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Critical Literacy in the Primary Grades

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CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

by

Whitney Talbert Spooner

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study using ethnographic methods was to gain insights into how teachers of primary-aged students successfully enact critical literacy in their classrooms. Using a critical pedagogical theoretical framework, I addressed the following research questions: In what ways are teachers of primary grades modeling and fostering critical literacy within their classrooms? What challenges have primary-grades teachers faced when employing critical literacy practices? What suggestions would teachers offer to those who wish to move toward a more critical stance with their teaching? I interviewed nine K-3 teachers who had experience with critical literacy and supplemented interview data by observing lessons and taking photographs of student work and teacher-created instructional supports. I applied an inductive analysis, looking for patterns and themes.

There were three types of critical literacy enacted by primary-grades teachers: employment of critical literacy through themes predetermined by the teacher, critical literacy taught through student-centered themes, and teachers’ encouraging students to question what they read through social issues texts. Colleges and universities played an important role in supporting classrooms in which critical literacy is a central component. Obstacles existed such as questioning the readiness of students or fears of what parents would think about teachers addressing topics that could be controversial with their children. This study may help teachers interested in making space for critical literacy by understanding ways teachers have successfully enacted critical literacy with primary-
aged students and illustrating the supports and obstacles that other teachers have experienced along the way.

Keywords: critical literacy, critical social practice, social issues literature, social justice teacher education, social issues text.
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CHAPTER 1: THE STUDY

Problem

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, a shift in federal policy, placed a greater emphasis on accountability for meeting standards and passing standardized tests (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). The major emphasis of NCLB was on low achieving students and schools but it has had an impact on all schools. Part of NCLB required that all teachers be highly qualified. Ensuring that every teacher in every classroom is a quality teacher is essential to addressing the challenges of achievement in schools. Quality teachers are knowledgeable, strategic, adaptive, and reflective, and they make a huge difference in student learning (International Reading Association, 2007).

Under the reign of NCLB, administrators and teachers focused on ensuring students meet or exceed test scores in certain academic areas. Due to the increased focus on test scores, many districts have mapped out when and how teachers are to teach standards, leaving little to no room for teachers to focus their energy or creativity on critical lifelong lessons that may or may not be included in the district’s plan. This leaves teachers feeling as if they are no longer educating the whole child. Such a strict standards-based curriculum leaves little time for teachers to focus on any areas other than those prescribed by the standardized tests. Teachers are often abandoning creative and
innovative approaches to teaching, such as critical literacy, only to replace them with the teaching of standards that are often disconnected or decontextualized.

Student results on the achievement tests that are used as a measure under NCLB should not be the only focus or measure of student achievement (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007). Such a large focus on achievement tests tends to narrow the learning goals of a school (Liston et. al., 2007). There are other important values that are being pushed aside due to the focus on standards-based achievement tests. Teachers find themselves teaching a strict regimen of mandated standards and fear their students will not pass the standardized tests if they do not follow the linear curriculum from the district and state.

**My Experience**

Prior to this study, I taught elementary school for 10 years in two separate school districts. The first school district in which I was employed was a very rural district, with one primary, elementary, middle, and high school for the entire county. Upon moving to the Atlanta area, I was offered a job in an extremely large district. Within this district, I have worked at two very different schools. One school served a community with very low socio-economic status, with almost 90% of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch, while approximately 12% of the other school qualified for free and reduced price lunch.

Having experience at three very different schools helped me to grow as a teacher. While the socioeconomic status of the students was different at each of the schools, some of the struggles and problems were the same. The pressure for students to score at or above proficient on state mandated tests was daunting. Trying to find time to adequately
teach the required standards and build relationships with students and their families was tough on every teacher, not just me.

Each year that I have taught I have had numerous parents share with me their thankfulness and appreciation for teaching their children. Some parents have stated how much their child had learned that year; others have emphasized my level of caring for their child. Even though I received such kind recognition I was very tough on myself as a teacher. Part of me felt like there was always something more that could have been included in my instructional routine or a different technique employed as an effort to help struggling students.

It was during a search for strategies to enhance my teaching that I found a doctoral program being offered by a university that was close to my home. I felt that this was the perfect way for me to grow and become a better teacher. I began taking classes and it was during one of my required courses that I first learned about critical literacy.

During my second summer as a doctoral student I was introduced to critical literacy. I eagerly welcomed the new information and ideas that I was learning in my doctoral program. I was dumbfounded that I had been teaching for almost a decade and was oblivious to critical literacy. Upon careful examination and interrogation of my own pedagogical practices, I noticed that critical literacy could be a very powerful tool to use in my classroom. Perhaps this could be one of the changes that would help me improve as a teacher. I did extensive research on ways to incorporate critical literacy into my first grade and second-grade classrooms. I interviewed fellow teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the level of knowledge surrounding critical literacy amongst teachers.
that I worked with as well as to gather their input on ways to weave critical literacy into our classrooms. I gathered information and articles in an effort to learn more about critical literacy.

In my quest to learn more I began to question whether critical literacy was appropriate for students in younger grades, particularly kindergarten through grade three. For the purpose of this study, the term primary grades is defined as kindergarten through third grade. My thinking was based on the fact that the majority of information that I discovered mentioned only the upper elementary grades. It seemed as if there was a lot less information on critical literacy in the early grades. In my attempt to incorporate critical literacy I noticed a much bigger problem within my classroom. With numerous standards to teach, could I stray from them and focus on teaching my students to utilize a critical literacy perspective? I began to feel tormented between teaching the rigorous multitude of standards and teaching students the lifelong skills and methods of thinking about themselves and others in literature and within social situations.

Given these two issues, I was torn whether or not critical literacy was appropriate in my classroom. I wholeheartedly believed in the theory of critical literacy and in teaching children to view their world with a critical literacy lens, but I could not seem to find a place to situate critical literacy within my classroom. A portion of the problem was the socioeconomic and cultural make up of my class and school. Much of the literature written about critical literacy deals with giving a voice to the marginalized or oppressed. Given the geographic area in which I teach, these are not two descriptors typically assigned to students attending the school. While there is a high interest in
critical literacy at the scholarly level, there remain few theorized accounts of enacted classroom practices in different institutional and geographic sites, including white, upper-middle class settings (Comber & Simpson, 2001). Lankshear and McLaren note that discussions and practices of critical literacy are “often confined to being pedagogies of the oppressed and do not pay sufficient attention to how the consciousness of the elites is to be addressed” (1993, p. 50). I began to find that there was a gap in the literature surrounding critical literacy in the primary grades.

**Purpose of the Study**

Vasquez (2010) states that critical literacy should not be a topic that is added on to a curriculum, but a frame through which to participate in the world. She believes that teachers should pay close attention to topics that capture students’ interests, and these topics should be used to build a curriculum that has significance to these students. There are some primary classrooms in the United States in which critical literacy plays an important role in the daily functioning of the classroom. The purpose of this research was to gain insights into teachers of primary-aged students who successfully enact critical literacy within their classrooms. Examining how teachers [have successfully incorporated critical literacy into their classrooms] may help other teachers to identify and understand ways in which they too can utilize the theories of critical literacy within their classrooms. The following research questions guide the study:

(1) In what ways are teachers of primary grades modeling and fostering critical literacy within their classrooms?
(2) What challenges have primary grades teachers of primary faced when employing critical literacy practices?

(3) What suggestions would teachers offer to those who wish to move toward a more critical stance with their teaching?

In examining critical literacy in the primary grades, I was interested in the logistics of this pedagogical approach in the classroom. I wanted to find out everything about critical literacy in regards to the teachers of primary grades. I sought to find out the types of activities that teachers incorporated into their teaching, and into their schedules. Did these teachers have a support system to help them address problems and plan lessons? My main goal was to use the information and the knowledge gained from this study to open the doors for other teachers to attempt critical literacy within their classrooms, especially primary-grade teachers. I sought to create an opportunity for others to gain insight into how teachers are enacting critical literacy within their classrooms and to hopefully enhance the work of others so that other teachers will embrace critical literacy as pedagogy.

**Origination of the Study**

It is through one of these opportunities in my own classroom that my dissertation topic emerged. I was working with a professor trying to increase the level at which I enact critical literacies with my students. My students knew that I was in school and was trying to become a better teacher. They were so excited to meet one of my teachers and to become active participants in my learning. As I completed graduate classes, I chose to focus the majority of my research efforts on critical literacy. Near the end of my
coursework I had an opportunity to collaboratively conduct research with one of my professors. As we discussed our research plan, we knew that we wanted our research to focus on social issues that were relevant to the students in my class. Critical literacy makes teaching responsive and relevant to children’s lives. It also engages children in the “four dimensions” of critical social practice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). The four dimensions of critical social practice are: disrupt the commonplace, consider multiple viewpoints, engage in sociopolitical analysis, and take action (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). We did not want to create situations or to plan topics just for the sake of our research, but to focus on real-life problems or issues that the students were facing. In an effort to ensure that our research was meaningful for the students I planned to hone in on and carefully listen to student conversations over the next few weeks to ensure that the topic we chose was important to the students. As it turned out, there was a situation that had been occurring that I realized I could use to teach my students appropriate social interactions.

At the time, I had a student named Anh (in order to ensure confidentiality, all names used are pseudonyms), who was non-verbal but who would echo what others said. My students were very caring and loving with this student. They often went out of their way to include her during center activities, to save her a seat in the cafeteria, and to treat her with kindness. A problem arose when one of the lunch monitors repeatedly reported that my class was disruptive in the lunchroom and that the non-verbal student was the cause of the behavior. In an effort to investigate these claims, I uncovered that some students, realizing Anh was mostly non-verbal but would repeat what they told her to say,
used this opportunity to take advantage of her. By getting Anh to utter harmful words and phrases such as “stupid,” “shut up,” or “you suck,” these six- and seven-year-olds positioned Anh as deficient or less than human. In order to disrupt the commonplace, we needed to treat these discursive utterances as texts to be analyzed and problematized so the children would see their harmful, if unintended, effects.

The students did not understand that Anh had a disability and did not realize that asking her to say silly things was inappropriate. My students, along with many young children, were not familiar with the term disability, and if they were, they thought of physical or visible disabilities rather than hidden or invisible ones. We wanted the class to understand human differences, so we used children’s literature as a springboard.

We conducted several lessons on disabilities, both visible and invisible. With young children, often a safer or less-threatening approach to solving interpersonal problems and addressing diversity issues is the use of persona dolls (Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989). We found a doll and developed a persona similar to Anh’s, being careful to change the gender and ethnicity. I introduced the doll to the class so the children could see the problem from an outsider’s perspective. We created a situation with the doll very similar to what was happening with Anh. We used the doll to build empathy in my students.

At first I was very apprehensive about using the doll with my class. I predicted that they would think it was very childish and it would not help with this situation. I was completely wrong. The incident that “occurred” with the doll made a big impression on
my students. They came up with ideas and solutions to help the doll and his friends deal with this situation. They included the doll in all of our classroom activities.

After three to four months of learning about people with disabilities, the students started taking action. Some of the action was spontaneous, such as students’ treating Anh with respect and including her in playground games. They also stood up for her when children from other classes were not treating her nicely. Other action was purposeful, as we brainstormed with the class ways to stand in solidarity with people with disabilities as allies or “heroes.” Collaboratively, the class decided on three ways to take action:

1. Create a morning news show about how to support people with disabilities.
2. Go to other classrooms to share information.
3. Make signs or posters and hang them around the school.

The students were very excited to share this information with others. As they shared, they began to notice students from other classes taking action. They thought that it was so neat that they had started a “chain reaction.” Other teachers on the grade level team witnessed some of the interactions of my students and asked for professional development. After the professional development, several of the teachers came to me and asked for ideas and help with lessons for their classes. The PE and Music teachers separately complimented my class. They stated that for 3 years, they had partnered with Anh because other children would not be her partner. They mentioned they noticed a change with the students in the same class and eventually other classes volunteering to be Ahn’s partner.
These lessons created a class that had a closer relationship with each other than any other class I have taught. They looked out for one another. They truly cared about each other. When one of them had a birthday party, the entire class went to the party. They offered to help each other if they noticed any student falling behind. They stood up for each other, played together, and helped each other. They got very defensive when other students would comment on the nonverbal student. They came up with a plan to encourage other students to stand up when children are not treating each other nicely. They made signs and went on the morning news. The day that I heard them telling the student to say random phrases, I could have very easily told them not to say that and gone about my day. I am so glad that I took the time to listen to my students. “Teacher researchers have faith in their students; they know too much to give up on them” (Mohr, Rogers, Sanford, Maclean & Clawson. 2004, p. 23).

**Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. In this first chapter I have explained how I came to be interested in this topic. I have presented the need for greater insight into critical literacy within primary classrooms. I have outlined the problem and the research questions that guide this investigation. Chapter Two offers a literature review that serves as the foundation for understanding different viewpoints and critical perspectives that were the focal point of my research. Included in the literature review are explorations of the sociocultural context of learning, critical literacy, the perspective of my study, and finally transferring theory to practice.
In Chapter Three I discuss my methodology. Specifically, I explain my stance as the researcher and how I collected and analyzed my data. I explain how I chose my participants and explain a little about each one. Last, I discuss data collection including sources of data, rationale and methods of analysis.

In Chapter Four I present the themes that I identified when analyzing my data and an explanation of each one. Finally, in Chapter Five I summarize the study and my findings and offer implications for future practice and for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review establishes theoretical, empirical, and practical contexts for my study. The first section explores the sociocultural context of learning. In the second section, I explore critical literacy, the perspective at the core of my study, and how it transfers from theory to practice. In the following section, I discuss critical literacy as pedagogy. Finally I include the specifics of critical literacy within a primary-aged classroom. The review of literature provides the foundation for understanding different viewpoints and critical perspectives that serve as a focal point in my research.

The Sociocultural Context of Learning and Critical Literacy

From birth, people are heavily influenced by their surrounding cultures. In every person’s life there are certain inherited cultural traditions and wisdoms that are learned because of society. Gauvain (2001) sought to examine how cognition is developed through life resources. Activity theory is a theory suggesting that children learn best in their normal day-to-day activities through communication with adults (Gauvain, 2001). Children learn to be competent through their interactions with their social world. This interaction provides meaning for their actions and thoughts. According to Gauvain (2001), higher mental functioning is a result of these interpersonal interactions.

Family, including parents and siblings, and peers have an enormous influence on cognitive development. Relationships with family members and peers help children develop certain cognitive skills. These relationships can be symmetrical or asymmetrical.
The sociocultural context is not the only context that influences cognitive development, but it is important. People develop into certain beings because of the situations they are exposed to by being born into families and even certain cultures. Changes in thoughts and behaviors do not solely arise from individual development, but, rather, occur within cultural creations of ideas and relations (Vygotsky, 1978).

Teachers can build relationships with families and community members outside their classrooms. These relationships help teachers understand and learn about the backgrounds of their students, their lives outside of school, personal situations, and the students’ funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992). Teachers become the learners. This knowledge and information can be used to connect with students in the classroom.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

My relationships with my students are of utmost importance to me. Each student that enters my classroom is different. Appearances, behaviors, beliefs, backgrounds, home lives, friends, and many other attributes construct each individual student. I used culturally relevant pedagogy to create a strong relationship between my students’ lives at school and their lives at home. Culturally relevant teaching is a term that was first used by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) to describe a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by incorporating their cultural backgrounds as a positive influence and way to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

In order to ensure a culturally relevant classroom, teachers must get to know their students and the students’ educational backgrounds. Through this knowledge, teachers
are able to better connect students’ home lives and school lives. Culturally relevant teachers will utilize their knowledge of students’ backgrounds and experiences as a basis for their lessons and methodology. It is through these understandings and the building of positive relationships that students recognize genuine care from the teacher. Every student has a right to be treated equally and with respect; “Status equalization affirms the value of children and their cultures” (Jones, Pang, & Rodriguez, 2001, p. 38). This promotes an environment where students feel safe examining uncomfortable topics. Building positive relationships is the foundation that must occur for students to be comfortable within a culturally relevant classroom (Jones, et al., 2001). Creating a culturally relevant classroom is a way in which teachers can reach students. Culturally relevant pedagogy gives students continuity between home and school that can positively impact their learning and behavior.

Within literacy, once a safe environment is established, students are more comfortable engaging in and contributing to meaningful discussions. It is through these discussions and interactions with classmates that students gain new and deeper understandings of texts. Interactions among students provide students opportunities to create new understandings and achievement (Au, 1997; Wilson & Laman, 2007). Au (1997) explains that from a sociocultural perspective, achievement is a product of the opportunities and support that students receive rather than their ability. The interactions among students and teachers produce learning opportunities and achievement (Au, 1997). Reading is considered to be a higher mental function, which is a social practice. Au
(1997) also asserted that a student reading is a social interaction; even a student reading alone is a social interaction between the student and the text.

Children learn to be competent through their interactions with their social world, or their sociocultural context. This interaction provides meaning for their actions and thoughts. Children who do not feel valued or safe often shy away from classroom interactions, causing them to seem uninterested or rebellious. Sociocultural theory offers insights into students’ learning processes and practices associated with literacy development. Such literacy acquisition is an important part of the social and cultural world.

**Freirian Critical Pedagogy**

Critical literacy is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire (1970), an educator from Brazil. Freire's (1970/2005) philosophy developed from his experiences of teaching literacy to adults in Latin America. He was a social critical theorist who was concerned with the conventional methods of schooling and the unfair relationships that these methods produced. With the conventional methods of schooling, the teacher was the person with the power, deciding what knowledge to pass along to the students. Freire referred to this as the banking concept of education.

The banking concept portrays students as empty containers to which teachers deposit small bits of information that they feel the students need to learn. Freire (1970) stated that, “In these classrooms, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing and the teachers separate themselves as being the possessors of knowledge” (p. 72). With this...
method of educating, students are not active in their learning; they are not being challenged to think, question, or analyze. Freire (1970) identified the need for education to be transformed from the more formal, teacher-centered education to an education that is guided by the learners themselves. Serafini (2003) explained that instructional practices based on critical perspectives allow teachers to make decisions based on the needs of their students, not predetermined or mandated by commercial reading programs. Teachers make the instructional decisions while considering the larger social contexts and forces, viewing the classroom space as “part of society, influenced by the political, cultural, and historical forces contained therein” (para. 33). In critical classrooms, students and teachers engage in discussions around interrogating issues of gender, social class, race, and ethnicity within the literature and media.

According to Coffee (2008), social critical theorists concerned with dismantling social injustice and inequalities developed the term “critical literacy.” Social critical theorists believed that the government leaders are the ones who decide what truths are to be privileged. Leaders in charge of governments and schools had the power and therefore decided what was important to be taught in schools and what was not. Certain groups (the marginalized) were left out of these important decisions, creating a further disconnect between those with power and the oppressed. The separation between the ones with power and the oppressed created a problem because the oppressed did not realize that they were oppressed. Freire (1970) articulated this concept when he wrote, “as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically accept their exploitation” (p. 64). According to Beck (2005), “Critical
educational theory or critical pedagogy applies the tenets of critical social theory to the educational arena and takes on the task of examining how schools reproduce inequality and justice” (p. 102). Critical literacy can help teachers and students learn to examine different meanings within texts and the construction of these meanings. This will also help students understand how they are positioned by different readings and interpretation (Serafini, 2003).

Freire and Macedo (1987) claim that reading does not only consist of decoding written words or languages but is preceded by and entangled with knowledge of the world. The world to which they refer is the immediate environment, or context in which a person lives. Freire and Macedo (1987) believed that children read texts, words, and letters of contexts. Texts could be any objects within the context. Also, part of the context of a child is the language of adults within their world. They read the language of adults through their beliefs, ideas, fears, and values. Reading is a continuous relationship between the text and the context. “Reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and rewriting of what is read” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 36).

**Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is the ability to read and analyze texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships and society (Bourke, 2008; Coffee, 2008). Serafini (2003) considers critical literacy to be “an approach that addresses the social, historical, and political systems that affect literacy and what it means to be a literate person in contemporary society” (para. 30). Critical literacy does not actually require the ability to read words on paper in order
to engage in a critical discussion of texts, which can include songs, conversations, pictures, television, movies, web pages, music, art, or any method of communication between people. Humans are literate in multiple ways (Harste, 2003). Students today are not only going to be using reading and writing to make meaning but a multitude of other modalities.

Rather than tell students what to learn, teachers who follow the principles of critical literacy encourage students to voice their opinions within classroom discussions. Students are encouraged to enter conversations together, mutually informing the understanding of the texts and surrounding issues (Beck, 2005). Given that social context plays an enormous role in learning, the best learning environments are those that provide students multitudes of opportunities for social interactions (Beck, 2005). These opportunities are often encouraged by the teacher asking thought-provoking or open-ended questions, encouraging discussion among the students. Freire’s (1970) problem-posing education is an example of students sharing their opinions and voices in classroom discussions. Another example would be the teacher taking on the role of the student while the student may take on the role of the teacher, sharing knowledge with the teacher or problem solving alongside the teacher. Teachers and students can also make discoveries together.

Critical literacy is about creating spaces or opportunities for looking at the ways texts and images are constructed and constructive; it is about creating critical conversations (Vasquez, 2004). It is within the literature discussions that the students in critical literacy classrooms create and participate in these critical conversations. In a
critical literacy curriculum students are able to construct knowledge in context. This allows them to become social scientists, helping them develop the necessary disposition to think in this way (Soares & Wood, 2010). As social scientists, students develop the abilities to take a critical position toward a text or content and transfer the concepts to their own lives (Soares & Wood, 2010).

Critical literacy lessons include a focus on sociopolitical issues and social justice through critiquing these issues (Beck, 2005). Using literature that focuses on social issues is an important part of a critical literacy curriculum. Critical literacy makes differences visible, presents multiple perspectives, and disrupts the status quo by addressing issues often not seen in young adult literature, such as homelessness, war, gender, immigration, etc, (Wilson & Laman, 2007). Using these texts will introduce readers to situations that they may not be familiar with and help them grow to care for people and issues represented within the books.

**Adopting a Stance of Critical Literacy**

In an environment of high-stakes testing and political reforms, teachers find themselves with a mandated curriculum that is linear and step-by-step. Teachers are often strictly tied to this curriculum. This has created an environment in which teachers are fearful of their class not scoring well on standardized tests and one that leaves teachers in conflict. Teachers spend so much time on state standards and testing practice, they are left little to no time to focus on developing students as “critical and social practitioners of literacy” (Paugh, Carey, King-Jackson, & Russell, 2007, p.32).
A teacher’s vision, or philosophical beliefs about the nature of reading and of children, is the driving force behind instructional decisions (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009). Some teachers are trapped in a conceptual box that hinders their views of literacy. These teachers often have a narrow view of literacy and limit books to those that they feel are appropriate for their students (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005). Teachers trapped in this box will often limit book discussions to characters, settings, and plots rather than addressing issues of social justice (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005). Without intending to or realizing what they are doing, these teachers often practice Freire’s (1970) banking method of education, giving students knowledge rather than allowing them to construct and negotiate meaning (Gregory & Cahill, 2009).

Teachers must first become critically aware, having a clear understanding of what critical literacy is before they can teach students to read critically (Gregory & Cahill, 2009; Jewett & Smith, 2003; McDaniel, 2006). To become critically aware, teachers must become “transformative intellectuals who take control of their learning and teaching and provide their students with the critical tools they need to understand and interrogate unquestioned social practices while using the same tools for interrogating their own cultural practices” (Jewett & Smith, 2003, p. 69). This may require them to question their current understandings, how they arrived at them, and the extent to which they are valid (Hall & Piazza, 2008). Teachers may find it difficult to develop students’ critical literacy perspectives when they have not yet developed their own (Hall & Piazza, 2008). Once teachers fully understand how to be critically aware then they can introduce the concept to their students.
Gregory and Cahill (2009) discuss the fact that “critical literacy becomes more than a tool; it becomes, instead, a form of cultural capital that provides us with awareness of our historicity” (p. 3). It is through this position or understanding that teachers begin to problematize terms and frameworks that are common within the teaching profession (Gregory & Cahill, 2009). Such problematizing may create internal struggles for teachers in regard to classroom practices. It is what teachers choose to do in regard to this tension that is important and can be the difference between educating students and schooling students.

If teachers choose to ignore the tension and continue on with their traditional daily instruction, they are continuing to make deposits in Freire’s (1970) banking theory of education. Wilhelm (2009) refers to this tendency of teachers not to change as “the salience of the traditional” (p. 36). Teachers within this mindset often teach how they were taught, even if it violates their own beliefs and theories (Raths, 2001; Wilhelm, 2009). Teachers will not be able to take on a critical literacy perspective or framework until they embrace the tension and encourage students to question issues of power—especially disparities within social contexts like socio-economic status, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. (Coffee, 2008; Gregory & Cahill, 2009).

Paugh and colleagues (2007) examined their teaching practices. They began to focus on literacy teaching as a socially negotiated practice, or a two-way street. Students had a voice in their learning and had choice in meaningful learning activities. Students were allowed to suggest learning activities for choice time, which was a period set aside each day for independent learning. The classroom focused on meaningful interactions
(Paugh et al., 2007). “Creating a literacy classroom that values such interactions requires a special theoretical frame that defines literacy as a social process where people act and make meaning of those actions through the use of language” (Paugh, et al., 2007, p.35). Students shared ideas, strategies, and suggestions. The students complimented each other and some students stepped up as leaders who had often chosen not to participate. Through these meaningful interactions students were reading the world, caring for each other while reading the words, the literacy curriculum.

Behind every concept or skill that teachers teach, there is an opinion or perspective (Edelsky, 1999). McDaniel (2006) emphasized the importance of teachers understanding their own beliefs and biases. Without examining and fully understanding their personal beliefs and biases, it is difficult for teachers to enact a critical stance. In order for teachers to become critically aware and teach with a critical literacy perspective, they will need to examine their beliefs and become reflective upon these beliefs (McDaniel, 2006; Wilhelm, 2009). Thinking about what one knows and has experienced serves as a foundation for critical literacy. Wilhelm (2009) includes the thought that teachers must not only be reflective but also reflexive. Reflexive is defined as “getting outside one’s own normal way of seeing and knowing, and then privileging the perspectives, values, experiences, processes, and history of others” (p. 38).

Sometimes teachers may not realize that they are not a neutral party in the education of their students. Teachers hold biases that influence their teaching. If teachers do not come to terms with these biases, they continue to promote the status quo (Freire, 1970/2005; Hall & Piazza, 2010). If teachers are going to ask students to use
texts to better understand themselves and their world, then teachers must do the same (Hall & Piazza, 2010). Self-examination is not always easy but in the end teachers will begin to understand how their influence is hindering or helping their critical teaching. Turning the lens on themselves will allow teachers to create the space for critical literacy practices within their classrooms (Hall & Piazza, 2010). For example, Burns (2004) realized that she was not neutral in her decisions and instructional practices. She examined her beliefs and strived to keep her biases out of her teaching practices.

McDaniel (2006) discusses the need for critical literacy to be modeled in order for it to be successfully implemented into classrooms. Jewett and Smith (2003) mentioned the same concept, that teachers must first be exposed to ideas and ways of enacting critical literacy. The more that teachers were exposed to critical literacy and suggestions for implementation, the more interested teachers became in implementing critical literacy (Jewett & Smith, 2003).

However, even after ample modeling, some teachers are still apprehensive about incorporating critical literacy into their instruction (Jewett & Smith, 2003). Such apprehension can often create resistance to critical literacy. Jewett & Smith (2003) found that teachers’ resistance to critical literacy in the primary classroom was political in nature. Teachers were concerned with parental response to certain topics. They were also concerned with the notion of teaching students to question authority or become text critics since that is not the norm in today’s literacy classroom (Bourke, 2008; Jewett & Smith, 2003).
Critical Literacy as Pedagogy

There is no specific instructional regimen that comes in a “How to Incorporate Critical Literacy Manual.” Freire’s beliefs [of critical literacy] are more of a philosophy than a step-by-step method to be followed (Freire, 1997; McDaniel, 2004; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). He emphasized that his beliefs were not a “one size fits all” set of beliefs; they would need to be fitted for each situation. Freire (1970) suggested pedagogical change that would change the way teachers and students thought rather than a specific set of teaching strategies or techniques.

Critical literacy is more of an organic practice that evolves out of the situation, the relationship between the teacher and the students, the texts chosen, and the opportunities given for students to question and share their opinions. Critical literacy creates a space for students to bring their own experiences into discussions and activities (Soares & Wood, 2010). Behrman (2006) states that “a critical literacy agenda should encourage teachers and students to collaborate to understand how texts work, what texts intend to do to the world, and how social relations can be critiqued and reconstructed” (p. 491). Rather than follow an agenda, predetermined by the teacher, a critical literacy approach would be to construct the discussion as it happens in the classroom. A critical literacy approach would also focus on recognizing and examining power in an effort to create a more humane and just society.

Students need an opportunity to explore their own inquiries through different modes of learning (Harste, 2003). Teachers can help students become these types of learners by providing them with the opportunities to explore their inquiries; to explore
their personal, social, and academic problems (Harste, 2003). This type of learning is much more relevant for students. Edelsky (1999) suggests that one characteristic of a critical curriculum is that there are few to no exercises. Teachers do not assign students numerous exercises; the students take on the learning tasks, feeling a greater sense of empowerment. This also allows the tasks to be much more in tune with students’ lives.

The key is not what the task is but why the students are doing it (Edelsky, 1999). Freire’s (1970) solution for this problem was to redefine the roles of students and teachers so that the teachers learn and the learners teach. The roles of students and teachers are often blurred in critical literacy. The teacher is not always the one leading discussions or asking questions. The students are not always the ones answering questions and do not spend their time searching for a “right” answer. Critical literacy focuses on students reading their world, in which reading is an act of understanding the world around them, including the word, and using this understanding as a means to social transformation.

Encouraging students to think critically about what they are reading is one of the teaching goals that is frequently overlooked. Teachers often spend time focusing on skills such as recognizing the main characters or plot of a story. Along with this is teaching a student to question how a text is positioning him or her and to examine whose interest is being served by the text (Leland & Harste, 2000a). One of the main goals of critical literacy is for students to read from a critical perspective or through a critical lens, so to speak. Reading from such a perspective will help readers gain the knowledge about the author’s purpose and perspective.
Critical literacy allows the students and teachers together to examine their community and decide what they want to learn and take action on or against. “Teachers with a critical perspective can change the patterns of interactions within classrooms and enlarge the space of the possible” (Leland & Harste, 2000b, p. 6). It is within the literature discussions that the students can create and participate in these critical conversations. Leland and Harste (2000b) believe that critical literacy provides opportunities for students to understand how language works, that questioning texts is acceptable, and that it is important to teach students how to act on the newfound knowledge acquired from their questioning. “Critical literacy is not only a type of pedagogy that is different from a traditional approach, it is a different worldview that transforms teaching and the way we, students and teachers, see and interact with the world” (Wood, 2005, p.4).

Lewison, and colleagues (2010) offer a model of critical literacy instruction that involves a transaction among personal and cultural resources, critical social practices that are enacted, and critical stances taken within the classroom. The model of critical literacy instruction set forth by Lewison and colleagues focuses on the movement between the personal and social, and context. It is important for students to be aware that understandings are never truly theirs alone; rather they are situated within social, cultural, and political dimensions. Starting with what students already know, or the personal, may not always be the best way. Students may be uncomfortable or embarrassed speaking or acknowledging personal situations and it may be much easier for them to discuss someone else. Often, teachers feel uncomfortable starting a
conversation about difficult social issues and may begin with social issues literature (Lewison, et al., 2010).

**Four Dimensions of Critical Social Practice**

Critical social practices are the social practices that students and teachers engage in as they create curricula (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2010). Teachers who use critical social practices create an environment where students feel comfortable (what may be considered “normal”) by asking questions, viewing situations through different lenses, challenging naturalized views of the world, and visualizing different outcomes for situations. “Critical literacy practices support students in gaining a greater understanding of how social and cultural forces shape their choices and their lives” (Lewison, et al., 2010, p. 7). Critical literacy makes teaching responsive and relevant to children’s lives. It also engages children in the “four dimensions” of critical social practice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Lewison, et al., 2010):

1. Disrupting the commonplace
2. Considering multiple viewpoints
3. Focusing on the sociopolitical
4. Taking action

The four dimensions are all interrelated and are useful tools for teachers engaging in critical literacy.

**Disrupting the commonplace.** When teachers and students disrupt the commonplace, they view everyday events through new lenses. In this dimension teachers and students problematize existing knowledge and question how certain texts are
positioning the readers. This is a tough stance for teachers who are typically seen as transmitters of knowledge (Lewison, et al, 2002). Popular culture and media are usually included to help students understand how they position people. This dimension of critical literacy helps students gain an understanding of critiquing their world and text.

**Considering multiple viewpoints.** Critical readers must move beyond accepting what is written and examine, question, and even argue with what is written. Cooper and White (2008) state, “the term critical has generally been defined as an attitude of questioning and skepticism regarding commonly accepted truisms” (p. 102). For instance, as Molden (2007) argues, “critical literacy requires readers to become active participants in the reading process. It encourages readers to take on a new perspective when approaching text, encouraging them to question, to dispute, and to examine power relations” (p. 50). Luke and Freebody (1997) maintain that critical literacy practices are activities that help the reader see ulterior motives and multiple meanings of text. Some of the practices of critical literacy are, according to Ciardello (2004), “examining multiple perspectives, find one’s authentic voice, recognizing social barriers and crossing borders of separation, regaining one’s identity, and listening and responding to the call of service” (p. 138).

**Focusing on the sociopolitical.** In this dimension of critical literacy, teachers encourage students to go beyond the personal responses or explanations to texts. An example of this would be to help students move beyond personal explanations for problems such as homelessness. Students may view it as laziness or someone not willing to work. Teachers can use literature and multimodal texts to explore social and
sociopolitical explanations, such as poverty or lack of mental health services. Exploring these social causes will help students see how power works.

Teachers attempt to question how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape the perceptions, responses, and actions of students (Lewison, et al, 2002). In this dimension, the study of language and power aids in challenging the unequal power relationships that are present in society. Literacy is used to engage in the politics of everyday life and is redefined as a form of citizenship and politics. This allows people from marginalized groups to participate in society as an act of resistance. This dimension also brings to the attention of people of privilege the sociopolitical understanding of their position and that of the marginalized group. Often people from the marginalized group already understand injustice and the sociopolitical as it relates to their marginalized identities.

Taking action. In order for action to be taken, students and teachers must have gained knowledge from the other three dimensions of critical literacy. Once they have gained deeper understandings from the other three dimensions, informed social justice can be pursued. Within this dimension, students and teachers can read their world and use their reflections to transform it. Language is used to question practices of injustice. Language is also analyzed to identify how it is used to maintain domination and offer marginalized groups access to the dominant forms of language. This dimension of critical literacy challenges and redefines cultural borders. Students are encouraged to cross the existing borders in an effort to better understand others.
**Social Issues Literature**

Using literature about social issues is an important component of a critical literacy curriculum. Vasquez (2010) points out that there really is no such thing as a critical literacy text. Teachers may choose to teach from texts that highlight social issues to introduce critical literacy into their classrooms. Vazquez (2010) suggests that this is usually the easiest way for teachers to begin teaching through a critical literacy perspective. Picture books and novels that highlight social issues make differences visible, present multiple perspectives, and disrupt the status quo by addressing issues often not seen in young adult literature, such as homelessness, war, gender, immigration, etc. (Wilson & Laman, 2007). Using these texts will introduce readers to situations with which they may not be familiar and help them grow to care for people and issues represented within the books. Researchers, teachers, and others believe that through the work of critical literacy they can cause social change by helping students read and better understand their surroundings, or developing a critical consciousness. Once they have this awareness they will have the ability to critically analyze texts and transform their own identities and realities (Hagood, 2002).

**Choosing texts.** Teachers should model reading from a critical stance in everyday teaching and learning experiences and provide students with a variety of texts that invite critical literacy (McDaniel, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). In the primary classroom, the teacher is most often the person responsible for making the instructional decisions, including choosing texts. Teachers may be unaware that they may be choosing and using texts in their classroom that promote their own values and
beliefs Teachers must understand that texts are not neutral and that texts represent particular points of view while oppressing others (McDaniel, 2006; Vasquez, 2010).

It is imperative that teachers choose texts carefully. Teachers must make an effort to include critical books within their instruction. Critical texts meet at least one of the following criteria outlined by numerous authors (Jewett & Smith, 2003; Leland et al., 1999; McDaniel, 2006):

(a) They explore differences, rather than making them invisible. They explore what differences actually make a difference.

(b) They enrich the understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized.

(c) They are an example of how people can take action on important social issues.

(d) They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in society to position people and groups of people.

(e) They provide complex endings for complex social problems; no happily ever after.

All texts included in daily lessons do not have to contain critical messages or contain multicultural characters. Jones (2006) refers to this as the Multicultural Trap, in which teachers focus solely on including texts that contain views and opinions of marginalized characters and the use of multicultural literature. Including multicultural literature is important but teachers must also encourage students to critique and challenge mainstream texts, since students will encounter them most often (Jones, 2006).
Teachers habitually avoid social issues literature because there seems to be a common understanding that children will not or cannot fully understand the tough issues. (Leland, Harste, & Shockley, 2007). Heffernan and Lewison (2000) discussed a teacher who checked out a book on slavery from the media center. She kept it for several months, never reading it to her class. She admitted that she was very uncomfortable sharing a book about slavery with her class. She was afraid that they would not understand some of the concepts and that the book would upset her students. Finally, after reading a professional article on critical literacy and the importance of supplementing curriculum with texts, she shared the book with her class. The teacher stated that she was pleasantly surprised at the level of understanding, engagement, and enthusiasm that the students demonstrated towards the social issues books. Heffernan and Lewison (2000) admitted that the reactions of the students have interrupted the long-held assumptions of the teachers in this study. The teachers felt that the students would be upset by the concepts in the books and shied away from them, whereas the students actually became more compassionate.

“In the spirit of critical literacy, teachers should grant children the freedom to express themselves and weave life experiences into learning, while seriously addressing issues of social justice, equity, and diversity in developmentally appropriate language” (Chafel, Flint, Hammel, & Pomeroy, 2007, p. 74). In their article, Chafel and colleagues (2007) bring to light another example of an apprehensive teacher who shared a story with her class only to lead her class to a meaningful discussion. Teachers responded and listened to students’ questions. For a few teachers, it was tough to fight the urge to
correct students. They affirmed and respected the students’ ideas and views, in an effort to extend the experiences their children had with language and literacy (Chafel, et al., 2007).

Many times students are not aware that the ideas found within texts are open to examination. Students often view the teacher and text as the authority, the one who holds the knowledge, and the one from whom knowledge is obtained. Students are often taught not to question the teacher, that it is not appropriate (Bourke, 2008). Children frequently carry over this notion of “that’s just the way it is” to texts. Bourke (2008) defines this as the rule of text:

The perception that text is authoritative and final and an underlying belief that suppresses the reader’s license to challenge, question, deconstruct, and rewrite the assumptions, beliefs, ideologies, and concepts embedded, whether implicitly or not, within the perspective of the text. (p. 309)

Students have to be taught to view texts from a critical perspective. Teachers must encourage students to question the intentions of texts. Jones (2006) encouraged students to search for ways in which they could change the story to match their own lives. It was through this reconstruction of the stories that children were able to read mainstream texts more critically (Jones, 2006).

Students are more likely to search for correct answers in books, not challenge the message because this is the process that they have been taught and have internalized (Hall & Piazza, 2008). It is the role of the teacher to introduce students to the notion that it is okay to question ideas in texts. Ladson-Billings’ (2006) explains that students’
understandings and actions can be reconstructed through instruction that values critical literacy while recognizing the students’ frame of reference.

Most textbooks do not include more than one perspective of an incident. Textbooks and curriculum normally include the perspective of the winner (Leland, et al., 2007). In this same sense, the voice of the winners is usually represented and that of the losers’ is not (Leland, et al., 2007). In their study, Leland et al. (2007) discussed the importance of revisiting teachers’ and students’ initial conclusions about historical events. The assumptions that were made needed to be interrogated in order for them to be open to more than one possible explanation (Leland, et al., 2007). This rings true of the “one right answer to any question” perspective. Teachers must be aware that there is more than one answer or interpretation and help students understand this concept. This helps students reject the notion that they are “doing school” and that they can think beyond the words (Leland, et al., 2007).

Critical Literacy in Primary Classrooms

While much of the literature available on critical literacy addresses upper grades, there are some examples of critical literacy in primary classrooms. Teachers of children in the primary grades sometimes think that ideas or theories do not apply to them because they teach younger students (Vasquez, 2004). Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2010) suggest that if students are expected to learn and think a certain way when they are older, we should begin teaching them in the same ways when they are younger. In many ways critical literacy looks the same in primary classrooms as it does in upper grade levels. Vasquez (2004) used language critically to help her preschool students think critically
and understand that they can have an active role in their world. The school that the preschoolers attended had an annual barbecue. The day after the barbecue several of the students became upset when they realized that one of their classmates was a vegetarian and there were no vegetarian options offered at the barbecue. The children wrote letters and conducted surveys about including vegetarian options.

In another scenario presented by Vasquez (2004), young students compared different perspectives in texts. The preschoolers engaged in conversations about how the authors were trying to position the readers of each text. The students then created their own version of a text that they had previously read and questioned. The preschoolers took their roles very seriously and took a critical stance on many issues that may have otherwise been ignored.

Leland and Harste (2000b) call for critical literacy to begin in kindergarten through the incorporation of books that invite students to examine relationships and social issues. Critical literacy in a primary classroom may look a lot different than critical literacy in a high school or college classroom. With older children it is easier to problematize and explore the complexities of their worlds than it is with younger children (Gregory & Cahill, 2003). Older children more often actively examine the texts that form their reality. Some texts may not be appropriate for younger children but may be more appropriate for older students. Leland and colleagues (1999) expressed that some teachers felt that certain texts included in a critical literacy classroom were too sad for younger students.
Teachers of younger students can foster critical literacy through the use of multimodal learning. Vasquez (2004) helped students develop their identities as critically literate citizens through the use of toys that the children were very familiar with, Power Rangers. Pelo and Pelojoaquín (2008) explored social justice issues that occurred when students were building with Legos. Whitney (2008) addressed biases and helped students to develop anti-bias attitudes through the incorporation of persona dolls.

Teachers must carefully choose materials to use in the classroom and plan ways to engage students critically. Bourke (2008) suggests that one way to foster critical literacy with students would be to familiarize them with and support them in the process of asking deeper, more pertinent questions. Students need to be able to question the assumptions embedded in text as well as to question their own assumptions that they bring to the text (Leland et al., 1999).

Teachers can incorporate modeling critical literacy through reading a thought-provoking book aloud to students, pausing to discuss thoughts and questions that may arise about different characters and their positions in the story. Teachers can engage students in critical literacy by discussing with them what seems to be valued and ignored in specific texts. Teachers may present certain [well-chosen] texts to use with students during these activities (Hall & Piazza, 2008; McDaniel, 2006). It is critical that teachers be aware of the language that they are using when they are helping students to develop critical literacy skills. Teachers have to question or comment carefully and help students to articulate their thoughts.
Strategies for Younger Students

Teachers need to pay attention to their students and change the way they view incidents, or problems, to see them as learning possibilities for students (Van Sluys, 2005). Teachers of young students often find themselves teaching in the moment and addressing issues that are important to students. This is not to say that teachers do not need to plan and create lessons and always rely on the fact that there will be an issue with students that can be turned into a lesson. Teachers need to carefully plan lessons that will engage their students. Teachers should not, however, recoil from legitimate questions or inquiries from students.

After students become more comfortable with questioning and analyzing texts, Clarke and Whitney (2009) encourage using Reader’s Theatre to help students gain an understanding of multiple perspectives in text. Lewison and colleagues (2010) suggest dramatizing a picture book read aloud to the class. Students have an opportunity to step into a role within the story. This aids students in understanding the characters’ thoughts as well as actions.

Examining advertisements and how they exploit different demographic groups is a way that students can examine ways in which texts are used to position readers (Lewison, et al., 2010). Graphic organizers are another powerful tool in aiding students understanding of multiple perspectives in a text (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). One of the strategies that Molden (2007) suggested was bookmarking. Students create a bookmark by folding a sheet of paper, each fold representing a different section. The sections include a topic they found interesting in the story, an idea or concept they found
confusing, an issue the whole class needs to discuss, and an illustration or graphic organizer that helped them better understand the text.

Another way to support the development of critical literacy skills is to encourage students to make connections with the texts (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Molden, 2007). These connections are supported by personal experiences and can be completed orally, in writing, or by sketching. Connections can be included in critical literacy to encourage students to think in different ways; one of these is to make disconnections. Disconnections help students to see how texts are different from their lives (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Jones, 2006). McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) also suggest juxtapositioning, a technique that helps demonstrate multiple perspectives. Van Sluys (2005) refers to juxtapositioning as reading against the grain.

Freire (1970) introduced the idea of problem-posing education. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) include many problem-posing lesson ideas. With problem posing students question the author’s message from a critical perspective and can actually be student facilitated. Van Sluys (2005) encourages readers to question what the author is and is not saying. Another strategy suggested by McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004) was including alternative texts in the curriculum. These texts will help students see an event or story from many different viewpoints. Examining and analyzing the characters in fairy tales can give students an opportunity to question the status quo.

The aforementioned strategies are ways to help students deconstruct texts. Reconstructing texts is just as critical. When students reconstruct texts, they are using the knowledge that they have learned and are creating new ways of thinking. Jones (2006)
stated, “reconstructing identities of people who have been marginalized and devalued over the course of time is crucial in the work of critical literacy” (p. 77). There are many activities that teachers can use to get students involved in reconstruction of texts including journaling, diary entries, and changing familiar stories (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). Teachers help students understand deconstructed texts and move on to creating new texts, allowing students the opportunity to change or fix the problems in the original story. Encouraging students to rewrite popular stories or fairy tales, or create emancipatory fairy tales that go against what might be considered a normal fairy tale, is a way in which students can reconstruct texts to create new ways of thinking (Lewison et al, 2010).

Teachers need to break away from the structure of read, discuss, write, and share. Teachers can engage students in broader concerns and issues and encourage the social action aspect of critical literacy (Chafel, et al., 2007). Once students understand the importance of being critically aware and how to view texts through a critical lens, they must act on the knowledge that they have gained. It is important for students to use the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts to connect to larger social issues (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). McDaniel (2004) explains that “by developing critical perspectives toward texts, students can transfer these skills to the larger society, thereby ‘reading’ their world through a critical stance that leads to empowerment” (McDaniel, 2004, p.473). Readers should question the text and work toward changing themselves and their world.

Lewison and colleagues (2010) and Vasquez (2004) utilize learning walls to make curriculum visible to students, parents, and administrators. Learning walls also act as
resources for students to relate new learning to previous conversations and ideas. Learning walls can also become a resource for generating new topics of inquiry. Students can keep their own versions of the learning wall in a journal form.

**Taking Action**

Rather than just studying injustice, when critical literacy is enacted, students are encouraged to take action. A critical curriculum recognizes the power of everyday people (Edelsky, 1999). Students can view examples of what people have done in the past and decide for themselves the social action they wish to take. “While critical literacy involves critical thinking, it also entails more. Part of that ‘more’ is social action built upon an understanding that literacy positions individuals and, in so doing, serves some more than others” (Leland et al., 1999, p. 71). Comber and Thomson (2001) state, “school versions of critical literacy have tended to emphasize the importance of text-analytic work or critical reading practices, whereas curriculum that focuses on critical social action and textual production is often reserved for adults” (p. 453). Understanding the different views that are presented or underlying in texts is crucial as a first step, but critical literacy takes it farther. Taking social action is the next step in becoming critically literate (Comber & Thomson, 2003; Gregory & Cahill, 2009; Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison & Vasquez, 1999).

Having a critical conversation is not enough; students must be encouraged and guided through the process of taking action (Wood, 2005). Supported by his encouragement, Wood’s students wrote city officials about a park that was being torn down. Wood (2005) considered this to be too trivial a subject to be considered social
action. What he learned was that this was important to his kindergartners and it was through their letters that city officials became aware that children did use and care about this park. The officials actually improved the park rather than tear it down in response to the students’ letters.

**Conclusion**

Democratic values are included in numerous textbooks and taught in elementary schools. Although the values of democracy are taught, they are not often followed in the school setting. In a democracy every person is supposed to have an equal say (Edelsky, 1999). Teachers are often seen as the transmitters of knowledge. Critical literacy allows students and teachers to actively take part in the learning that occurs in classrooms:

Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice. (Lewison, et al. 2010, p. 3).

Every book used in a classroom does not have to address a social issue that may be impacting the lives of primary aged children, but every child should be given the opportunity to think critically about textual representations of the world (Meller, Richardson, & Hatch, 2009). Critical literacy helps students become socially aware. Taking what has been learned in the classroom to other facets of their lives, children can make a huge impact on their communities. Critical literacy helps students overcome being helpless victims and position themselves as social activists determined to make a
change for what they think is right (Leland & Harste, 2000a). Through critical literacy, students gain a better understanding of others, a greater appreciation for diversity, and an awareness of living in a more global society (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). “By developing critical perspectives toward texts, students can transfer these skills to the larger society, thereby ‘reading’ their world through a critical stance that leads to empowerment” (McDaniel, 2004, p. 473).

If teachers can think imaginatively and critically about their teaching and learning they can incorporate the tenets of critical literacy into their primary classrooms (Vasquez, 2004). This may entail some uncomfortable reflections upon personal thoughts and beliefs to realize that the role of teaching is never neutral. Rather than telling students what to learn, teachers who follow the principles of critical literacy encourage students to voice their opinions within classroom discussions. Students are encouraged to enter conversations together, mutually informing the understanding of the texts and surrounding issues (Beck, 2005). Given that social context plays an enormous role in learning, the best learning environments are those that provide students multitudes of opportunities for social interactions (Beck, 2005). These opportunities for social interactions are often encouraged by the teacher asking thought-provoking or open-ended questions, democratic conversations among the students. These conversations will empower students to take action to improve the situation and offer new options. Through critical literacy students are able to transform social conditions that are specific to their lives while relating the issues to a larger context, thus making a change that is meaningful to the students.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation study was to gain an understanding of primary grades teachers’ enactment of critical literacy. Chapter 1 introduced the study, presenting the problem, purpose, research questions, significance, and limitations. Chapter 2 presented a literature review, which included theories and research on critical literacy practices to provide the necessary background knowledge for understanding this study. In this chapter, I provide the methodological theory for my research stance. I include a rationale for my methodological choices and a detailed description of the methods utilized throughout the study, including participant selection, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. The next section discusses ethical and political considerations. The final section is a summary of the chapter. Pseudonyms will be used for people and places throughout the report.

Methodological Orientation and Research Questions

The naturalistic paradigm of qualitative research best suited this study. Gaining knowledge about critical literacy practices within primary classrooms was the main goal of the study. It was necessary for me to discuss with teachers who had experiences with critical literacy in order to further my knowledge of how those teachers made space for critical literacy within their classrooms. Merriam (2009) explained that qualitative researchers are interested in better understanding meanings that have been constructed or
how people make sense of their world and their experiences within their world. With this study, I sought to better understand how teachers of younger children enacted critical literacy within their classrooms. The research questions that guided my study are:

(1) In what ways are teachers of primary grades modeling and fostering critical literacy within their classrooms?

(2) What challenges did teachers of primary grades face when employing critical literacy practices?

(3) What suggestions would teachers offer to those who wish to move toward a more critical stance with their teaching?

The goal of this study was to investigate critical literacy with younger students and to discover ways in which teachers promoted critical literacy through their instruction. Hopefully, this information will support other teachers of young students in fostering critical literacy practices within their classrooms. Tierney states that “one role of the researcher is to paint portraits of possibilities” (Tierney, 1994, p. 112).

In examining critical literacy in a primary level classroom, I was interested in ways in which teachers of younger students are able to enact critical literacy in their classrooms given the small amount of research that was available about this particular area. I want to share with the teaching profession and scholarly community ways that teachers have successfully fostered critical literacy with their younger students. I also wanted to gain a better understanding of the obstacles and hurdles, if any, that teachers had to face when preparing and enacting lessons in their classrooms. Investigating the
positives along with the negatives will provide other teachers with a much clearer understanding of what critical literacy in the primary grades entails.

My first two research questions center on critical literacy in a primary classroom. Seeking answers to these questions allowed me to learn ways that teachers have successfully and unsuccessfully fostered critical literacy within their classrooms. Examining what ways critical literacy has been enacted within classrooms would potentially guide the teaching and research of other critical educators. Data collected through interviews, classroom observations, and photographs will help me answer the first two of my research questions.

My final research question focuses on helping other teachers who wish to move toward a more critical stance with their teaching. When trying a new lesson or technique it is always best to know what to expect. Critical literacy is no different. If, through this research, I can alleviate a portion of the uncertainty that a teacher may feel about reading a social issues text or encouraging students to ask important questions, I have been successful. I chose to focus on the third question in an effort to help others understand the challenges that have been faced when enacting critical literacy. Data from my interviews with teachers who have experience with critical literacy will help to answer my third research question.

**Interview Study**

“Conversation is a basic mode of human interaction” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. xvii). I chose to conduct interviews as my main method of data collection for several reasons. Interviews allowed me the opportunity to better understand the teachers, their
beliefs, and their experiences with critical literacy. Learning more about the thoughts and opinions of teachers who have critical literacy experience in primary grades was my main objective in each interview. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) identify interviews as a way to gain useful research that can be rewarding for both parties participating in the interview. I was able to gain useful information from participants and will produce research that will strengthen their teaching practices. By the end of my conversations with participants, they had asked and answered many questions. Hopefully, the interview experience with me was rewarding for them in the way that they were able to share their knowledge of critical literacy in primary classrooms. Reading interview transcriptions may bring about a new understanding, and interview reports can contribute new knowledge to the phenomenon being studied (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The conversations that I had with the participants helped me to understand ways in which they enacted critical literacy within their classrooms.

Patton (2002) discusses the fact that researchers are not able to observe everything. Interviews are used to find out from people those things that cannot be observed. Interviews help researchers find out information on events that have previously occurred and about people’s thoughts. “We cannot observe how people organize the world and how they attach to what goes on in the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Interviews were best for this study because they allowed the participants to share their perspective with me. Interviewing teachers who were familiar with critical literacy and who knew what it looked like and how to enact it in a primary classroom could explain all of those things to me.
In discussing the outcome of interviews done in the past century Tierney and Dilley (2001) argue that interviewers have gathered data as a way to investigate and discover topics that have rarely been investigated. Critical literacy in primary classrooms has not been widely investigated. Tierney and Dilley (2001) also state that “researchers have used interviews to understand particular aspects of theoretical puzzles, attempting to refine theories based upon interview data centered on respondents’ experiences” (p. 466). Given that critical literacy, at the time of my study, was not widely practiced in primary classrooms, interviewing teachers who, in some capacity, enacted critical literacy was the best way to find out how it fit into primary classrooms. Interviewing teachers helped me better understand the particular aspects of critical literacy that teachers enacted and they were able to discuss the aspects of critical literacy in primary classrooms.

Lankshear and McLaren (1993) call for critical literacy research to identify the characteristics of an individual’s “routine actions, unconsciousness knowledge, and cultural memory from which community members draw in order to engage in politics of everyday life” (p. 405). They define this to mean developing participatory field approaches and research that will engage, interpret, and appropriate such knowledge (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 405). Hopefully, the data gathered from these interviews will enable other teachers to take on a more critical stance in their classrooms. According to Lankshear and McLaren (1993) the critical literacy researcher needs not only to identify the unconscious routines but to disrupt them in an effort to create change.
Research Settings and Participants

I interviewed nine elementary school teachers who have successfully implemented critical literacy within their classroom. I interviewed participants about their critical literacy practices and beliefs. I employed purposeful sampling to identify participants based on their teaching styles and philosophies. Since the focus of this study is the primary grades, one of the requirements for these teachers is that they teach or have taught a primary grade within the past five years. Another requirement for a teacher to be interviewed is that they must have knowledge and experience with critical literacy.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Grade Most Recently Taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>First Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>First Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bea</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Third Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>First Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Second Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Negotiating Access

When I first sought out participants for this study I knew that finding participants would be difficult. I was the only teacher in my grade level and I dare say in my building that was consciously enacting critical literacy within my (second grade) classroom. Others may have been practicing some of the tenets but were not aware that there was a formal pedagogy tied to the phenomenon and so were not intentionally practicing critical literacy. I decided to reach out to Chris Leland, a well-known, established author who had published numerous articles and books on the topic of critical literacy. This author has written about her research within classrooms. I emailed the author about my dissertation and she responded to me with a list of teachers who to her first-hand knowledge were enacting critical literacy within their classrooms. I then emailed each
teacher on the list explaining to them who I was and why I was contacting them. I was able to set up interviews with four teachers from the group.

This author and the teachers that she suggested were concentrated in a small area of the United States. To ensure that I had a broad sampling of teachers from multiple areas, I sought other methods of finding participants. An additional method of finding participants that I employed was searching through National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference programs for any presentation on critical literacy. When I found critical literacy presentations, I then narrowed my search to include primary or early elementary grade levels. I was able to locate a presentation that led me to an article written by three professors. I contacted one of the professors and explained my research interest. I gave her permission to give the participants in her study my contact information in an effort to maintain the confidentiality of the identities of her participants. I did not ask her to give me the names or contact information of her participants. There were two participants in her study, one of whom contacted me and wished to participate in my research.

I then had five participants but I still felt that I could find more. My dissertation chairperson subscribed to a critical literacy listserv. I drafted a call for participants and he submitted it to the listerv (see Appendix A). Five people wishing to participate in my research contacted me. These individuals were located across the United States and Canada. I communicated with them via email to set up interviews by phone or video chat.
Researcher’s Role

As the researcher my goal was to learn about the experiences, knowledge, and ideas of my participants. My participants and I had a common interests and passions for critical literacy. Several of them shared with me that this was a topic or an area which they cared about and they would enjoy seeing it more widely practiced. It was my role to listen to their stories, to learn about their experiences both positive and negative. As a teacher who enacted critical literacy I shared some of the same experiences with the participants. I was prepared to share my experiences with the participants if necessary, to build conversation or to encourage them to share their stories. This was not necessary. Each of the participants was passionate about critical literacy and more than willing to spend his or her time discussing it with me.

Data Collection

My primary method of data collection for this study was in-depth interviews. “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p.9). I conducted open-ended interviews, utilizing a list of interview questions that I had prepared ahead of time to guide the interview. Over the course of several months I implemented an interview study in which nine participants were interviewed about critical literacy practices within their schools and classrooms. Bogden and Biklen (2007) suggest interviewing participants to gain a further understanding of their knowledge of the phenomenon being researched. It was through interviews that teachers shared with me their experiential knowledge of critical literacy in their classrooms. Patton (2002)
asserts that interviewing allows a researcher to gain firsthand knowledge of the participant’s thoughts and knowledge on a phenomenon. I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with teachers who enact critical literacy within their primary classrooms. Each interview was between 60 and 90 minutes. I prepared a list of questions (see Appendix C) ahead of time but wanted the participants to feel comfortable enough to speak freely about his or her thoughts on critical literacy enacted within the primary classroom.

**Interviews**

Patton (2002) explains that an interview guide contains a list of questions or issues that will be explored or discussed during the course of an interview. Although I used an interview guide, I treated each interview as a conversation with the participants. The guide was for me, so that I could ensure through my conversations with participants that I had covered each topic that I wished to discuss. Using the guide allowed me to, according to Patton (2002), “remain free to build a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that had been predetermined,” (p. 343).

I was able to travel to a Midwestern state to interview four of the participants. It was coincidental that four of my nine participants were located within a few hours of each other. I was fortunate that our schedules allowed me to visit them at a time when I was on Spring Break. As I visited these four teachers, I took photographs to further document my exploration of critical literacy in primary grades. I took photographs in order to remember details that may be forgotten or even overlooked, if I did not have the picture to reflect upon (Bogden & Biklen, 2007).
Scheduling was a big obstacle with my interviews. As a teacher, my time was limited as to when I could interview participants. During two of my face-to-face interviews, teachers invited me to stay with her class and observe a lesson. Observations are a valuable data-gathering tool in research, because they occur in the natural setting, are real-time, and provide the researcher with a first-hand encounter of the phenomenon being observed, or “behavior as it is happening” (Merriam, 1998, p. 88). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) argue that “carefully and systematically recorded observations of slices of everyday life generate richly detailed accounts of practices rarely obtained through interviews alone, and can provide deep insights into social practices, events and processes” (p. 219). Merriam (2009) states that it is best to observe the phenomenon in the natural setting. Although I was unable to visit the classroom of each participant, observing in the ones that were available was an opportunity to gather extra data for my study.

Student work can provide insight into how students make sense and understand ideas that are constructed in classroom lessons. In the classes that I was able to observe, and even in some that I did not observe, the teachers wanted to share with me their students’ work. I took photographs of student work to add to my data collection. Given time and financial constraints, I was not able to visit the classroom of each participant. Multiple data sources were collected in an effort to achieve triangulation.

Photographs

“Photographs provide strikingly descriptive data, are often used to understand the subjective, and are analyzed inductively” (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p. 141). To document
my observations, when I had the opportunity to visit schools and interview participants, I
took photographs. Overall I took 130 photographs to help me remember and allow me
the opportunity to look back and analyze any clues that may be in the photographs
(Bogden & Biklen, 2007).

Data Analysis

As I conducted each interview I audio recorded the conversation so that it could be transcribed verbatim. I employed a freelance transcriptionist to transcribe my first three interviews. She was unavailable later in my study, so I hired another transcriptionist. The quality of the transcripts was not to my standards, so I went back and transcribed the remaining interviews. Due to the large amount of data that I collected and the time between interviews, it was important that I conduct analysis simultaneously with data collection. As I completed each interview transcription, I conducted an initial round of open coding. “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 173). Merriam (2009) referred to open coding as having a conversation with the data. She mentioned that this is a time to write down notes and questions about the data. Open coding is going through the data and recording any recurring item or information in the data. During my first round of coding my data, I listened to the audio recordings multiple times, to ensure that I was hearing everything that was being said and even things that were not being said. As the interviews were transcribed, in an effort to manage the data, I coded each transcript with words or phrases that stood out as I was reading them.
Once open coding was complete I began axial or analytical coding. Merriam (2009) refers to this process as connecting the codes and building themes or families out of individual codes. This was an inductive process, meaning that once I start coding my data there were no established codes or themes. After I applied codes to each transcript, I read and reread the codes and transcripts to connect ideas and identify themes from my data. Patton (2002) mentioned that as the data collection process continues the data analysis process continues and once a researcher reaches the point of data saturation the analysis becomes more deductive than inductive.

While completing my analytical coding, I began to physically group portions of the transcripts I had coded the same. Once I went through each group, I decided to code the portions of the transcripts that I had grouped together. All the while, I continued to listen to the recorded interviews. As I had my second grouping of data I began to see themes emerge. I grouped the data into themes. Once I had my themes organized, I composed a document for each of the themes. I then went through my interview transcripts and copied and pasted each of the items that I had coded into one document. This was another way of helping to stay organized and keeping track of the data. Once I had these documents finished, I went back through and coded them again to ensure that each statement was in the place where it fit best.

**Positionality**

At a very young age, I decided that I wanted to become a teacher. As I pursued this goal, many people tried to persuade me to choose another career path. I ignored many derogatory comments about teachers, only to finish my undergraduate degree a few
semesters early with a teaching position attained. Thirteen years later, I am still teaching and loving it. Like many others in the profession, I pour my heart and soul into my teaching. On a daily basis, I strive to make a positive difference in the lives of my students and their families.

I chose to pursue my doctorate degree in an effort to become a better teacher. Along the way, I have learned numerous innovative teaching methods and theories. One such approach is critical literacy. While I have explored many aspects of critical literacy as well as experimented with incorporating them into my daily instruction, I felt that I could increase the capacity to which I enacted the tenets of critical literacy. It was through this study that I examined the ways in which teachers could successfully incorporate critical literacy their lives as teachers and share with others who struggle with some of the same obstacles that challenge today’s teachers.

I have always loved being a teacher. There have been situations that have been difficult, but overall being with my students brings me great joy. I have always treated all of my students as if they were my own children. Although they are six years old, they deserve to be treated with respect and integrity. It was extremely important that I modeled and facilitated relationships with my students that helped them become well rounded and caring individuals. A teacher’s vision, or philosophical beliefs about education and of children, is the driving force behind instructional decisions.

The county in which I taught had very strict curricular guidelines. There was a rigorous framework, breaking down each of the subject areas into standards. These standards are planned out into quarters. The school where I taught had taken the
arrangement of standards by quarters and the expectation from our grade level leader was that each week, all the teachers in a grade level are focusing on the same set of standards for each subject area. This had taken away any instructional freedom or decisions from the teachers. It takes an innovative teacher to incorporate the wide range of standards to be covered each week into a set of meaningful and relevant lessons for young students.

I made it a point to get to know my students and their families as people, in an effort to show them that I was part of the community where I taught. Each year, I tried to attend one or two extra curricular events for each of my students outside of school. This was extremely time consuming and often caused time away from my own family but I felt that it was an important component in building relationships with my students and their parents. When the parents knew that I cared for their child, and had the child’s best interest at heart, they were much more supportive of me as a teacher. Over the years I have attended countless baseball games, soccer games, piano recitals, dance recitals, and many other activities that have helped me become a part of the community in which my students live and operate.

Given that I had created strong relationships with my students and their parents, I felt comfortable approaching topics with my students that other teachers may feel too uncomfortable to discuss. This goes back to the parents understanding that I had their children’s best interest at heart and would not deliberately bring up social issues unless there was an important lesson involved. I took on a critical literacy perspective in my classroom the past few years and felt that it was important for my students to engage in critical literacies. I believed that it is okay to sometimes stray from the standards-based
curriculum if it means that the students are gaining knowledge that is building their understanding and will aid them in the future.

Building close relationships with my students allowed me to understand their backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses. Understanding the families and home lives of students can give teachers insight into funds of knowledge that students bring with them to school. These funds of knowledge are broad areas in which students are educated that may not always be demonstrated within the school setting. Through their research, Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) discovered that the household and cultural knowledge of students could be used within the classroom to support instruction. I was often invited to have dinner with the families of my students. Being in their homes for dinner was a unique learning experience for me. I also made a point of inviting families in to share if they celebrated holidays or had special traditions. It was through these funds of knowledge that I was able to create an opportunity for students to inquire and learn through an area in which they were knowledgeable and interested. These funds of knowledge are broad areas in which students are educated that may not always be demonstrated within the school setting.

I valued students and their cultures. In my effort to be a culturally relevant teacher, I planned lessons around subjects that my students were interested in and tried to bring their outside cultures into my classroom. I offered them multiple viewpoints on the same historical events. I utilized parents as often as possible, inviting them to come and teach lessons, read books, and volunteer their time in any other way that they were willing.
I strove to create close, positive relationships with each of my students and their families. I believed that these close relationships with my students created a safe place for everyone to learn, myself included. In my classroom I attempted to demonstrate to my students that we were all co-learners at times as well as co-teachers. Interactions between students and teachers produce learning opportunities, and students are not always the only people learning within a classroom.

**Ethical and Political Considerations**

Given that this was a qualitative, nonexperimental study that took place in the natural setting, there were minimal to no risks involved with the research. However, since I recorded and observed teachers, I took all precautions to explain my research to the participants before I obtained informed consent. I used a formal consent form, requiring a signature from participants. Participant identities remained confidential throughout the study. Additionally, I used pseudonyms for schools, teachers, and students when I reported the data, and all participants will remain confidential. I did not include any identifiable information for students, the school, or school district when reporting the study. I stored all data, field notes, and research data in a secure file cabinet, to which only I have access.

**Trustworthiness**

“Trustworthiness is all the actions that teacher researchers employ to take stock of the complexities of the problems or issues they address in their studies” (Pappas & Tucker-Raymond, 2011, p. 8). I triangulated my data through the utilization of multiple data sources (Merriam, 2009). I conducted interviews, took photographs, observed
lessons, and used current research in the field to triangulate the data. If there was a question about a statement made by a participant, I contacted them and clarified the statement, thus conducting member checking. Member checking is another way of establishing credibility to guarantee that I am portraying data appropriately (Merriam, 2009).

**Limitations**

As a primary-grades teacher, the lens through which I view this research may be biased. The population of this study was small and did not represent every teacher from other schools or school districts. The results may not be generalizeable to all other schools because the populations differ at each school. I do hope that the results of my study will be applicable to other classrooms in which the student populations are similar. Teachers who teach different populations may hold different opinions. Future research could include a larger population sample, including schools with a greater variety of students.

**Summary**

In this qualitative study I explored critical literacy in primary classrooms. To understand this phenomenon, I conducted interviews of teachers. I triangulated my data by collecting data from multiple sources. No identifiable information for students, the school, or school district will be included in the reporting of the study. I will keep all names and identities confidential. I conducted inductive and thematic analysis in an organized manner that helped me identify the recurring themes in my data.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This study investigated critical literacy in primary classrooms. In what follows, I begin the discussion by introducing critical literacy and include a typology of critical literacy as it relates to this study. I have categorized the typology of critical literacy into three types: the employment of critical literacy through themes that were predetermined by the teacher, critical literacy through student-centered themes, and encouraging students to question what they read through the inclusion of social issues texts. I continue the discussion with an explanation of the role colleges and universities played in the classrooms in which critical literacy is a central component. Lastly, I present the elements that teachers felt were important in allowing them to enact critical literacy within their classrooms. By enacting critical literacy within their classrooms, the participants in the study believed they were increasing the likelihood that their students would also. As a matter of confidentiality and respect for their professions, I refer to my participants and locations by pseudonyms.

Critical Literacy Typology

Shannon (1995) called for teachers to be critically literate. “The term critical literacy has come to refer to such a wide range of educational philosophies and
curriculum interventions that their family resemblances and shared characteristics would be hard to pick” (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 2). Critical literacy is a term that envelopes many different practices and is often situation-specific, which is reflected through the findings of this study.

Essentially, critical literacy is about enabling young people to read both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources. It is also about writing and rewriting the world: it is about design and re-design. (Janks, 2013, p. 227)

Critical literacy may look vastly different within different settings. Teachers have different beliefs. Students have different beliefs. Schools hold specific values as more important than others. The socio-economic makeup of classes is different from school to school. Even the level at which students have enacted critical literacy could be a factor in what critical literacy may entail within a classroom. Comber (as cited in Cherland & Harper, 2007) supports the differences we see amongst critical literacy practices: “What constitutes critical literacy needs to be negotiated in particular places at particular times and to be informed by our personal and professional histories” (p. 24).

As a researcher, one of my first findings was that, within this study, there were multiple types of critical literacy enacted and taught. There was a variance in the ways in which teachers enacted critical literacy. Reese, a participant in the study, coined the phrase “spectrum of critical literacy” when discussing the many ways that she has enacted critical literacy. Many different authors have defined critical literacy in many different ways. Cherland and Harper note, “critical literacy does not reference a unitary
approach or practice” (2007, p. 25). Comber (as cited in Green, 2001) recognized multiple forms that critical literacy could take. Each form had its own guiding principles and beliefs that guided the different approaches to critical literacy. These principles include “repositioning students as researchers of language, respecting minority practices, and problematising classroom and public texts” (Green, 2001, p.7). It is important to remember that the aforementioned principals are not all encompassing of critical literacy and within them there may be some overlapping of practices (Green, 2001). While critical literacy may look different or take on different forms, there are still foundational principles that impact the choices that teachers make when encouraging students to take on critical literacy practices.

Although critical literacy does not stand for a unitary approach, it marks out a coalition of educational interests committed to engaging with the possibilities that the technologies of writing and other modes of inscription offer for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity, and political enfranchisement. (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 2)

Stevens and Bean (2007) decline to provide a definition of critical literacy, claiming that giving it a specific definition will somehow take away the essence. They claim that if critical literacy stays a moving target it will maintain its potential. “A sociocultural and critical stance on literacy is more about a framework or view of literacy than methods, approaches, or sequences to lessons” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 63).

There is not a teacher’s manual for critical literacy. It is not something to add on to the literacy block of a teacher’s day.
Making critical literacy practices part of ongoing literacy instruction is not something extra to “fit in” as a teaching unit or separate part of the day. Rather, it involves the regular application of a lens that will help create readers and writers who are better able to analyze all texts and think more deeply about texts they encounter. (Papola-Ellis & Eberly, 2015, p. 10)

Participants in the study had very similar and at the same time very different ways in which they enacted or taught critical literacy with their students. I have categorized them into three types: The employment of critical literacy through themes that were predetermined by the teacher, critical literacy through student-centered themes, and encouraging students to question what they read through the inclusion of social issues texts. Each category will be explained further in the sections below.

Critical literacy through teacher planned themes. Teachers of primary grades often use themes or thematic units to integrate science and social studies into their language arts instructional time. These themes are often representative of the required grade level science or social studies standards but teachers also include seasonal and holiday themes into their yearly plans. This area within critical literacy was the most discussed by participants. Almost all of the teachers mentioned incorporating critical literacy into themes within their classrooms. Participants in this study mentioned ways in which they utilized the same themes from year to year within their classrooms. Some of these themes were based on the standards while others were not; it varied from teacher to teacher.
As a first and second grade teacher, I included certain themes into my classroom at the same time each year. I would find math, reading, and science or social studies activities all related to the theme. For example, in the fall we would study pumpkins. We would read books about pumpkins. We would estimate pumpkin seeds. We would experiment with pumpkins sinking or floating. I would plan activities around whatever the theme was for the week or month. I carved out at least 15 to 30 minutes each morning for my read-aloud time. Each day I would read a different book—whether it was fiction or nonfiction, it always went with the theme. Many of the themes were seasonal but as I grew in experience I moved away from those types of themes during my reading instruction and focused more on reading strategies. This allowed me to use books that were a little more meaningful to the students, in my opinion.

The read-aloud time is sacred to teachers. Bea, Pam, Katherine, and Ava all discussed the importance of reading aloud to students. Katherine stated, “That one little area is mine. I can do it. Nobody is telling me, you have to read them this book during this time.” Bea mentioned trying to tie everything together the best she could but her main focus was her literature time. She plans literature-based activities related to certain topics during literature time. Often the books that she reads during her read aloud time are tied to what the class is currently learning about in science or social studies. To enact critical literacy, teachers tried to use social issues texts. They also tried to incorporate as many versions of a story as possible. One of the examples that were shared was the Civil Rights Movement. Lauren made sure that she included stories from the perspectives of Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks that many teachers read but she likes to include more
obscure stories, the stories that are much less heard of than most. Bea described herself as a little sporadic. It depends on what she and her class are doing at the time. She may read a critical literacy or social issues book every day one week but then not read one for a month.

Participants chose books for their read-alouds to promote deeper thinking among their students. Pam and Ava referenced the importance of having meaningful discussions after read-alouds. As teachers, they felt it was their duty to ensure that students were able to hold deep and enriching conversations. After many read-alouds they would encourage rich class discussions. Sometimes during the discussions with their class, teachers made lists for the students as a model for an activity they were about to have the children complete, or to serve as an example and reminder of the conversation (Figure 2, Appendix D; Figure 3, Appendix D). While making lists may not sound like critical literacy, it is the topic of the list that is important. In figure 2 the teacher documented student responses to gender roles while the class was discussing what girls and boys could and could not do. Figure 3 is a picture of a list made while the class discussed ways in which they could help the homeless. Both of these topics are critical because they are helping the students to disrupt the commonplace, or to question their thoughts on these topics.

Bea often had students write about the story. She would have them predict what they think will happen and why, and to explain their thinking. Both Pam and Bea frequently have their students write about situations that may have occurred in the story. They encourage students to agree or disagree with characters or with certain parts of the
book. Another way that students were encouraged to respond to social issues text is to create a response to how they think the characters felt during parts of the story (Figure 1, Appendix D).

Katherine, like a majority of participants, used her themes to focus on issues that were not part of the mandated science or social studies curriculum, but to include social issues. These social issues, like homelessness, may not be the normal themes seen in primary level classrooms on a day-to-day basis. Often teachers utilize more curriculum-based or standards-based themes, such as animals or goods and services for example. Katherine discussed how she used themes with her students:

In the beginning of the year we talk about respecting differences and how we are all different. I always teach why people move around at Thanksgiving. At Christmas I always do the homeless issue. When we come back in January that is when I start my whole civil rights sort of thing. Right now [April] we are kind of on Earth.

**Common core standards.** A group of governors and state commissioners began to develop a set of shared national standards. They began this as an effort to ensure that students across the country would be held to the same level of educational standards. Their goal was to hold all students accountable to the same set of high standards. It was their goal that all students would be prepared for college and the workforce (Kendall, 2011). The Common Core State Standards have sparked many debates since their debut.

Mention of standards was present in every interview conducted for this study. Although there were participants taught in a state where Common Core has not been
adopted, their state followed similar educational standards. Common Core Standards were discussed by many of the participants. Many of the teachers favored the Common Core Standards over their previous state mandated standards in regard to a few areas. “The Common Core focuses on developing the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students will need to be successful” (www.corestandards.org). Common Core Standards require students to think deeper and require students to participate in meaningful conversations focused around their learning.

Within this study, teachers used the state-mandated writing standards to incorporate different themes. After classroom discussions on several Civil Rights leaders, Reese was moving into writing biographies. She encouraged her students to choose the person about whom they wrote, and she noticed that several students chose to write about Civil Rights leaders such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. Through their research, students were able to learn more about historical figures that were not included in a specific grade level standard. Reese incorporated research, synthesizing facts, and writing biographies, and allowed students to research self-selected historical figures. Reese shared that she felt students chose historical figures Mahatma Ghandi and Abraham Lincoln based on conversations that were had earlier in the year.

Kendall (2011) brings to light the fact that teachers do not spend time and effort only for students to be successful in their class. Teachers’ ultimate goal is preparing students to be citizens of a larger society. While the debate over the Common Core Standards continues, teachers are teaching the required standards and framing it in their own personal ways.
**Student centered critical literacy.** One of the ways that teachers enacted critical literacy was to plan lessons around questions or concerns voiced by students. The teachers who enacted critical literacy in this way listened very carefully to their students and took every opportunity to address comments or questions that they heard students voice. One of Anna’s students wanted to know if girls could be firemen. Rather than answering her, she led the class in researching the answer. Ava overheard her girls talking about a race and insinuating that boys were faster than girls. Instead of correcting them, she found books and materials to help them change their assumptions.

A common thread throughout the conversations with participants was the issue of time. Not having enough time to respond and create lessons in response to social issues raised by students was widespread among participants. The copious amount of mandated standards along with high-stakes testing left participants feeling as if they did not have time to authentically include most concerns or questions raised by students, in terms of creating a lesson or activity.

Creating a space or a community in which students feel comfortable questioning and critiquing things that they may take for granted is a way that multiple participants feel is imperative to enacting critical literacy within their classrooms. Reese shared that she feels critical literacy starts with building a classroom community where students feel open to share, a safe place to talk about things and to ask questions. Conversations held within these classroom communities are very purposeful, and there are guidelines for being respectful and hearing each other’s perspectives yet still being able to disagree.
Participants were able to plan around issues or questions raised by students. Ava really learned to recognize socially constructed comments and felt that it was important not to skate over these teachable moments. She acknowledged that it would be much easier to dismiss them and move on to whatever she had planned for the day but she has really made an effort to make time for these concerns. Ava shared that she tried to keep a notebook and jot down comments that concerned her. She engages the students in conversation about their comment and lets the students know that she is interested in hearing more about the topic. She then plans a lesson or finds a book that focuses on the previously mentioned topic. She will open the lesson the following day asking the students if they remember the conversation about the topic and let them know that she wants to know a little more about the students’ thoughts. She then lets them know that she found a book that reminds her of the situation. Ava shared that she felt this gave her enough time to think about the issue and allowed her to come up with an appropriate book or activity, still taking the time to address it at that moment.

Reese admittedly did not plan units around student inquiries until after the state-mandated testing was completed in the spring of each year. While she did address questions and use picture books to enact critical literacy, she felt too stressed to cover all the required standards and it was not until after testing that she felt as if she had a little more freedom. Once the testing was complete, Reese did a student inquiry unit based on some of the questions raised by her students. Some of them were interested in a janitor strike, some were interested in the farm workers movement and the child slavery movement. One group in her class chose to study a girl who started a movement in
Kenya to plant trees. The students worked in groups to study different movements that have occurred.

**Using social issues picture books.** Every participant discussed the importance of carefully choosing picture books. Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) applaud teachers who move away from the prescribed book list, which can be mind-numbing, to include controversial books.

The forward-thinking teachers are moving away from a curriculum of consensus and conformity toward one that values diversity and difference. As they use social issues, multicultural, and international books, they create curriculum that honors diversity, invites silenced voices to be heard, allows multiple perspectives to be explored, and helps students connect the local and the global. (Leland, Lewison, and Harste, 2013, p. 72)

Through careful planning, social issues texts can be included within lessons and units taught throughout the year. Reading books that address social issues exposes students to tough issues. When classes hold discussions about these issues, students are exposed to what other kids are thinking and it helps them change their thinking. Katherine reported, “If you don’t use critical literacy books, the other stories are such fluff. There is nothing there.” Social issues texts allow teachers to address issues that their students may currently be facing. Katherine also shared that, “These books allow me to bring firsthand things in that I can’t teach firsthand because I haven’t experienced it.” Teachers may or may not have experience with the issues that students are facing. Incorporating a children’s book on the topic allows children to feel as if they are not the only ones
dealing with a problem or facing an issue. Ava discussed the fact that Vasquez (2010) presents examples for younger children:

I love and always have been fascinated with picture books and I always used them, even in high school. There are a lot of sophisticated picture books. That is how we came up with the framework for using that as a means that is age appropriate and it just kind of grew from there.

Anna mentioned how the books are like the anchors for everything that she did. She listened to what her students were saying and heard the issues that were important to them and the books were how she triggered the conversations about the issues. Social issues texts allow teachers to start conversations on topics that may not normally be discussed in a classroom, specifically in a primary classroom. These books allow children to see that they are not alone in facing issues. These books help students to see that it is okay to discuss certain topics or to view topics in a different way. Katherine stated,

In the books you are looking for the voices that nobody hears and in your classroom you have lots of voices that nobody hears, that nobody knows. It was all hidden, no one talked about it. Kids don’t know how to deal with it and they don’t know that filter of how to come to grips with that.

The difference with including social issues text and planning an entire unit on an issue that may arise from student inquiry is that teachers can choose a book that may focus on an issue that they are aware of that they may not particularly need to spend time on in an
entire unit. Teachers may read a social issues text because they know that a student is struggling with an issue.

Reading a book and discussing it afterwards can be a powerful way for students to hear the opinions of others in their class and may often bring out new information. Ava shared that when she was reading a book about a child with two moms, she had a student speak up and identify with the character. Katherine was reading a book that mentioned someone going to jail and afterward one of her students came up and shared that members of her family were in jail. She had not been previously aware of this. She went on to say that the students made connections over books like this and were often happy to learn that they were not the only ones that others shared the same situations.

As stated earlier in this section, teachers discuss books after they read them. Pam shared student work that demonstrated ways in which her students asked questions after reading and discussing picture books (Figures 4 and 5, Appendix D). Katherine sometimes had her students choose symbols that they felt were important from the book. She would also encourage students to write an explanation of why they chose certain symbols to represent the story. She also required students to predict, and write about, what they thought would happen next. She could measure student comprehension through this activity and view what students were thinking after hearing and discussing the story (Figures 6 and 7, Appendix D).

Not every book has to address a social issue. Another way for teachers to enact critical literacy within their classrooms is to incorporate books that illustrate another side, or a less popular view of a story. This helps students to understand ways in which
authors choose to position themselves when writing a story. Understanding that there is more than one side or version of a story can be difficult for younger students, but once introduced can be very powerful. An example that was shared was the story of Christopher Columbus. Many students only know one version of his discovery of America. However, reading the story from the point of view of someone who already lived on the land that was allegedly discovered by Columbus helped add a new perspective. This is a more complex skill for students but there are stories written for younger students that exemplify the voices of those not always heard. Included in Appendix E is a list of books collected while conducting this research. The list contains books that teachers mentioned in their interviews, that I noticed while observing in classrooms, or that were referenced in research on the topic of critical literacy. Several of them illustrate the view of the oppressed, in situations with which young students can relate.

There is no right or wrong way to enact critical literacy. It can be as simple as asking questions after reading a book. It can be a month-long inquiry unit focused on questions or concerns brought forth by students. As illustrated in the section above, critical literacy looks very different in different classrooms.

**The Role of Higher Education**

The teachers that participated in this study had anywhere from 5 years to 25 years of experience in the classroom (see Table 1). None of the teachers involved in this study were new to teaching. They were all established teachers who, one way or another, were part of a group or network with university support. One of the common topics of
conversation throughout each interview was that of the university influence. Seven out of the nine participants in this study worked with groups outside of their schools that focused on enacting critical literacy within their classrooms. The remaining two learned about critical literacy through a graduate program or course, but did not engage with a university-affiliated group outside of their graduate studies.

Each of the seven participants who worked with a university-affiliated group referenced the important role that a university played in these groups. Whether it was the presence of a university researcher conducting research with the teacher, the influence of a university professor guiding conversations, or just a teacher inquiry group led by a fellow teacher, the participants shared that it was through these situations that they learned about critical literacy and began experimenting with it in their classrooms.

**Critical literacy missing from initial teacher education programs.** While most of the teachers in this study learned about critical literacy from a university or affiliate of a university, it was not during their initial teacher education programs. The teachers in this study learned about critical literacy through graduate programs, or teacher inquiry groups, or someone from a university conducting research in a school. The teachers in this study did learn about critical literacy from universities-just not through their initial teacher preparation.

The majority of the teachers who participated in this study mentioned the fact that critical literacy was not a concept that they were familiar with when they began teaching. Meller (2008) studied critical literacy with new teachers and found that it was very difficult for new teachers to enact critical literacy: “Implementing critical literacy is
difficult for new teachers. They are confronted with many challenges as they try to deliver thoughtful and purposeful instruction to their students. Critical literacy practices do not come with instructions, teacher’s guides or a checklist” (p. 221). Meller goes on to explain that “new teachers’ interpretations of critical literacy may reflect that ambiguity as they are trying to understand its meaning and how it fits into their reading instruction” (2008, p. 221).

Lindsey shared that she “taught the textbook because I was new and that is what I was told to do so I did.” New teachers are learning classroom management, planning lessons, preparing materials, emailing parents, and many other mechanics of teaching. It is hard for them to grasp the many facets of having their own classroom and to reflect on their teaching in order to frame their teaching through a critical literacy lens. Reese addressed the fact that as a new teacher she did not feel ready to enact critical literacy:

Once I had gone through my first year [of teaching] and was able to start thinking for myself that is when I started realizing these things and just remembering why I wanted to teach in the first place. Seeing my kids and realizing that there is a whole lot of things that are holding them back but don’t necessarily have to hold them back.

New teachers are often busy making sure that they are covering grade-level standards, dismissing students the correct way, corresponding with parents, and planning lessons for the following day. Focusing on framing their teaching in a critical way is often overwhelming when they are just starting out, unless they have a strong background in teaching this way.
**Graduate degrees.** Participants in the study shared that it was during their graduate degree programs that they learned about critical literacy. Anna learned about critical literacy from a professor who had done some work with critical literacy and taught about it in her university classes. Critical literacy intrigued Anna, so she took the opportunity in this class to investigate and learn more about it. She wrote a paper about critical literacy and during her research became very interested in critical literacy and trying it in her classroom.

When many of the participants went back to graduate school, they found there were many new concepts being taught. Lauren felt that she was introduced to many new strategies when she went back to graduate school: “My master’s degree opened up a whole new world to me.” It was years into their career when a few of them went back for graduate degrees and first heard about critical literacy. Katherine stated that when she went back to get her master’s degree there had been a tremendous shift, just in a few years’ time. When she first heard about critical literacy, Katherine felt lost and remembered thinking, “She is talking about critical literacy and I’m thinking what the heck is she talking about.” Lauren mentioned that things were different when she went to graduate school than when she was working on her undergraduate degree. She mentions being a little jealous of all of the things that were being taught compared to what she learned when she was in school. Lauren stated:

> Things were so different from when I was an undergrad. They brought a whole new perspective and it showed me how much things had changed. The critical literacy thing was new for me, too. We tossed around the words critical thinking
all the time but I don’t think I ever really grasped the level of what you could do
with it and it has been really fun with the little kids. Because most of the classes I
took it seemed to be more geared toward older kids.

Lindsey alludes to the fact that although it had only been seven years from the time she
started teaching until she read a book for one of her graduate classes, that completely
changed her method of thinking about her teaching and how she transformed her
approach in the classroom.

Like other participants, when Lindsey learned about critical literacy it
transformed her approach in the classroom. Although she had a sociology degree and
was very interested in social justice type of work, she never bridged the two. They
remained separate and she never thought about what her students could do in terms of
social justice, taking action, and having a voice when they saw something that they
disagreed with. Critical literacy brought her interests together and provided her a
platform or framework to work from, or “connect the dots.” She refers to learning about
critical literacy as a pivotal day in her career. The more she learned the more she thought
about it and changed her teaching. Lindsey shared that,

I would have called myself a student-centered teacher and I thought that little kids
could do great things but that just really kind of made me think about the
capacities of young kids and how I think that they know a lot and they are often
being wise beyond their years and people pick up a ton stuff that I don’t think
they often get the opportunity to pick up on.
Providing support. Anna was one of the participants that did not work with a group outside of school, but she was pursuing a master’s degree. She decided to enact critical literacy within her kindergarten classroom and write her master’s thesis on this research. She discussed how she became very discouraged because critical literacy in her kindergarten class was challenging at first. She, along with others, mentioned how in the beginning she had grand expectations for what she thought would come up with her students. Along the way she met with her professor who encouraged her to stop and think for just a second. “She said that I was wanting them to talk about these huge, big ideas but they are five years old and the things that they are talking about are really big to them.” Anna went on to share that having this relationship and access to her professor encouraged her to continue with her critical literacy practices. She felt that her professor was able to refocus her and reinforced the fact that critical literacy looks a little different when children are five and when they are nine. Anna felt reassured that critical literacy was making a difference with her students. “It is still the foundation. It was just talking about gender roles but she made the good point that, it was setting them up for later in life issues with equality and things like that. I hadn’t thought about it that way.” Having access to support at the university level was significant for Anna’s understanding of critical literacy within her classroom. Had she not had support from her professor, she may have overlooked key points in her research. She felt that her professor had more experience with critical literacy and was able to guide her thinking.

Teachers often get so involved with their day-to-day practices that, unless they are attending classes at a university or pursuing a higher degree, they are not aware of the
new theories or practices that are out there. Sometimes schools have school-focused professional development sessions, when leaders of a school encourage everyone in the school to learn a new program or curriculum. James had a phenomenal experience with a professor from a local university. His school received a grant for professional development. He described it as “basically a person from the university comes in and says, ‘How can I help you?’” He went on to describe the professor that he worked with as a great coach. She never discouraged him or told him that he was doing something wrong; she just guided him and other teachers who met with her during their planning time.

After trying many new things with her, the researcher/professor shared with the group that she had something she wanted to try with them. At that point, she had gained their trust and confidence and they were willing to try anything she suggested. It was critical literacy. According to James, she shared with them:

[W]onderful books that I had never heard about with themes and kind of controversial topics and subjects. But one of the things, one of the first books she introduced to us, showed me how to reevaluate books because now as a teacher I look at everything through a different lens.

James credits the university professor with teaching him about critical literacy and helping him frame his teaching in a different way. She showed him how to pick out books to use with his students. Pam shared a similar story about working with someone from a local university,
There was a group of us that started working with her and we would meet after school. We would all bring books that we found and discuss them. What could we do with the kids and what conversations had they had. Out of that, it has kind of grown.

None of the participants were new teachers. None of the participants’ experience with critical literacy was the result of an undergraduate teacher education program. By starting with practicing teachers who enact critical teaching, teacher education research can identify the conditions that lead to teachers’ enacting critical pedagogy in their classrooms and beyond (Ritchie, 2012). A change is required to help teachers enter the profession better equipped to enact critical literacy.

**Overcoming Obstacles in Order to Successfully Enact Critical Literacy in Primary Classrooms**

In talking with participants about critical literacy, there was not a single participant who learned about critical literacy, attempted a few lessons in their classroom, and then taught in their classroom happily every after. Each participant shared fears or apprehensions when approaching critical literacy. Most of the fears or apprehensions were unwarranted, but they were meaningful enough for participants to discuss. Other participants may not have had fears or apprehensions in the beginning, but along the way situations arose that made them reflect on their teaching. Since the ideas shared often made teachers think twice about critical literacy, they are being presented as obstacles. In the sections that follow are the major categories that arose as obstacles of critical literacy in primary classrooms with participants of this study.
**Personal beliefs.** Teachers in this study did not set out to introduce wildly controversial topics to their students. As Vasquez (2004) states, “a critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived” (p. 1). The lessons and activities that the teachers of this study planned were either the product of a mandated curriculum, the product of themes taught in the classroom year after year, or concerns that arose from students. Critical literacy does create space for teachers to address social and political issues from the community within their classrooms (Vasquez, 2004). However these issues are usually brought up or questioned by the students, teachers in this study were responsive to their students. Participants shared that there were times when they hoped that students would have asked questions or wanted to take action while talking about different topics, but they did not so the teacher moved on with what was planned.

As the participants were discussing critical literacy in their classrooms and many different lessons and activities that had been completed over the years, I wondered if there were ever any topics or areas that they avoided. As I began asking about these fears or apprehensions in regards to critical literacy it became clear that one of the first steps each teacher completed was to examine how they felt about the issue at hand. While talking to Lauren, she reminisced about the time when she was learning about critical literacy. She would shop for books and items to bring in and use in her teaching. Lauren stated, “I would pick up a book in a bookstore and look at it, and because it was controversial, I would think, no I couldn’t do that and put it back down.”

There were a few topics that participants shied away from because of personal beliefs, but overall the majority of participants charged forward with issues that arose in
their classroom, even if they sometimes felt uncomfortable. Some of the topics that were shared that teachers felt too uncomfortable discussing with younger students were homosexuality, violence, mental disabilities, and racism. Teachers all shared reasons why they did not feel comfortable breaching the aforementioned topics with their students. Whether it was religious beliefs or a class’s homogenous racial composition, teachers felt it was important to honor these elements.

**Fears or apprehensions.** As an implication in her 2009 dissertation, Knutson claims that educators need to do a better job of educating parents and administration about the principles of critical literacy and framing it a basic literacy skill. Given that critical literacy practices can often deal with subjects or topics that could be viewed as controversial, it is very important that teachers build strong relationships with their students, the parents, and with their administrators. Teachers were afraid that parents or administrators would be upset with them when they discussed controversial topics with their students. Participants shared that they were hesitant to define critical literacy to parents and administrators because they did not them to think that they were teaching their students to question authority. They also did not want parents to think that they were unnecessarily discussing topics with students that were inappropriate or questioning the family beliefs. Ava shared that students in primary grades are at such a shapeable age,

In some ways they still idolize their parents and see them as, you know, everything that they say is true and perfect and for the most part their parents are amazing. Of course, at the same time I think that it is important to them at this
age to recognize it is not necessarily true. And even at such a young age you do not have to be disobedient but I think there is a difference between disobedience and questioning but still being respectful.

The fear or apprehension that teachers felt, in regard to parents, was that they did not want parents to feel as if they, as teachers, were teaching students that what their parents were telling them was not true. If parents got upset, they would go to administration upset or come to the teacher upset and the situation may build from there.

Building relationships is important in most situations, but when a teacher deals with potentially controversial topics it is viewed differently when a strong relationship has been built between the teacher and all others involved. Building a strong relationship helps others to understand the motives and underlying currents of the teaching decisions. When schools partner with the community it positively impacts student achievement and helps to ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach their highest potential (Epstein, 2011).

**Questioning the readiness of the students.** “Often issues of social justice and equity seem to be looked upon as heavy-handed issues” (Vasquez, 2004, p.30). While students generate many of the topics discussed or addressed through critical literacy, teachers often wondered if their students were ready for those types of conversations. Lauren shared her struggle with the idea that she may be taking away the innocence of her students:

How much do I tell them? Like the whole Thanksgiving thing. Do I tell them how poorly the native people were treated? How far do you go with it? I think a
lot of that is continuum and if everyone in the building does it, which we are not always there, we have gotten better. They can gradually hear more over time, I guess. They are not as innocent as they used to be. I am older and they are way more sophisticated than anyone realizes. They surprise me every year with what they know and understand.

Lauren was not the only teacher to voice this opinion or concern. In sharing her concern about whether or not her students were ready for these types of conversations, Ava discussed her way of getting the students excited about what they were learning,

I think the first few conversations that I had with them, I really had to, I guess I was hesitant to, like any teacher would be, like are they able to do this? I think the first few lessons that I did I really hyped it up and I said, you know, these are really fancy conversations that I don’t normally have. And they think children your age that are seven year olds, they can’t do this but I know that you can.

This empowered her children to believe that they could do something others believed they could not do. She noticed her students sitting a bit taller and very pleased to participate. She demonstrated respect for her students and their intelligence. Ava shared that she remembers being very surprised by the conversations that her students had and how some of her students who never really had much to say really spoke up and shared amazing comments.

Knowing their students and knowing their developmental levels of learning played a key role in how these teachers approached topics with their students. As many shared, they were worried that their students may not have been ready for the
conversations that took place, but in hindsight the students surprised them with their level of understanding and the comments that they made. Reese framed many of her conversations with her students through the lens of fairness and unfairness. From a young age, students understand the concept of being fair. Reese used the following statement to help her students understand: “Because your friend got chosen for a team, that does not mean that it is not fair. But, being treated wrongly just because of our skin color, that is unfair.”

**Apprehensions of what parents would think.** There were times, if a topic or question was raised that was not appropriate for a whole class discussion, teachers would discuss it with the student and let the parents know what was questioned or said. Anna had a situation in her classroom where the students got into a debate over how people become homeless. There was a point in the conversation where she felt that this would be best handled by students having conversations with their parents because the students had such strong opinions. She emailed the parents and gave them a little information on the classroom discussion. Bea discussed respecting parents’ and families’ beliefs. She stated, “I think I work very hard to have a good relationship with the parents and so I think I’m probably sensitive to their desires.”

 Teachers were very apprehensive of what parents would think of them enacting critical literacy with their students. After Lauren began enacting critical literacy in her classroom, she along with other teachers worried about parents’ reactions and what the children would go home and tell their parents. This was an ongoing fear. Eventually after she gained experience with critical literacy in her classroom, Lauren really
examined what she was questioning. She asked herself, “how could anybody come forward and say this is not the right thing to teach?”

As mentioned in the previous subsection, Reese uses fairness to explain social justice topics to her students. She experienced a parent who did not think some of the topics that Reese was teaching were developmentally appropriate for the students. The parent felt that the students were not ready to talk about some of the topics. Reese shared that in actuality, the parent’s child was one of the most vocal in the discussions being held. She explained to the parent that what the class was studying was fairness and unfairness in history and that the students understood and were able to hold conversations appropriately. Explaining it in this way to the parent gave the parent a better understanding of how Reese was approaching the more difficult topics in her classroom.

**Apprehensions about school administration.** As the instructional leaders of schools, administrators want to ensure that the students within their buildings are being provided with the best education possible. Administrators vary from school to school. Personal beliefs, personalities, educational goals and objectives are all different based on the administrator. In today’s schools, teachers are expected to follow a similar curriculum across grade level teams and, in some extreme cases, they may be questioned if an administrator visits the classroom and something vastly different is happening than [that of what (s)he sees happening] when visiting other classrooms on the same grade level.

Participants had mixed experiences with their administrators. Some had administrators who supported their efforts and some just went about their teaching in
hopes that everything would be okay. Anna’s administration was very leery of her using critical literacy with her students, only because they did not want the district to question what she was doing in her classroom. However, James was never really concerned with what his administrators would think because a researcher from a local college served as an advocate for the work that he was doing in his classroom in conjunction with the researcher.

Ava and Reese both had very close relationships with their administrators. They both shared openly with their administrators the happenings with their students in terms of critical literacy. Ava studied critical literacy when completing her Master’s degree and invited her principal to her presentations or to watch the videotaped copy. Her administrator watched all of her presentations and was thankful that Ava was framing her teaching through critical literacy.

Reese served as an advocate for critical literacy at her school with other teachers. Her administration knew of this and somewhat supported it. The administrator’s child was in Reese’s class and was fully aware and supportive of the types of lessons and discussions Reese facilitated within her classroom,

She knows what I am involved with and she knows what I care about and what I am passionate about, but at the same time as a principal, she has her responsibilities and she has her pressures. She is not going to encourage me to do it but she is not going to discourage me at the same time. She knows what I want to do and she knows what I am interested in.
Katherine shared similar sentiments with discussing her administration. Her building administration felt that as long as they were covering all that was required it did not matter how they taught it. Katherine felt that, “We had that freedom. They didn’t care what we did as long as we were covering what needed to be covered.” Katherine was recognized in a published book and she showed it to her principal, who congratulated her.

Other participants had the full support of their administrators. At the school where Pam and Bea teach it is the expectation that critical literacy be enacted with students. Although she shared that she always felt supported by her administration, she did share a conversation with her administrator where she was asked not to read a book to her class. Bea remembers her administrator telling her, “Don’t stir anybody up,” when she was thinking of reading a particular book with her class.

**Carving out time and making space.** Many teachers choose to become teachers because they want to change the lives of children. Strict time constraints along with mandated standards in addition to rigorous standardized testing leaves teachers feeling as if they can no longer impact students the way they once hoped. “In many schools in the United States and elsewhere, scripted lessons and behavior management routines diminish the role of the teacher as decision maker and professional educator” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 39).

Teachers will always find the time to read books to their students. It is important to choose books carefully. Finding time to have the deep discussions and conversations when addressing social issues through critical literacy was a struggle for all participants. A vast majority of participants expressed the desire to take on more of the social action
piece of critical literacy. It is tough to fit in the discussions, but it is almost impossible to always include the social action component. Finding the time and an authentic action are tough for teachers of young children.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine ways in which teachers, specifically those of the primary grades, are employing critical literacy in their classrooms. In turn, this study will potentially provide encouragement and offer ideas to other teachers of similar grade levels. The findings from this study will hopefully provide teachers the confidence to attempt to find space for critical literacy within their classrooms. Teachers have the ability to inspire students in powerful ways. They impact much more than just students’ academic learning. Teachers influence the ways in which students interact with others and the world around them (Stronge, 2007).

Kendall (2011) brings to light the fact that teachers do not spend time and effort in order for students to be successful only in their class. Teachers’ ultimate goal is preparing students to be citizens of a larger society. While the debate over the Common Core Standards continues, teachers are teaching the required standards and are able to include education that reaches beyond the scope of the standards.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the study, presented the problem, explained the purpose of the study, and identified my research questions. In Chapter 2, I presented my review of the literature, including the theoretical framework. In Chapter 3, I provided a description of the methodology and data analysis procedures used in this study. In Chapter 4, I presented the findings of this study by describing the themes that were identified from my data analysis. This chapter presents conclusions from the study, a review of the findings
from this study. Next, limitations of the findings are identified. The significance of this study is explained followed by the implications for future research and future practice.

Review of Findings

The research questions that guided this study were: (1) In what ways are teachers of primary grades modeling and fostering critical literacy within their classrooms? (2) What challenges have primary grades teachers of primary faced when employing critical literacy practices? and (3) What suggestions would teachers offer to those who wish to move towards a more critical stance with their teaching? Based on data collected, I have established the following general conclusions that address each of my research questions:

*In what ways are teachers of primary grades modeling and fostering critical literacy within their classrooms?*

The teachers that participated in this study are enacting critical literacy in many different ways. Teachers are modeling and fostering critical literacy by listening to students’ questions and acknowledging them. Listening to students and writing down concerns or issues that arise helped teachers focus on issues that were authentic to students. In a kindergarten class, when learning about community helpers a student asked if girls could be firemen. Rather than just saying yes and moving on, the teacher took the time to address this concern with literature, videos, and guest speakers.

Teachers would allow and encourage students to conduct inquiry projects on topics of their choice. After hearing different viewpoints to popular historical stories,
students were excited to research other, less-known people. Students chose to research and study issues that may normally have gone unnoticed, like a janitorial strike.

Teachers are presenting students with books that address social issues. Sharing stories that mention a family member being in jail, or a struggle that a family went through, helped students to feel included. Recognizing that others have two moms was a way that a teacher helped a child to understand that he or she was not the only student dealing with what the student viewed as an embarrassing situation.

Teachers encouraged students to question situations that they felt were not fair. Encouraging students to ask questions helped them to take ownership in this practice. Students are often told, “because that is the way it is,” which is not the case. Rather than shut down the questions of students, teachers in this study encouraged them and helped students come up with solutions to the problems that were recognized.

*What challenges have primary grades teachers of primary faced when employing critical literacy practices?*

Every teacher that I interviewed shared challenges that were faced when enacting critical literacy. Some of the challenges were typical problems that teachers face everyday, and would be challenges with or without involving critical literacy. Being that the teachers who participated in this study were adding critical literacy to their never-ending list of tasks at hand, they were still very passionate that critical literacy was so important to them and for their students that it was worth the challenges.

Time was the biggest challenge for the participants of this study. Finding the time to teach all of the mandated standards and meet the requirements placed on them was a
huge struggle for participants. Making space for critical literacy, or being able to incorporate it with some of the mandated standards, was another challenge. The number of different standards being taught on a daily basis made it hard for teachers to naturally integrate critical literacy into their daily lessons. In speaking about critical literacy and the challenges faced when enacting it, Anna shared,

I would want the curriculum to be more conducive to conducting it because in kindergarten I managed to weave it in during my read aloud time but other times I really had to work to find the time to do it because there was just so much other stuff we were required to do. I really have to sit down and figure out how to weave it into the content areas. It would take some thought and planning, I just wish there was more space in the curriculum for it.

*What suggestions would teachers offer to those who wish to move towards a more critical stance with their teaching?*

Rose was adamant that getting started with critical literacy was much easier than most think it would be. She stated, “I think that it’s a lot easier than you think. It can happen.” There are ways to begin enacting critical literacy in classrooms without having to radically change each lesson plan and activity. Implementing small steps along the way can over time change the way teachers teach and students think about their learning. It can start by just asking questions at the end of a read-aloud. Begin by asking students what they feel uncomfortable about. Reese suggests starting small with just asking questions and as the years go on build and build on the ways in which you enact critical literacy.
Finding a group that is focused on social justice or critical literacy will help teachers take on a more critical stance. As stated in an earlier chapter, being part of a group of educators or students learning to be educators immensely helped participants bring critical literacy into their daily lesson plans. James was a teacher who worked with a researcher from a local college and another grade level colleague. Having someone to run ideas by and to discuss thoughts with was one of the key reasons he felt successful with critical literacy.

Participants shared that they addressed many different issues with a critical literacy lens. Bullying was an issue where teachers enacted critical literacy to help their students change. Teachers address bullying all the time. It is how they address it that makes the difference. Teachers who wish to bring critical literacy into their instructional practices can reflect on ways that they address problems with their students. They can change how they approach these issues. Starting with topics that they are already addressing or teaching and examining ways in which they can critically frame their teaching will help teachers create a space for critical literacy.

Teachers who participated in this study knew their community. They knew and respected the beliefs of the families within their community. Having built strong relationships allowed teachers to know that certain topics may not be well accepted by families in their community. Whereas on the opposite side, knowing the families and community members may also provide teachers with insight into issues that they may not normally be aware of and can help teachers be supportive of students.
Limitations of Findings

This was a qualitative study and focused on developing a better understanding of critical literacy in primary classrooms. At the time of the study, critical literacy in primary classrooms was not something that was widely written about. It was imperative to the study that participants have experience with critical literacy in primary classrooms, so that they could adequately discuss ways in which they enacted critical literacy with their students. Finding participants was difficult. There was not a large sample of teachers who had experience with critical literacy in primary grades. One of the major limitations is that this was a small sample of participants.

The participants were very willing to discuss critical literacy with me. Many of them gave up personal time, one even taking a break from a family vacation to be interviewed. Critical literacy was something that they all had a passion for, so they overlooked the challenges to ensure that it was enacted in their classrooms. For other teachers, not sharing this same level of passion, on top of the high demands of teaching it may be viewed as another addition to an already busy schedule. If teachers are not aware of the reasons and benefits of critical literacy, they may push it aside. The teachers involved in this study learned about the rewards of critical literacy through graduate programs and groups and had reasons to believe in critical literacy. Without those affiliations, other teachers may not understand critical literacy. Ava stated,

I think critical literacy is very misunderstood. Many teachers think that if you are reading between the lines in reading comprehension that means you are doing
critical literacy practices. That is an element of it but it goes so much more beyond that.

It is important for teachers to be familiar with and understand what enacting critical literacy entails before enacting it with students.

**Significance of the Study**

In a time when teachers’ pay is dependent on the test scores of their students, when students are expected to pass standardized testing or they will not move on to the next grade level, when budgets have been cut, when teachers are being handed scripted curriculum to teach lessons from, it is more difficult to be a teacher now than ever. The creativity and flexibility that teachers were once able to demonstrate in their teaching seems to be dwindling.

There have been many studies that have examined critical literacy with older students. There have been studies that examine critical literacy in one classroom with younger students. To my knowledge, this is the first study of its kind, in that it focused specifically on ways in which primary grades teachers enact critical literacy.

There is minimal literature that addresses critical literacy with younger students. This study will contribute to critical literacy literature in that it focuses on younger students and ways that teachers have successfully enacted critical literacy in kindergarten through third grades. Teachers are enacting critical literacy while at the same time teaching mandated standards and preparing students to take standardized tests. While others feel that it is impossible, these teachers are passionate about the benefits of critical literacy on their students.
Implications

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore ways in which primary grades teachers’ enacted critical literacy. Next, I will present implications for future practice and further research, based on my findings in this study. My suggestions for further research and practice are based on my own experiences as a teacher and a researcher. While my findings cannot be generalized in ways that translate directly for teachers in specific settings with specific students, my findings suggest implications that may inform the work of other teachers of critical literacy.

Implications for future practice. One of the struggles shared by every participant was that of timing. Knowing that this is a struggle, we need to create a guide or suggestions for teachers to enact critical literacy and still cover all of the other requirements. Having access to a guide or suggestions would help teachers ensure that they are teaching the required standards, that their students will demonstrate adequate progress on the mandated tests, and that they will still be able to enact critical literacy with their students.

The fact that, out of this group of nine teachers, none of them learned about critical literacy to a level where they felt comfortable enacting it in their classrooms, is troubling.

We need educators and activists who see it is as a part of the job of teaching and demand that learning not be reduced to test scores, teaching not be reduced to scripted lessons, and teacher preparation not be reduced to letting smart people or unemployed professionals from other fields learn on the job.
A change is needed in order to better prepare teachers to be activists and to teach students to be the same.

**Social justice teacher education.** “Critical literacy requires a different pathway than the dominant, decontextualized approach to teacher education many preservice and in-service teachers experience” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 43). There has been a shift in teacher education programs to focus more on social justice teacher education. Oyler (2013) claims that social justice teacher education includes critical literacy practices and perspectives. Comber (2015) concurs when she states, “Critical literacy pedagogies are underpinned by theories of social justice” (p. 362). Janks (2014) articulates that it is the job of teachers to teach students how to interrogate the world and to help them develop a social conscience. It is also the job of teachers to develop in students a critical imagination for redesign (Janks, 2014). This is not a concept that teachers are learning in the traditional teacher education programs. Learning how to navigate students through the process of questioning their world and making a change falls under social justice teacher education.

Ritchie, An, Cone, and Bullock (2013) found it disconcerting that social justice was far from being the center of the teacher education program they were researching. They suggest that teacher education programs must put social justice at the center of their programs rather than including them marginally in the entire teacher education program (Ritchie, An, Cone, & Bullock, 2013). Having teacher education programs that are focused on social justice will prepare new teachers to support students in questioning
situations when they do not agree. Social justice teacher education provides new teachers with a foundation to be comfortable having conversations with their students that may address topics often shied away from by new teachers. These conversations lead students to better understand themselves and others and to become agents of change.

*Taking action for social change.* I felt like I was inaccurately representing or enacting critical literacy in my own teaching. I sensed that I could do more or there were better ways to approach situations in my classroom. In trying to follow the “four dimensions” of critical social practice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Lewison, et al., 2010) I became very disappointed with myself and with my students. We had disrupted the commonplace and considered multiple viewpoints. We focused on the sociopolitical, but when it came to the taking-action piece we seemed to be stuck. When I reached the point in lessons with my students where it was time to “take action” and make a change in their world, time and again it seemed very contrived. I had visions of the students sharing ideas of ways we could take action and the truth of it was, I was the one with the ideas and it was as if I were trying to sell them to my students. I felt as if I had not done a good job and I questioned my teaching and myself.

As I started reviewing the data from this study, I began to notice a trend. I was not alone in my struggle. The vast majority of participants shared some of the same sentiments that I had shared. While time for the social action was a constraint for many teachers, others shared that sometimes it did not feel authentic. It seemed as if they were encouraging their students to write letters or make a video. Others were struggling with the exact area where I felt like a failure.
Just hearing my participants discuss the activities that their classes had participated in and ways that their students responded made me wish that I had an inquiry group with which to work. Most of these teachers worked in groups and this is how they got ideas and support. I believe that if schools partnered with local universities and started more teacher groups, many more teachers would take on a more critical stance with their teaching.

Teachers partnering with parents and other community stakeholders could be beneficial in growing the community of teachers who enact critical literacy. When parents find out how critical literacy teaches their students to think, question, and research possible solutions to issues that are relevant to their children, they could be great advertisers for critical literacy.

In reflecting on this study, another question that arose is what it would look like if an entire grade level or school enacted critical literacy. Seeking teachers to lead professional development sessions could help teachers interested in enacting critical literacy. This could provide the support for teachers experimenting with critical literacy. Could a school design professional development to support teachers along this journey? Another question that came to mind centers on mandated tests. Would it make a difference in the scores on mandated tests? Could you measure the effect that it has on students? Critical literacy supports students in many different skills and it would be interesting to see if it has an impact on test scores.

**Implications for future research.** There is definitely a need for more research in this area. This study focused on nine teachers, which is a very small scale. Conducting a
larger-scale study that is more in-depth involving teachers of primary grades enacting critical literacy could identify specific areas that cause teachers to struggle or shy away from critical literacy (Cochran-Smith, 2004). A study that follows teachers for longer periods of time could provide more insight into teachers decisions when enacting critical literacy.

A longitudinal study would also provide a deeper understanding of the context in which the teacher enacts critical literacy. Identifying these areas could help teachers write curriculum that is more conducive to critical literacy.

Many universities have social justice teacher education programs. Researching teaching styles of teachers who attend traditional teacher education programs in comparison to teaching styles of those teachers who attend social justice teacher education programs would possibly produce results that would encourage more colleges and teachers to focus on social justice.

**Conclusion**

We are never going to live in a world without problems. Things are never going to be fair for everyone. There will always be injustice and differences. As educators, it is our responsibility to prepare students to recognize, question, and work to change situations which we feel are unjust. It is our job, as educators, to prepare students to recognize unfairness and injustice and to act as agents of change. Janks (2013) suggests that as educators and researchers we should consider the following questions, and I agree:

How can education contribute to a world in which our students at all levels of education become agents for change? How can we produce students who can
contribute to greater equity, who can respect difference and live in harmony with others and who can play a part in protecting the environment? (p. 227)
References


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Invitation to Participate in Study

I am a doctoral student at Kennesaw State University. I would like to ask for your assistance with my dissertation research study *Critical Literacy in the Primary Classroom*. The purpose of my study is to examine ways in which teachers are incorporating critical literacy into their primary grades classrooms.

I am searching for teachers who would be able to help contribute to the literature on critical literacy. You are kindly invited to participate in my dissertation study if you are (a) a primary grades teacher (grades K-3) (b) have been a primary grades teacher in the past 5 years (c) are familiar with critical literacy (d) enact or enacted critical literacy into your classroom on a regular basis. As a participant of my study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that may last up to 90 minutes. Given the location your interview may be conducted face to face or via Skype. Once we have completed the initial interview, I will conduct a follow-up interview with you if needed via telephone/Skype to clarify any questions.

There will be no recognized physical risks for participants of this study. The information obtained for this study including your name and the stories you share will be kept highly
confidential and deleted after completion of this study. Furthermore, your name will not be identified on any part of this dissertation.

Please respond to my email at spoonerwhitney@gmail.com if you are willing to participate in this study. I am very grateful for your sharing your experiences and participating in my study.

Please contact me at 678-333-6434 if you have any further questions.
APPENDIX B

SIGNED CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Study: Critical Literacy in a Primary Classroom

Researcher's Contact Information: Whitney Spooner, spoonerwhitney@gmail.com, 678-333-6434

Introduction
You have been invited to take part in a research study conducted by Whitney Spooner of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Description of Project
The purpose of the study is to investigate the implementation of critical literacy in primary classrooms. Vasquez (2010) states that critical literacy should not be a topic that is added on to a curriculum, but a frame through which to participate in the world. She believes that teachers should closely pay close attention to topics that capture students’ interests, and these topics should be used to a curriculum that has significance to these students. There are some primary classrooms in which critical literacy plays an important role in the daily functioning of the classroom. I am also interested in the extent to which students are engaging in acts of social justice. One of the major goals of this study is to create knowledge and use the knowledge to enhance the work of others so that other teachers will embrace critical literacy as pedagogy.

Explanation of Procedures
This phase of this study will consist of interviewing elementary school teachers who have successfully implemented critical literacy within their classroom. In this phase of the study, I will interview participants about their critical literacy practices and beliefs. I will employ purposeful sampling to identify
participants based on their teaching styles and philosophies. Since the focus of this study is the primary grades, one of the requirements for these teachers is that they teach or have taught a primary grade within the past three years. Another requirement for a teacher to be interviewed is that they must have knowledge and experience with critical literacy.

**Time Required**

Participants will be asked to partake in an interview with the researcher. This will take no more than an hour. Based on scheduling, the researcher may also observe within the participants environment. Given the location of participants, follow up questions or conversations may be required but will be kept to a minimum. Such follow-ups will take place via phone or Internet communication.

**Risks or Discomforts**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study.

**Benefits**

Others in the field of literacy education and elementary education may benefit from the understandings resulting from this research. This research could provide others in the field a deeper understanding of how to teach using a critical literacy lens within their primary classrooms.

**Confidentiality**

The results of this participation will be confidential. Any potential identifiers (student names, teacher names, school names) will be removed and participants will be given pseudonyms.

**Signed Consent**

I agree and give my consent to participate in this research project. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.
Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #0112, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (678) 797-2268.
APPENDIX C

Critical Literacy in Primary Classrooms Interview Questions

How long have you been teaching?

How would you describe the setting in which you teach?

Has your experience been mostly in this setting? Or tell me about your teaching experience.

Does your school follow a mandated curriculum? If so, what is it? If not, next question.

Who makes the decisions about curriculum at your school?

Do teachers have input into this curriculum?

How is the scope and sequence decided?

How did you become familiar with critical literacy?

When did you begin to teach using a critical literacy lens?

Do your teammates also utilize critical literacy?

Tell me what critical literacy looks like in your classroom.

Have you always used critical literacy in your classroom?

If not, have you seen your incorporation of critical literacy make an impact on students?

Can you explain this impact or lack thereof.

On a typical day, describe how you incorporate critical literacy into your daily instruction.

Based on answer about mandated curriculum, have you ever had an administrator disagree with your use of critical literacy? I was very apprehensive and have found that
most teachers that I work with are apprehensive about critical literacy based on their perception of how parents will react. Have you ever shared this apprehension? Why or why not?

If you had an opportunity to “start over” in your teaching career, would you continue to use critical literacy?

For someone just beginning to teach using critical literacy, what would your advice be?

What are some ways this teacher can incorporate critical literacy into his/her teaching?
APPENDIX D

Photographs

Figure 1. Student response after reading a book.
Figure 2. List made by the teacher during a class discussion.
Figure 3. List made by the teacher during a class discussion.
Figure 4. Questions from a student after the teacher read a book.
Figure 5. Questions from a student after the teacher read a book.
Figure 6. Students choose symbols they feel are representative of the book and predict what will happen next.
Figure 7. Students choose symbols they feel are representative of the book and predict what will happen next.
APPENDIX E

Children’s Books

10,000 Dresses by Marcus Ewert

A Chair for My Mother by Vera Williams

All the Colors of the Earth by Sheila Hamanaka

Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman

Amelia's Road by Linda Jacobs Altman

Angel Child, Dragon Child by Michaela Surat

Black and White by David McCaulay

Bullies Never Win by Margery Cuyler

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type by Doreen Cronin

Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes

Dear Mrs. Larue by Mark Teague

Diary of a Fly by Doreen Cronin

Diary of a Spider by Doreen Cronin

Diary of a Worm by Doreen Cronin

Encounter by Jane Yolen

Feathers and Fools by Mem Fox

Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting

Freedom Summer by Deborah Wiles

Hey Al by Arthur Yorinks
If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks by Faith Ringgold
It’s Okay to be Different by Todd Parr
Louis the Fish by Arthur Yorinks
My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother by Patricia Polacco
No David by David Shannon
Oliver Button is a Sissy by Tommie dePaulo
One Green Apple by Eve Bunting
Say Something by Peggy Moss
Seven Blind Mice by Ed Young
Sister Anne’s Hands by Marybeth Lorbiecki
Skin Again by Bell Hooks
Smoky Night by Eve Bunting
Sylvia and Aki by Winifred Conkling
The Colors of Us by Karen Katz
The Juice Box Bully by Bob Somson and Maria Dismondy
The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson
The Rag Coat by Estelle Condra
The Recess Queen by Alexis O’Neill and Laura Huliska-Beith
The Secret Footprints by Julia Alvarez
The Sneetches by Dr. Seuss
The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales by Jon Scieszka
The Story of Ruby Bridges by Robert Cole
The Table Where Rich People Sit by Byrd Baylor

The Three Little Pigs by David Wiesner

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by Jon Scieszka

The Trumpet of the Swan by E.B. White

The Ugly Vegetables by Grace Lin

The Wall by Eve Bunting

Those Shoes by Maribeth Boelts

Through My Eyes by Ruby Bridges

Tight Times by Barbara Shook Hazen

Tuesday by David Wiesner

Two Bad Ants by Chris Van Allsburg

Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne

We Share One World by Jane Hoffelt

White Socks Only by Evelyn Coleman

Whoever You Are by Mem Fox