusions

While this study is limited in its scope, it provides some valuable insights for educators and researchers. First, this study provides a teacher's point of view about implementing this type of instruction. Much of the research about critical literacy instruction gives guidelines (and some examples) about how to teach with this type of focus, but it does not explain the possible management pitfalls or give a realistic viewpoint of what it is like. In this study, however, I am at times painfully honest about what went poorly in class and the problems I encountered. I also explain how I resolved those problems and what I would do to avoid them in the future. This

viewpoint is important for other teachers who are interested in pushing students to a higher level of understanding, since often research says what should be done without explaining how to put it into place in a real classroom. Because there is such a lack of information about critical literacy instruction in practitioner handbooks, this study provides a valuable and, at this point, absent voice.

Second, this study involves an experienced teacher implementing a new type of instruction based on educational theory and research. Often classroom teachers feel that educational research is too far removed from the practical realities of everyday teaching. Teachers are very busy trying to fulfill their many responsibilities, so reading educational research that seems too theoretical to apply to the actual classroom seems a waste of time. Instead many teachers would rather wait for someone else to interpret the research and write a practitioner handbook about it. This study is unique because I—a practicing classroom teacher— did not wait for others to interpret the research, but instead trusted in my own ability to understand the research, devise a plan for implementation that met the needs of my specific students, and evaluate the results for myself. Other teachers can see that I was able to do this and know that they could do the same thing.

Third, many teachers fear trying something new. Their teaching methods have been adequate in the past, so they should be good enough for the future too. While this is an understandable point of view, born of an educational system that swings from one extreme to another, it limits a teacher from responding to the needs of current students. As students change (largely because the culture we live in changes) teaching practices should change also. My experience of taking a risk with a new type of instruction can serve as an example for other teachers. I tried something new and experienced failures and successes as I did so. Though the

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instruction did not function perfectly, my students still learned the required core curriculum and furthered their skills. Along with that, however, they also took some important steps toward developing a critical perspective that will serve them well in today's complex, democratic society.

Conclusions about My Students

During this critical literacy unit about friendship I came to understand something very important about my students' abilities. First, my students are capable of critically analyzing and discussing various types of texts. For my entire teaching career I have focused on helping students build their reading comprehension skills. My goal has been to help students become "active" readers who set "clear goals" for reading, "evaluate" the texts they read, pay attention to the "structure of the text," work to "make predictions" about the text, "read selectively," and who "construct, revise, and question the meanings they make as they read" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 205). This has been and is still a worthwhile goal. The data collected from student work and discussions clearly shows that students engaged in these processes. As students completed the reading guides and discussed texts with their groups, they moved through many of the comprehension strategies discussed in Chapter 2. In fact if this unit were focused solely on improving comprehension and practicing reading strategies, I would have judged it a complete success. Indeed, when the end-of-year testing was completed, my students performed satisfactorily. There was no drop in test scores from previous years when comprehension instruction was my main focus. Clearly, though I was working on helping students to develop critical literacy, I did not neglect the required curriculum. Rather the more basic comprehension processes included in the core curriculum are logically part of critical literacy.

The difference from previous year, however, was that I expected more from my students. I pushed them beyond a comfortable, familiar level into the more complex, critical level needed to function successfully in democratic society. I was pleased to find that in some cases, students were able to jump from the comprehension level of understanding to the desired deeper, more critical level of awareness. I observed students who could "reflect on, discuss, and write about the insights that literature gives them about their world and their relationships to others" (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006, p. 46). They were able to, as Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006) state, "read" (p. 52) each author and ponder the ways in which texts are affected by an author's background. They were also able to "read" themselves, figuring how their personal "characteristics" and backgrounds "influenced" their "responses" to texts (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006, p. 52). These insights were more basic than I had first envisioned, but they were still valuable and still represent a powerful shift in thinking. These students built a foundation that will help them as they mature and their literacy skills progress, both in and out of school.

Some students, though, were not able to reach that higher level of understanding. There are many possible reasons for this, but the most compelling is that my students are young and their contact with society varies widely. Each one comes to my class with distinct perspectives and experiences that are largely dependent on the lifestyles of their parents and families. It is unrealistic to expect that students would be able to recognize, let alone understand, all the biases, viewpoints, or conflicts within a piece of writing or within themselves when their lives have only been twelve or thirteen years long. They are just learning to "read the world," so their ability to "read the word" from an advanced, complex point of view is in its infancy (Freire, 1983, p. 5). None of the students are at the same starting point and therefore, they cannot all get to the same

ending point. They can and did, however, bring their own unique view to the discussion. This enriched and expanded the experience for all of the students.

Conclusions about Myself

From this experience I learned four important things about my teaching. First, it is clear that this unit did not unfold the way I thought it would. This was the first time I had attempted to "have [my] students become critically literate," that is, to "understand that the author writes from a particular perspective" and that "the author's perspective is not the only perspective" (Delaney, 2007, p. 30). Even though I am an experienced teacher, in this area, I am a beginner. So, much like a beginning teacher, I had an idealized vision of what would occur. As the data shows, it took me a while to let go of that idealized vision and see what was actually going on in class. When I did, I came to understand that, though many aspects of the experience could have been improved, I am capable of guiding students through the process of building critical literacy. As I gain more experience with this type of instruction, I will become more comfortable with the fact that "critical literacy shifts the boundaries of discussion between teacher and students [and] changes relationships" (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 646). Although things did not run perfectly, I am hopeful that I can improve my ability to guide students through critical literacy processes.

Second, this unit also reinforced the importance of my lesson planning for student success. Because "the critical literacy classroom is characterized by an emphasis on students' voices and dialogue," I deliberately tried not to plan the same way I plan my other units (Beck, 2005, p. 394). In an effort to allow students to have greater influence over the discussion, I made my plans less formal. In fact I even felt that too much planning would stifle my students' ability to direct their own learning.

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What I discovered was that while my preparation had to be different from my traditional planning, it still had to exist. When I did not make a specific plan, things descended into chaos, like they did on our poetry discussion day. However, when I over-planned, students did not initiate meaningful discussion, as is illustrated by the students' use of the first reading guide I created. The proper type and amount of planning led to meaningful discussion and effective use of class time. This type of planning is characterized by an anticipation of student needs and a realistic appraisal of the pitfalls (off-task behavior, nonparticipation, arguments) too much student freedom could create. Also, this preparation should include time for me and my students to become comfortable with the student autonomy involved in critical literacy instruction (Beck, 2005).

Third, I came to understand that giving away control of classroom discussion and choice of text is not the same thing as giving away control of the class. When I started teaching middle school, I had to learn to take charge of the classroom. Because I had 30–36 diverse (and often strong-minded) students in a class, I ensured coverage of the curriculum and an appropriate classroom atmosphere by tightly managing everything. After eleven years of teaching, this is now a comfortable and familiar persona for me. For this friendship unit, however, even though I am a veteran teacher, I am a beginner at critical literacy instruction. Therefore, when this unit called for me to loosen the reigns, it was difficult for me and I think somewhat unsettling for the students. It was like I was back in my beginning days of teaching. I was unsure of my role and felt unsteady with what was going on. This led to a somewhat erratic management style from me and inconsistent work from my students. I reacted harshly to off-task behaviors on some days and was able to take them in stride on other days. Students did not know what to expect from me. I did not know what to expect from me or my students either.

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Since my teaching demeanor was unpredictable, their work was too. This complicated the already complex, unknown situation. Beck (2005) has suggested that because students are not experienced with the critical literacy inquiry process, they "may not recognize that accompanying their new empowerment is a responsibility to acknowledge the voices of others" (p. 396). Students did not recognize their new responsibility, but neither did I. However, as time passed, my students and I became more at ease with these inquiry procedures. Just like a beginning teacher, I needed time and experience to figure out what was best to do. As my students and I gained more experience, I learned that I could still retain management of the classroom while letting students direct their discussions of the texts they chose. Implementing the critical inquiry process was, as Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) have pointed out, "hard work" (p. 408) that required me to exert continued effort and exercise persistent patience. With further practice I will improve my ability to guide students through the hard work of critical literacy inquiry.

Finally, I have learned that handling the tension between scaffolding the text and allowing student independence requires flexibility and responsive teaching. I must be willing to change my plans for some or all of the students. After eleven years of teaching, it is my instinct to plan for all possible situations, even though, realistically, I know that is not possible. I make detailed lesson plans and carry them out. I have always tried to be a reflective teacher and who avoids ruts. I have changed a lot of the units I teach and develop new units every year. However, throughout the course of this unit, I have realized that I usually change things for the next time I teach the unit. I rarely change things during the unit, except to cut out certain parts. This unit required me to make changes as I went. I will definitely change some things before teaching this unit again, but I will also be prepared to modify my plans along the way.

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Planned Changes

There are three overall changes I will make before implementing this type of instruction again. First, I will plan to complete the unit over a longer period of time. This will allow me to work with each group individually and explain what is required of students more fully. While this unit spanned a couple of months, it included the Thanksgiving and winter holidays. The actual instructional time was probably closer to six weeks. Next time I will plan to introduce the topic of study and then work on it over an entire quarter or semester. If we worked on the inquiry unit two to three times a week, I would have more time to respond to the specific needs of my students. Also, I would be able to teach students how to use their autonomous group time more effectively.

Second, next time I teach this unit, I will teach and practice more about discussion. I certainly brought it up a lot during my instruction, but we did not have time to model and practice good discussions. Before any group work starts, I will teach lessons about how to start a discussion, engage in dialogue, and respectfully disagree with others. Students will have a chance to practice. This will make their critical literacy discussions more effective.

The final change I plan to make is to work on reading the author and reading ourselves as readers (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006) throughout the year. If I introduce these ideas right from the start of the year and we discuss them with most of the texts we read, I think students will be more able to work successfully in groups. Students will have already taken "the first step toward critical awareness," which is to "[reflect] on how these experiences shape…interpretations" of texts (Beck, 2005, p. 394). Group work will start out at a higher level than it did during this unit.

Recommendations for Future Research

While I learned many things from this research study, it has also generated some new questions. First, I am curious to see what my experience will be when I implement this type of instruction a second time. Hopefully the unit will be improved by my prior experience and the changes I plan to make. Will those changes improve my experience? Documenting the process a second time and comparing it to my experience from this time would make an interesting qualitative study.

Second, I wonder a more about my students' viewpoints on what happened during this unit. When I teach this again, I could collect more data from their perspectives. Using interviews, student journals, and other student-centered data, I could construct an account of critical literacy instruction from the student point of view.

Third, I am curious just how much this type of instruction impacts students' comprehension skills, such as summarizing, vocabulary acquisition, identification of themes, and the other skills targeted in the state core curriculum. Future research could be conducted using an experimental design with pretests/posttests and a control/experimental group.

In conclusion, there is more to be learned about critical literacy instruction and the implementation of it. It is an important area of study that deserves more consideration, since it holds such promise for preparing students to function productively in democratic society. This study serves as a good start to that process and clearly shows that successful implementation of critical literacy instruction is possible.

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Parental Permission Form to Participate as a Research Subject

Introduction
This research study is being conducted by Amy Geilman as a part of her master's thesis to examine the experiences of 7th grade language arts students as they participate in an inquiry unit about friendship. Particularly, the researcher is interested in the nature of interactions that take place as students read various types of texts, examine those texts in a critical way, and discuss them in groups. Your child was selected to participate because he/she is enrolled in Amy Geilman's 7th grade language arts class. The research study will be supervised by Roni Jo Draper, Associate Professor in Teacher Education in the David O. McKay School of Education at Brigham Young University.

Procedures
Your child will participate in this research study while he/she participates in the inquiry unit during October of 2009. He/she will read texts about friendship and discuss issues related to friendship in small groups. Your child will complete some assignments and journal entries. At the conclusion of the unit, your child will complete a project to showcase what he/she has learned. Small group discussions will be observed and audio-taped and the tapes will be transcribed. Direct quotes from those transcriptions may appear in research publications and presentations, but will only be linked to a pseudonym. Artifacts created for and during the unit (e.g., assignments, journal writing, and final projects) will be collected, photocopied, and returned to your child.

Risks/Discomforts
There are minimal risks for participating in this study. However, your child may feel uncomfortable being observed and audio-taped. I will work to create a comfortable classroom environment and discuss with him/her any concerns he/she might have. I will also be happy to schedule meetings with you and your child so that, together, we can work out any issues that arise.

Benefits
It is not anticipated that your child will receive any direct benefits from participating in the study. It is possible that he/she will experience indirect benefits from participating in a collaborative learning environment.

Confidentiality
All information provided will remain confidential and will be reported with no identifying information. All data, including assignments, journal responses, final projects, observational notes, tapes, and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location. Only those directly involved in the research will have access to them.

Compensation
Your child will not be compensated for his/her participation in this study.

Participation
Students who choose not to participate in the study will participate in the inquiry unit as a regular part of instruction. However, their work will not be copied, audio tapes of their discussions will be erased and not used for the study, and observational notes of the child will be excluded from the study. The student will not be identified as a participant or non-participant by the researcher. You have the right to excuse or withdraw your child from participating in the study at anytime without jeopardy to your child's class status or grade.

Questions about the Research
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Amy Geilman at 801-412-2100, amy.geilman@jordan.k12.ut.us or Roni Jo Draper at 801-422-4960, roni_jo_draper@byu.edu.

Questions about your Child's Rights as a Research Participant
If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Christopher Dromey, IRB Chair, 801-422-6461, 133 TLRB, dromey@byu.edu.

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will that my child participates in this study.

Child's Name: _____   Parent's Name:_____

Date:_____   Signature:_____

Assent to be a Research Subject

Introduction
This research study is being conducted by Miss Geilman as a part of her master's thesis to examine the experiences of 7th grade language arts students as they participate in an inquiry unit about friendship.

Procedures
You will participate in this research study while you participate in the inquiry unit during October of 2009. You will read texts about friendship and discuss issues related to friendship in small groups. You will complete assignments and journal entries. At the conclusion of the unit, you will complete a project to showcase what you have learned. I will observe and audio-tape your small group discussions. Then, I will listen to the tapes and write down what you say. I might use some quotes from your conversations in my final paper. I will also make copies of some of your assignments (without your names) so I can use parts of them in my thesis paper.

Confidentiality
All information provided will remain confidential. I will not use your names when I write about what you have done.

Participation
If you choose not to participate in the study, you will participate in the inquiry unit as a regular part of class. However, your work will not be included in my research. If you choose not to participate in the study, there will be no penalty to you or your grade in this class.

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____　　　　Date: _____

Inquiry Unit Outline: Friendship

Enduring Understandings
1. Thematic
   Friendship is an important part of life and can affect people positively or negatively. When choosing friends, it is important to carefully consider the characteristics not only of individual people, but the relationships that those people have. Trust plays a big part in friendship.
2. Reading
   A critical reader does more than just read and comprehend a text. Critical readers consider their experiences, biases, and perspectives along with the author's background, point of view, and possible biases. Readers can then determine the important ideas and whether or not they agree with the author's assertions.

Things to Do Before Beginning the Unit
1. Group kids based on reading levels and classroom temperament. Groups of four are ideal, but three or five will also work. Determine reading level through the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) or similar reading test.
2. Make copies.
   a. Possible resource form (one for each student)
   b. Reading guide (one per text for each group)
   c. Discussion record form (one for each student)
   d. Final project assignment paper (one for each student)
3. Gather resources from the library or internet (or at least identify some possible resources). This will be an ongoing process throughout the unit since students will study texts by genre. When a new genre is used, bring in new resources. (If the library is available for your entire class period, take the kids to the library and let them find the resources while there.)

Daily Plans
Day 1: Large-group Discussion
1. Discuss inquiry with the students.
   a. Inquiry is the act of seeking information by asking questions.
   b. What kinds of things can we inquire about?
   c. What kinds of questions do we ask?
      i. Thick: complex and broad (open-ended)
      ii. Thin: simple and specific (close-ended)
2. Intro the topic of friendship. Have kids think about friendship for a couple of minutes.
3. Have kids brainstorm questions they have about friendship. Record all questions on the board. (After class, evaluate all the questions and choose 3-5 guiding questions for the inquiry unit.)

Day 2: Large-group Discussion
1. Review the previous day's discussion briefly.
2. Question: Where can we find information about friendship? Have kids brainstorm. Focus in on textual sources.
3. Have a discussion to define text. Start broad and narrow it to the definition of text that we will use for our inquiry unit: written forms or things that started out as written forms (plays, movies, TV shows).
4. Intro textual inquiry: Formulate a question, read a text (or various texts), and discuss the text—all for the purposes of learning new information and gaining a new perspective.
5. Brainstorm a list of all the types of texts we could use to answer our questions about friendship.
6. Intro critical literacy: a way of reading that focuses on understanding not just the text, but the social context that surrounds the text, the author who created it, and the reader who studies it.
7. Discuss democracy and being an informed citizen.
   a. To become an informed person, you need to take a critical stance about text and information presented.
   b. How can we recognize that an author has a point of view? (Think of genre of text, possible purposes for writing, and possible past experiences of author. Can do some research about author if needed.)
   c. Does a reader have to agree with what an author thinks? (No, but a reader must think deeply before deciding whether or not to agree.)

Day 3: Large-group Discussion and Individual Work
1. Intro the five guiding questions.
2. Hand out the Possible Resources form, one to each student.
3. Explain that students will be searching the library for possible sources to use in the inquiry unit. (Students have previously been given practice searching the library, as orientation to seventh grade.) For each source, students will consider the guiding questions and record which questions connect to that source.
4. Take the students to the library and let them search for sources. They will spend about 30 minutes in the library.
5. Collect the forms after class and combine the lists, grouping categories by genre. Add any additional sources that are needed. These lists will be used to pull resources that students will use throughout the unit.

Days 4-5: Large-group Discussion
1. Hand out a reading guide to each student.
2. Read "A Mason-Dixon Memory" by Clifton Davis (or similar type of personal essay from a literature anthology).
3. Walk students through the reading guide, using it as a framework to discuss the text. As the guide is filled out, be sure to point out the proper way to discuss text ideas and answer any questions students have about how the reading guide works.

Days 6-7: Large-group Discussion and Small-group Discussion
1. Put students into pre-determined groups.
2. Discuss how to work well in groups. Talk about taking turns, compromising, how to disagree, and staying on task.
3. Explain that students will be examining texts with the help of their groups. They will move through the texts by genre. I will circulate and help students as they work.
4. Show students the collection of texts to use. Students can choose whatever text they would like to use.
5. Explain that each student does not need to fill out a reading guide. Instead, each group will complete a collective reading guide, so one student will need to be the scribe.
6. Have students start with Picture Books. They will read three picture books and complete a reading guide for each one.

Day 8: Small-group Discussion
1. Today, students will study newspaper articles.
2. Each group will read two articles and complete a reading guide for each one.

Day 9: Small-group Discussion
1. Today, students will discuss novels and movies.
2. Have novels in class for students to look through, but they should choose a book that at least one person has read. That person can summarize the text for the other group members. However, it will be better if most of the group members have read the book.
3. Each group will discuss one novel and complete a reading guide.
4. Each group will also discuss one movie and complete a reading guide.

Day 10: Small-group Discussion
1. Today, students will read poetry.
2. Each group will read two poems and complete a reading guide for each one.

Day 11: Individual Work
1. Students will work alone today to answer the reflection questions.
2. Write the questions on the board and have students write a paragraph responding to each one.

Day 12: Small-group Discussion
1. Today, students will read magazine articles. The best magazines for friendship articles are ones like *American Girl* and *Girl's Life.* The boys might balk at this, but remind them that they should read critically and they do not have to agree with what is stated in the articles.
2. Each group will read two articles and complete a reading guide for each one.

Days 13-15: Small-group Discussion
1. Students will read any type of text they choose.
2. Each group will read and discuss four texts and complete a reading guide for each one.

Days 16-17: Small-group Discussion
1. Students will discuss the guiding questions. They will try to answer the questions and connect them to various texts.
2. Each student should record their answers on his/her own Discussion Record Form.

Day 18: Large-group Discussion
1. Discuss the guiding questions and what students think about each one.
2. Discuss the overall unit and what students thought about it.

<u>Days 19-21</u>
1. Hand out the Final Project Assignment. Students should create a project to respond to one of the final questions. They can write texts, create art, create multi-media projects (like slide shows or films) or make music.
2. Give students three class periods to work on their projects.
<u>Days 22-23</u>
1. Have students share their projects with the class.
2. Students will first start by sharing projects with a small group of students.
3. Anyone who wants to share with the entire class can do that after the small-group sharing.

APPENDIX C

Name _____

Date _____ Period ____

Friendship Inquiry Unit: Possible Resources

Friendship Guiding Questions
1. What makes a good friend?
2. What makes a bad friend?
3. What is the role of trust in a friendship?
4. What ruins friendships?
5. How do you choose friends?

Possible Sources

Title	Author/Creator	Guiding Question

APPENDIX D
Friendship Unit Sample Texts

Novels

- *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson
- *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White
- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney
- *Dog Song* by Gary Paulsen
- *Don't You Dare Read This Mrs. Dunphrey* by Margaret Peterson Haddix
- *Double Fudge* by Judy Blume
- *Eragon* by Christopher Paolini
- *Frog and Toad Are Friends* by Arnold Lobel
- *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling
- *Holes* by Louis Sachar
- *Kira-kira* by Cynthia Kadohata
- *Mercy on These Teenage Chimps* by Gary Soto
- *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary
- *The Janitor's Boy* by Andrew Clements
- *The Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot
- *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls

Poetry Anthologies

- *A Kick in the Head* by Paul B. Janeczko
- *A Maze Me: Poems* for Girls by Naomi Shihab Nye
- *I Can't Stop Smiling* by Carol Lynn Pearson
- *Lunchbox Mail* by Jenny Whitehead
- *Partly Cloudy* by Gary Soto
- *Poetry for Young People* by Robert Frost
- *Poetry for Young People* by Edgar Allan Poe
- *Poetry for Young People* by Carl Sandburg
- *Swimming Upstream* by Kristine O'Connell George
- *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O* by Shel Silverstein

Picture Books

- *Daisy-Head Mayzie* by Dr. Seuss
- *My Friend Rabbit* by Eric Rohmann
- *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* by Patricia Polacco
- *The Butterfly* by Patricia Polacco
- *The Friend* by Sarah Stewart
- *The Gardener* by Sarah Stewart
- *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch
- *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles
- *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss
- *Woolbur* by Leslie Heakoski

Reading Guide (Original)

Text Type	
Text Title and Author/Creator	
Readers' Purpose(s) and Relevant Guiding Question(s)	
Author's Presumed Purpose	
Author's Intended Audience	
Author's Message(s)	
Interpretation of the Work • How was this text like or unlike other things you have read? • What will you remember most from this text? • Did this text match your expectations, or did it surprise or confuse you? How? • What do you think is the significance of this text? Is it more than entertainment?	
"Reading" the Author • What do you know about the author? • What can you infer about this author's knowledge, values, and experiences? • How do you think the text was influenced by the author's ethnic background or by whether the author is male or female, rich or poor, young or old? • What effect do you think the author intended to have on readers?	

Context for Reading • If the text was assigned, how did that fact affect your reading? • If your group chose it, what made you pick this rather than something else? • Did all members of the group read the text or did one group member summarize the text for the others?	
Feelings/Reactions while Reading • Did reading this work bring back memories of experiences in your own lives? • What aspects of the text did you most enjoy? Least enjoy? • Did you ever feel confused or frustrated while reading?	
"Reading" Yourselves • What characteristics about yourselves do you think influenced your reaction to the text? • How much do you think your responses were influenced by your ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, experiences, or values? • Do you think the experience of reading this work has changed you in any way?	
Guiding Questions and Answers	

Reading Guide (Revised)

What type of text are you reading?	
What is the title? Who wrote/created it?	
What is your purpose for reading this text?	
Which of the guiding questions are relevant to this text?	
What do you think was the author's purpose for writing this text?	
Who is the author's intended audience?	
What is the author's message?	
What do you know about the author? What can you infer about this author's knowledge, values, and experiences?	
How do you think the text was influenced by the author's ethnic background or by whether the author is male or female, rich or poor, young or old?	
What effect do you think the author intended to have on readers?	
If the text was assigned, how did that affect your reading? If your group chose it, what made you pick it?	
Did all members of the group read the text or did one group member summarize the text for the others?	

Did reading this work bring back memories of experiences in your own lives?	
How much do you think your responses to the text were influenced by your ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, experiences, or values?	
Why is this text important?	
Do you think the experience of reading this work has changed you in any way?	
Guiding Questions and Answers	

APPENDIX G

Student Reflection Questions

1. What were the most important ideas from the texts you read?

2. What are your answers to the guiding questions?

    a. What makes a good friend?

    b. What makes a bad friend?

    c. What is the role of trust in a friendship?

    d. What ruins friendships?

    e. How do you choose friends?

3. What was your favorite text? Why did you like it?

4. What are your thoughts/feelings about your group and how your group members work

    together?

5. What are your thoughts/feelings about the unit?

APPENDIX H

Name _____

Date _____ Period ____

Discussion Record: Guiding Questions

Question	Which texts did your group read that connect to this question?	How did each text connect?
1. What makes a good friend?		
Answer to Question 1		
Question	Which texts did your group read that connect to this question?	How did each text connect?
2. What makes a bad friend?		
Answer to Question 2		
Question	Which texts did your group read that connect to this question?	How did each text connect?
3. What is the role of trust in a friendship?		
Answer to Question 3		

Question	Which texts did your group read that connect to this question?	How did each text connect?
4. What ruins friendships?		

Answer to Question 4

Question	Which texts did your group read that connect to this question?	How did each text connect?
5. How do you choose friends?		

Answer to Question 5

Anecdotal Record Form   Date _____

Group	Observations
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	