Graphic Novels and Critical Literacy Theory: Understanding the Immigrant Experience in American Public Schools

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Graphic Novels and Critical Literacy Theory: Understanding the Immigrant Experience in American Public Schools

Abstract
The purpose of the study was to bring light to a persistent and growing problem in American public schools. There is a fundamental lack of understanding on the part of school personnel and native-born American students about the unique needs and challenges faced by English language learners (ELLs) and immigrant students in American schools. The study investigated if having students read graphic novels, while using critical literacy theory as an analytical lens, helped non-ELL students foster deeper understanding about the unique challenges facing ELL and immigrant children. This qualitative study employed an inductive analysis of data collected from classroom observations and focus groups. The findings suggest that reading graphic novels using critical literacy theory was effective in helping non-ELL students develop new connections and understandings about the issues faced by ELLs and immigrant children during their immigration journeys, particularly their experiences in American public schools. The findings also suggest that school leaders should provide teachers with targeted professional development about the unique needs of ELLs, the use of graphic novels, and the efficacy of critical literary theory. Further recommendation suggests school personnel also take steps to make their schools more welcoming and accommodating to ELL students and their families.

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Graphic Novels and Critical Literacy Theory:
Understanding the Immigrant Experience in American Public Schools

By

Michael Maloy

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by:
Dr. Marie Cianca

Committee Member:
Dr. Joellen Maples

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, the five people who are the center of my universe. Foremost, I would like to acknowledge and thank my wife, Amy. We both know that this dissertation would not have been possible without your love, support, and patience. I appreciate the sacrifices you have made on my behalf; more than words can express. I would also like to thank my children, Chloe, Ella, Molly, and David. You have given me more patience, understanding, and support than I had a right to ask of you. You inspire me to be a better husband, father, and person every day.

I am grateful to my dissertation chair, Dr. Cianca, and my committee member, Dr. Maples. Both of you showed a great deal of patience and support. There were more than a few challenging spots during my dissertation journey, but you both encouraged me to stay focused, to keep writing, thinking, and breathing.

I am indebted to Sharon Ryan for her editing work and patience.

Finally, I would like thank my colleagues in the Brighton Central School District, particularly Mr. Robert Thomas, Ms. Betsy Balling, and Dr. Vincent Mancuso. Your emotional support and goodwill were integral to this process.
Biographical Sketch

Mike Maloy has been a teacher and administrator in the Brighton Central School District for 20 years. Mr. Maloy attended the University of Rochester from 1989 to 1994 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in History and Religious Studies in 1994. He attended Nazareth College from 1995 to 1998 and graduated with a Master of Science degree in 1998. Mr. Maloy began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2013. He pursued his research on using graphic novels and critical literacy theory as a means to investigate the experiences of immigrant students in American public schools under the guidance of Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Joellen Maples.
Abstract

The purpose of the study was to bring light to a persistent and growing problem in American public schools. There is a fundamental lack of understanding on the part of school personnel and native-born American students about the unique needs and challenges faced by English language learners (ELLs) and immigrant students in American schools. The study investigated if having students read graphic novels, while using critical literacy theory as an analytical lens, helped non-ELL students foster deeper understanding about the unique challenges facing ELL and immigrant children. This qualitative study employed an inductive analysis of data collected from classroom observations and focus groups. The findings suggest that reading graphic novels using critical literacy theory was effective in helping non-ELL students develop new connections and understandings about the issues faced by ELLs and immigrant children during their immigration journeys, particularly their experiences in American public schools. The findings also suggest that school leaders should provide teachers with targeted professional development about the unique needs of ELLs, the use of graphic novels, and the efficacy of critical literary theory. Further recommendation suggests school personnel also take steps to make their schools more welcoming and accommodating to ELL students and their families.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

There are unprecedented changes occurring in demographics and immigration patterns in the United States. The impact of these changes on American public schools, particularly in regard to English language learners (ELLs), substantiates the need for further research on current educational policies and practices for such specialized populations. Before policies and best practices are identified, however, educators must understand and appreciate the unique needs and challenges faced by this growing population of students (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).

The national population, which was approximately 300 million in the year 2005, is expected to be more than 360 million by the year 2030 (Doorn & Schumm, 2013). The vast majority of this population growth is attributed to immigration as the birth rates in the United States have steadily decreased over time. As a result, the United States has experienced, and will continue to experience, a profound increase in racial and ethnic diversity. In 2007, it was estimated that 21% of elementary and secondary school students spoke a language other than English at home (Doorn & Schumm, 2013).

English language learners in American public schools. This unique and growing population of immigrant children within the larger American school population is commonly referred to as English language learners. The Glossary of Education Reform (2014) defines English language learners as students who are unable to “communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who qualify for specialized instruction in both the English
language and in their academic courses” (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014, para. 1). This broad label fails to differentiate between different groups of learners. No distinction is made between immigrants or refugees or between those with extensive former education and those with limited or interrupted prior education.

Over time, the demographic make-up of teachers in the American public schools, however, has remained largely unchanged. The vast majority of teachers in the United States are White, middle class, and female (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Many teachers have not received significant training in how to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Teachers often find that a specific portion of the student population, English language learners (ELLs), to be particularly challenging. By definition, ELLs are not proficient in academic English and, most likely, they do not share the cultural background of their English-speaking peers or teachers. Training programs for pre-service and in-service teachers have failed to keep pace with changing student demographics and, as a result, teachers are unprepared to meet the unique needs of ELLs (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010; Polat, 2010; Schall-Leckrone & McQuillan, 2012). Teachers, especially those who teach at the secondary level, also report a lack of connection with ELLs (Cho & Reich, 2008; Reeves, 2006; Tan, 2011). Understandably, if teachers do not understand the needs of their students, how to address their needs, or have a lack of personal connection with their students, it is unlikely that teachers will be effective in their instruction.

Shifts in immigration patterns and demographics continue to transform the population of the United States and American public schools and disrupt what had been commonplace. As such, it is more important than ever for citizens, and particularly
educators, to adopt and endorse critical and flexible thinking skills. Teachers and their students must be willing and able to consider issues from multiple viewpoints. John Dewey (1902), writing about the rapid rate of societal change in turn of the century America, stated:

> Social, economic, and intellectual conditions are changing at a rate undreamed of in past history, and unless the agencies of instruction are kept running more or less parallel with these changes, a considerable body of men is bound to find itself without the training which will enable it to adapt itself to what is going on. (p. 83)

Increased immigration is presenting the United States with numerous new sociopolitical issues. The failure to address these changing conditions will likely result in issues of social justice. For example, the practice of having ELLs take high-stakes tests in English rather than their native language has been criticized and debated (Menken, 2006, 2008, 2010; Solórzano, 2008). Some states not only test ELLs in English but mandate that all instruction take place in English-only settings (Gándara & Baca, 2008; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Rios-Aguilar & Gándara, 2012). English-only policies, such as those adopted in Arizona, are criticized by immigrants’ rights groups and have resulted in civil rights litigation (Gándara & Orfield, 2012).

**Immigration policy in the United States and public education.** Throughout history, nations have reacted to immigrants crossing into their borders in a multitude of ways. Castles (1995) suggested that while there are considerable differences in policies, attitudes, and behavior toward immigrants in different countries, there are four main conceptual reactions to immigration: (a) total exclusion, (b) differential exclusion, (c)
assimilation, and (d) pluralism. The United States has a long history of assimilation and pluralism.

Assimilation is usually defined as the policy of incorporating migrants into society through a one-sided process that involves immigrants shedding the characteristics that make them unique, such as their language and social customs, in order to blend in seamlessly with the majority population (Castles, 1995). Pluralism may be characterized as the acceptance of immigrant populations as ethnic communities that retain the language and traditions that differentiate them from the majority of the population with regard to language, culture, and social behavior. Pluralism implies that immigrants should be granted equal rights in all areas of their adoptive nations, and they should not be expected to sacrifice what makes them unique, although this is usually with an expectation of conformity to certain key values (Castles, 1995). A genuinely pluralistic society necessitates a public that is not only tolerant of cultural differences, but it is able to engage critically with various perspectives and mindsets.

The United States has historically vacillated between assimilation and pluralism, and there has never been a uniform national response to immigrants. Acceptance of immigrants has differed from region to region, has changed over time, and has been influenced by the particular immigrant group in question (Castles, 1995). Other factors influencing how well immigrants are accepted into the larger culture include regional dynamics in the labor force, the amount of resources available to welfare systems, and the amount and type of education possessed by the immigrants (Castles, 2010).

As assimilation took the fore of cultural and legal practice, the task of educating immigrant children fell largely on the United States public education system.
Educational philosophers have debated if the purpose of school is to transmit a single state-sponsored curriculum to students or to develop democratic dispositions in students. John Dewey, one of the most influential thinkers in the history of American education, sided squarely with the democratic camp believing that public schools were a vehicle to promote democratic ideals. Dewey (1902) argued that schools were essential to prepare individuals for citizenship. He cautioned that citizenship should not be narrowly defined as being related to the functions of government, such as voting and legislation, but that citizenship should be considered the ability to take part in and contribute to the larger society. Dewey (1902) wrote:

We find that our political problems involve race questions, questions of assimilation of diverse types of language and custom; we find the most serious political questions grow out of underlying industrial and commercial changes and adjustments; we find that most of our most pressing political problems cannot be solved by special measures of legislation or executive activity, but only by promotion of common sympathies and a common understanding. (p. 75)

Dewey (1902) felt that public schools were the best hope for helping to forge common sympathies and common understanding. Dewey asserted that schools must change to meet the changing conditions and needs of society: “Change the image of what constitutes citizenship, and you change the purpose of what school is” (Dewey, 1902, p. 76). His conception of schools and education was, thus, not one of handing a static set of norms from teacher to student, but it was a dynamic exchange that provided students with the skills and habits of mind required to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world. In his book, Democracy and Education, Dewey (1916) wrote, “It would be
impossible to find a deeper sense of the function of education in discovering and
developing personal capacities, and training them so they would connect with the
activities of others” (Dewey, 1916, p. 45). He endorsed the promotion of critical thinking
to address the changing sociopolitical realities. An educated populace that is able to
adapt to new conditions, and is committed to considering the perspectives of others, is
better suited to promote social equality and justice for all.

While Dewey had a profound impact on American education, his reach was not
universally accepted or applied. The United States is, after all, a collection of individual
states each with a high degree of autonomy to implement educational regulations and
policies and to use state-allocated resources as they see fit. At no time has public school
policy in the United States been universally applied across the states and local
municipalities. The economic, social, and political realities differ from state to state, and
even from county to county, within a given state. Thus, schools’ approaches to dealing
with social issues, such as immigration, depend greatly on local dynamics (Hursh &
Martina, 2003).

**Changing education policy.** In addition to the changing the dynamics of
immigration, public schools have also faced a great increase in the demand for
accountability in the last 20 years. Two landmark pieces of education legislation, the No
Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB] (2003) and Race to the Top [RTTT] (2009),
increased accountability for schools and school districts (Hursh, 2013). Along with the
implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS), NCLB and RTTT
have ushered in great change in American public schools. Both NCLB and RTTT require
that high-stakes standardized tests be implemented to measure student achievement. These tests have been widely criticized (Hursh, 2013; Menken, 2008, 2010).

The NCLB (2003) supported standards-based education reform. The underlying assumption of standards-based education is that establishing goals, which can be measured and evaluated, can improve individual outcomes in education. Individual states were charged with developing assessments of basic skills in English and math in order to receive federal school funding. NCLB helped usher in “high-stakes tests” designed to measure the attainment of identified standards. Because states were allowed to set their own standards, there was little agreement on a national level as to what children should be learning and what the standards of acceptable achievement were (Gay, 2007).

In 2009, the federal government established new legislation called Race to The Top. In return for federal education aid, individual states agreed to implement standardized tests aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards, or the “Common Core” (Kober & Rentner, 2011). States accepting RTTT funds had to adopt the CCLS but were allowed to retain 20% of their previous state standards. A key shift with the adoption of the Common Core was increased rigor in the curriculum to ensure that students were “college and career ready.” States also needed to align their state assessments to the CCLS, which often meant standards being raised, and more rigorous tests. While many would agree that clearer standards and increased rigor are desirable, the Common Core has been criticized because teachers’ evaluations are tied to their students’ test scores. When teachers feel their livelihoods are at stake, they may resort to test preparation rather than focus on promoting critical thinking skills. Both teachers and administrators have taken even more drastic steps in the face of high-stakes testing,
including cheating, or moving, or holding back academically at-risk students so they will not negatively impact school test data (Berliner, 2011).

Most states have also made passing these more rigorous tests a prerequisite for high school graduation. These changes can be especially problematic if teachers are charged with teaching populations, such as ELLs, who have unique and challenging learning needs. The challenges faced by ELLs, including persistent gaps in reading achievement, lower graduation rates, and higher drop-out rates, are well documented (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003; Echevarria et al., 2006; Lovett et al., 2008).

**Educating learners with specialized needs.** Unlike ELLs, other populations with specialized instructional needs, particularly students with disabilities, have well-defined regulations. In 1975, the United States Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142. This legislation required states and local governments to protect the rights of, and address, the specific educational and physical needs of young children with disabilities. In 1997, Congress amended the law and renamed it the Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) Act (1997). This federal regulation helps to provide guidance for states to implement their own policies.

New York State regulations for students with disabilities establish: qualifications criteria for students to be identified as having one of 14 different special education classifications; strict timelines for implementation and review of programming; the establishment of Committees on Special Education (CSE) to make decisions about students’ programming; the creation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students receiving special education services; and the goal that students should be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) possible—that which most closely aligns with
Inconsistent policies for ELLs. The reaction of public schools to the demands of ELLs has been much more inconsistent than with students with disabilities. A wide range of policies toward ELLs exists in public schools. Many of the states along the southern border of the United States have implemented restrictive immigration policies and English-only educational laws. Between 1993 and 2007, five border states, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Florida, each with a large population of Latino immigrants, issued 33 legislative resolutions about immigrants, aliens, or non-citizens (Filindra & Kovacs, 2012). The state resolutions represent a number of issues dealing with immigration—cost of social services, incarceration rates, labor issues, naturalization policies, and educational issues. California and Arizona have both implemented laws establishing English-only education (Gándara & Orfield, 2012). The belief behind these policies is that a “sink or swim” environment will force ELLs not to rely on their native language.

ELL policies in other states and communities are much more progressive. Promising programming for ELL populations does exist. Echevarria et al. (2006) conducted a seven-year research project into the effectiveness of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). Echevarria et al. compared the achievement data of the ELL population whose teachers had been trained in SIOP to ELLs whose teachers had not been trained in the program. The results showed that ELLs who were taught using SIOP protocols fared better on post assessments than the control group (2006).
discussions and conclusions portion of their study, Echevarria et al. pointed out the political reality that implementing programs can be dependent on federal and state funding, that resources are in high demand, and that complex problems are not simple to solve, even when useable knowledge about what works for students exists (Echevarria, 2006).

Federal funding to state educational systems and state funding to local school districts drives what programs may or may not be implemented. Educational policy makers at the both the state and local levels should allocate funds where there is the greatest need. Funding is often dependent upon the number of students represented in a high-needs population and their academic achievement. The unique set of circumstances in a particular district, among them ELL population demographics, ELL achievement data, size of district, access to funding, and teacher training, drive what programs are put into place and how effective they are in meeting the needs of ELLs. While navigating the myriad of issues and challenges previously described, schools can simultaneously look for ways to implement supports for ELLs that are low in cost and within their control. Looking to the use of graphic novels as a resource to support struggling readers is a promising possibility.

**Immigration narratives in graphic novels.** Graphic novels are literary works that use sequential art to tell a story. Graphic novels, like other forms of literature, include many genres. The use of graphic novels for struggling readers, including ELLs, is well documented (Bitz, 2004; Gavigan, 2012; Schwarz, 2002).

Furthermore, a growing set of graphic novel titles focus on immigration narratives. *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2007), *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007),
Vietnam: A Family’s Journey (Tran, 2010), Escape to Gold Mountain (Wong, 2012), and The Four Immigrants Manga (Kiyama, 1998) are just a few of the books dealing with the pressures to assimilate into the larger American culture, the desire to maintain one’s own unique cultural heritage, and other challenges faced by immigrants.

These works, both in their content and their format, provide an ideal platform to consider the unique experiences of immigrants. The art and illustrations accompanying the narratives in graphic novels help struggling readers understand the story despite having difficulty reading in English. The immigration narratives, themselves, illustrate the very human issues at play as individuals, families, and communities wrestle with issues of assimilation and the retention of preserving their native culture. The novels depict, in differing ways, the challenges faced by immigrants in different social settings.

Graphic novels have the ability to help non-immigrants disrupt common place thoughts and consider American society and culture from the viewpoint of a recent immigrant. Graphic novels with immigration narratives can help both American-born teachers and American-born students understand the unique challenges faced by immigrants. These novels introduce the themes of assimilation and the inequity in sociopolitical and economic status between the native-born populations and the immigrants. As such, these works of literature are ideal resources to help introduce critical literacy theory and to consider the plight of recent immigrants to the United States. Graphic novels are often more accessible to struggling readers, can be used to investigate themes of social justice, and can help students interrogate their own perceptions about culture (Brozo & Mayville, 2012; Chun, 2009; Schwarz, 2007).
**Problem Statement**

There is a fundamental lack of understanding on the part of school personnel and non-ELLs about the unique needs and challenges faced by ELLs and immigrant students in American schools. The lack of understanding is the result of many factors including the changing student demographics in American public schools, secondary general education teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of ELLs (Cho & Reich, 2008; Reeves, 2006; Tan, 2011), and the lack of pre-service training programs targeted at English language learners (Baecher, 2012a). This lack of understanding is problematic in the midst of the many other challenges facing ELLs in American schools. Teachers may not understand how to improve conditions for the ELLs and will fail to identify new strategies and techniques that may be beneficial to ELL populations.

An initial step in addressing any complicated issue is to try to grasp the problem at an elemental level. An important consideration in meeting the needs of ELLs is to know and understand ELLs as individuals. Without a firm understanding of the unique needs of ELLs, it is difficult to advocate for programs or resources that will benefit them. The use of graphic novels depicting immigration narratives, coupled with the analytical framework promoted by critical literacy theory, offer a promising avenue for teachers and non-ELLs to better understand and appreciate the needs of ELLs.

**Theoretical Rationale**

Critical literacy theory allows for the examination of intended and unintended consequences of our biases, interpretations, and connections with ELLs. Many definitions of critical literacy exist, but there is a broad understanding of what the theory entails. In the broadest terms, critical literacy is characterized by an emphasis on the
students’ voices (Avila & Moore, 2012). Critical literacy is an instructional approach to interacting and engaging with texts that encourages the reader to consider the political act of both creating and interacting with a given work. The focus of the theory is not to address the many of facets typically associated with literacy such as phonemic awareness, decoding, or fluency. Critical literacy encourages readers of a given work to actively analyze and dissect the work to consider matters such as the author’s purpose in creating the piece of work, the intended and unintended messages put forth by the work, and the cultural and political impact of interpreting a work through different filters or lenses. Critical literacy is “an attitude toward texts and discourses that questions the social, political, and economic conditions under which the texts were constructed” (Beck, 2005, p. 362). Readers are encouraged not to simply accept the text at face value but are encouraged to consider issues such as the author’s intent and motivation in writing the piece, the cultural and political background that influenced the author’s views, and if the reader accepts or rejects the author’s stance.

While critical literacy proponents would likely agree on a broad set of principles, the same political considerations that serve as the underpinning of the theory make it a difficult theory to define or codify. Because each reader engages with and challenges a text using his or her own cultural background, political perspectives, and belief systems, there is no single directed path to take when engaging in critical literacy. As Clarke and Whitney (2009) aptly related, “the social justice approach to critical literacy makes it antithetical to a prescriptive definition” (p. 530). Because each reader will interpret and engage with the text differently and will bring his or her own unique cultural and political inclinations to bear, each reading of the text will yield different results. The goal is not to
establish a step-by-step “how to” guide, but rather to have each individual engage with the text in a uniquely individual and critical way.

The theory, depending on how it is applied, often assumes that an imbalance of power exists between the creator of the work and those for whom the work is intended (Beck, 2005). Critical literacy is aimed at challenging individuals to construct their own understanding and critiques of the work in order to help them foster a deeper understanding of the world. Proponents of critical literacy theory reject the passive transmission of a set of knowledge from an authoritative figure to a submissive recipient (Janks, 2014).

While the word literacy often implies reading and print text, the application of critical literacy theory is not limited to print media. The tenets of critical literacy theory can be applied to virtually any and all mediums of creative work including television, movies, web pages, music, art, and other means of expression (Draper & Reidel, 2011). The primary focus is to interact with the work critically, to question assumptions stated by the author or the work, and to make new meanings or understanding of the culture (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006).

Depending on the unique settings in which they work and the unique populations with which they are engaged, educators apply critical literacy theory differently. The application of critical literacy theory as a pedagogical tool may be strongly influenced by such considerations as student demographics, the socio-economic realities of the surrounding community, or the traditions and values of the region. The very emphasis on creating independent thinkers resists categorization or codification of the theory into a prescribed pedagogical construct. As such, the use of critical literacy theory differs from
Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) recognized that teachers can be frustrated by the lack of a clear definition of critical literacy theory. The authors stated, “critical literacy has been described in many ways by numerous literacy educators, theorists, and linguists” (p. 382). The authors attempted to synthesize the professional literature of the previous 30 years to try to create a framework from which to operate. They arrived at a framework that consists of four dimensions: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice. (p. 382)

Disrupting the commonplace involves challenging teachers and students to question their assumptions about everyday occurrences. By actively examining what is held to be “normal” or “routine,” one comes to understand that these concepts may not be universally agreed upon. What is normal to one portion of the population may be unfamiliar or foreign to other segments of the population (Lewison et al., 2002). A discrepancy or lack of agreement about “normalcy” may be particular true for immigrant children who may be from cultures with different linguistic, religious, and social norms than have traditionally been prevalent in American public schools. Acknowledging that multiple concepts of the commonplace exist invites further consideration of alternative views.

Interrogating multiple viewpoints is a logical extension of disrupting the commonplace. Once one understands that different people may have different conceptions of what “normal” and “common” are, it is logical to consider why one has
come to hold the belief systems, norms, and values he or she holds. If there is a predominately held set of beliefs and a way of doing things in a particular setting—an ethnic neighborhood, a school district, a classroom—then how did these norms become established? Were other alternative viewpoints—which are now known to exist—seriously understood and considered? Do those who have an alternate viewpoint or voice have the freedom and power to advocate for their beliefs? Interrogating multiple viewpoints challenges teachers and students to not only recognize that varied perspectives exist, but to also try to understand these perspectives and weigh them against their own held beliefs (Lewison et al., 2002).

Just as disrupting the commonplace logically leads to interrogating multiple viewpoints, once one has seriously considered others’ perspectives, it is logical to consider sociopolitical issues. This dimension of critical literacy theory focuses on the sociopolitical powers at play in decision-making processes (Lewison et al., 2002). When an author decides what stories to tell or what words to use, or when a teacher decides what books to teach or how interaction will occur, dimensions of power come into play. What stories are not being shared? Are there voices and perspectives that have been silenced or ignored? Considering these questions challenges the teacher and student to take a position and make judgments about what is right or just.

The last dimension, taking action and promoting social justice, is the culmination of the other three dimensions. Lewison et al. (2002) pointed out that the fourth dimension is “often perceived as the definition of critical literacy” (p. 383). Once students have considered, analyzed, and drawn conclusions about different sociopolitical issues and positions, it is reasonable, and moral, to encourage them to act on their belief
and to take informed action. The authors warned that trying to address the fourth dimension, taking action and promoting social justice, would not be successful unless the other dimensions were initially addressed. The work of Lewison et al. (2002) has frequently been cited in the literature, and it has influenced many subsequent proponents of critical literacy.

Critical literacy theory lends itself well to the study of the ELL population in American public schools. ELLs have, by their mere presence in schools, disrupted what has traditionally been considered commonplace in schools. ELLs bring with them multiple cultural norms and viewpoints that, in a democratic society, must be interrogated and considered. The changing demographics ushered in by new immigration trends have created challenging sociopolitics with which communities and schools must contend. Increases in immigration rates in communities may put a strain on limited resources for education and welfare systems, and they can stress existing labor markets (Castles, 2010). Lastly, Wong (2012) suggested that how well ELLs are integrated into U.S. schools and society is ultimately an act of social justice. If implemented well, educating ELLs has the promise to uphold the democratic ideals upon which the United States was founded. If implemented poorly, educating ELLs can lead to new and costly political, economic, and cultural issues for years to come.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine if graphic novels, coupled with instruction in critical literacy theory, foster a deeper understanding for non-ELLs about the issues facing English language learners. Deeper understanding and appreciation of
ELLS and their challenges is necessary given the dramatic growth of this population within American public schools.

Research Questions

The research questions considered in this study are the following:

1. What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLS as a result of the reexamination of preexisting assumptions through reading a graphic novel using critical literacy theory?

2. How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?

Potential Significance and Importance

Interrogating held beliefs about ELLs will likely foster a greater appreciation of ELLs’ challenges in school. Administrators may realize the need for more support for faculty in terms of professional development opportunities, resources, and time to plan strategies and lessons tailored to support ELL populations. Teachers and administrators alike may place more emphasis on implementing and replicating successful strategies.

Students, both ELL and non-ELL, may also benefit from a structured discussion about the unique issues facing ELL populations. Non-ELLs may gain a deeper appreciation for the struggles and accomplishments of recent immigrants to the United States, and may possibly understand the need to embrace fully and include, rather than ignore or reject, immigrant populations.

ELLS will hopefully feel an increased sense of belonging to school community and, ideally, to the larger American community, as their stories are told and appreciated and their realities are considered more frequently, more openly, and more deeply. ELLs will
ideally feel their voices are being heard and appreciated in the larger discourse about American education and American culture.

**Definition of Terms**

*English-Language Learners* – are defined as “students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses” (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014)

*Graphic Novels* – Many definitions of “graphic novel” exist. For the purpose of this study, Francisca Goldsmith’s (2005) definition will be used. Goldsmith’s definition of graphic novels points out the difference between graphic novels and comic books:

Unlike the cartoon, comic strip, or comic book, the graphic novel is complete within itself and provides a beginning, middle, and end to the story or information it places before the reader. However, it shares the earmarks of sequential art that comic books incorporate: image and word are bound together in order for the narrative to unfold. (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 25)

*Critical Literacy Theory* – “an attitude toward texts and discourses that questions the social, political, and economic conditions under which the texts were constructed” (Beck, 2005, p. 362). This definition was chosen because, of all of the many definitions available, it best aligns with the goals of this study.

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* – a “federal legislation that enacts the theories of standards-based education reform” (No Child Left Behind Act Law & Legal Definition,” 2014).
Summary of Chapter

The United States is experiencing unprecedented changes in demographics and immigration patterns. One result of these shifts is an increase of ELL populations in American public schools, which has presented both schools and ELLs with numerous challenges. Historically, American society has reacted to influxes in immigrant populations in a myriad of ways. At some points, the larger society has attempted to assimilate immigrants while, at other times, a policy of pluralism was more widely accepted. Although policies toward immigrants have changed over time, the American public education system has consistently been charged with educating immigrants and preparing them to participate in American culture. Due to the state-controlled nature of American education, the response to immigration and educating English language learners has been far from uniform. Some states have adopted English-only policies in schools while other states have been more accommodating and accepting of immigrants.

An issue that seems consistent across state lines, particularly in the latest wave of demographic change, is an increasing disconnect between teachers and the growing ELL population. While the student population in American schools has changed rapidly, the teaching population has remained largely unchanged. The use of graphic novels depicting immigration narrative and the application of critical literacy theory may provide an avenue for deeper understanding of the unique needs of ELLs. Critical literacy theory, as endorsed by Lewison et al. (2002), encourages the reader to disrupt the commonplace, interrogate multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, and take action to promote social justice (Lewison et al., 2002). It is a theory that is well aligned
with an investigation of the disruptions immigrant students have caused to what has been commonplace in American schools.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature in the numerous aspects of educating ELLs in American public schools: (a) the challenges faced by ELLs in American public school, (b) an analysis of the efficacy of teacher-preparation programs for general educators working with ELL populations, (c) an exploration of the use of graphic novels with ELL populations, and (d) the use of critical literacy theory as a potential avenue to explore the unique perceptions and cultural understandings of ELLs.

The research design, methodology, and analysis is discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents a detailed analysis of the results and findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

This chapter examines the scholarly topics concerning English language learners in American public schools. The literature review is divided into four broad themes: (a) the challenges faced by ELLs in American public schools, (b) teacher preparation programs for general educators working with ELLs, (c) graphic novels and ELLs, and (d) critical literacy theory.

The following literature review is intended to provide the contextual background necessary to understand the challenges faced by ELLs in American public schools. The literature review also serves to frame the questions being investigated in this study. The research questions for this study are the following:

1. What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of reading a graphic novel and using critical literacy theory?

2. How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?

Review of the Literature

The first two themes discussed, (a) the challenges faced by English language learners in American public schools and (b) teacher preparation programs for general educators working with ELLs, focus on the challenges faced by ELLs and the school personnel who work with them. The last two themes, (c) graphic novels and ELLs and
(d) critical literacy theory, focus on possible pedagogical approaches to address the issues ELLs and their teachers face in school.

**Challenges faced by ELLs in American public schools.** ELLs represent a growing and diverse group of learners within American public schools. This group presents unique challenges not only for the particular school that ELLs attend, but for the American educational system in general. American public schools have been slow to adapt to this extensive demographic shift. Schools have struggled to correctly identify the needs of ELLs, to train general education teachers, and to support the literacy needs of ELLs (Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, & Frisco, 2009; de Jong, 2014; Rios-Aguilar & Gándara, 2012).

One of the challenges facing both ELLs and the teachers who work with ELL populations is a significant and persistent lag in student achievement scores. Goldenberg (2008) and Lovett et al. (2008) both reported that ELLs have been shown to lag significantly behind their English-speaking peers in reading achievement. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, a comparison of student achievement scores between fourth grade ELLs and non-ELLs revealed that the ELLs scored 34 points lower in reading and 25 points lower in math (Goldenberg, 2008). This lag has existed for years with little progress made since before 2005.

The report, *The Condition of Education 2013*, (Aud et al., 2013) released by the U.S. Department of Education cited data gleaned from the NAEP testing. The report states:

In 2011, the achievement gap between non-ELL and ELLs was 36 points at the 4th-grade level and 44 points at the 8th-grade level. At grade 4, this achievement
gap was not measurably different from that in any assessment year since 2002. At
grade 8, the achievement gap between non-ELL and ELLs in reading scores was
three points smaller in 2011 than in 2009 (47 points), but not measurably different
from the achievement gap in 2002. (Aud et al., 2013, p. 56)

The report states that not only does an achievement gap exist, but that attempts to
address the gap have largely been unsuccessful since 2003. This same report indicates
that the ELL population continues to increase across the United States. Aud et al. (2013)
estimated the current ELL population in the US to be 11.2 million students or nearly 20%
of the population of school-aged children.

Echevarria et al. (2006) cited similar data that established an achievement gap
between ELLs and language-dominant populations. On the reading portion of a 2002
California state reading test, for example, 11% of ELLs scored at or above the 50th
percentile compared to 57% of non-ELLs and 48% of all students (Echevarria et al.,
2006). Compounding the difficulty of addressing the gap is that fact that the term “ELL”
represents a large and diverse group of learners.

Burt et al. (2003) and Echevarria et al. (2006) explored the fact that the label
“ELL” does not represent a single group but, rather, a vast demographic range of students
who arrive at schools with different experiences, with different levels of education and
literacy attainment in their native language, and they come from different socio-economic
backgrounds. One group of ELLs may be highly educated and highly literate in their
native language, have ample resources at their disposal, and may simply not be proficient
in English. Another group of ELLs may have limited formal schooling, may not be
literate in their native language, and may not have the resources they need to succeed in an academic setting.

Roberts and Bryant (2011) illustrated this point by comparing Spanish-speaking ELLs, a group that comprised about 80% of all ELLs nationwide, with Asian-language speaking ELLs, who comprised approximately 11% of the national ELL population. Their study found that Spanish-speaking ELLs begin school with lower literacy rates than both non-ELLs and Asian-speaking ELLs. The three groups also showed different average increases in growth scores in reading from kindergarten to grade 1. Roberts and Bryant reported that in a nationally representative student population of 21,000 students, the average scale score improvement on a reading assessment for Spanish-speaking English language learners is 26 points, compared to 31 points for non-ELLs and 34 points for Asian-speaking ELLs (Greg & Mohammed, 2010). Some of the discrepancies can be explained by the variation in socio-economic status (SES) between the three groups. Spanish-speaking ELLs tend to come from high-poverty populations. Singh’s 2013 study confirmed the work of Roberts et al. and states that both school-level SES and student-level SES are important predictors of student performance (Singh, 2013). The disparity in reading achievement and SES for ELLs is far from the only challenges facing ELLs and their teachers.

Echevarria et al. (2006) pointed out additional challenges faced by ELLs, including the fact that ELLs are often placed in lower-ability classes in school than their non-ELL peers. A myriad of factors helps to determine class placement for non-English-speaking immigrants in American schools. Factors, such as the size of the ELL population in a given school, the size of the ELL population of the larger community, and
the availability of and access to trained ELL teachers, all determine class placement for ELLs (Callahan et al., 2009). Placement of ELLs can have a dramatic impact on the expectations for students from the students, themselves; from their families; and from their teachers.

Many schools have opted to place ELLs in classes that stress intense instruction in English language acquisition, which are taught by certified ELL teachers, especially as students first enter school. These courses often isolate ELLs from their similarly aged English-speaking peers (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Placement in small English language focused classes often draws ELLs away from subject-specific classes taught by teachers with specialized content-area certifications. Removing ELLs from the general education setting is particularly troublesome at the secondary level where content specialization is more commonplace (Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller, 2010). Even when ELLs are placed in content-based classes, as opposed to ELL specific classes, ELLs tend to be placed in the lower-ability classes where they are available. ELLs are more likely to be placed in a track aimed at high school graduation rather than college preparation. Placement in lower-track classes often leads to lower academic achievement and less opportunity to develop higher level thinking skills (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Lower academic achievement and lack of access to college preparation coursework negatively impact ELLs’ access to post-secondary education (Flores & Drake, 2014). Not only are ELLs likely to be placed in lower ability tracks, they are often misidentified as having learning disabilities and are likely to be placed in special education classes (Ortiz et al., 2011; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).
ELLs often present their teachers, particularly secondary, general education teachers, with a challenge. Teachers sometimes find it difficult to determine if an ELL student’s difficulty in class stems from the fact that he or she is, by definition, not proficient in English or if there is another learning challenge at play. Schroeder, Plata, Fullwood, Price, & Sennette (2013) stated that ELLs are often inappropriately identified to receive special education supports. Teachers sometimes mistake cultural differences for cognitive or behavioral disabilities (Schroeder et al., 2013; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

In addition to the considerable financial costs associated with placing students in smaller settings with specially trained teachers, Schroeder et al. (2013) pointed out that misidentifying ELLs as needing special education services has far-reaching ethical and moral consequences, and it promotes school-sanctioned cultural inequality.

Ortiz et al. (2013) concurred that ELL populations are overrepresented in special education classes, particularly regarding misidentification as learning disabled with reading disabilities. Ortiz et al. also pointed out that the classification of students for special education services depends on the clinical judgment of teachers, school psychologists, and administrators. The same study goes on to state that teachers specially trained in bilingual education or certified as ELL teachers also have difficulty distinguishing between cognitive delays and cultural differences (Ortiz et al., 2011).

Should school systems begin to implement robust response-to-intervention (RtI) programs with fidelity, the misidentification of ELLs who need services might decrease, but there is a lack of clearly defined tier one interventions for ELLs (Thorius & Sullivan, 2013). Even if effective tier one interventions existed, an educator would still be required
to determine if a student’s lack of response to intervention was due to cultural differences or cognitive issues (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Not surprisingly, given a gap in reading achievement, lack of access to higher level classes, and over-identification for special education supports, ELL populations also have higher dropout rates than their non-ELL peers (Ortiz et al., 2011; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). ELL populations in American schools face one of the highest dropout rates of any population in American public schools (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011). While many factors determine why students dropout, Sheng et al. (2011) highlighted three factors that are particularly important to ELL populations: English proficiency, family socio-economic status, and cultural differences. Dropout rates for ELLs are among the highest in urban centers. In 2008, ELLs had the highest dropout rates of all students in New York City schools (Menken, 2010). High-stakes tests that are often required for graduation make it more difficult for ELL populations to complete their diploma requirements. Some ELLs complete all of the requirements for graduation but do not pass the high-stakes tests (Menken, 2010). While authors such as Hursh (2013), offered criticism of NCLB and the negative impact of high stakes testing on schools in general, others such as Gándara and Baca (2008), Harper, De Jong, and Platt, (2008), Menken (2006), and Solórzano (2008) stated that high-stakes tests are particularly harmful to ELL populations.

The federal education legislation commonly known as No Child Left Behind, passed in 2001, required that students in grades 3 through 8 are tested annually in English (Gándara & Baca, 2008). Schools that do not show sufficient improvement in scores from year to year can be designated as schools in need of improvement, and they may
eventually face being taken over by agencies promoted by that state’s department of education. This policy is problematic for ELL populations who are, by definition, deficient in English language usage. Some states with high populations of ELLs have turned away from promising bilingual education programs to provide more instruction in English in hopes of bolstering performance in yearly English exams (Gándara & Baca, 2008).

Moving away from bilingual to English-only instruction has provided additional challenges to ELLs. ELLs in English-only schools are not encouraged or allowed to use their native languages to answer questions or to explain their reasoning. A student’s lack of English proficiency is often mistaken as an indicator that the student does not comprehend concepts, when the real issue is being able to communicate adequately in a foreign language (Gándara, 2008). While Gándara (2008, 2010, 2012), Kaplan and Leckie (2009), and Menken (2006, 2008, 2010) all pointed out the challenges, limitations, and drawbacks of moving from dual-language to English-only instruction, many states have moved to English-only instruction due to federal legislation requiring high-stakes testing in English.

States, such as Arizona and California, have legislated English-only or English-dominant instruction in all schools. Other states have continued to allow bilingual education to remain in practice (Gándara, 2008, 2001). While states, such as New York, may allow bilingual education, schools in urban centers with higher ELL populations may feel the pressure to adopt English-only practices. Menken (2006) attributed a move away from bilingual education to English-only classes in New York City schools to the pressures teachers and schools face when administering tests required by NCLB (2003).
Not only does NCLB require testing for reading comprehension in English, but the legislation does not endorse specialized training for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers.

NCLB (2003) also “fails to recognize English as a second language (ESL) as a specialized academic discipline in which teachers should be ‘highly qualified’” (Harper et al., 2008, p. 267). Following NCLB, Florida passed legislation that all prospective teachers seeking state certification in any subject area must have a concentration of classes focused on teaching ELLs. While this would appear to be an admirable policy, Florida makes no distinction between the hours of training required of all prospective teachers and the degree of specialized training conferred to ESL-certified teachers. Because the amount of coursework and specialized training required to earn a concentration in teaching ELLs is much less than that required coursework to earn the more rigorous ESL certification, some interpret Florida’s policy as devaluing of the ESL certification (Harper et al., 2008). School districts may not see the need hire teachers with the ESL certification when all teachers have had to complete a concentration.

Another challenge facing ELLs in public schools is that teacher-training programs and job-embedded professional development opportunities have not kept pace with the dynamic change in the ELL population. As stated earlier, while the growing ELL population represents a dramatic shift in student demographics, teacher demographics have not changed as rapidly. Most teachers in the United States remain White, middle class, and female (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). This trend data was corroborated by Lowenstein (2009), who pointed out that the number of African American teachers has
decreased. More and more, ELLs come to school and interact with teachers who are not likely to share their cultural background, native language, or socio-economic status.

**Issues of acculturating immigrants and ELLs into American public schools.**

Researchers, such as Brown and Chu (2012); Choi, Dewey, and Lee (2013); Crosnoe (2013); Crosnoe and Fuligni, (2012); and Crosnoe and Turley, (2011); and others have investigated the challenges and issues that arise from the immigrant’s point of view, when immigrant families enroll their children into American public schools. Many themes are consistent throughout these studies. Immigrants in schools face issues of diminished expectations, increase in generational tensions, and shifts in students’ sources of socio-emotional support.

Brown and Chu (2012) and Choi et al. (2013) explored immigrants’ perceptions that teachers have diminished academic expectations for immigrant students. Both studies found that immigrant students felt as if they didn’t belong to the larger school community. Lacking the belief that they belonged, in turn, negatively impacted the immigrant students’ will to succeed and engage fully.

Choi et al. (2013) and Witkow and Fuligni (2011) both discussed an increase in generational tensions between immigrant students and their parents. Immigrant students, particularly adolescents, increasingly look to school peers from their dominant culture, rather than to their parents, for validation, acceptance, or help. This shift from family to school or friend support, particularly for socio-emotional concerns, may cause tensions as parents see cultural norms and traditions increasingly challenged and rejected by their children (Choi et al., 2013). On the other hand, when school and friend support is more academically oriented it can be to the benefit of both the immigrant student and the
family. For example, immigrant students who are more dependent upon their parents may not realize the importance of taking college preparation courses early in their high school career. Teachers and friends, however, can explain the importance of getting on the right academic track, especially for sequentially based curricula such as mathematics (Witkow & Fuligni, 2011).

Intergenerational frustrations also manifest themselves when immigrant parents feel ill-equipped to advocate adequately for their children. Parents from Asian cultures typically have high educational expectations for their children (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011). While many immigrant parents understand the importance of education and want their children to succeed academically, it is often difficult for parents to support for their children if they are not familiar with how the American school system works or cannot speak English well (Choi et al., 2013). The inability of parents to successfully advocate for their children may result in feelings of inadequacy or shame.

The 2013 investigation of Choi et al. studied Korean parents’ views of school as unique in that it employed Korean interpreters to interview parents and get direct quotes from parents. Employing direct quotes allows Choi et al. to portray and discuss the frustrations parents can feel in much more human terms than an answer to a survey can. It allows for the immigrant parents’ “voice” to be heard. For example:

I don’t know what’s important in middle school and what level he should be academically. Even when I read books at the library, I still cannot figure it out. My poor English prevents me from getting them what they really need. . . . I am scared to meet teachers at the parent-teacher conferences. The most dreaded thing is meeting teachers at school. . . . Usually, my husband comes with me. We just
sit there saying nothing. . . . I always stayed ahead of her when we were in Korea.

Now, I let her be in control. (p. 510)

Qualitative data, such as that collected by Choi et al. (2013), puts the human perspective on some of the quantitative data collected in other studies. It is vital to hear the authentic voice of ELLs and their parents about their challenges with American schools.

**ELLs’ socio-emotional needs.** ELL students in American schools face unique issues not faced by their native English speaking peers. ELLs and immigrants face issues of threats to their identities, of being isolated in school, and of bullying. ELL students frequently report that both students and teachers mispronounce their names, or worse, change their names by Americanizing them. Kohli and Solórzano (2012) and Stanley (2014) stated that ELLs can be adversely impacted when people at school, particularly teachers, fail to learn their names. Stanley explained that ELLs often feel that if their names are not worth knowing, then they are not worth knowing as people. ELL students can internalize this emotion and feel they are not as important as their peers who happen to have easy-to-pronounce names. ELL students, particularly those with very limited proficiency in social language, find themselves isolated from their grade-level peers.

Georgiades, Boyle, and Fife (2013) and Malsbary (2014) investigated the relationship between students’ cultural backgrounds and their reports of social isolation, loneliness, and bullying in public schools. While it is unclear if ELL students are bullied more frequently than their non-ELL peers, Koo, Peguero, and Shekarkhar (2012) and Peguero (2009) suggested that that immigrant students from Asian countries face more incidents of anti-social behavior and bullying than do students of Asian descent who were born within the United States.
While many of the studies mentioned deal with the challenges faced by immigrant students and their families, few capture an authentic immigrant voice as well the study by Choi et al. (2013). The numbers and statistics gleaned from qualitative studies are useful to convey many of the challenges facing ELLs such as lower graduation rates, higher dropout rates, and persistent lags in reading ability. Quantitative studies, however, are less effective in conveying the human aspects of the immigrant or ELL student experiences such as frustration, feelings of inadequacy, or fear. Teachers feel they are unprepared to meet the needs of ELLs, and that training programs targeting instruction for ELL populations are too few and may not be effective (Baecher, 2012a, 2012b; Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010; Polat, 2010). More qualitative studies are needed to better express the socio-emotional struggles faced by ELL and immigrant students.

**Teacher preparation programs for general educators working with ELLs.**

The study of teacher preparation programs for general education teachers working with ELLs, as opposed to certification programs in ELL instruction, is an emerging field of study. The preparation opportunities available to these two distinct groups of educators are quite different. Preparation for pre-service teachers is usually provided in a college setting before teachers enter the work force. In-service professional development occurs mainly in the work place and is designed to augment or refine teachers’ current practice. The discussion of pre-service training is divided into two sub-topics: (a) the perceptions of pre-service teachers about ELLs, and (b) pre-service training and teachers’ assessment of their own self-efficacy in meeting the needs of ELLs.

**Pre-service training and teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward ELLs.**

Coursework and training opportunities for pre-service teachers, those who have not yet
obtained a teaching position in schools, are quite distinct from the training available to teachers who are employed. Pre-service training typically happens in a college or university setting and often depends on student teaching placements to provide access to K-12 students in public schools. It is crucial that the issue of teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of ELLs and their particular needs are examined carefully.

Studies by Brown et al. (2011), Lee and Dallman (2008), and Lonnquist, RB-Banks, and Huber (2009) were conducted in college settings following a pre-test, intervention, and post-test organizational schema. Typically, students are asked at the outset of a class, either through open-ended questions in an interview or by questions on a survey, to assess their preparedness for teaching ELLs or their perceptions of ELL populations and their educational needs. The studies of Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009), Brown et al. (2011), and Doorn and Schumm (2013) all investigated pre-service teacher’s attitudes towards ELL populations.

Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009) conducted a mixed-methods study to determine how pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward ELLs, and their perceptions of their own preparedness to teach ELLs, were impacted by taking part in pen pal letter-writing project. Pre-service teachers in a Midwestern university were paired with middle school-aged ELLs, all who were refugees who had been forced to leave their home countries with no option of returning. Each pen pal grouping exchanged letters weekly for a 10-week period. Prior to the exchange of letters, the pre-service teachers were administered a questionnaire to assess their knowledge of refugee populations, their assessment of their own pre-service training, and their personal experiences with refugees.
Some of the participants stated they had no prior knowledge about what refugees were or what unique needs refugee students might face (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). The perceptions of the research participants about the effectiveness of their preparation to teach refugees improved after participation in the pen pal project. Participants also had significantly more positive perceptions about their preparation to teach refugee children after participation in the pen pal project (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). The findings were consistent with those of Brown et al. (2011) who also conducted research using a design comparing pre-intervention and post-intervention perceptions of in-service teachers.

A 2011 study conducted by Brown et al. investigated if the knowledge and attitudes of the pre-service teachers at a university in southeast Tennessee changed after completing a required course named Teaching Diverse Learners. Prior to the course, 46% of the 57 students had little or no experience working with diverse populations. Upon completing the course, 96% of the participants reported having some or substantial experience working with diverse populations. Brown et al. observed that in a time in which a great discrepancy exists between the backgrounds and life experiences of students and teachers, courses in multiculturalism and diversity should be mandatory for all pre-service teachers (Brown et al., 2011). Similar positive results for training for pre-service teachers were reported in a 2013 study conducted by Doorn and Schumm.

Doorn and Schumm (2013) implemented a mixed-methods study to attempt to answer the research questions: (a) “What are the attitudes of pre-service teachers at the university regarding the language development and literacy of diverse students? (b) Does the teacher-preparation program affect these attitudes and how? and (c) What other
factors affect these attitudes? Participants in the study were given a questionnaire and an individual interview to assess their personal attitudes toward and their preparedness to work with students from a diverse population. The results of the questionnaire indicated that participants held positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity in the classroom and that they had a wide range of personal experiences in regarding cultural diversity. Many participants had lived in, learned in, or worked in diverse cultures for many years. The participants in the study supported linguistic diversity and also felt that bilingualism or multilingualism should be adopted in schools nationwide (Doorn & Schumm, 2013). The results of the study are consistent with both those of Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009) and Brown et al. (2011). Students who had participated in in-service programming felt more prepared to work with ELL populations upon completion of the program.

While these three studies suggested that pre-service interventions positively impact pre-service teachers’ perceptions of ELLs, successful programs do not appear be commonplace in American universities and colleges. The following research studies attempted to determine in-service programs’ impact on prospective teachers’ perceptions of their own self-efficacy. The studies described subsequently did not have the promising results as those of Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009), Brown et al. (2011), and Doorn and Schumm (2013).

**Pre-service training and teachers’ assessment of self-efficacy.** The following studies attempted to evaluate pre-service teachers’ assessment of their preparedness to work with ELL populations. As such, they differ from the studies discussed earlier in that the participants were assessing their own abilities rather than the results of a program
or coursework. Pre-service teachers’ assessments were, as a result, much more personal and individualized.

Polat (2010) conducted a quantitative study to address the differences between pre-service and in-service teachers’ beliefs about their self-competency and readiness to teach ELL populations. The study was unique because it attempted to compare the perceptions of these two groups. Prior research had been conducted for each of the two groups, but Polat’s study was the first to compare the results of the two groups using the same questionnaires. A major finding of the study was that the in-service content area that teachers felt “unprepared, unready, and incompetent” to support, were the language and academic needs of ELLs in mainstream classrooms (Polat, 2010, p. 239). The study found that more in-service teachers reported feeling prepared for the challenges of teaching ELLs than did pre-service teachers. Polat’s findings for pre-service teachers were inconsistent with the results from a 2010 study conducted by Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010) who attempted to measure the self-efficacy and knowledge of pre-service teachers to determine how confident they were for teaching ELL.

Durgunoğlu and Hughes’ 2010 study included a pre-survey similar to Doorn and Schumm’s 2013 study, but it differed in that the researchers observed the pre-service teachers in classrooms to assess if they applied what they learned during their classes. Doorn and Schumm’s study did not contain the component of directly observing the practices of pre-service teachers. The results of Durgunoğlu and Hughes’ initial survey indicated that the pre-service teachers had neutral views about their preparedness and self-efficacy, and they had slightly positive views of ELLs and their parents. Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010) attempted to verify the self-reported efficacy and preparedness scores
with a qualitative in-depth classroom observation of four of the pre-service teachers who were randomly selected from the population that had completed the initial quantitative survey. The classroom observations evaluated each teacher’s use of resources, techniques, and modification to address the needs of ELLs in his or her high school classrooms. The observations of pre-service teachers’ methods and attitudes toward ELLs were consistent with the low self-efficacy scores on the initial quantitative questionnaire and demonstrated that they did not know how to or did not attempt to address the unique learning needs of the ELLs. Furthermore, the lack of interaction between pre-service teachers and ELLs went unaddressed by mentor teachers, suggesting that they, too, did not know how to address the unique needs of ELLs (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010). The findings of this study, that pre-service teachers felt unprepared to meet the challenges of working with ELLs, were similar to those of a study conducted by Schall-Leckrone and McQuillan in 2012.

Schall-Leckrone and McQuillan (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate the influence of embedding language-based strategies into a history methods course to prepare novice history teachers to teach ELLs. Specifically, the researchers questioned if coursework in academic language and historical analysis better prepared pre-service teachers to work with ELLs in secondary social studies classes. Participants in the study were students in a secondary history-methods class at a Jesuit university in the northeastern United States. Data were collected from two cohorts of students over a 2-year period. Survey data revealed that completing the course work actually made participants doubt their ability to teach history to ELLs more than they had at the beginning of the course work. Participants shared that after the course they knew how
much work was required to prepare adequately to meet the needs of ELLs. Of all of the survey items analyzed, the single item with the greatest increase from pre- to post-survey was the statement, “I do not feel confident in my ability to work effectively with ELLs in a secondary history or social studies classroom” (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009, p. 254). As such, the findings are similar to that of Durgunoğlu & Hughes’ study (2010). Another study that found pre-service training to be ineffective was conducted by Baecher in 2012.

Baecher (2012b) conducted a study to ascertain how well a pre-service program had prepared teachers for the realities of working with ELLs in real classroom settings. Baecher surveyed 77 novice teachers, teachers having 1 to 4 years of experience in a teaching position in a school, and teachers who were all graduates of a master’s degree in education program in a large urban northeastern U.S. university that was preparing teachers of ELLs. According to the study, 64.5% of the participants in the study reported they were unprepared to work with ELLs. Of the 77 participants, 60% also reported they did not feel confident they could address the literacy needs of the lowest ability readers (Baecher, 2012b). Baecher’s findings were therefore consistent with those of Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010) and Schall-Leckrone and McQuillan (2012), who also found pre-service teachers felt unprepared to adequately deal with the challenges of teaching ELLs. Participation in the trainings actually appeared to have lowered participants’ sense of preparedness, as they were now more aware of the very real challenges facing ELLs.

In 2012, Baecher conducted a document analysis study to assess the extent to which the existing teacher-education curricula at one higher education institution were addressing the instructional needs of ELLs (Baecher, 2012a). A total of 119 syllabi were
reviewed and coded by the author using a rubric to assess the degree of attention provided to ELLs in the syllabus. The review of the syllabi revealed that while the needs of ELLs were addressed, the vast majority of the course syllabi did not specify readings, assignments, projects, or clinical (field-based) assignments relative to ELLs. Baecher (2012a) indicated there was very little attention to ELLs across the curriculum. Baecher offered some explanations for this finding, including the lack of organizational consistency in the school of education along with a lack of collegial sharing amongst faculty. This analysis of course syllabi was unique, and it was difficult to corroborate Baecher’s findings against any other study or school of education. Although similar studies evaluating schools of educations’ syllabi were lacking, Baecher’s findings were consistent with the findings of Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010), Schall-Leckrone and McQuillan (2012), and Baecher’s (2012b) own study, which all found that pre-service teachers who had completed undergraduate course work felt they were unprepared to meet the needs of ELLs.

López, Scanlan, and Gundrum (2013) crafted a unique quantitative study that looked at ELLs, specifically Hispanic ELLs’, performance on the 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) 4th Grade Reading Test which is administered in all 50 states and Washington, DC. The authors looked at the data for the 15,000 Hispanic students who took the test from 2,800 schools. The authors identified each state’s requirements for pre-service teachers working with ELLs and attempted to correlate the impact of state requirements for teachers of ELLs with the achievement data for Hispanic ELLs. They found that training in methodologies to assist ELLs had a significant and positive impact on student achievement. While training in working with
ELLs was demonstrated to be effective, the study reported that some of the states have no requirements for specialized training. Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, South Carolina, and Tennessee all witnessed an increase in ELL populations ranging from 300% to 700%. None of the states, however, requires specialist training. In contrast, states that require all teachers to have some kind of ELL training but they do not require specialized training, showed markedly higher achievement on the NAEP assessments than states that require no ELL training for general education teachers (López et al., 2013). These findings are consistent with the findings of Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010), Schall-Leckrone and McQuillan (2012), and Baecher’s two separate studies from 2012, all finding that pre-service teachers were unprepared to meet the needs of ELLs.

Another broad topic of study about ELL investigated the use of alternate methods and materials for instructing ELLs. A fairly large body of research exists about the use of graphic novels to help address the needs of struggling and reluctant readers. Fewer studies directly address the use of graphic novels for ELL populations whose academic struggles and reading lags can appear to be quite similar to native-language speaking, low-ability readers.

**Graphic novels and ELLs.** Several qualitative studies have been conducted to show that employing graphic novels with ELL populations helps students understand critical literacy theory, investigate issues of immigration, and gain important language acquisition and literacy skills. Graphic novels, by their very nature, promote a multi-modal form of literacy. The works used are not text only, but they are accompanied by pictures, giving the readers another avenue to explore in their attempts to decipher the
meaning of the work. As the subsequently discussed studies show, the multi-modal approach works particularly well for low-ability readers.

The traditionally accepted understanding of literacy, the ability to read and write in print, has increasingly given way to a new broader sense of literacy involving non-print texts such as television programming, movies, music videos, and other visual formats (Schwarz, 2006). As American society becomes increasingly influenced by media, educators’ understanding of literacy has broadened to include multiple modes of text. This new expanded literacy is more dependent on visual literacy, the ability to interpret and analyze visuals, and it is often referred to as multi-modal literacy or multiple literacies (Schwarz, 2002).

Graphic novels with pictures accompanying text, require multi-modal literacy skills as readers need to interpret the pictures as well as the text. While it may appear that having two sets of text, one print and one visual, to analyze may be more difficult, several studies have found the addition of pictures helps students. Struggling readers, particularly, benefit from the ability to interpret the print text by using clues from the pictures. Liu (2004) summarized how visuals aid reading comprehension by stating that visuals often repeat or reinforce written text, visuals provide readers with additional information to interpret written text, and visuals increase readers’ interest in the written text. Pictures/visuals may also help reluctant or struggling readers by allowing them to “see” the story’s characters and plot lines (Snowball, 2005). The written text found in many graphic novels is often less difficult than those of print-only texts and is, therefore, more accessible to struggling readers.
Struggling readers frequently do not enjoy reading because it may reinforce feelings of low self-esteem (Smetana & Grisham, 2012). Struggling readers avoid reading tasks whenever possible, which serves to increase the problem as the reader is avoiding practice. Because the written text in graphic novels is usually less challenging than in print-only texts, and because there are pictures to augment the written text, struggling readers often enjoy graphic novels more than print-only texts. Increased motivation to read allows for more practice and more opportunities for teachers to assess a student’s reading skill (Smetana & Grisham, 2012). Analyzing a graphic novel’s pictures allows struggling readers to draw on a relative strength and engage with the text more deeply, which, in turn, increases comprehension (Snowball, 2005). Increased comprehension also has a positive impact on student recall of the text. Liu (2004) conducted a study in which readers of similar reading ability were given texts to read. One group of low-ability students read text-only works while the other group was given the same written text, but it was accompanied by a comic strip that illustrated major plot points. The group of low-ability readers who were given the text with a comic strip recalled approximately 20% more than did the low-ability readers in the text-only group. This pattern did not hold true for more proficient readers, indicating that stronger readers gained more information from the written text than they did the visuals (Liu, 2004). The previously discussed studies evaluated the benefits of graphic novels to reluctant and struggling readings. The subsequent studies will discuss how graphic novels can help ELLs in particular.

Danzak (2011) analyzed a project named Graphic Journeys in which ELLs read graphic novels about immigration and then composed their own immigration experiences
as graphic stories. The project helped promote multiculturalism, provided ELLs with increased motivation and connectedness to school, provided them authentic writing opportunities, and allowed them to explore and define their own voice (Danzak, 2011). Danzak’s findings were similar to that of a 2002 study conducted by Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat. While not specifically targeted at ELL populations, Morrison et al. (2002) reported that having students write their own graphic work, in this case comic strips, and required the students to determine how to represent the main idea of their story in both visual and written form. Doing so allowed the students to employ multi-modal literacy skills (Morrison et al.). Visuals allowed the students to draw on their own experiences in ways that written text could not.

Chun (2009) explored ELLs’ interaction with the graphic novel *Maus* and concluded that ELLs were able to gain an appreciation for how language can be used for and against a population of people or a cause. Use of graphic novels, particularly those with themes of persecution or alienation, deepened students’ engagement and allowed them to draw on their own experiences to help understand the text (Chun, 2009).

Hammond (2012) suggested that a student, in this case an ELL student, bringing his or her own experiences to the text means there is no single correct reading of any text. On the contrary, each student bringing his or her unique experiences to the text means the reader constructs the meaning of any given work, which results in a multitude of meanings and interpretations (Hammond & Macken-Horak, 1999). Not only are graphic novels accessible to ELLs, but there is a growing number of graphic novel titles depicting immigration narratives.
Boatright (2010) specifically looked at graphic novels that depicted immigration stories and issues. Engaging with the graphic novels helped students understand the narrative techniques employed in the graphic novels and provided a resource for exploring complex issues of immigration. Students gained a deeper appreciation for the challenges faced by immigrants (Boatright, 2010). A theme shared by these and other immigrant narratives is the concept that immigrants must give up something of themselves to be accepted in their adopted home. Succeeding in America means immigrants must go through the process of “shedding their ethnic identities” to overcome the challenges they face (Ghiso & Low, 2013, p. 23). Boatright suggested that most immigrants would understand this theme from their lived experience.

Martinez-Roldán and Newcomer (2011) and Mathews (2014) explored the 2007 graphic novel, *The Arrival*, written by Shaun Tan (2007), which depicts an immigration narrative. *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007) is a unique graphic novel because it contains no written text. The entire story is depicted in pictures alone. Mathews (2014) suggested that a book with no written text at all “levels the playing field so that ELLs feel they have the capability of contributing to the reading process” (Mathews, 2014, p. 67). With no written words, readers are completely dependent on their visual literacy skills. Martinez-Roldán and Newcomer (2011) agreed that the ability to read images is prioritized to the point of excluding the need to analyze the written word. Martinez-Roldán and Newcomer asked ELLs to read *The Arrival* and to interpret the story using their own immigration story as a reference. At various points in the narrative, students were asked to predict what might happen next based on their own experiences. The different
predictions students made were an indication of the variety of immigration experiences they faced (Martinez-Roldan & Newcomer, 2011).

**Critical Literacy Theory**

Critical literacy theory was developed by social critical theorists who were concerned with post-colonial educational settings. The struggle of former colonies to assert their own voice and to throw off the vestiges of the former colonial rule greatly influenced the development of critical literacy theory. Educators, in particular, were concerned with the power dynamics and political implications of creating and transmitting knowledge (Endres, 2001). Many newly independent nations were no longer interested in continuing to transmit the culture and norms of the former colonial power.

Paulo Freire is considered to be “synonymous with the concept of critical literacy” (Endres, 2001, p. 363). Freire grew up in poverty in Brazil and taught English to adult learners. He was influenced by what he saw to be an inequity between those in power who controlled the educational system and the students who had no power (Shor, 1999). In Freire’s view, a traditional education entails the “banking concept of education” (Mayo, 1995, p. 365). This model of education is characterized by instruction that “turns [students] into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (Endres, 2001). The student, the recipient or receptacle of the teacher’s knowledge, has little value or power and is expected to accept, unquestioningly, what has been foisted upon them. Freire deeply rejected the idea that learners had no knowledge or wisdom of their own.

Freire believed that students should be engaged in opportunities to construct meaning and knowledge actively. In this model, schools become spaces where students
interrogate social conditions through dialog about issues significant to their lives (Beck, 2005). Critical literacy encourages teachers to serve as facilitators of conversations that question traditional power relations as opposed to being transmitters of a set of learning (Shor, 1999). As stated earlier, by placing the power to form knowledge in the hands of students, one avoids a narrow prescription of what learning will take place or how the learning will be achieved. Each unique learner brings a different set of circumstances to the educational discourse and will engage with texts and school differently.

In their 2002 article, *Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices*, Lewison et al. recognized that teachers can be frustrated by the lack of a clear definition of critical literacy. They stated, “critical literacy has been described in many ways by numerous literacy educators, theorists, and linguists” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382). The authors attempted to synthesize the professional literature of the previous 30 years to try to create a framework from which to operate. The framework they devised consisted of four “dimensions”: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice.

By implementing the first three dimensions, teachers could hope to enact the fourth. The authors warned that trying to address dimension 4, taking action and promoting social justice, would not be successful unless the other dimensions were addressed first. Dimensions 1 and 3 are particularly well aligned with a Freirean conceptualization of critical literacy, which posits that one must not blindly accept what one is being told but should question the motives of the speaker and realize that an imbalance of power is usually at play. The work of Lewison et al. (2002) has been
frequently cited in the literature, and it has influenced many subsequent proponents of critical literacy.

Other frameworks for applying critical literacy have been proposed. As recently as January of 2014, a new framework was proposed by Hilary Janks (2014) in her article, *Critical Literacy’s Ongoing Importance for Education* (Janks, 2014). Janks proposed a framework by which teachers:

- make connections between something that is going on in the world and their students’ lives,
- consider what students will need to know and where they can find the information,
- explore how the problematic is instantiated in texts and practices by a careful examination of design choices and people’s behavior,
- examine who benefits and who is disadvantaged by imagining the social effects of what is going on and of its representations,
- imagine possibilities for making a positive difference. (p. 350)

One can see the thread that runs through Freire to Lewison et al. (2002) and finally to Janks (2014). Freire, Lewison et al., and Janks all promoted that readers look at works critically, questioning the author’s motivations and persuasive techniques, and look to form new meaning from individuals engaging with texts, and also encourage the reader to consider the sociopolitical issues at play in the creation, dissemination, and analyses of a given work.

**Efficacy of critical literacy theory.** Several qualitative studies have shown that critical literacy theory can be effective in changing the views of both students and teachers about what is assigned and how it is read. In their case study of a pre-service teacher working with middle school students, Groenke and Maples (2008) demonstrated
that the novice teacher could implement key aspects of critical literacy into her discourse with students and that the students embraced and used critical literacy methods of analysis. In the study, a pre-service teacher communicated in a chat room with middle school students about a book they had read about racial inequality in the US. The teacher employed some pedagogical techniques that were aligned with critical literacy theory. One practice, called “uptake,” involved the teacher sharing her own opinions about the text and requesting her students share their opinion. The students were able to demonstrate that they could challenge the teacher’s opinion and provide text-based or experientially based evidence to support their positions (Groenke & Maples, 2008). Transcripts of the student-teacher chats, along with teacher reflections and student writing, showed that the pre-service teacher was able to utilize critical theory tenets and that students were able to make their own meaning by critiquing the text using their own experiences as filters for understanding. While independent thought is a trait valued in America, James (1997) pointed out that in certain cultures, speaking one’s mind may run counter to familial and cultural expectations for children and students. Some may even consider independent thought to run counter to familial and cultural norms of the home culture (James, 1997).

Students in two different middle schools in Canada were shown to understand key components of critical literacy as they created digital text that demonstrated their understanding of sociopolitical and economic injustice in their surroundings (Burke, Hughes, Hardware, & Thompson, 2013). In the study, small groups of five to six middle school students engaged in literature circles or book club activities. In the groups, the students read texts such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and books
about children living in war-torn nations (Burke et al., 2013). The students synthesized what they read and planned to create digital texts, using Glogster, an interactive poster software, or Bitstrips, an application that turns student work into cartoon-like strips. The students created original works that promoted some sort of social action based on what they had read. One student created a mini public relations campaign for providing clean drinking water to those in war-torn areas. Another student wrote of the difficulties children in high-poverty nations have accessing education. The student work not only demonstrated that the students understood social issues but that the students were inspiring others to act on behalf of those who needed help. Field work observations, teacher journals, and student work demonstrated the students understood key aspects of critical literacy theory and were able to apply it to their own writing.

Researchers working with middle and high school students from a poor urban community in California utilized key critical literacy principles to promote increased literacy skills and social action (Wright & Mahiri, 2012). Students in the study took part in participatory action research to identify, research, and propose a way to address an issue in their community. The students advocated for the development of a youth center with programs targeted at addressing the needs of community children. In the program, students were given increasing challenging texts to read concerning the subject of urban poverty and social programs. As the readings grew more challenging, support from adult facilitators was decreased. Students were motivated to engage in challenging literacy tasks because they saw the immediate outcome as not only gaining individual skills but also actively helping their community. One adolescent male in the study remarked that
his motivation to read, and to interpret works from multiple viewpoints, increased because he knew he was trying to help others.

Critical literacy techniques have also been shown to be effective in adult education classes for English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) students (Huang, 2011). Adult learners in a college setting in Taiwan, who were learning English as a foreign language, were encouraged to uncover the hidden messages in different text to gain a better comprehension of what the author was trying to accomplish. By considering the author’s underlying message, students moved from being submissive recipients of information to being active readers who were able to question and critique a given work. Students in the study reported that critical literacy aided their comprehension and made them better writers (Huang, 2011).

Critical literacy theory offers promising opportunities for teachers and students in settings in which a discrepancy in sociopolitical power exists. Researchers have shown that employing critical literacy principles in a wide array of education settings has been successful in having both teachers and students question issues of power and disenfranchisement (Mayo, 1995). The study of critical literacy has often empowered students to advocate for changes to address societal problems (Burke et al., 2013).

As such, critical literacy theory appears to be an ideal theory through which to consider the issues facing English language learners in schools. By examining the cultural and political forces at play in public schools, as well as the texts that ELLs are asked to interact with, one might be able to foster deeper faculty-student connections. Students may be motivated to take action on their own behalf to address some of the social injustices they might face.
Criticism of critical literacy theory. While promoting and championing critical literacy theory, both Endres (2001) and Beck (2005) pointed out potential shortcomings or criticisms of the theory. The issues they put forth are still present, perhaps more present, in classrooms today. As is the case with any theory, it is important to be aware of these criticisms and to consider them when employing the theory in practice.

In the article, *A Critical Read on Critical Literacy*, Endres (2001) pointed out many issues that should at least be considered when applying critical literacy theory to a given work. First, Endres (2001) pointed out that while critical literacy theory is highly dependent on a thoughtful critique of a given work, readers may “overlook other dimensions of reading and writing” (p. 407). One can be so absorbed in considering the social context and political implications of the text that one can be blinded to other aspects of the work. While Freire, Janks (2004), and Lewison et al. (2002) would encourage the reader to consider the power dynamics at play in the creation of a work, Endres (2001) cautioned that not all works are not overtly political. Authors create work to convey “aesthetic, emotional, and personal meaning, especially in literary and autobiographical works” (p. 407). It is important to be open to more than the political implications of any given text.

Endres (2001) also pointed out that not all texts are written in a context such as Freire’s research, where a dominant culture is passing along a sanctioned set of knowledge and content to the readers or learners who have less political power. Some texts are created by authors in the same socio-economic conditions or social group as the reader. Certain aspects of critical literacy theory will still apply, but one may not assume perpetuating sociopolitical inequalities to be the main purpose of the text (Endres, 2001).
Beck (2005) also pointed out several possible shortcomings for critical literacy theory that are grounded in the practical day-to-day operations of a classroom with typical teachers and students. Beck (2005) stated that, “not all students’ voices are created equal; some students are simply more articulate than others, and yet others are persuasive for reasons related to age, gender, race, class, or ethnicity” (p. 394). Just as there might be power dynamics and politics at play in the intersection between author and reader, there might be similar issues at play between students within a classroom. Those students who are more confident in sharing their view may dominate discussions and limit the development of quieter less assured students. The dynamic that Beck proposed seems to suggest oral conversation in a classroom. In such a setting, it may be likely for a more domineering student to overpower a less confident student. One student asserting their will over another student, however, would not seem to be a likely occurrence if the discourse were committed to writing. If analyses of text were carried out in writing, teachers and students could use the frameworks proposed by Janks (2014) and Lewison et al. (2002) to compose reflective responses to the text. The methodical step-by-step frameworks endorsed by Janks (2014) and Lewison et al. (2002) might allow a less confident but more reflective member of the class to construct and argue his or her position in a more calmly reasoned manner than by employing sheer force of will as Beck (2005) suggested could happen with a more confident student.

Beck (2005) suggested that critical literacy, while aimed at empowering the student or reader, might be uncomfortable for students who have grown accustomed to a pattern in which the teacher has most, if not all, of the power. Beck cited studies that suggest this dynamic can be at play particularly with older students such as adult learners.
Beck referenced a study of a critical reading and writing program for adult learners at the university level in which adult students persisted in the belief that the teacher was the authority as to the format and content of the final written assignment and resisted assuming authority for their work. Students from different cultures perceived the student-teacher relationship differently and, in some cultures, the teacher is given the utmost respect and authority. Parents of immigrant children often interpret a school’s attempt to empower student thought and individuality as undermining parental respect and authority (James, 1997).

Beck (2005) pointed out that not all teachers are comfortable with the precepts of critical literacy theory—particularly if they themselves were not exposed to a similar style of discourse in their own schooling. Teachers, particularly newcomers to the profession, face difficulties in implementing critical literacy practices in the classroom. Part of this struggle relates to the absence of a single, widely accepted definition of critical literacy or a template for bringing critical literacy to pedagogical practice. Many novice teachers who are themselves in “survival mode” might be reluctant to shift too much power to their students. Lewison et al. (2002) also suggested that more seasoned and confident teachers may find it easier to fully implement critical literacy precepts fully into their classroom. Despite the above-mentioned warnings and critiques, critical literacy theory has been shown to be effective in a wide array of different settings (Gutiérrez, 2008; Janks, 2014).

**Potential Contributions of the Proposed Study to the Literature**

ELLs face many challenges in American public schools. Many of the disadvantages they encounter can be demonstrated quantitatively with statistics gleaned
from national and student achievement data, including: lower graduation rates, higher dropout rates, and a persistent and pronounced lag in reading achievement compared to native-English speakers. Increasingly, ELLs come to American public schools in which the change in student demographics is much quicker and more pronounced than the change in faculty demographics. As a result, ELL students are more likely to be taught by teachers who are not from the same cultural background or who do not speak the same language. While a considerable number of quantitative studies have been conducted to statistically illustrate the disadvantages ELLs face, there is a relative lack of qualitative studies to illustrate the more human and personal challenges faced by ELL and immigrant students.

More qualitative research is needed to give “voice” to the experiences of ELLs within the American public schools. Many of the issues facing ELLs and their families in school are difficult to convey with numbers and statistics because of the issues being rooted in the social and emotional realm. For example, issues of anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and lack of a personal connection can be illustrated and expressed more effectively, employing qualitative methods. Qualitative methodology allows the subjects of the study to be heard by employing their own words. More research giving voice to ELLs and their families is needed. This study adds to the growing literature on the use and efficacy of implementing critical literacy theory to address social issues and engage students.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter examined the scholarly literature on a number of topics concerning ELLs in American public schools. The literature review was divided into four broad
themes: (a) the challenges faced by ELLs in American public schools, (b) an analysis of the efficacy of teacher-preparation programs for general educators working with ELL populations, (c) an exploration of the use of graphic novels with ELL populations; and (d) the use of critical literacy theory as a potential avenue to explore the unique perceptions and cultural understandings of ELLs.

The first theme to be explored was the challenges faced by ELLs in American public schools. ELLs persistently achieve significantly lower than non-ELLs, particularly on reading assessments (Goldberg, 2008; Lovett et al., 2008). ELL populations in American schools face one of the highest dropout rates of any population in American public schools (Sheng et al., 2011). ELLs are overrepresented in special education classes and lower ability classes (Ortiz et al., 2013; Schroeder et al., 2013). Witkow and Fuligni (2011) and Choi et al. (2013) both discussed an increase in generational tensions between immigrant students and their parents. As a whole, the population of teachers in American schools, whose demographics are increasingly dissimilar to ELLs (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), are often not adequately trained or prepared to meet the challenges of teaching ELLs.

The second broad theme was a discussion of the efficacy of teacher preparation programs for general educators working with ELL populations. While the studies of Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009), Brown et al. (2011), and Doorn and Schumm (2013) demonstrated that pre-service training for future teachers can be successful, other studies suggest a bleaker picture of the efficacy of teacher training programs. Given that teachers in the United States are generally White, middle class, and female (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005) and that teachers are not likely to be adequately trained to meet ELL student
needs, it is important to look for ways to promote closer connections between teachers and ELLs.

The third theme was an exploration of the use of graphic novels with ELL populations. Graphic novels allow struggling readers to capitalize on their ability to interpret and analyze visual data. Graphic novels may be an ideal vehicle through which to challenge teacher and general education students’ preexisting assumptions about and their perceptions of immigrant students.

The fourth theme discussed was the use of critical literacy theory as a potential avenue to explore the unique perceptions and cultural understandings of ELLs. Critical literacy is “an attitude toward texts and discourses that questions the social, political, and economic conditions under which the texts were constructed” (Beck, 2005, p. 362). Lewison et al. (2002) established a framework through which teachers could engage students using critical literacy theory. Their framework consists of four dimensions: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice. Critical literacy theory, therefore, appears to be a valuable theory through which to consider the issues facing ELLs.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the methodology used in this qualitative study, including a description of the research context, study participants, data collection, and the step-by-step procedure used for the collection of data. A description of the process for data analysis and the role of the researcher are also included in this chapter. Where appropriate, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the school and the school district, as well as the participants and their families.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The challenges faced by ELLs in public schools are well documented. Quantitative studies have demonstrated a significant and persistent lag in reading achievement on standardized tests at both the national and state levels (Burt et al., 2003; Echevarria et al., 2006; Lovett et al., 2008). ELLs are also significantly more likely to drop out of high school, fail to graduate, and be mistakenly identified as being in need of special education services (Ortiz et al., 2011; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). While quantitative data is able to convey many of the issues facing ELLs, statistical analysis is not as facile as qualitative analysis in representing the socio-emotional issues confront by ELLs.

Both ELLs and their parents have struggled to adapt to American public schools and have advocated for the supports ELLs need (Choi et al., 2013). ELLs and immigrant students are sometimes confronted with diminished expectations of teachers for ELLs (Brown & Chu, 2012; Choi et al., 2013). Witkow and Fuligni (2011) and Choi et al. (2013) both discussed tensions between immigrant students and their parents as students navigate their way through the American education system and increase their enrollment in secondary settings.

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology used in this qualitative study, including a description of the research context, study participants, data collection, and the step-by-step procedure used for the collection of data. A description
of the process for data analysis is also included in this chapter. Where appropriate, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the school, the school district, the participants, and their families.

The purpose of the study was to assess if the use of graphic novels, coupled with critical literacy theory, can foster deeper understanding by non-ELLs about the issues facing English language learners. Deeper understanding and appreciation of ELLs and their challenges are necessary given the dramatic growth of this population within American public schools.

**Study Methodology**

This study was a qualitative study that employed an inductive analysis of data collected from classroom observations and focus groups. Qualitative research examines individuals’ life experiences and strives to make sense of, and glean meaning and significance from, these experiences. At the heart, this study has a social justice component that aimed to foster a deeper understanding of the unique needs of ELLs and to advocate for more support for this population. Fassinger and Morrow (2013) urged researchers to “understand the importance of framing social justice research with the needs and desires of and benefits to the community under study as the primary aim” (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, p. 74). Furthermore, Fassinger and Morrow suggested that qualitative approaches help to “empower participants by helping them to voice their stories and by honoring their strengths, needs, and values” (Fassinger and Morrow, 2013, p. 75).

Using inductive qualitative methods to systematically collect and analyze data, this study aimed to address the two research questions:
1. What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of reading a graphic novel and using critical literacy theory?

2. How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?

Research Context

The study was conducted over a 4-week period ranging from early September to mid-October 2015. The study took place in a high school of an affluent suburban school district serving approximately 3,600 students. According to the 2013-2014 New York State School Report Card (2014), approximately 28% of the entire student population was characterized as minorities, with 2% of the students identified as ELL, 12% identified as students with disabilities, and 12% characterized as economically disadvantaged. The district breakdown by ethnic grouping was: American Indian, 4%; Black or African American, 6%; Hispanic or Latino, 5%; Asian or Pacific Islander, 13%; White, 72%; and multiracial, 4%. A corresponding demographic breakdown of the approximately 320 faculty members revealed significant discrepancies from the student demographics. The demographic breakdown for faculty was: American Indian, 0%; Black or African American, 1%; Hispanic or Latino, 2%; Asian or Pacific Islander, 1%; White, 95%; and multiracial, 1%.

The district has one high school that serves students in Grades 9 through 12, and at the time of the study, it had a population ranging from 1,100 to 1,200 students between 2010 and 2015. The student demographics of the high school are representative of that of the district as a whole. For the 5 years before the time of this study, no new major housing construction had taken place in the district. As a result, the district had not
experienced a rapid growth in student population that neighboring districts had experienced. The student population has varied little since 2010. For the 2013-2014 school year, the high school had a 96% attendance rate, 1% suspension rate, and 97% of the students graduated within 4 years. The staff had an 8% turnover rate.

Research Participants

The two different parts of the study, each answering a unique research question, had a different set of participants. Part 1 of the study was intended to answer research question 1: *What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non ELLs as a result of reading a graphic novels and using critical literacy theory?*

The participants in Part 1 of the study comprised 11 students. All 11 students received special education services in English, which were delivered by a single teacher, Sally (pseudonym). Sally was a special education teacher with 5 years of teaching experience. Sally served her entire career in the district in which the study took place. Sally has a master’s degree and certifications in special education in the language-arts content area, secondary English, and secondary literacy. Sally has been extensively trained in critical literacy theory. She taught a ninth grade English class for 11 students with special education needs. Sally worked with three teaching assistants, assigned to her class, to provide additional support to Sally’s students. The classroom teaching assistants were all new to Sally’s classroom, although some had previously worked in the district in other positions. Being new to Sally’s class, none of the teaching assistants had any formal training in critical literacy theory. The 11 students all had received special education services in the past, but the placements for two students represented a move to a more restrictive environment than before. All but one of the students were new to
Sally’s classroom. The lone exception was a student who was repeating the class from
the previous school year. The class consisted of seven males and four females. Three
students were African American, one was Hispanic, one was Asian, and six were White.
All of the students were 14 years old at the time of the study. Table 3.1 provides a brief
description of each of the participants for Part 1 of the study.

Table 3.1

*Study Participants – Research Question 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Roll in Class</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliad</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Younger brother of Jerome, second year in district. Also reserved and reluctant to participate during the first days of school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Gregarious and cheerful. Frequently participates. Likes to read, but not out loud in front of teachers or peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Relatively strong reader in class. Likes graphic novels. Student athlete, but not in fall season.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Strongest reader in class. Writing difficulties. Soccer player.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Avid reader of graphic novels. Enjoys art and drawing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Social with peers. Had read several graphic novels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Very quiet. Reluctant participant in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelley</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Relatively quiet student. Enjoys music and school drama productions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Relatively strong writer. Does not like to read aloud in front of peers. Originally from New York City.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part 2 of the study intended to answer research question 2: *How accurately do
graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the
United States?*
There were 12 students in Part 2 of the study. All 12 students were classified as English language learners. The students all received their ELL support from a single teacher, Heather (pseudonym). Heather had 20 years of teaching experience, 16 years were in the district in which the study took place. Heather is a certified ELL teacher who works with students who receive ELL services. In addition to her teaching experience in American public schools, Heather also taught English overseas and volunteered in adult literacy programs. The 12 student participants ranged in age from 14 to 19 years old. The student participants were members of each grade level class from Grades 9 to 12. The students’ level of English proficiency also varied greatly. The ethnic distribution of the 12 students was: one Black student, six Asian students, and five White students. There were 10 male students and two female students. Table 3.2 provides a short description of the participants for Part 2 of the study.

**Research Procedures**

1. The researcher obtained study approval from the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board as well as from the school district in which the study took place.

2. The researcher met with the teachers participating in the study to explain the purpose and structure of the study and to confirm the use of two graphic novels depicting immigration narratives that were read by Sally’s students in her classroom and in several after-school book reading sessions.
Table 3.2

Study Participants – Research Question 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Roll in Class</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>16 years old, 11th grade. Twin brother of Carlo. From Central Europe. Less than one year in ELL class. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marco</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>16 years old, 11th grade. Twin brother of Paul. From Central Europe. Less than one year in ELL class. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomas</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>14 years old, 9th grade. From Eastern Europe. Less than one year in ELL class. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ShanShan</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>14 years old, 9th grade from East Asia. Two years in ELL class. Female.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuan</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>19 years old, 12th grade, from Far East Asia. Started at high school in fall of 2014. Two years in ELL class. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiang</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>15 years old, 10th grade, from Asia. Started at high school in fall of 2014. Had transferred from local school high school in area. Two years in ELL class. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdullah</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>18 years old, 12th grade, from Middle East. Moved to US in fall 2012 as 9th grader. Two years in ELL class. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gene</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>15 years old, 10th grade, from Asia. Started at middle school in district in 2012. Three years in ELL classes. Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>16 years old, 11th grade from Far East Asia. Started at high school in 2013. Two years in ELL classes. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramish</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>15 years old. 10th grade, from Asian Sub Continent. In ELL class two years. Male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maeve</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>15 years old. 10th grade. From Western Europe. Two years in ELL classes. Female.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebram</td>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>17 years old, 11th grade, from Africa. Started at idle school in district in 2011. Three years in ELL classes. Male.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The researcher met with the students in Sally’s classroom and with student volunteers for the after-school book read to explain the purpose and scope of the study. The researcher distributed letters informing the teachers
(Appendix A), the parents of student participants (Appendix B), and the students (Appendix C) of the purpose of the study.

4. The English version of the parent letter (Appendix B) was translated into Chinese (Appendix D), Italian (Appendix E), French (Appendix F), and Spanish (Appendix G).

5. Translated versions of the letters to the parents were sent home to the parents of the student volunteers. The researcher received consent from the teachers and permission from the students’ parents (Appendix H) to participate in the study (Appendices D and E). The consent form (Appendix I) explained participants’ rights to privacy, how collected data was to be stored and secured, and that the participants could have access to the study’s final report and findings. The researcher also obtained the students’ assent to participate in study activities (Appendices J).

6. Prior to initiating the reading of the graphic novels, *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese*, in Sally’s class and in the after-school book read format, the researcher met with the participating teachers and provided a short professional development opportunity and a discussion about critical literacy theory and its tenets.

7. Sally began instruction of the graphic novel with her class. She was left to her discretion to tailor instructions according to the unique needs of her students and the expectations she had established in her classroom. The researcher observed Sally’s class 10 times. The purpose of the observations was to ascertain the degree to which students displayed the four dimensions of
critical literacy theory. Observations were audio recorded and the data was secured. Classroom observations addressed research question 1: *What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of the reexamination of preexisting assumptions through reading a graphic novel using critical literacy theory?*

8. The researcher created field notes that specifically looked for implementation of critical literacy theory (Appendix K).

9. Heather, conducted an after-school book read of the novels *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese*. The students volunteered to participate in the book read format. The student volunteers were identified from Heather’s rosters of ELL students.

10. The researcher conducted two focus groups with five to eight immigrant students classified as English language learners. These focus groups were intended to address research question 2: *How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?* The focus groups were conducted immediately after the close of the school day. The focus groups last approximately 45 minutes and consisted of approximately 10 questions (Appendix L).

Prior to the onset of the study, the researcher conducted a short professional development opportunity to inform the teachers of critical literacy theory. Teachers were provided with the 2002 article by Lewison et al. describing the four dimensions of the theory: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice. The
teachers were encouraged to reference critical literacy theory, to the best of their ability, within the limited time scope of the study and within the context of the teachers’ other responsibilities. The researcher did not expect teachers unfamiliar with the theory to be experts in the theory, but he asked that they would approach the teaching of the novels in a way that would be consistent with their normal instructional practice. Sally was well versed in critical literacy theory, having completed graduate-level courses in the subject. The students, both ELL and non-ELL, were not familiar with critical literacy theory prior to reading the novels. The fact that Heather was not familiar with critical literacy theory or strategies to implement its tenets was not problematic for completion of the study.

Confidentiality. Each study participant was asked to sign an informed consent statement (Appendices H-I) prior to being in the study. The informed consent statements explained the specific measures that were to be undertaken to protect the confidentiality of each participant in the interview and evaluation process. All individuals who signed a consent form were provided a copy for their personal records.

All data collected from interviews, focus groups, and observations, including transcripts, audiotapes, and any supporting documentation, will remain in a locked, secure area in the researcher’s possession for a minimum of 3 years upon the conclusion of the dissertation process.

Description of graphic novels used in the study and selection criteria. Two graphic novels were chosen to be read in this study: *The Arrival*, by Shaun Tan (2007) and *American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang (2007). The books were initially suggested by the researcher and subsequently agreed to by both teacher participants in the study. There are several different graphic novels depicting immigration narratives
including *Escape to Gold Mountain* by David H. T. Wong (2012) and *Vietnamerica: A Family’s Journey* by G. B. Tran (2010). While there are many graphic novels that explore themes of immigration, stereotypes, and prejudice, *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* were selected to be the best fit for the study. A brief description of each book and its merits for inclusion in the study are discussed below.

*The Arrival*, by Shaun Tan (2007) is a unique graphic novel because the story comprises only pictures. There are no words in the book, which made it a promising book to engage low-ability or reluctant readers. Anticipating that many of the study’s participants might have difficulty with reading due to either learning disabilities or language barriers, *The Arrival* presented a unique opportunity. *The Arrival* is 128 pages long and organized into six parts or chapters, but because it has no words, the book can be “read” at different paces. The story depicts the travels and hardships of a nameless male protagonist who flees his homeland, leaving behind a wife and daughter, to seek opportunities in a foreign land. The character’s homeland is troubled, as it is represented by a shadowy monster-like figure with a long, spiked tale. The images in the book are primarily drawn in dark shades of grey and black. There are no bold or primary colors. The images grow darker when the protagonist faces obstacles and hardships. When the character experiences moments of relative happiness, such as receiving a letter from his daughter, the images lighten. The book depicts landscapes, animals, and technology that are unusual to the protagonist and the reader alike. Many of the images have a fantasy-like quality that highlights the strangeness of the environment that the protagonist encounters. The protagonist ultimately navigates his new homeland, finds a job and housing, however humble and meager, and is reunited with his family. The fact that there
are no names, specific nations, or cities allows the story to be generalized, and it also leaves room for a great deal of interpretation by the reader. As such, the book was selected to be the first book the participants would read, to serve as a broad introduction to the themes of immigration and the challenges immigrants face.

The second book, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (2007), is a well-known and award-winning graphic novel that also deals with themes of alienation, acceptance, and “otherness.” Unlike *The Arrival, American Born Chinese* is a more “traditional” graphic novel in that the full color images are accompanied by text-based dialogue. The book tells the stories of three separate, but ultimately related, main characters: The Monkey King, a character based on a traditional Chinese folk story; Jin Wang, a Chinese-American student who moves to a new high school in a predominantly Caucasian suburb; and Danny, an American high school student who plays basketball and desires to fit in. The three main characters all deal with issues of inclusion and acceptance, and they struggle to belong with characters who ostracize them. All three characters, at times, compromise elements of their identity to gain acceptance into a wider culture. The story puts all three characters at odds with their surroundings. Some examples of this are discussed in detail in the data analysis later in Chapter 4. *American Born Chinese* was chosen because both its setting and characters were similar to the context and student population of this study. Much of *American Born Chinese* takes place in an affluent suburban American high school with a predominately Caucasian population. Many of the students in Heather’s classes were Chinese or were from other East-Asian countries, similar to the main characters in *American Born Chinese*. The study participants are described in detail later. One challenge presented by *American
Born Chinese is the multi-narrative format with three intertwining stories. Although the interplay between the images and words may appeal to low-end or reluctant readers, American Born Chinese tells a complicated and sophisticated story that could present challenges to many students. For this reason, the book was selected to be the second book read. Having both books read together also afforded the opportunity for the students to compare and contrast the two works, to explore themes across the books, but also to have access to a book that might better meet their own reading levels and interests.

Data Collection

The study was structured as a qualitative study, incorporating classroom observations and focus groups. Each of the sets of data addressed a different research question, and each had a unique protocol for data collection and analysis. The two different methodologies are discussed separately.

Observations. Students in the classes taught by Sally read the graphic novel as part of their regular classroom instruction. The researcher conducted 10 classroom observations. The purpose of the observations was to collect data that addressed research question 1: What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of the reexamination of preexisting assumptions through reading a graphic novel using critical literacy theory?

Observation notes were collected, secured, transcribed, and coded, looking specifically for implementation of critical literacy theory dimensions. The researcher listened for evidence of the four dimensions and coded the data accordingly. Prior to the observations, the researcher created a field guide in which to take detailed field notes.
(Appendix K). The field guide provided basic information such as date, location, and time of the observation. More importantly the field guide identified the specific activities and research questions observed. Using such a guide focused the observation notes and filtered out information not pertaining directly to the research questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

**Focus groups.** In addition to the observations, two focus groups of ELL participants were conducted. The focus groups were intended to specifically address research question 2: *How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?* The focus groups were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. All audio files created during focus group sessions were logged by date, time, and location. The files were sent to a transcriptionist. All of the files are stored in a password-protected computer that is secured in a locked cabinet on the researcher’s personal property.

**Procedures Used In Data Analysis**

The nature of the qualitative research collected from classroom observations and focus groups generated a great deal of data to store and organize. The researcher stored field notes, files, and audio recordings of the focus groups in the researcher’s personal computer. All files and were backed up to an external hard drive. Digital audio files, which were logged with identifying criteria (date, time, location), were sent to an external transcriptionist. Transcriptions allowed the researcher to analyze the audio data in a written document. The researcher’s computer was password protected and, along with the external hard drive, it is stored in a locked cabinet on the researcher’s personal property.
Data from the data sets were coded using multiple coding strategies including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 2013). Different coding strategies were utilized for the focus groups. Transcripts of the focus groups were coded using open coding to identify distinct concepts and categories. Once the codes were identified, the researcher engaged in axial coding to identify relationships and connections between the open codes. Data collected from classroom observations were initially coded selectively in order to identify the implementation of the four dimensions enumerated by Lewis et al. (2002).

Several methods of data verification can be used in qualitative studies before the findings are submitted as a final work (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2008). Morse et al. (2008) discussed several data verification methods including methodological coherence, appropriate sampling, and concurrent collection and analysis of data. Methodological coherence entails taking steps to ensure that the data collection methods are appropriately matched to the research questions. In the study, the data collected through classroom observations and interviews were aligned to the two research questions. A second verification method was an appropriate sampling. Attempts were made to ensure that the research participants had the appropriate knowledge or insights to address the research topics appropriately. Again, in the study, the researcher endeavored to align appropriate study participants to appropriate research questions. Finally, Morse et al. discussed collecting and analyzing data concurrently. They suggested that a good researcher continually revisits research design, implementation, data collection, and data analysis to confirm that all aspects of the study are aligned and make sense. “Verification strategies help the researcher identify when to continue, stop or modify the research
process in order to achieve reliability and validity and ensure rigor” (Morse et al., 2008, p. 17). Employing the strategies described above helped ensure that the data collected during the study was well aligned to the research questions.

**Summary of Chapter**

The study was a qualitative study, which employed an inductive analysis of the data collected from the classroom observations and the focus groups. Qualitative research examines individuals’ life experiences and strives to make sense of and glean meaning and significance from these experiences. Fassinger and Morrow (2013) suggested that qualitative approaches help to “empower participants by helping them to voice their stories and by honoring their strengths, needs, and values” (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, p. 75).

Chapter 3 provided a description of the research context and the study participants. Methods to protect participant confidentiality and to ensure the security of the obtained data were highlighted. The chapter included processes for data collection from two distinct sets of data: observations and focus groups. Finally, the methods for data analysis and data verification methods were explained. Chapter 4 provides a detailed discussion of the findings of the study that are constructed to address the study’s two research questions and the themes that emerged from an analysis of collected data.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Chapter 4 provides a detailed discussion of the findings of the study constructed to address the study’s two research questions:

1. What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged non-ELLs as a result of reading a graphic novels and using critical literacy theory?

2. How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?

The chapter presents the findings of the study and discusses the themes that emerged from an analysis of the collected data.

Data Analysis and Findings

The study was conducted over a 4-week period beginning in early September and concluding in mid-October 2015. The study consisted of two distinct but interrelated parts, each addressing a different research question. The two parts of the study each had a unique set of participants, a unique methodology for data collection, and a unique methodology for data analysis. The two parts of the study were unified by three main factors: (a) all study participants attended the same suburban high school, (b) the participants were drawn from two unique subgroups of the larger student population, and (c) all participants engaged in the reading of the same two graphic novels: The Arrival by Shaun Tan (2007) and American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang (2007). The two
parts of the research study are discussed separately and then connections between the two are explored.

**Research question 1: results and analysis.** Part one of the study was designed to address the first research question: *What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of reading a graphic novels and using critical literacy theory?*

The 11 student participants for Part 1 of the study were members of a class taught by a special education teacher, Sally, who agreed to participate in the study for two reasons. Sally had extensive training in critical literacy theory in graduate school and had experience writing curricular units, which applied the theory. Secondly, the research study’s focus on the unique needs of immigrant students aligned well with a year-long theme Sally had created that focused on social justice and how people overcome barriers. Because Sally integrated the reading of the two graphic novels into the curriculum of her class, the student participants were not required to do any extra work outside of normal class instruction. While a total of 13 classroom observations were conducted over a four-week period, the first three of these lessons dealt mainly with building background information and introducing the concepts of critical literacy theory. As such, the first three lessons did not focus on the reading of the graphic novels that was expressly referenced in research question 1. The focus of the data analysis centered on the 10 observed lessons in which the students were exploring the graphic novels. The 10 observations ranged from a minimum duration of 15 minutes to a maximum of 48 minutes, with eight of the observations lasting between 35 to 48 minutes.
During all observations, both field notes and audio recordings were taken to ensure accurate representation of classroom conversations and discussions. Audio recordings of the classroom discussions were transcribed using the paid transcription service through www.rev.com. The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and edits were made. Any information identifying the study participants was removed by the researcher. Pseudonyms were assigned to all study participants.

The transcripts and field notes were primarily coded using a selective coding process. Selective coding is useful when the researcher is looking for specific and pre-identified information from a data source (Creswell, 2013). During classroom observations, the researcher listened for specific times when the teacher or students engaged in conversations that illustrated the four dimensions of critical literacy. As described in Chapter 3, the four dimensions of critical literacy are: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice.

In their 2006 article, Researching Critical Literacy: A Critical Study of Analysis of Classroom Discourse, Van Sluys et al. provided prospective researchers with themes, phrases, and questions through which to evaluate if a particular dimension was being discussed. For example, participants may be “disrupting the common place” if either of the following questions are answered in the affirmative: Do participants question “everyday” ways of seeing? Do participants use language and other sign systems to interrogate “how it is”? (Van Sluys et al., 2006, p. 215). When present, student comments were coded using the term “disrupt” for the first dimension, “multiple” for the second dimension, “socio” for the third dimension, and “action” for fourth dimension.
Over the span of 10 lessons, Sally and her students read two graphic novels, *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007) and *American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang (2007). The first five lessons were dedicated to *The Arrival*, the next four to reading *American Born Chinese*, and a final lesson was dedicated to comparing the two works. In those lessons, both Sally and her students engaged in conversations and discussions that were representative of the first dimension of the critical literacy framework of Lewison et al. (2002), disrupting the commonplace. Disrupting the commonplace involves examining and questioning what is believed to be “normal” or “routine” or “the way it is.” In a multicultural society such as the United States, what may be considered normal to one portion of the population may be unfamiliar or wholly different to other segments of the population (Lewison et al., 2002). While many instances of disrupting the commonplace took place over the 10 lessons, three examples are highlighted in which Sally and her students most fully realized the elements of disrupting the commonplace.

**Disrupting the commonplace: questioning previously held assumptions.** As the students read the two graphic novels, there were numerous times when the students began to question their previously held assumptions about immigrants and the immigration experience. Three significant instances of disrupting the commonplace challenged students’ previously held conceptions about immigrants and immigration. The first instance focused on the reasons that immigrants leave their home countries and venture out on an immigration experience. The second example centered on the challenges that immigrants face in assimilating to a new country, language, and culture. The final example explained how natural born citizens in the immigrant’s adopted country react to various immigrant groups. In each of these examples, Sally and her
students challenged previously held conceptions about immigrants and forged new connections and understandings about immigrants and their experiences.

**Why immigrants leave their native land.** The first instance of disrupting the commonplace described students’ previously held assumptions about why immigrants leave their native countries. While reading *The Arrival*, Sally’s students recalled a sequence of images early in the novel depicting troubles in the main character’s homeland. There were several pictures depicting a spiked tail of what the students interpreted to be some sort of a monster or dragon. The images were quite dark, and the tail of the creature cast shadows over the city. The students realized that the tail did not represent an actual monster or creature but something bad that had happened in the main character’s homeland. A group of students engaged in a discussion in which they debated how dire the situation actually was for the main character and his family. They questioned if the problems necessitated that the main character leave immediately or if he had some time to plan and prepare for his departure. The students ultimately came to the conclusion that the immigrant must have had to leave his homeland quickly.

The passage represented a challenge to the students and perhaps too many Americans’ preconceived notions about immigrants. The discussion challenged the students’ thinking or disrupted the commonplace on multiple points. Sally’s students appeared to have held the belief that immigrants willingly leave their home countries in search of a better life or set of circumstances. They did not seem to consider fully the hardships and obstacles immigrants might face in their journeys, or that they may have been reluctant to leave their homes. Secondly, many of Sally’s students believed the notion that immigrants to a new country were fundamentally better off in their new home
than they were in their home country. They appeared to hold the assumption that the benefits of moving to a new nation clearly outweighed the challenges or obstacles presented in the immigration journey. Table 4.1 is an excerpt of the students’ discussion, which was facilitated by one of the classroom teaching assistants, Fran (pseudonym).

Table 4.1

First Illustrative Excerpt of Disrupting the Commonplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line #</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Time Stamp</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Eliad</td>
<td>9/10; 10:43 am</td>
<td>The man doesn’t want to leave but he has to. We thought that was important to show that all immigrants don’t want to leave their homes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/10; 10:43 am</td>
<td>They may have no choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Eliad</td>
<td>9/10; 10:44 am</td>
<td>He’s not excited to go. He needs to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:44 am</td>
<td>That is a scary picture. Do you think he should stay and try to fight whatever it is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/10; 10:45 am</td>
<td>If he is willing to go and leave his wife and daughter behind it must be pretty bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>9/10; 10:45 am</td>
<td>But if it were really bad shouldn’t they all go?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Eliad</td>
<td>9/10; 10:45 am</td>
<td>I don’t think they can all go. He would take them if he could.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/10; 10:46 am</td>
<td>Isn’t it bad to break up the family though?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:46 am</td>
<td>How bad do you think the situation is if the wife and daughter can stay? Are they in real danger or is it just not the best situation? Maybe he’s looking for a better job. For more money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/10; 10:47 am</td>
<td>I think it can’t be that bad if they are staying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>9/10; 10:47 am</td>
<td>But if he could stay you think he would. It must be bad if he’s going.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:48 am</td>
<td>Do you think the artist would draw a big spikey tail unless it was really bad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Eliad</td>
<td>9/10; 10:48 am</td>
<td>I don’t think it’s a war or anything. In this picture they aren’t running away. The city isn’t destroyed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>9/10; 10:49 am</td>
<td>In these pages he’s taking his time to pack carefully. It doesn’t look like he’s trying to escape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/10; 10:49 am</td>
<td>He makes the bird and puts it in his hat as a joke. He wouldn’t do that in a war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:50 am</td>
<td>So what do you think? How much choice does he have in leaving? Is the monster tail bad enough that he has to go or is he choosing to go? Steven?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/10; 10:51 am</td>
<td>I think he has to go. He doesn’t look excited to leave. Maybe not an emergency, but he has to go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:51 am</td>
<td>Mariah?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>9/10; 10:52 am</td>
<td>I don’t know. I keep changing my mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:52 am</td>
<td>I’ll come back to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>9/10; 10:52 am</td>
<td>Okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>John, What do you think?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>I always thought immigrants wanted to go somewhere else to get a better life. Unless it was a war and they had to leave immediately. Some people even choose to stay during wars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>I’m always amazed at people who stay in their homes during hurricanes when they’ve been warned to leave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>9/10; 10:54 am</td>
<td>I thought leaving is something they wanted to do. If they didn’t want to go they’d just stay, right? But maybe he has to go. Maybe he has no choice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The excerpt reveals how the students, with the encouragement of the teaching assistant, started to reconsider some previously held views. In the initial exchange (lines 40 to 52) the students tried to determine what level of threat the spiked tail symbol represented to the city, the main character, and his family. Steven, Mariah, and Eliad debated how dire the situation in the main character’s homeland truly was (lines 42 to 45). Fran asked the questions: “How bad do you think the situation is if the wife and daughter can stay? Are they in real danger or is it just not the best situation?” (line 46). Mariah answered that the man has “time to pack carefully” and that it appeared he was not in flight mode (line 51). After debating the issue further, Fran encouraged the students to take a position, “So what do you think? How much choice does he have in leaving?” (line 53). While Mariah remained undecided, both Stephen and John stated that the main character had no choice but to leave his home (lines 54 to 60). John then expressed a point that revealed that the passage had challenged his previous conception of immigrants’ motives in leaving their homeland. He stated, “I always thought immigrants wanted to go somewhere else to get a better life” (line 60). Prior to reading *The Arrival*, John held the belief that immigrants willingly left their homes in search of a better situation. He had not considered that an immigrant might have been reluctant or unwilling to leave, unless it was under a dire situation that had immediate life and death consequences. John clarified, “I thought leaving is something they wanted to do. If they didn’t want to go, they’d just stay, right?” (line 62). A clarifying follow-up question from Fran may have encouraged John to clarify his thoughts further and to explain exactly how his prior held belief had been challenged, but it is clear that John reconsidered his view on the motives immigrants have in leaving their homes. In doing
so, John had begun to create a new understanding for himself. He may not have gained a full understanding of the immigrant experience, but he challenged his previously held assumptions.

The next example of disrupting the commonplace addressed another portion of the immigrants’ journey: the challenges that immigrants face once they have arrived in their new country. The immigrants’ journey is not complete once travelers cross over the border into a new country. While they may have physically arrived at their destination, the immigrants’ emotional and social journeys are far from completed. The immigrants have entered a new stage in their journey, and they start the process of acculturating or assimilating themselves into the adopted culture. The following example of disrupting the commonplace dealt with this distinct portion of the immigrant’s journey.

**Challenges faced by immigrants.** Sally’s students engaged in another discussion that strongly represented aspects of the dimension, disturbing the commonplace. The students’ discussion centered on a passage from the book *The Arrival* in which the main character, after overcoming some challenging obstacles, secured an apartment for himself. In order to obtain the apartment, the main character had to first navigate his way around a strange city, learn to communicate in a foreign language, and find a job that would pay him the wages he needed to afford an apartment. Sally’s students engaged in a dialogue in which they expressed their opinions about the main character’s apartment and his reaction to securing it. One student, Rosa, liked the apartment and felt the main character must be proud of it, particularly given the challenges he had overcome. Miriam, on the other hand, had a completely different interpretation of the apartment. She thought the apartment was small, dirty, and depressing. She felt that the main
character, rather than feeling pride, would feel frustration. Miriam believed the main character would be disappointed to have come so far, worked so hard, only to obtain a poor quality living space. Table 4.2 is an excerpt of their conversation that provides evidence that the students challenged one another’s preconceptions about immigrants’ experiences settling in a new home.

Several points in their dialogue indicated elements of disrupting the commonplace. While both Rosa and Miriam forged new connections, Rosa seemed to create a new understanding of the immigrant experience while Miriam did not. The discussion was facilitated by one of Sally’s classroom teaching assistants, Alicia (pseudonym). The excerpt revealed a dissonance between the way Rosa and Miriam interpreted what was happening in the passage. Rosa saw the main character’s attainment of the apartment as a major accomplishment and described either the character or his apartment in positive terms: “proud” (line 4); “great” (line 12); “better” (line 24); “safer and better”, “proud” (line 26); “happy and proud” (line 29). Miriam, on the other hand, had a distinctly different interpretation of the apartment and the level of accomplishment it represented for the main character. While Rosa used positive words and phrases to describe the apartment, Miriam used much more negative and critical terms: “dingy” (line 8); depressing (line 11); “dingy and dirty” (line 13); “smaller” (line 18); and she felt the apartment would make her feel “depressed” (line 20).
**Second Illustrative Excerpt of Disrupting the Commonplace**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line #</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Time Stamp</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>The man now has his own apartment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Okay. Why do you think that’s important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>It’s his own. He looks so proud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Why do you think that Rosa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>He has a place of his own and he’s decorating it with letters from his daughter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>His dog is sleeping on his bed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>It looks dirty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Can you tell if he likes the apartment or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>It’s small.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>He’s worked so hard and that’s the apartment he can get? That’s depressing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Really? He looks so happy. After all he’s been through, I think he’d be proud to have found a place. I think it’s great.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>There’s barely any room. It looks dingy and dirty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>But his family can join him now. He’s been so lonely. I don’t think he’d care how big or nice the place was. They can be together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>He does look happy and excited. Why does he keep looking up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>He wants to see if his wife and daughter are coming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>I know I miss my kids if I’m away from them for a weekend. He’s been gone a long time. I think he’s very excited to see his family. And now they have a place to stay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>It looks smaller than his house in the beginning of the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Let’s look back. It’s certainly not much bigger. It may be the same size or smaller. Would that matter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>He went alone to a new place and worked hard and he’s only got the same? It doesn’t look much better. I’d be depressed. Why go through all the trouble?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Well, what is different? Why did he leave his wife and daughter in the first place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>The monster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Is there a monster in his new home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>No. It’s not scary. Before everything is dark and shadows. Now it’s better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>It looks the same to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>I think it’s safer and better for his family. I think he’s proud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>It is brighter, I think. Adam, is the new home brighter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>He looks happy and proud. Think of all he’s been through. Not everyone lives in a fancy house. He likes what he has. People can look down on you if your clothes are older or if you house is small.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>Sometimes living in a city is expensive. Do you know what this makes me think of? Cars. Not everyone can buy a nice new car every few years. I know our cars are older and don’t look great, but we work hard to keep them running as long as we can.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>9/10; 10:53 am</td>
<td>A lot of people work very hard for what they have even if others don’t think it is much.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note that not only did the girls have a difference of opinion but that Rosa tried to encourage Miriam to consider an alternate view. Rosa responded to Miriam’s contention in line 11 that the situation for the main character was “depressing.” Rosa countered, “Really? He looks so happy. After all he’s been through, I think he’d be proud to have found a place. I think it’s great” (line 12). Later, Rosa again challenged Miriam’s interpretations by saying, “He looks happy and proud. Think of all he’s been through. Not everyone lives in a fancy house” (line 29). It is important to note that Rosa was the child of immigrants from Central America. While Rosa never specifically referenced her parents or their experiences in any of the observed discussions, it is highly likely that Rosa’s world view was influenced by her parents and their life experiences.

At several points in the discussion, Alicia asked the group clarifying questions to sharpen their interpretations. Alicia asked the students to consider if the size of the apartment was important (line 19) and if the main character’s conditions was improved or the same as they were in the old country (line 23). Alicia appeared to agree with Rosa’s contention that the apartment represented a success. After Rosa stated that the main character should be proud (line 26), Alicia offered her agreement that the apartment seemed brighter (line 27). Alicia also attempted to explain the challenges of living in a city where costs can be higher than the students may have been used to (line 30).

While Miriam’s comments did not specifically state or reveal her prior held belief, it was apparent that she held a certain view of immigrants and the challenges they face. Many hold the belief that immigrants move to a new country to make a better life for themselves, and that in countries such as the United States, a better life is a likely result. It was once part of American mythology that the United States had streets paved
with gold and economic prosperity, and an improvement in one’s social standing was virtually guaranteed to anyone with a strong work ethic. It appeared as if Miriam subscribed to the myth of American culture and that she was dismayed when the main characters’ actions did not yield more satisfactory results. The passage about the apartment, or Miriam’s interpretation of it, challenged Miriam’s apparent belief that successfully assimilating into a new culture and “making it” was a relatively straightforward and matter-of-fact process. The main character’s apartment provided a dissonance to Miriam’s view that immigrants’ paths to success should be easier. She did not seem to appreciate the complexity and volume of challenges that immigrants might face. Miriam seemed to expect that the main character’s life would be significantly improved as a result of his move to a new country.

Rosa, on the other hand, appeared to recognize that there are a great many challenges immigrants can face on their journeys, and that overcoming each obstacle would likely be a source of pride for the traveler. Rosa was happy for the main character’s success and was able to articulate the pride and satisfaction the main character must have felt in overcoming his obstacles. In doing so, Rosa went beyond making a connection and seemed to be understanding the difficulties an immigrant faces. It is interesting to note that Rosa’s attempt to debate Miriam or to challenge her thinking represented one of the few times, and possibly the sole time, that a student actively confronted a classmate’s views. In all of the other observations, there were no observed examples of students debating one another or pushing one another’s stances or interpretations. In most cases, even when a difference of interpretation existed, the
students appeared satisfied to “agree to disagree.” Rosa, though, tried to persuade Miriam that her interpretation of the passage could have been limited or inaccurate.

Another of Sally’s students, Steven, also appeared to have made a connection with *The Arrival* and its depiction of the challenges immigrants face. When asked which of the two graphic novels better represented the immigration experience, Steven offered the following, “I’d pick *The Arrival*. I liked that the main character got to have his wife and daughter with him in the end. It showed how hard it can be for immigrants” (September 24, 2015).

Like Rosa, Steven did not subscribe to the view that by moving to a new country, one would rapidly reap rewards and see an improvement in one’s status. Both Rosa and Steven seemed to understand that an immigrant’s journey may well be laden with unforeseen obstacles and challenges. Again, Rosa is the child of immigrants. It is interesting that during all of the observed lessons, Rosa never made an overt reference to her parents’ experiences as immigrants or how her own childhood experience might have been impacted by being the child of immigrants. At no point in any of the discussions did Rosa make a direct correlation between her family’s experiences and what was happening in the text. It is, however, a safe assumption that Rosa’s interpretation of the novels was influenced by her understanding of her family’s history. The immigrant experience may be very scary to those striving to make their way in a new land with foreign languages, customs, and beliefs. Steven and Rosa came to understand that the immigration experience is often fraught with obstacles and challenges.

The thoughts of Rosa and Steven dealt with the portion of the immigrant experience in which immigrants must learn about their new homeland and decide how
much they want to assimilate to the norms of their new country. A popular American myth holds that the United States is a “melting pot” in which people from all countries and cultures are welcomed and their unique languages, traditions, and rituals somehow are melded into a new American culture where all are accepted. This conception of the melting pot has been questioned for several reasons as well as the belief that immigrants may wish to hold on to their unique cultural identities. While some Americans may wish that immigrants adopt elements of the United States’ culture, the United States has no laws requiring immigrants to speak an official language or to shed their own cultural identity. The United States could be more accurately described as a pluralistic society (Castles, 1995). Immigrants face emotional challenges in deciding how much to adapt to a new country. They must consider if they will retain what is distinctive of their own culture or decide to adopt the new country’s culture in an attempt to fit in. The members of the home country must also determine how much they will accept and welcome the immigrant. This portion of the immigration experience is explored in the third example of disrupting the commonplace. The final example of disrupting the commonplace details how native-born citizens look at, feel about, and react to newly arrived people to their area.

Views of native-born citizens toward immigrants. The final example of disrupting the commonplace involved the persistent and often insensitive and hurtful stereotypes Americans have about immigrant populations. While reading American Born Chinese, Sally’s students confronted some commonly held stereotypes Americans hold about different cultural groups. Specifically, the students discussed a passage in which the character of Chin-kee brought a take out container with a cat’s head in it to the school
The American high school students in the novel reacted very strongly and negatively to Chin-kee’s choice of food. Sally’s students discussed the stereotype that Chinese people eat cats as well as other persistent stereotypes about other cultures. One student in particular, Terrance, challenged the validity of these stereotypes. Table 4.3 shows the discussion facilitated by another of Sally’s classroom teaching assistants, Debby (pseudonym).

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line #</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Time Stamp</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>9/17; 10:20 am</td>
<td>Chinese people don’t eat cats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>9/17; 10:20 am</td>
<td>They don’t do a lot of stuff Chin-kee does.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>9/17; 10:21 am</td>
<td>Some people think they eat cats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>9/17; 10:21 am</td>
<td>Lots of people think it. It’s like the first thing people think of. It’s not right. Hate it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Debby</td>
<td>9/17; 10:21 am</td>
<td>What do you hate? That it is a stereotype? There are a lot of stereotypes that Chin-kee seems to represent. Why is the cat one so bad for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>9/17; 10:22 am</td>
<td>It’s so common and wrong. It’s like saying all black people eat fried chicken. I hate it when people go along with those things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Debby</td>
<td>9/17; 10:22 am</td>
<td>Are there other stereotypes like that for other people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>9/17; 10:23 am</td>
<td>Irish people drink too much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/17; 10:23 am</td>
<td>Italian’s love spaghetti.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Debby</td>
<td>9/17; 10:24 am</td>
<td>So what bothers you so much about this one? Or is it all of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>9/17; 10:25 am</td>
<td>If everyone thinks something is true, it doesn’t mean it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Debby</td>
<td>9/17; 10:25 am</td>
<td>I know. That can be upsetting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the exchange, Sally’s students identified four different ethnic stereotypes that persist in American society. Terrance initiated the exchange by challenging the validity of the stereotype that Chinese people eat cats (line 14). Terrance’s reaction to the stereotype was strongly visceral. He stated, “It’s not right. Hate it” (line 17). When
asked by Debby to explain why the stereotype was upsetting to him (line 18), Terrance made a connection to another persistent and potentially hurtful stereotype, that African Americans eat fried chicken (line 18). Terrance used the word “hate” to describe how he felt about the stereotype, which indicates his strong conviction that the stereotype is inappropriate.

The students readily identified other stereotypes that persist in American culture. Tom identified the stereotype that Irish people drink too much (line 21), and Steven identified a similar stereotype that Italians eat spaghetti (line 22). Terrance questioned the validity of these assumptions about cultures when he stated, “Those things aren’t right for all people. Not all black people like fried chicken. I don’t know any Chinese people who eat cats” (line 23). Terrance was also disturbed by how easily and persistently people adhere to these stereotypes. He stated, “If everyone thinks something is true, it doesn’t mean it is” (line 25).

The exchange highlights several instances in which Sally’s students were questioning “the way it is.” When Terrance used the phrases, “It’s not right” (line 17) and “Those things aren’t right” (line 23), he appears to be going well beyond simply questioning the veracity or accuracy of the stereotypes. While he fell short of explicitly saying so, one can reasonably interpret Terrance’s statements as a rebuke of unjust and hurtful stereotypes.

The three examples discussed were examples of students challenging both their own individual preconceived notions of immigrants and the immigrant experience as well as those of the larger society. Through their discussions of The Arrival and American Born Chinese, Sally’s students came to forge new connections and understandings about
the challenges faced by immigrants. The students called into question their assumptions
about why immigrants leave their home countries, what happens once they arrive in a
new country, and how native-born citizens react to immigrants. In some cases, the
students were emotionally invested in the discussion and were able to articulate their
thoughts. The comments of Terrance and Rosa, in particular, revealed that they had
moved beyond making connections and had begun to forge new and deeper
understandings of the immigrant experience. The next part of the chapter discusses the
second dimension of critical literacy theory: interrogating multiple viewpoints.

Interrogating multiple viewpoints: a missed opportunity. Critical literacy
theory encourages students and teachers alike to move beyond challenging the
commonplace to forge deeper understandings by considering things from others’
perspectives. Critical literacy theory prompts readers to “imagine standing in the shoes
of others—to understand experience and texts from our own perspectives and the
viewpoints of others, and to consider these various perspectives concurrently” (Van Sluys
et al., 2006, p. 232). Sally’s students delved into interrogating multiple viewpoints
dimension less frequently than they did in the disrupting the commonplace dimension.
The following is an example of a missed opportunity to interrogate multiple viewpoints.

Sally asked her students to find a picture or series of pictures that depicted one of
the characters in the book American Born Chinese. One of Sally’s students, Jerome, was
assigned the character of Chin-Kee. Jerome was a very reserved student who does not
frequently volunteer his thoughts or actively engage in classroom discussions. He
typically avoided speaking in whole-group discussions and would frequently shrug his
shoulders or say “I don’t know” rather than to participate in class. Jerome was also
guarded in his interactions with teachers in non-academic conversations. He would answer questions about the sports he played but little about anything personal such as his family or his past. Jerome, however, engaged in a lengthy discussion with Sally about his assigned character Chin-kee.

Jerome took an immediate and deep interest in the character of Chin-kee who is from China and is visiting his American cousin, Danny. Chin-kee’s character represented many of the stereotypes associated with the Chinese. Amongst other things, Chin-kee wore traditional Chinese robes, has exaggeratedly large buck teeth, and speaks in broken English. During his visit, Chin-kee accompanies Danny to his American school and he proceeds to embarrass Danny. In one passage, for example, Chin-kee brings a takeout container with a cat’s head in it to the school cafeteria. Chin-kee seems oblivious to Danny’s embarrassment.

Sally asked Jerome to discuss Chin-kee and explain the picture he selected to best represent Chin-kee. Jerome picked a scene in which Chin-kee’s behavior in class is particularly outlandish and is deeply embarrassing to Danny. Jerome explained that he picked the scene because of Chin-kee’s over-the-top behavior. It is apparent that Jerome made a strong personal connection with the character. Several times in the discussion Sally encouraged Jerome to reflect on Chin-kee’s behavior and what point the author, Gene Luen Yang (2007), might have been trying to make with his depiction of Chin-kee. In doing so, Sally attempted to encourage Jerome to consider the passage from a different viewpoint than his own. Despite Sally’s best efforts, Jerome’s responses indicated that, while he made a strong personal connection to the character, he may not have fully
understood what Gene Luen Yang was trying to convey. Table 4.4 is an excerpt from Sally and Jerome’s conversation about Chin-kee.

Table 4.4

Illustrative Excerpt of Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line #</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Time Stamp</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:10 am</td>
<td>You related to the Chin-Kee or what’s going on in that part of the book?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:10 am</td>
<td>Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:11 am</td>
<td>Hm? You understood him, or what that feels like? You get that character?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:12 am</td>
<td>Yeah. He’s obnoxious. People stare at him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:12 am</td>
<td>You feel like you’re obnoxious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:13 am</td>
<td>I don’t think you’re obnoxious. Do I give you the impression I think your obnoxious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:13 am</td>
<td>No. Other teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:14 am</td>
<td>Other teachers think you’re obnoxious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:15 am</td>
<td>You stand out? How?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:15 am</td>
<td>Everyone’s watching what I’m doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:15 am</td>
<td>In that picture Chin-Kee really is being out there. That seems like an exaggeration. The writer is really trying to push the point. Why do you think they did that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:16 am</td>
<td>Not sure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:16 am</td>
<td>Do you think Chin-kee is really that annoying or is that how people see him? Or he sees himself?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:16 am</td>
<td>He sees himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:17 am</td>
<td>Do you ever feel that way? That you don’t fit in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:17 am</td>
<td>Not in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>9/17; 10:18 am</td>
<td>You picked the picture because he doesn’t fit in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>9/17; 10:18 am</td>
<td>Yeah. No one understands, and they look at him funny.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this exchange there were several occasions in which Jerome indicated that he had a strong connection with Chin-kee. For example, in lines 60, 66, and 68, Jerome shared that he identified with Chin-kee and how people react to him. Jerome stated that Chin-kee was “obnoxious” (line 60) and that he “stands outs” (line 66). Jerome identified with Chin-kee because “Everyone’s watching what I’m doing” (line 68)—just as they do with Chin-kee. Sally asked five separate questions (lines 57, 59, 61, 65 and 67) to clarify what Jerome was saying about the connection he feels with Chin-kee. Sally
asked Jerome, “You stand out? How?” (line 67). Each of these questions was intended to have Jerome explore the connection he felt with Chin-kee and to explain the reasons for his connectedness.

At least twice in the conversation, Sally asked Jerome questions to consider why the author depicted Chin-kee in such a provocative way. Sally directly questioned Jerome about the author’s intent. She asked, “The writer is really trying to push the point. Why do you think they did that?” (line 69). Unfortunately, Jerome did not or could not answer Sally’s question saying “Not sure” (line 70). Sally tried again to encourage Jerome to consider if there was a deeper meaning in how Chin-kee was represented. She asked, “Do you think Chin-kee is really that annoying or is that how people see him? Or sees himself?” (line 71). Again, Jerome failed to address what Sally was asking him. While he answered her question, “He sees himself” (line 72), it was clear that Jerome was unable or unwilling to consider that the author may have had a specific purpose or intent in depicting Chin-kee using stereotypical images.

Sally attempted to have Jerome see beyond his initial connection with Chin-kee to see that there was something larger going on in the passage. It is likely that Gene Luen Yang’s (2007) depiction of Chin-kee was intended to have readers question how Americans see immigrants, particularly those from China. Even the character’s name, Chin-kee, utilizes a persistent and pejorative term to label the character. Yang intentionally employed many glaring stereotypes: the traditional robes, the buck teeth, the broken English, and eating the cat’s head. Sally tried to have Jerome consider why those particular symbols or stereotypes were used to engage Jerome in a deeper discussion about how Americans might see people of Chinese descent.
Despite Sally’s efforts, Jerome failed to consider the representation of Chin-kee on a deeper level than his own personal connection. Jerome’s inability or reluctance to answer Sally’s questions in lines 69 and 71 may have several causes. Jerome was typically very quiet and reticent about sharing his thoughts. It is likely that Jerome’s own maturity and academic development limited his understanding of the imagery used to depict Chin-kee. Where Sally was trying to get Jerome to see larger societal issues at play, Jerome was rooted in his own personal connection to the character. It might also be that Jerome’s personal connection to Chin-kee was so strong that he did not want to consider that there may be other ways to interpret the passage. When it was clear that Jerome was unable or unwilling to consider other perspectives about the depiction of Chin-kee, Sally reverted to asking questions about Jerome’s personal connection with Chin-kee. She asked, “You picked the picture because he doesn’t fit in?” (line 75).

The discussion can accurately be described as a “missed opportunity” at interrogating multiple viewpoints. Sally encouraged Jerome to consider other meanings behind the passage, and Sally’s questions represented an attempt to get Jerome to “consider alternative ways of seeing, telling, or constructing a given event” (Van Sluys et al., 2006, p. 215). Jerome’s answers, however, indicated that he was rooted in his own personal connection to the character. As such, Jerome might not have forged a new understanding of immigrants or the immigrant experience, but he clearly made a strong connection. Jerome felt that, like Chin-kee, he was stared at, and he did not fit in at school. Jerome’s assertion that he felt like he did not belong is a strong connection to how an immigrant student may feel in an American school. The final example to be discussed highlights the third dimension, focusing on the sociopolitical.
**Focusing on the sociopolitical: ethnic neighborhoods.** The focusing on the sociopolitical dimension encourages students and teachers to “move beyond the personal to explore issues of power and relations among local, common, and natural ways of understanding the world and larger social systems” (Van Sluys et al., 2006, p. 215). During the 10 observations of Sally’s classes, only a handful of examples of the focusing on the sociopolitical dimension were observed. The following passage represents the discussion that most closely aligned with the indicators for the focusing on the sociopolitical dimension.

In the passage, several students discussed different sections of *The Arrival* in which various sections of neighborhoods in the main character’s adopted city are shown. Different portions of the city had distinct characteristics to differentiate them from other portions. In the passages, the main character is exploring the different neighborhoods and appears to be looking for a place to live. A group of Sally’s students engaged in a conversation (Table 4.5) about how immigrants choose to live in neighborhoods with other immigrants from their same culture. In doing so, the students started to explore how some larger sociopolitical factors impact an immigrant’s process of assimilating into their new culture. It is interesting to note that the students may have made stronger points about sociopolitical issues than the adult, Debby, who was facilitating the conversation.
Table 4.5

Illustrative Excerpt of Focusing on the Sociopolitical

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line #</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Time Stamp</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>9/10; 10:15 am</td>
<td>Immigrants sometimes come in groups and live in a part of the city. I grew up in New York City and there’s a big Chinatown and Little Italy. It’s like their own city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Debby</td>
<td>9/10; 10:15 am</td>
<td>I love Chinatown in New York City. It’s like its own little world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>9/10; 10:16 am</td>
<td>Families move to where there are people from the same culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>9/10; 10:16 am</td>
<td>My grandparents live in a neighborhood with lots of people from Russia. They have... there’s a big church where everyone goes. My grandmother goes to that church all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>9/10; 10:16 am</td>
<td>My neighborhood had a lot of people from Cuba and Puerto Rico. There are lots of parades for each different group. There’s always a festival going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Debby</td>
<td>9/10; 10:17 am</td>
<td>Sometimes neighborhoods can be very protective and try to keep strangers out. Almost like gangs. Look at the last pages of the book. You can see people from all different cultures. Do you think they all live in the same city? Same neighborhood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>9/10; 10:17 am</td>
<td>They can in a big city like New York.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the short passage, Terrance made multiple observations about the sociopolitical issues about how people decide where to settle in cultural neighborhoods. He stated, “Immigrants sometimes come in groups and live in a part of the city” (line 18), and he mentioned how different cultural neighborhoods take on their own identity and appear to be in communities unto themselves. Debby’s comment in line 19, “I love Chinatown in New York City” does little to further the conversation or to reinforce what Terrance was talking about. Despite this, the boys continued to discuss the topic and make connections. Debby’s distracting comment did not derail the conversation as Terrance pointed out that people seek out others from their own cultures to live with (line 20). Steven added to Terrance’s comment by saying that similar neighborhoods center around a church (line 21). Terrance added to the discussion by suggesting that people from similar cultures often celebrate their community with parades and festivals. Debby added
to the conversation when she stated that communities can be protective of themselves. She then encouraged the boys to look at the variety of cultures displayed in the book and asked the students to consider if cultural groups live amongst one another or separate themselves into separate communities (line 23). The group, particularly Terrance, seemed to understand why people from similar cultures gravitate to one another and form ethnic or religious communities. The conversation represented a solid start at focusing on the sociopolitical. The conversation may have been strengthened had the boys been encouraged to consider any downsides or negative aspects of ethnic communities or the tensions that can sometimes arise when cultures infringe on one another’s community.

**Summary of results from research question 1.** During the 10 lessons where Sally’s students read the two graphic novels, there were several instances of the first dimension, disrupting the commonplace. There were much fewer instances of both the interrogating multiple viewpoints dimension and the focusing on the sociopolitical dimension. The three examples for the disrupting the commonplace dimension are fairly robust examples of the dimension. The students’ comments and the adults’ questions led to well-developed discussions of the disrupting the commonplace dimension. By contrast, not only were there fewer instances of the interrogating multiple viewpoints or focusing on the sociopolitical dimensions, but the discussions represented forays into the dimensions rather than fully developed explorations. Sally, for example, tried to push Jerome’s thinking in the interrogating multiple viewpoints dimension. Despite her best efforts, Jerome did not take up or engage in her line of questioning. The example for the interrogating multiple viewpoints dimension represented a good start of discussing sociopolitical issues rather than an in-depth and well-developed discourse. Throughout
the 10 lessons, there were no observed instances of the last dimension, *taking action.* Sally’s students were able to at least begin to use the language of critical literacy theory and its dimensions to help them frame their conversations. The students were able to make many connections, and in a few instances, showed real understanding of the issues and challenges facing immigrants. In multiple discussions, the students appeared to be on the precipice of going much farther and deeper. On multiple occasions, a few well-placed questions and an increased willingness of the students to share their thoughts could have easily led to more robust conversations on multiple occasions.

**Research question 2: results and analysis.** Part 2 of the study was designed to address the second research question: *How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?*

The ELLs participating in Part 2 of this study were drawn from multiple class sections of Heather’s case load, as opposed to being a part of single class, as was the case with Sally’s class. Heather’s students read the two graphic novels, *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese,* in a book club format with Heather. The students arranged time during free periods before and after school to talk about the two books with Heather. Before reading the texts, the students were given the broad research question: “How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELL students’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States”?

The students were informed that they would be participating in a future focus group that was to be arranged at a time convenient with the students, their teacher, and the researcher. Two focus groups were arranged 10 school days apart. The first focus group was attended by all eight students and Heather. The focus group was conducted
after the completion of the book *The Arrival*. At the time of the first focus group, the
students had also read approximately half of *American Born Chinese*. A second focus
group was conducted with the same group of participants upon the completion of reading
the book *American Born Chinese*. The participating students were eager to compare the
two books.

The focus groups were audio recorded to ensure accuracy in recording the
answers. Again, transcripts of the focus group were made using the transcription service
www.rev.com. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and edited, and identifying
information was removed by the researcher. The data were analyzed for significant
statements, sentences, quotes, or groups of wording that provided an understanding of the
students’ experiences as immigrants to the United States and as high school students in an
affluent suburban district. Transcripts were analyzed for word and phrase repetition.
Examples of codes used: “making friends,” “school,” “fear of unknown,” “finding
work,” and “unfamiliar culture.” The separate codes were then analyzed together using a
“cutting and sorting” strategy (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 94). Cutting and sorting is a
technique that involves identifying quotes, phrases, or ideas that seem significant and
then sorting them into groups of similar ideas. For example, when a set of four quotes
with the code “unfamiliar culture” were grouped together, the topic of family ran through
all of the quotes. The same was also true for another pile of quotes that were originally
grouped together for the code “school.” Issues of family ran through all of the items in
that group. Through the process of cutting and sorting, three larger themes emerged: (a)
obstacles immigrant students face in educational settings, (b) the struggles families face
in adapting to a new country and culture, and (c) paving the way for others to succeed.
Obstacles faced by immigrants in educational settings. Several, if not all, of Heather’s students talked about their experiences as immigrants in American schools. This focus on school was to be expected for several reasons. While several students shared narratives of the larger immigration experience and how language presented complications for their parents at work, in finding housing, or becoming acculturated to a new country, all students could speak from direct personal knowledge about their experience in American schools. Also, much of the book *American Born Chinese* is set in an American high school, and the students readily identified with many of the events depicted. One passage in *American Born Chinese* that several of the students commented on depicted one of the character’s first days at a new school. The character, Wei Chen, is introduced to the school but several people have trouble pronouncing his name correctly. Several students identified strongly with this passage. ShanShan, a student from East Asia, shared:

The first day of school, no one can say your name. In *American Born Chinese*, kids made fun of him and he was sitting to the cafeteria, he didn’t know anyone. Wei Chen was like me, because on the first day, no one could say correctly my name. (September 28, 2015)

Other of Heather’s students also commented on the difficulty American students have with their names. Maeve, a female student from Western Europe, grew increasingly frustrated with other students’ inability to say her name correctly. Eventually, Maeve gave up trying to correct people. She stated, “I just stopped telling people how to say it right.” (September 17, 2015)
One of Heather’s students was born in Taiwan and had an American father and Taiwanese mother. He held dual citizenship and was given both an American name and a Taiwanese name at birth. When he permanently moved to the United States and began high school, he simply chose to go by his American name as his Taiwanese name was too difficult for American students and teachers to pronounce. Other students, particularly those from Asia, decided to Americanize their names to make them easier to pronounce. Those who kept their traditional names had varying rationales for doing so. One student’s name rhymed with a Chinese word that many Americans recognize and can easily pronounce. Immigrants are often sensitive about issues relating to the proper pronunciation of their name or suggestions to change their names. In many ways a person’s name is part of their identity. Some people feel that Americanizing one’s name is synonymous with sacrificing a large part of your identity. In addition to issues arising from pronunciation of names, several, if not all, of Heather’s students commented on the social isolation they experienced due to their lack of ability to communicate socially in English.

Several students, hailing from different regions of the world, identified with the character of Wei Chen Lun in *American Born Chinese*. In the book, Wei Chen eats alone in the cafeteria and has no friends. One student from Central Europe, Paul, shared the following:

When Wei Chen Lun went the first time to school, he was scared and sad, because he didn’t know nothing about the environment. In my opinion, this is a perfect depiction of my experience. I don’t have a lot of friends, because I didn’t know
the language, the city, and I didn’t know anybody. It was a horrible situation.  
(September 28, 2015)

Paul’s sentiments about the first days of school were echoed by several students. Tomas, another student from Eastern Europe, agreed with Paul’s comments. “Not speaking English. Not having friends. I didn’t know where to go or who to ask. Except for the teachers” (September 28, 2015).

It is interesting that two students from Eastern Europe identified so strongly with the fictional character of Far East Asian descent. Paul not only understood Wei Chen’s experiences, but he referred to the passage depicting Wei Chen’s first day as the “perfect depiction” of his own experiences. Marco, a student from Central Europe, also directly referred to the character of Wei Chen’s situation. He shared, “I haven’t friends and no one wanted to speak with me. I also sat in the cafeteria alone. I was scared to talk. I didn’t know English yet” (September 28, 2015).

That three students from different parts of Europe related so strongly to this character and his experiences in school indicates how universal some of the scenes depicted in *American Born Chinese* are to immigrant students. The students shared feeling isolated due to their inability to communicate socially in English. One student from Egypt relayed that the feelings of social isolation eased considerably as his command of English increased. He stated:

When I went to American school, I had no friends mostly because I didn’t know a word they were saying. Later on, when I learned the language, and I started to speak, I made a few friends and no one really cared that I was Egyptian.  
(September 28, 2015)
The students discussed in the previous passage could relate to issues of social isolation and loneliness in their first days in American school, and they described their experiences in strongly negative terms. One would expect students from Asia to identify readily with Wei Chen. This was the case for Xiang, one of Heather’s students from China. While not specifically referring to Wei Chen by name, Xiang also identified with the scenes depicting Wei Chen’s first days in school. Unlike the experiences of his European classmates, Xiang’s experiences in American public schools had a much harder edge to them. Xiang related both:

When I came to America, school was difficult, because of language and bullying. In my old school, students in the lunch room laughed at me, because I don't know English and I came from China. So I moved to this high school. (September 28, 2015)

Xiang reported being sworn at and yelled at in his previous school. It is of note that Xiang’s experiences differed in their degree of negativity. While his classmates reported feeling isolated, Xiang reported feeling targeted. At his prior school, Xiang was one of only a handful of students of Asian descent, much like Wei Chun’s situation in *American Born Chinese*. When Xiang moved to his new school, he found a much larger immigrant population, particularly immigrants of Asian descent, amongst the student body. This reality made Xiang’s transition to his new school much more comfortable.

Several of Heather’s students strongly related to the passages from *American Born Chinese* depicting student life in American high schools. Her students shared their experiences with issues of their identity, social isolation, and bullying. While the students liked *American Born Chinese* for its depictions of school, they found that *The
Arrival more accurately and more comprehensively conveyed issues of immigration not isolated to schooling. When speaking about American Born Chinese, the students tended to talk about their personal experiences as individuals. When referring to The Arrival, however, their conversations were much more centered on their families and the struggles they faced during their immigration experience. The students frequently referenced The Arrival as they shared their larger immigration experiences, including the reasons their families left their home nations and the obstacles they faced moving to a new country.

Struggles families face in adapting to a new country and culture. The differences in the immigration experiences of Heather’s students were quite varied as the students hailed from many different countries and regions of the world ranging from Western Europe, to the Middle East, and Far East Asia. The reasons the students’ families moved varied from fleeing war to looking for better economic opportunities to moving to rejoin family who had previously moved from their home country. There was also a wide discrepancy in the resources, both financial and emotional, available to their families before and during the process of moving. Some students’ parents moved to accept high-paying professional positions at local hospitals and universities, and their immigration experience was methodically planned. Others had to leave their homes quickly with little time to arrange resources. Despite these differences, the comments from Heather’s students revealed that all families faced obstacles of some kind during their journeys. Even families that moved under the best of conditions faced challenges.

Gene, an upperclassman from Far East Asia shared that his family’s move to the United States was well planned out. Gene, who was born in China, had lived in the United States for 3 years. Gene arrived with his mother after his father had moved to the
United States a year prior. Gene’s father was a guest engineer in an exchange program at a large optics company in the area. When his one-year commitment was completed, the company extended Gene’s father the opportunity to continue his visitation and possibly to permanently transfer him to the United States. Gene’s father extended his stay and had to secure a larger apartment so his family could join him. Gene’s father was also able to research local school districts to find which one he would have Gene attend. These events happened prior to Gene and his mother joining his father. Compared to the narratives of his classmates, Gene’s move was perhaps the most meticulously planned transition. Gene’s family spent considerable time and financial resources to try to make the transition as easy as possible for everyone involved. Their experience, however, was not without challenges. Gene remarked how having his father away for so long was challenging emotionally as Gene felt a loss of a daily connection with his father. Gene shared his experiences in trying to communicate with his father following a group discussion of a passage in *The Arrival* that focuses on the main character’s delight when he receives letters from his daughter. Gene shared:

We tried to Skype every day but the timing was hard because of the time difference. If I missed talking to him because I was tired or still at school, I was sad. I didn’t have to wait weeks though. Sending letters would be really hard.

(September 17, 2015)

Many of Heather’s students’ stories described leaving either immediate or extended family members during the immigration journey. Communication with family members remaining in their home country was another thread that ran throughout the students’ comments. Several of the students made frequent, even annual, trips to visit
relatives in their home countries. Other students never returned home but try to communicate with their remaining family regularly. Heather’s students connected with those portions of *The Arrival* that depicted the characters separating or reuniting with their loved ones. Xiang shared:

*The Arrival* does a better job [at] depicting immigration because if you [move] to another country, you must first learn the country’s language, then go to work, you get money for your family to come here too. It’s harder when the family is not here. (September 28, 2015)

Tao, another student from Eastern Asia, shared sentiments similar to Xiang’s. Tao stated, “*The Arrival* shows every single detail that would occur during immigration such as sadness to say goodbye to your loved ones and the language problem” (September 28, 2015).

While many of Heather’s students commented on the hardships of leaving their families, Paul shared that it was not only family members that immigrants leave behind. Paul’s immigration narrative differed from Gene’s in that his family’s move was much more sudden. Paul’s father picked Paul up at school one day and informed him it would be his last day at the school as the family had to move quickly. Paul related, “I was at this moment of time at school and my father said, ‘Okay, that’s your last day of school here. Say goodbye to all your classmates in this school’” (September 17, 2015). Clearly, this memory left a lasting impact on Paul.

Heather’s students discussed the impact the reasons for their families’ moves, as well as the timing of the moves, had on the families’ level of emotional preparedness. While Gene had a long time to prepare mentally and emotionally for his family’s journey,
other students had experiences much more similar to Paul’s in which they were given very little advanced notice of the move. The students related the feelings of stress and worry that can accompany a particularly sudden move. Gene’s experiences with his family’s methodically planned move varied greatly from that of Abdullah, whose family escaped war in a Middle Eastern country. As Abdullah stated, “They just woke me up and we just left that night. We took nothing with us” (September 17, 2015).

Abdullah’s experience mirrors closely a comment made by Tao who expressed the uncertainty caused by some immigrants’ journeys. Tao shared, “It’s not always planned out where you will work or live. Many families have to figure that out after arriving. Some families can figure that out before they ever leave” (September 17, 2015).

Heather’s students liked that The Arrival conveyed the uncertainty entailed in a move to a new country. The main character in The Arrival is frequently depicted as having trouble communicating in a language he doesn’t understand. He often resorts to drawing pictures or using pantomime to make himself understood. The Arrival also does not depict a singular immigration story. While the story of the main character dominates the narrative, other immigrants’ stories are also told. Tuan, a student from Far East Asia, shared the following.

I liked The Arrival better because it shows the reasons people leave to go to a new country, not just once they’ve arrived. People have to leave for a better life. It's not easy to leave your own country. People come for many reasons. There are stories about a man who came because of a war. There is girl who got away from hard working abuse. (September 28, 2015)
Heather’s students connected strongly with the passages in *The Arrival* in which the main character struggles to make sense of his surroundings. Their comments revealed both the loss of family connection and the sense of uncertainty that immigrant families experience as part of their journeys. While families face many obstacles, they also have supports that can help them cope with stresses of immigration. Immigrants find ways to overcome or mitigate the obstacles they face. Most often, immigrants rely on their families to find the financial and emotional supports they need to help them. The final theme to be discussed is “paving the way for others to succeed.”

**Paving the way for others to succeed.** Heather’s students shared that the psychological and emotional challenges immigrant children face can be eased or mitigated by seeking support from others, most frequently from family members. In some instances, the students were the recipients of other’s support, and in other instances, the students themselves provided support for their family members.

Gene’s well-planned immigration experience was described in some detail earlier in this chapter. As he listened to his classmates share their stories, particularly those in which the students’ journeys were relatively abrupt, he realized his story was fairly unique. Gene reflected that his family had made concerted efforts to minimize the challenges he would face. Upon listening to the immigration narratives of his classmates, Gene realized the lengths his family had taken to make his immigration journey as easy as possible. “My journey was a lot easier than some of my classmates. My family made the move as easy as they could” (September 17, 2005). Gene’s father moved ahead of the rest of family and prepared for their arrival. Gene and his family had the luxury of waiting to move until arrangements had carefully been made.
Several of Heather’s students referenced the immigration experiences of their younger siblings. Universally, the students felt that their younger siblings’ journeys were easier than their own. Ebram, a student from northern Africa, compared his experiences with those of his younger sister. Ebram felt his sister’s experiences in school were much easier than his own. He stated, “I think it was easier for my sister than me. She is three years younger. I started in eighth grade when she was in fifth. She asks me a lot of questions. I didn’t know who to ask” (September 28, 2015).

Maeve agreed with Ebram’s assessment that younger siblings may have advantages. She shared, “My brother is 5 years younger. I think it’s much better for him. He made friends faster than I did. He does sports which helps” (September 28, 2015). A third student, Ramish, also shared that his younger sibling had an easier transition than he did. He shared, “My younger sister is in fifth grade and has been here since she was a baby. That’s way different than me. I came in third grade not speaking any English. I think it was harder for me” (September 28, 2015). The older siblings provided advice and answered questions for their siblings. Much of the support the older siblings provided centered on issues of academics in school and making friends. Heather’s students reported that they felt their younger siblings had less anxiety and difficulty transitioning to school. All of Heather’s students with younger siblings felt their siblings were better prepared than they themselves had been.

The district in which the study took place is relatively small and it is possible, even likely, that younger siblings would have the same teachers as their older siblings. When siblings have the same teachers, it is often the case that families have already forged relationships with school personnel and navigated some of the obstacles presented
by enrolling in and getting accustomed to a new school. The familiarity that results when school personnel and families work together with younger sibling typically benefits the teachers, the parents, and the younger sibling. Unfortunately, the benefits may not extend to the older child, who can be considered to be a “path finder” for the family.

Summary of results from research question 2. Heather’s students reported that portions of both The Arrival and American Born Chinese accurately portrayed their own personal immigrant experiences. They universally agreed that, taken as a whole, The Arrival more accurately portrayed the immigrant experience than did American Born Chinese. While the students strongly identified with the scenes in American Born Chinese, which depicted Wei Chen’s experiences at a public school, they much preferred the entire scope of the narrative presented in The Arrival.

There were several portions of American Born Chinese that were relatable to Heather’s students. The students identified with passages depicting the social isolation and issues of identity faced by one of the main characters, Jin Wang. Several students reported having very similar experiences as when Jin Wang eats lunch by himself in the school cafeteria. Several students also related to the fact that many people in the story mispronounce Jin Wang’s name. They expressed frustration at having to repeatedly correct people as to the proper pronunciation of their names. At least one student ultimately quit trying to correct others’ mistakes. Another of Heather’s students related to those scenes depicting bullying, stating that he had been bullied in his previous school district.

Heather’s students agreed that The Arrival better depicted the entire arc of the immigrant experience from leaving one’s home country to adapting to a new culture.
They also appreciated that *The Arrival* depicted multiple immigrant narratives. The main character in *The Arrival* meets other recent immigrants and their immigration stories are briefly conveyed. Each of the immigrant stories depicted reveals a different reason why each immigrant left their home country. Heather’s students appreciated that multiple immigrant narratives were depicted, because, as they said, each of their own stories was unique in important ways.

In summary, the two graphic novels, or at least portions of them, can be considered to be accurate portrayals of the immigrant experiences of Heather’s students. Three themes emerged: (a) obstacles immigrant students face in educational settings, (b) the struggles families face in adapting to a new country and culture, and (c) paving the way for others to succeed. These themes aligned closely with much of the existing literature about the unique obstacles faced by immigrants, particularly students in American public schools. A detailed discussion and interpretation of these findings, as well connections to the literature, are provided in Chapter 5.

**Summary of Chapter**

Sally’s students read two graphic novels, and both Sally and her classroom teaching assistants facilitated discussions about the novels. In the students’ class discussions, there were several examples of the students disrupting the commonplace, which is the first dimension of the critical literacy theory framework of Lewison et al. (2002). Sally, through her questioning techniques, tried to get a student to consider why the author of *American Born Chinese* portrayed the character of Chin-kee using provocative cultural stereotypes. In doing so, Sally and the student’s discussion can be characterized as being on the precipice of demonstrating the interrogating multiple
viewpoints dimension. Finally, some of Sally’s students also began to achieve elements of third dimension, focusing on the sociopolitical. There were no observed examples of final dimension, taking action. The results revealed that the reading of graphic novels through a lens of critical literacy theory allowed for non-ELLs to forge new connections and understandings about the immigration experience. The use of graphic novels and critical literacy theory offered promising avenue for teachers to engage their students and achieve understanding of other broad topics of social justice such as institutionalized racism, sexism, or increasing disparity in wealth between the rich and the poor. A detailed discussion and interpretation of these findings, as well connections to the literature, are provided in detail in Chapter 5.

The ELL students in Heather’s classes reported that portions of each graphic novel accurately represented their immigration experiences. Coding of the students’ comments revealed three large themes: (a) obstacles immigrant students face in educational settings, (b) the struggles families face in adapting to a new country and culture, and (c) paving the way for others to succeed.

Chapter 5 consists of a discussion of the study’s results and how the results relate to the current academic literature. A brief discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are provided. Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations for school personnel, particularly administrators, teachers, librarians, school counselors, and social workers.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to bring light to a persistent and growing problem in American public schools. There is a fundamental lack of understanding on the part of school personnel and non-ELLs about the unique needs and challenges faced by ELLs and immigrant students in American schools. This lack of understanding is problematic in light of the significant challenges facing ELLs in American schools. It is unlikely, if not impossible, to adequately address a problem without first understanding it.

A critical first step in confronting any complicated issue is to attempt to understand the issue on a fundamental level. An important consideration in meeting the needs of ELLs and immigrant students is to know and understand their unique experiences, challenges, and struggles. This study investigated if having non-ELLs read graphic novels depicting immigration narratives, coupled with the analytical approach promoted by critical literacy theory, offered a promising opportunity non-ELLs to better understand and appreciate the needs of ELLs and immigrant students. Specifically, the study addressed two research questions:

1. What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of reading a graphic novels and using critical literacy theory?

2. How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?
The findings and implications of each of the research questions are addressed individually. Following the discussion of the findings, a brief discussion of the limitations of the study is provided. Finally, the chapter provides recommendations in two parts. First, recommendations for future research are discussed. Second, recommendations for school personnel, particularly administrators, teachers, librarians, school counselors, and social workers, are provided.

**Implications of Findings**

Part one of the study consisted of 11 non-ELL students in a special education classroom reading the graphic novels The Arrival and American Born Chinese using critical literacy theory as a theoretical lens, and it was intended to answer the first research question: *What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of reading a graphic novels and using critical literacy theory?*

The students in Part one of the study not only challenged their own individual preconceived notions of immigrants and the immigrant experience, but they began to question some assumptions and prejudices about immigrants that are propagated by American society at large. Observations of Sally’s classes revealed that Sally’s students were able to at least, partially, meet the criteria of the first three dimensions of the critical literacy framework proposed by Lewison et al. (2002): (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, and (c) focusing on the sociopolitical. As a result of addressing the three dimensions and engaging in critical discussions of the text, Sally’s students forged new connections and understandings about the challenges faced by immigrants. The students were considered to have made a connection when they identified with or related to a character or situation presented in one of the novels. A
connection may indicate that the students had a level of recognition or acknowledgment about passages in the book. The students were considered to have forged a new understanding when they fundamentally reconsidered a previously held belief and arrived at a novel conclusion or conception. To be considered a robust example of a new understanding, the students would ideally have to express their old beliefs and juxtapose it with their new belief.

In the observed lessons there were several examples of Sally’s students disrupting the commonplace by questioning previously held assumptions. Sally’s students not only reexamined their own personally held beliefs, but also questioned some of the assumptions made by society as a whole. An example of Sally’s students calling into question their own personal assumptions occurred during a discussion about why immigrants leave their home countries. A popular American belief is that immigrants come to the United States for a better life and that the lives of immigrants are improved once families have crossed into American borders. After reading *The Arrival* and engaging in critical dialogues, some of Sally’s students began to question if the myth of immigrants seeking a better life and experiencing an improvement in their condition was universally true. Prior to reading the novel, some of Sally’s students had never considered that many immigrants may not view leaving their homelands with a willing sense of adventure and the belief that their lives would invariably be improved. The possibility that some immigrants might be reluctant to leave their homes at all or might avoid leaving unless it were absolutely necessary had not occurred to some of Sally’s students. John stated, “I always thought immigrants wanted to go somewhere else to get a better life. Unless it was a war and they had to leave immediately” (September 10,
John’s comment revealed that he had constructed a new understanding and had begun to question his prior conception of “how it is.” The goal of employing critical literacy theory is for students to “participate in thoughtful exchanges with one another that will lead them to new and richer understandings of first personal, and later social, issues” (Beck, 2005, p. 394). In this case, John started to arrive at new and richer understandings of the immigrant experience.

Sally’s students not only questioned their own individual preconceptions, but in some cases, they started to challenge widely held societal views of immigrants. During a discussion of a passage in the book American Born Chinese, Sally’s students began to challenge common and persistent stereotypes. One student, Terrance, was particularly troubled by a stereotype referenced in the novel that Chinese people eat cats. Terrance stated, “It’s so common and wrong. It’s like saying all black people eat fried chicken. I hate it when people go along with those things” (September 17, 2015). The students discussed other persistent and offensive cultural stereotypes such as the stereotype that Irish people are heavy drinkers. After discussing other preconceived ideas, Terrance reiterated his disdain for the inaccurate and offensive nature of stereotypes. He stated, “Those things aren’t right for all people. Not all black people like fried chicken. I don’t know any Chinese people who eat cats” (September 17, 2015). Unfortunately, Terrance’s comments were made in a small group setting and neither his classmates nor the teaching assistant facilitating the discussion encouraged Terrance to explore and further develop his position. Terrance was beginning to consider that stereotypes are not simply individually held beliefs but are larger societal constructions. Terrance’s thoughts represent the beginning of sociopolitical reflection, and they could have been further
developed with some encouragement to pursue his line of thought more deeply or by answering clarifying questions. As Laman, Jewett, Jennings, Wilson, & Souto-Manning (2012) suggested, “Critical dialogue is complex and rarely accomplished within a single exchange” (Laman et al., 2012, p. 203). Critical dialogue requires the time and opportunity to revisit positions repeatedly and to reexamine and refine understandings. In this example, Terrance may not have arrived at a new understanding because he appeared to already have had, prior to reading the novels, a firm grasp on the inaccuracies inherent in stereotypes. Terrance, however, was very comfortable in expressing his displeasure with the stereotypes which indicated that reading the novels reinforced his previously held convictions.

**Interrogating multiple viewpoints.** During one of the observed lessons a lengthy exchange took place in which Sally tried to encourage one of her students, Jerome, to go beyond a personal connection he had made with the character Chin-kee from *American Born Chinese* to consider if the author of the novel was trying to make a deeper point.

Jerome was drawn to the proactive character of Chin-kee and, on several occasions, made reference to identifying with the fact that the American school students in the book found Chin-kee to be annoying and that Chin-kee “stood out.” Jerome stated that he, too, sometimes felt as if he didn’t fit in at this school or that the other students in his school looked at him differently. During the observed lessons, Jerome was usually very quiet and hesitant to share his thoughts and feelings. He would actively avoid answering questions or speaking to the class as a whole. In his conversation with his teacher about the character of Chin-kee, however, Jerome was relatively verbose and
enthusiastic in sharing his thoughts. Jerome’s uncharacteristic sharing suggested how deeply he connected with the character of Chin-kee.

Interestingly, Gomes and Carter (2010) engaged ninth grade special education students in reading the novel American Born Chinese, and some of the students had a very similar experience as Jerome in that they identified with the character of Chin-kee. As Gomes and Carter shared, “Chin-kee’s narrative has the strongest effect on students and their perceptions of themselves, their culture, and others” (Gomes & Carter, 2010, p. 69). Gomes and Carter further shared that the special education students in their classes did not believe that they fit in with the larger community and “did not feel comfortable sharing how their experiences were similar, or they did not possess the expressive oral language skills to express to communicate such ideas” (Gomes & Carter, 2010, p. 73). It was telling that Jerome and the students in the Gomes and Carter study were drawn to the character of Chin-kee. As Gomes and Carter suggested, the depiction of Chin-kee is so “brutal” and “terrible” and Chin-kee so clearly represents the “outsider” that readers are drawn to the depiction.

Sally focused on Jerome’s connection to Chin-kee in an attempt to get Jerome to look beyond his own personal connection to Chin-kee and to consider if the author was trying to engage the reader in a larger investigation into the nature of stereotypes. Sally tried on numerous occasions to get Jerome to “move beyond the personal to explore issues of power and relations among local, common, and natural ways of understanding the world and larger social systems” (Van Sluys et al., 2006, p. 215). Jerome, however, was “stuck” on his personal identification with Chin-kee. Despite Sally’s prompts, Jerome did not reevaluate an earlier assumption but, rather, held firm to his initial stance.
regarding Chin-kee. As a result, the exchange can be best characterized as a missed opportunity at interrogating multiple viewpoints. Additionally, Jerome’s thoughts about Chin-kee can best be described as a connection rather than a new understanding.

**Focusing on the sociopolitical.** Finally, Sally’s students were able to address the focusing on the sociopolitical dimension. During a discussion of a passage of *The Arrival* some of Sally’s students observed that different portions of the city had unique characteristics. The students analyzed the images of different parts of the city in the novel and related it to different neighborhoods or sections of cities they were familiar with. The students differentiated between residential, commercial, and industrial sections of cities. One of Sally’s students, Terrance, remarked that different immigrant groups often settle in the locations with one another. Terrance stated, “Immigrants sometimes come in groups and live in a part of the city. I grew up in New York City and there’s a big Chinatown and Little Italy. It’s like their own city.” (September 10, 2015). Moments later Terrance added, “Families move to where there are people from the same culture.” (September 10, 2015) These two comments indicate that Terrance had a firm understanding of larger societal issues at play, more than simply where an individual immigrant family chooses to settle. It is unclear, however, if Terrance’s understanding was based on his reading of the text or from his previous experiences. The fact that Terrance engaged in a dialogue with his classmates about the issues shows that graphic novels do encourage students to consider and discuss issues on a societal level.

Results from Part 1 of the study suggest that graphic novels and critical literacy theory offer a promising avenue with which to investigate complicated societal issues such as the challenges immigrants face. Graphic novels and critical literacy theory could
be employed by teachers to explore a wide variety of societal issues. Detailed suggestions for both further research and for school practitioners are provided later in this chapter.

Part 2 of the study consisted of ELLs from Heather’s case load reading the same two novels, *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese*, but with a different intent and focus than what was done in Sally’s class in Part one. Part 2 was intended to answer research question 2: *How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?*

The study revealed that the two graphic novels, when read accurately, reflected aspects of the immigration experience. Three themes emerged: (a) obstacles immigrant students face in educational settings, (b) the struggles families face in adapting to a new country and culture, and (c) paving the way for others to succeed. These themes are related to themes of ELLs that were discussed in the literature.

**Accurate depictions of ELLs’ immigration experiences.** Heather’s students reported that *American Born Chinese* better represented the issues faced by ELLs and immigrant students in school settings. Heather’s students found many connections to those passages in *American Born Chinese* that depicted issues dealing with immigrant students’ sense of identity and instances of social isolation or bullying. Some of Heathers’ students, particularly Paul, Maeve, and ShanShan, remarked how Americans had difficulty with their names. While their comments did not directly address the degree to which the students were bothered by the issue, the fact that all three students identified with the experiences of the character of Wei Chen in *American Born Chinese* and were moved to talk about it in focus groups was telling. None of Heather’s comments
specifically mentioned if it was primarily students or teachers who had the most trouble pronouncing their names, but their frustrations were evident. There are scholarly articles that highlight the strong negative impact that teacher’s mispronunciation of names can have on students. When teachers mispronounce or even Americanize a student’s given name, it can be quite harmful, particularly when done by teachers and other authority figures in school. As Kohli and Solórzano (2012) pointed out:

> Teachers have a responsibility to honor and celebrate these aspects of their students, but that does not always happen. When students experience disrespect to the names their families gave them, it is disrespect to both their family and their culture. These experiences may be subtle, but the cumulative impact of these slights are a damaging form of racism that we must begin to acknowledge and address. (p. 435)

Stanley (2014) agreed with Kohli and Solórzano (2012) that the harm to students can be particularly damaging when it is done, wittingly or unwittingly, by teachers. Stanley stated:

> Whether failing to learn some children’s names comes from laziness, lack of imagination or a sense of linguistic inadequacy, it creates effects, making two categories of people, those whose names the teacher knows (and hence are more likely to feel welcomed) and those whose names the teacher does not. (p. 13)

Heather’s students also shared feelings of social isolation, particularly in their earliest days in American schools, when they did not have a strong command of conversational English. Paul and Ebram shared comments that revealed feelings of
isolation and not knowing where to turn for help. The feelings of social isolation can be particularly troublesome for Asian students. Choi and Dancy (2009) shared that many Asian adolescents face social isolation from White adolescents in schools due mainly to language and cultural differences. Several studies, including Juvonen et al. (2006), Georgiades et al. (2013), and Malsbary (2014), explored the relationship between students’ cultural backgrounds and their reports of social isolation, loneliness, and bullying in public schools. Georgiades et al. (2013) and Malsbary (2014) agreed that students’ reports of isolation and loneliness diminish as students gain a command of English and are able to communicate socially with their grade-level peers. Indeed, Ebram shared that his feelings of social isolation diminished significantly once he had a better command of English. Ebram shared, “Later on, when I learned the language, and I started to speak, I made a few friends and no one really cared that I was Egyptian” (September 28, 2015).

Unfortunately, one of Heather’s students, Xiang, experienced not only isolation but direct bullying. Xiang’s poor treatment at a prior school led Xiang’s family to make the decision to transfer to the school in which the study took place. Again, the experiences of Xiang are not dissimilar to what is present in the literature. There is not a clear consensus as to whether students of Asian descent face more incidents of bullying and other negative behaviors than do students of other cultural backgrounds. The issue is further complicated when attempts are made to differentiate between types of bullying, such the difference between name calling and isolating behavior (Hong et al. 2014). However, Koo et al. (2009) and Peguero (2009) suggested that Asian American students report incidents of bullying and isolation more frequently and that immigrant students
from Asian backgrounds face more incidents of anti-social behavior than do students of Asian descent who were born within the United States.

To this point, participant comments were directly related to how ELLs and immigrant students feel about their experiences in American schools. The comments made by Heather’s students, and the fact that those comments were strongly connected to the literature clearly indicates the need for school personnel to be aware of the unique needs and challenges of their ELLs and immigrant students.

While the issues revealed through reading *American Born Chinese* relate directly to ELLs and immigrants’ experiences in schools, Heathers’ students shared their belief that the novel *The Arrival* better represented issues of immigration on a larger scale. *The Arrival* deals with larger familial issues such as families’ reasons for leaving their home country and the difficulties faced when encountering a new culture. Larger familial issues, such as the lack of connectedness to the family unit and fear of the unknown while attempting to adjust to a new culture, were repeated often by Heather’s students. These themes did not have a direct correlation to the literature about ELLs and the immigrant children previously discussed. These themes were grander in scope than issues directly impacting ELLs’ or immigrant students’ performance in or feelings toward school.

Heather’s students did engage in conversations highlighting that not all immigration experiences are the same and that families bring different resources and supports to bear. For example, Gene’s immigration journey, was meticulously planned and benefited from access to considerable financial and emotional support networks. Gene’s experience varied greatly from Abdullah’s experience in which his family fled from a war in the middle of the night. Gene and Abdullah’s comments, however, were not primarily
focused on school settings. This discrepancy in resources and supports, and the impact the differences have on immigrants’ ability to adopt to a new culture were tangentially connected to some of the literature discussed in Chapter 2. Echevarria et al. (2006) and Burt et al. (2003) agreed that the term “ELL” does not denote a single group with a single set of circumstances and experiences. Quite the opposite, the term ELL represents a widely diverse population with drastically different socio-economic support systems in place. A tangential connection can be made between the issues discussed by Heather’s students and Singh’s (2013) assertion that school-level SES and student-level SES are important predictors of student performance. Heather’s students, however, did not explicitly make this connection in their comments.

Heather’s students directly discussed the supports provided by older siblings to younger siblings, particularly in terms of transitioning to school and making friends. Ebram, Maeve, and Ramish all commented on how their younger siblings had a relatively easier time transitioning to schools than they. Both Cho and Sung-Woo (2005) and Choi and Dancy (2009) stated that family support, both in terms of financial resources and emotional support, had a great impact on students’ academic success and their socio-emotional well-being. Choi and Dancy (2009) found that familial support, particularly on the part of parents, can help alleviate and mitigate the “acculturative stress” that adolescent immigrant students feel at school. Both Crosnoe and Turley (2011) and Choi et al. (2013) discussed the importance of familial support on the educational attainment of ELL students. Parents’ ability to leverage their own educational and financial resources impacts their ability to advocate for their children and provide them with support. It is important for school personnel to understand this wide range of experiences to avoid
painting their ELLs’ and immigrant students’ experiences with “wide brush strokes.” A more detailed and nuanced understanding of the unique needs of particular families is needed.

**Limitations**

The study had three limitations, including the research context, the number of students participating in the study, and the timing in which the study took place. First, the study took place in a single high school in an affluent suburban community whose unique student demographic profile, with ELLs comprising only 2% of the student population and Asian-Americans representing the largest percentage of ELLs, is not representative of the student demographics seen in most school districts. Also, student participants totaled 23 students, 11 non-ELLs and 12 ELLs. As such, some of the findings may not be applicable to schools with larger and more diverse student populations. Lastly, the timing of the study, at the beginning of a new school year, had an impact on Sally’s students’ class discussions. The study was conducted at the beginning of a school year when a majority of Sally’s students were transitioning, not only into Sally’s classroom but to the high school as a whole. Sally and her students had not fully established a working rapport conducive to sharing personal insights. Because qualitative research examines individuals’ life experiences and strives to make sense these experiences, it is important that the participants are willing to share their thoughts and experiences openly. Sally’s students were reserved in the first two or three classroom observations. They, however, became much more comfortable with Sally and one another as the study progressed, and they were openly sharing opinions and thoughts from classroom to fourth observation onward.
**Recommendations for Further Research**

Recommendations are offered in two parts. First, recommendations for future research are provided. Second, recommendations for school personnel, particularly administrators, teachers, librarians, school counselors, and social workers, are discussed.

The study intended to provide a unique contribution to the existing literature about ELLs and the issues they face in American public schools. Both the research context and methodology of this study were unique. This study took place in an affluent suburban district with a fairly unique demographic profile as only 2% of the student population was identified as ELLs, and the majority of ELLs were of Asian descent. The vast majority of the research on ELLs in American public schools focuses on urban, high-poverty districts where most of the ELL population comprises students of Hispanic lineage from Central or South America. Further research should be conducted around the challenges ELLs face across a wide array of settings in American public schools. Doing so will give practitioners a more complete understanding of the needs facing ELLs across the socio-economic strata. As this study revealed, ELLs in affluent suburban districts also face considerable challenges. Schools with smaller ELL populations may be slower to react to the needs of ELLs and the teachers who work with them. While ELL populations in affluent suburban districts may be relatively low, when compared to urban districts, it is highly likely that ELL populations across all socio-economic settings will increase as the United States continues to experience unprecedented demographic shifts.

The methodology employed in this study was also a unique contribution to the existing literature. Having both ELLs and non-ELLs read graphic novels using critical literacy theory was a unique approach. Further research could be done to compare how
two different populations react to the same text. The two populations could be brought together to engage in critical conversations about their findings and interpretations. In this study, having the non-ELLs in Sally’s classes engage with the ELLs in Heather’s classes might have yielded new connections and understandings from both groups.

While the study offered a promising avenue to investigate the unique needs of ELLs and immigrant students, the study did not address many issues discussed in the literature review provided in Chapter 2. Further study on teachers’ reduced expectations for ELLs, which were identified by Brown and Chu (2012) and Choi et al. (2013), or the increase in inter-generational arguments, which were discussed in Witkow and Fuligni (2011), would be warranted. Additional qualitative research should be undertaken about school personnel misidentifying and inappropriately placing ELL students (Callahan et al., 2009; Ortiz et al., 2011) and the longterm impact of placing ELL students in lower ability settings (Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

Qualitative research can help convey the thoughts and feelings of English language learners and their families using their own unique voice. Researchers should seek out the experiences, opinions, and suggestions of English language learners and their parents. School personnel and researchers, alike, should seek to listen more to what English language learners report they need. Much of the existing literature on the challenges facing English language learners is written from the perspective of schools and school personnel. Much has been written about the challenges teachers face in meeting the needs of English language learners. More research needs to be undertaken that conveys the perspectives of ELLs as they engage with school structures that have not been designed to meet their needs. Many of the issues facing ELL students and their
families while engaging with public schools, particularly socio-emotional issues, are
difficult to convey with numbers and statistics. Issues, such as student anxiety, feelings
of inadequacy, and lack of a personal connection, may be more effectively conveyed by
employing qualitative methods. School personnel should seek to hear the authentic
voices of their English language learners.

Finally, further research should be conducted into the efficacy of reading graphic
novels and employing critical literacy theory. Graphic novels offer an excellent avenue
to engage students in social justice topics. It would be wise to consider the use of critical
literacy theory in any class in which themes of social justice are being discussed. While
studies have suggested the benefits of graphic novels (Boatright, 2010; Christensen,
2006), more research related to the use of graphic novels in social studies classes should
be conducted. Critical literacy theory lends itself to the investigation of social justice
topics such as racism, prejudice, stereotypes, poverty, and the unequal distribution of
wealth. Critical literacy theory is highly engaging to students and puts a premium on
developing students’ critical thinking and reasoning skills, and it promotes students’
development as independent thinkers. As such, critical literacy theory is a framework
that can be applied across multiple settings and curricular areas.

**Recommendations for School Personnel**

The study has several implications for school personnel. Administrators must
ensure that their school building has an inviting and welcoming environment for all
parents, guardians, and students. This begins when parents first enroll their students into
a school. Information about any special adult programming for parents, such as
curriculum nights or monthly parenting forums, should be provided during the enrollment
process. Written information about the school and school programs should be translated into the parents’ native language. Administrators must understand that communicating with parents of immigrant and refugee students requires different strategies and resources than those needed to communicate with native English-speaking parents. As Tarasawa and Waggoner (2015) pointed out:

> While research continually finds that ELL parents, generally speaking, place a high value on their children’s education, many immigrant, refugee, and ELL parents experience their relationships with their children’s schools very differently from mainstream English speaking families. Schools often struggle to meet the unique instructional and linguistic needs of these students, and communities with large ELL populations face the additional challenge of communicating with parents, who may have limited fluency in English and comparatively low levels of literacy in their native languages. (p. 129)

In addition to promoting strong relationships and communication with English language learners and their parents, school administrators must educate themselves and their staff members about the unique needs of ELLs and immigrant students and create school climates that embrace and promote the strengths ELLs bring with them to school. While all educators in public schools need a broad base of knowledge about English language learners, it is important to move beyond generalizations to provide professional development opportunities which are targeted, job imbedded, and sustained.

Professional development opportunities for administrators and other school personnel should be conducted in a series of sessions, with time between each session to process and reflect on what was previously discussed. Single session workshops tend to
be less effective than sustained workshops. Administrators and teachers benefit from being able to revisit topics over time.

To begin to address the needs of English language learners, educators must first understand issues on a broad scale. Professional development may be conducted using a study group model. The content of sessions should be organized using a “funnel” structure, beginning with broad topics and trends on a national level, and becoming increasingly more targeted, detailed, and aligned to the unique realities of a given educational context. Starting the conversation with the broadest terms will provide a context for what is happening in a particular school setting.

Educators must understand that the current demographic shifts taking place in the United States represent the most significant demographic shift the country has ever experienced. While immigrants are coming to the United States in unprecedented numbers, the impact of the shift is not felt universally across the nation as some regions experience a greater influx of immigrants than others. Some regions, particularly border states in the American South and areas with larger urban centers, are experiencing rapid growth of immigrant populations while other regions such the Rocky Mountain area and large portions of the Midwest are experiencing relatively little change. No region, however, is immune to immigration trends and those areas with comparatively low increases in immigrant populations can learn from the experiences of areas experiencing more rapid growth.

After investigating national trends, the focus should turn to demographic shifts experienced at the state, county, and local levels. Lastly, the demographic data for a particular school district and then for specific schools should be provided and analyzed.
Student populations can vary greatly within the same city within a few miles or even from building to building within the same school district. Administrators and teachers need to be aware of the number of immigrant and ELL students in their schools, the nations of the immigrant students, what languages are spoken by students, and the level of prior formal education attained by students. In addition to this demographic data, administrators and teachers must be aware of the unique challenges faced by immigrant students and ELLs.

Educators must understand that “English language learner” is a label that encapsulates a broad range of learners, and that the label is neither detailed nor prescriptive (Burt et al., 2003; Echevarria et al., 2006). The label ELL has been applied equally to students who are highly literate in their native language and have the emotional, financial, and educational supports of their families and communities, and to students who are refugees and may have had their formal education interrupted for years at a time.

Other broad topics to be highlighted should include teachers’ reduced expectations for ELLs, which were identified by Brown and Chu (2012) and Choi et al. (2013), or the increase in inter-generational arguments, which were discussed in Witkow and Fuligni (2011). Administrators and teachers should be informed that English language learners are often misidentified as requiring special education supports (Callahan et al., 2009; Ortiz et al., 2011) and that there are long term implications of placing ELL students in lower ability settings (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). English language learners and their families are often not familiar with, and therefore will not advocate to be placed in, the types of rigorous coursework required for college
admissions. Administrators and teachers must also be made aware of the harmful impact of not learning to pronounce their students’ names correctly (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Stanley, 2014). Finally, administrators and teachers must be trained or coached on the fact that an English language learner’s ability to speak effectively in social contexts may mask their skills to engage in academic discourse in reading and writing.

Once broad topics have been explored, the focus should turn to the needs of English language learners in a particular school building or classroom setting. The needs of English language learners in primary school and the teachers’ strategies to address those needs will look different from those of students in secondary schools. Guskey and Yoon (2009) suggested that effective professional development sets targeted goals based on student achievement data. For example, a session focusing on supporting English language learners’ reading development may include a goal that session participants will learn strategies and methods to help improve student performance on a particular reading assessment. In order to set realistic and measurable student achievement goals, school personnel must have an accurate understanding of their English language learners’ current level of performance as measured on research based assessments.

School building leaders should strongly consider bringing in outside experts to support staff in their learning. Experts from local universities, community organizations, or other school districts may be identified. Employing outside experts is a strategy that is supported by both Mullen and Hutinger (2008) Guskey and Yoon (2009).

While building-level administrators must take an active leadership role in facilitating community relationship building professional development opportunities, it is also important for school leaders to delegate responsibility to teachers and support staff where appropriate. Delegating identified tasks to school staff, such as leading a
particular professional development session or monitoring student achievement, helps to build organizational capacity and increases the likelihood that discussions about student achievement will take place outside of organized professional development sessions (Mullen and Huntiger, 2008).

The use of a study group structure is another strategy that is recommended. “As a means of job-embedded professional development that infuses teacher learning into daily practice, study groups allow teachers to work together to evaluate their own learning and that of students” (Mullen and Huntiger, 2008, p. 283). Study groups also provide for distributed leadership by making teachers accountable for engaging in an active discourse about student performance. It is vitally important to provide teachers with time to implement what they have learned as well as to provide follow up opportunities for questions and clarifications. The study group structure provides these opportunities (Mullen and Huntiger, 2008).

In addition to professional development, administrators must promote a culture that supports teachers in their efforts to meet the needs of ELLs. Administrators must advocate for or allocate financial resources to staff programs supporting ELLs adequately, to provide related job-embedded training, and provide adequate planning time for ELL teachers and their general education colleagues. A co-teaching model in which an ELL teacher provides support to ELL students within a general education class taught by a content-area teacher is a promising delivery model.

Professional development opportunities should include training on critical literacy theory and the use of graphic novels. As previously discussed, reading graphic novels using critical literacy theory as an analytical lens yields multiple advantages. Utilizing
graphic novels and critical literacy theory helps students develop critical thinking, improve literacy skills, and understand social justice. Many graphic novels promote topics of social justice, and they help students investigate important societal issues such as persecution, intolerance, and discrimination.

Administrators should encourage teachers to create a classroom environment that encourages what Malsbary (2014) referred to as a “transcultural” classroom experience. Malsbary suggested that students should be learning about, celebrating, and honoring all cultures and not simply learning English. “Immigrant students were agentive transcultural navigators whose practices broach new understandings of social life and learning, and present a pedagogy of possibility” (Malsbary, 2014, p. 1312). ELL students should be valued for their unique cultural understandings and expertise. School personnel should engage English language learners in welcoming interview sessions. The first of these sessions would be intended to provide broad biographical information as well as an insight into the student’s experiential history (Malsbary, 2014). Subsequent interviews might focus on the student’s transition to school culture and to specific academic challenges. Interviews would provide teachers and staff with valuable insights into their English language learners as individuals.

Teachers must advocate for professional development and training to help them better meet the needs of all of their students. Teachers must arm themselves with the most accurate demographic and academic information about their students as possible. If teachers are to address the needs of the learners in their classrooms, they must first understand their students as individuals with unique narratives and academic strengths and weaknesses. Teachers should have access to accurate and current information about
their students’ performance on formative and summative assessments of key academic skills.

In addition to the specific needs of individual learners, teachers should be aware of the general challenges English language learners face across educational settings. Brown and Chu (2012) and Choi et al. (2013), for example, found that immigrant students and their families perceive that teachers have diminished academic expectations for immigrant students. These studies also found that immigrant students reported feeling isolated from the school culture. Teachers should also be aware that it is typical for immigrant students to face inter-generational disagreements and frustrations with their parents (Choi et al., 2013; Witkow & Fuligni, 2011).

Teachers, particularly English and social studies teachers, should provide their students with the opportunity to read graphic novels. Teachers should seek out professional training on critical literacy theory and its tenets. Once trained, teachers should employ the strategies within critical literacy theory to encourage their students to critically analyze texts, to consider authors’ intent and purpose in writing books and to question issues of social justice. The use of critical literacy theory creates an environment in which teachers facilitate inquiries that question how things are done. Teachers, rather than being transmitters of a set of learning, become change agents who encourage students to think critically and deeply for themselves (Shor, 1999).

In many school settings, particularly in middle schools where it is common for teachers to work together on interdisciplinary teams, English and social studies teachers design interdisciplinary thematic units. A recommendation would be for English Language Arts (ELA), social studies, and certified ESL teachers to design an inquiry
based interdisciplinary thematic unit to investigate the impact of immigration not only on individuals but on society as a whole. An interdisciplinary investigation of this kind would offer a powerful opportunity to highlight the unique experiences and authoritative voices of recent immigrant students. The shared stories of immigrant students would serve as primary sources to help contextualize the larger discussions.

Students and teachers in ELA classes could read graphic novels such as *The Arrival, American Born Chinese*, or one of the many other graphic novels which directly explore immigration narratives. Broader topics such as discrimination, persecution, or individuals forging a unique cultural identity in a pluralistic society could also be explored.

Students and teachers in most American history classes specifically address the demographic shift experienced by the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. During this time period a dramatic increase in immigration from Eastern Europe accompanied a rapid societal shift which helped transform the United States from a traditionally rural and agrarian society to an increasingly urban and industrialized society. Again, the United States is currently experiencing the most dramatic demographic shift in its history.

Having a certified ESL teacher help design and teach the interdisciplinary would provide both students and teachers access to a valuable resource with specialized content knowledge and skills. The ESL teacher would help ELA and social studies teachers: (a) identify appropriate learning targets for English language learners; (b) research, select, and modify curricular materials and resources to meet the learning needs of diverse learners; (c) provide direct instructional support to both ELLs and non-ELLs alike.
School librarians should seek to increase the number of graphic novel titles in their collections. There is a great deal in the literature about the benefits of using graphic novels. Graphic novels are often high-interest books that engage struggling readers, explore subjects of social justice, and can encourage students to question and reconsider their own perceptions about culture (Brozo & Mayville, 2012; Chun, 2009; Schwarz, 2007). Gavigan (2012) suggested that graphic novels encourage the use of multiple literacies, and can increase both reading comprehension and reading motivation. Christensen (2006) and Draper and Reidel (2011) both advocated for the use of graphic novels in social studies classrooms because the themes of conflict, cultural exchange, and discrimination are often explored in graphic novels.

School counselors and social workers must also be aware of and prepared to address the unique needs of ELLs. Counselors and social workers must understand the unique family dynamics that can play out in ELL households that might not be present in the households of native English speakers. It is common for counselors and social workers to have a different relationship with families than the teachers. Teachers typically work with a student for a single year while the student is in a particular grade level. The focus of the teacher-student or teacher-parent relationship is typically academically based. Counselors and social workers, on the other hand, can work with a student’s extended family for multiple years while the student is in a particular school building. The counselor-student and counselor-family relationship is fundamentally different as the relationship will typically involve helping families negotiate support services both inside and outside of the school district.
Alameda-Lawson, Lawson, and Lawson (2010) encouraged counselors and social workers to engage immigrant families not only to provide school support to families, but also to leverage the unique skills and resources that could be at the families’ disposal. More established immigrant families, for example, can provide emotional or mentoring support, informal translation services, or they could simply answer questions for families who have more recently entered a school district. Seddon (2015) advocated that school counselors and social workers seek specialized training to increase their “multicultural competence.” As Seddon suggested, school counselors will:

. . . inevitably face situations when culturally sensitive interventions are necessary in working with parents and students. One aspect of multicultural competence involves developing an understanding of the cultural background of the students and families school counselors serve. When striving to support ELL students, school counselors must work to understand the potential language and cultural barriers that may impact both students and their families. (p. 10)

While the challenges and obstacles facing ELLs in American public schools are numerous, school personnel can take steps to better address the needs of ELLs, immigrant students, and their families. The recommendations discussed offer practical advice for school personnel to begin to address the needs of ELL students and their families.

Summary

The United States has experienced an unprecedented demographic shift in which record numbers of immigrants are entering the country. The American public education system has been slow to respond to this shift. Immigrant students and English language
learners who attend public schools in the United States face a unique set of challenges in which school personnel are ill equipped to respond. The first step in addressing any large issue is to understand the dynamics at play and how the individuals are impacted. This study was conducted in hopes of having educators better understand the immigrant experience, particularly as it applies to immigrants and ELLs in American public schools. The study investigated if having students read graphic novels, while using critical literacy theory as an analytical lens, helped non-ELL students foster a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience. The study employed qualitative methods to gather and analyze data from classroom observations and focus groups of students who had read two graphic novels depicting unique aspects of the immigration experience. *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007) depicts the immigration experience broadly, while portions of *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (2007) depict scenes that take place in American public schools.

The study demonstrated that reading the graphic novels and employing critical literacy theory provided a promising approach to help non-ELL students develop new connections and understandings about the issues faced by ELLs and immigrant children during their immigration narratives and their transition into the American public school system. The study also offered recommendations for further research and for school personnel working with English language learners and immigrant students.

Further research is recommended in areas concerning the unique experiences of English language learners in American public schools; specifically teachers’ diminished expectations for ELLs, the misidentification of ELLs as special education students, and the impact of placing of ELLs into support services that are not aligned with their
educational needs. Further scholarly research into the unique needs of English language learners and immigrant students should be conducted utilizing qualitative research methods. It is vitally important to hear the human voice of English language learners and their families.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that school personnel, including administrators, teachers, and school counselors, take steps to make their schools more welcoming and accommodating to English language learners and their families. English language learners interact with schools differently than native English speakers do. Further recommendations suggest school building leaders provide teachers with targeted, job embedded, and sustained professional development about the unique needs of English language learners. Additional professional development about the efficacy of reading graphic novels coupled with critical literary theory should be provided. Any professional development opportunity should include specific, attainable, and measurable goals about student academic performance or socio-emotional well-being.

Ultimately, school personnel should strive to understand their English language learners on a personal level, to know and appreciate their students’ unique immigration narratives and experiences. Hearing the voices of their English language learners will encourage educators to engage students in a more holistic manner.
References


NYCRR Part 154, Equal Educational Opportunities for English Language Learners, (2014). New York State Education Department.


Appendix A
Letter to Teacher Participants

Dear ________________,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College conducting a study on the challenges English Language Learners (ELL) and immigrant students face in American public schools. I would like to have students read two graphic novels, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, and *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan. The books depict the experiences of an American high school student of Chinese ancestry and of immigrants in general. I then hope to conduct classroom observations and focus groups to see if reading the graphic novel influenced student perceptions about the issues faced by immigrant children in American public schools.

I am requesting your participation which will involve: participating in a short professional development session about critical literacy theory; assisting me in identifying and recruiting students to participate in the study; and allowing me to observe class lessons in which the graphic novels are read.

To ensure the accuracy of classroom observations and focus groups, I will audio record sessions with a digital voice recorder. The interviews will be transcribed, analyzed, and coded. For the purposes of protecting your privacy, recordings and transcriptions will be secured in my personal computer which is password protected and will be locked cabinet on my personal property. The results of this research may be presented in conferences and publications in education journals. Your identity, as well as the identity of the school district and other participants of this study will remain anonymous in all written descriptions of the study.

I plan to complete my dissertation in May of 2016. Should you be interested in a copy of the report, I would be happy to provide it to you.

I appreciate your participation and assistance in completion of this dissertation.

Sincerely,

Michael Maloy
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
E-mail: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Appendix B

Letter to Parents of Student Participants

Dear ____________________,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College conducting a study on the challenges English Language Learners (ELL) and immigrant students face in American public schools. I would like to have students read two graphic novels, *American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang, and *The Arrival*, by Shaun Tan. These books depict the experiences of immigrants and children of immigrants as they encounter new cultures. The purpose of the study is to see if reading the novels will have an impact on students’ views about immigrants.

Some students will be reading the novels as part of their normal classroom instruction in their English class. Other students will be reading the novels as part of an after-school book read. Those participating in the after-school book read will be asked to meet two times over a three week period. In the first meeting I’ll explain the purpose of the study and distribute the books. At the second and third meetings we’ll discuss the novel and the students’ reactions to it, as well as their impressions about immigrant students. I hope to conduct focus groups and interviews to see if reading the graphic novel influenced student perceptions about the issues faced by immigrant children.

I am requesting your consent to have your child participate in the study. Student participation which will involve focus groups. There is no need to prepare for focus groups. Focus groups will be conducted two times, approximately half way through the novel and upon completion of the novel. Focus groups may take place after school. The focus groups will consist of five to eight students and will last about one hour. I hope to conduct the study during a three to four week period in the fall semester of the school year.

To ensure accuracy, I will record focus groups or interviews with a digital voice recorder. The interviews will be transcribed, analyzed and coded. For the purposes of protecting your child’s privacy, recordings and transcriptions will be will be secured in my personal computer which is password protected and will be locked cabinet on my personal property. The results of this research may be presented in conferences and publications in education journals. Your child’s identity, as well as the identity of the school district and other participants of this study will remain anonymous in any and all written descriptions of the study.

Your child may withdraw from participation in the study or refuse to answer a particular question without penalty at any time. I will be asking your child a few questions during the interview or focus group, but our conversations will feel more like a friendly conversation than a formal interview. The attached consent form describes the risks and benefits of participation in this study.

I plan to complete my dissertation in May of 2016. Should you be interested in a copy of the report, I would be happy to provide it to you. I appreciate your consent to have your child participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Michael Maloy
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
E-mail: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Michael Maloy
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
E-mail: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Appendix C

Letter to Student Participants

Dear ______________________,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College conducting a study on the challenges English Language Learners (ELL) and immigrant students face in American public schools. I would like to have students read two graphic novels, American Born Chinese, by Gene Luen Yang, and The Arrival, by Shaun Tan. These books depict the experiences of immigrants and children of immigrants as they encounter new cultures. The purpose of the study is to see if reading the novels will have an impact on students’ views about immigrants.

I am requesting your participation which may involve individual interviews and focus groups. You do not need to prepare for either one. Focus groups will be conducted upon completion of the novel. Focus groups may take place during classroom instruction if you are reading the book as part of a class, or after school if you are reading the book as part of a book club. The focus groups will consist of five to eight students and will last about one hour. I hope to conduct the study during a three to four week period in the spring semester of the school year.

Individual interviews will be conducted with students currently receive or who have received specialized supports from an English as a Second Language (ESOL) teacher.

To ensure the accuracy of our discussions, I will record our conversations with a digital voice recorder. The interviews will be transcribed, analyzed and coded. For the purposes of protecting your privacy, recordings and transcriptions will be secured in my personal computer which is password protected and will be locked cabinet on my personal property. The results of this research may be presented in conferences and publications in education journals. Your identity, as well as the identity of the school district and other participants of this study will remain anonymous during the study and after the dissertation is completed.

You may withdraw from participation in the study or refuse to answer a particular question without penalty at any time. I will be asking you a few questions during the interview or focus group, but our conversations will feel more like a friendly conversation than a formal interview. The attached consent form describes the risks and benefits of participation in this study.

I plan to complete my dissertation in August 2015. Should you be interested in a copy of the report, I would be happy to provide it to you.

I appreciate your participation and assistance in completion of this dissertation.

Sincerely,

Mr. Maloy
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
E-mail: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Appendix D
Letter to Parents of Student Participants, Chinese Translation

親愛的_____________，

我是聖·約翰·費舍爾大學（St. John Fisher College）的一名博士研究生。我論文的研究課題是：英文語言學習者和移民學生在美國公立學校所面臨的挑戰。本研究要求學生讀兩本書：《American Born Chinese》 by Gene Luen Yang，和《The Arrival》 by Shaun Tan。這些漫畫小說講述了新移民及其子女在新文化環境中的經歷。這項研究的目的是要看看是否讀小說會對學生對移民的看法產生影響。

在本研究中，要求部分受試學生將這兩本小說將以課內閱讀資料在英語課堂上完成，其他學生將其作為課外閱讀資料於課後完成。要求參與課外閱讀的學生在三周的時間裏與我會面兩次。在第一次會議上，我會解釋研究的目的並分發書籍。在第二次會議上，我們將討論小說，學生對小說的反應，以及他們對移民學生的影響。我希望能通過焦點小組和訪談形式看看讀圖畫小說是否影響學生對移民兒童所面臨的問題的認知。

我請求您同意讓您的孩子參加這項研究。學生的參與將涉及焦點小組。參與焦點小組討論無需事先準備。焦點小組將先後進行兩次，分別在閱讀中期和末期進行。焦點小組有可能在放學後進行。焦點小組將包括五至八名學生，將持續約一小時。我計畫在本學年秋季學期3至4周的時間進行研究。

為了確保研究數據的準確性，我會用數碼答錄機記錄焦點小組討論及訪談。這些討論及訪談的內容將被轉錄，分析和編碼。為了保護您孩子的隱私，這些數據資訊將被存放在個人電腦裏，並以密碼保護，並存放在上鎖的櫃子裏。這項研究的結果可能出現在教育期刊或發表在其他學術場合。您孩子參與研究的數據將被匿名形式出現。

在您孩子參與本課題研究期間，他/她有權隨時退出此項目或者拒絕回答訪談中的某一個/一些問題，而且不會受到懲罰。在焦點小組討論或者訪談中，我將會問您的孩子幾個問題，但我們的對話更像是一種親切交談，而非正式訪談。附加的同意書說明了參與此項研究風險和益處。

我預計於2016年5月完成我的碩士論文。如果您對我的研究結果感興趣的話，我非常願意向你提供這樣一份研究報告。非常感謝您同意您的孩子參與這項研究。

此致
Michael Maloy
電話：XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
電子郵件：XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Appendix E

Letter to Parents of Student Participants, Italian Translation

Lettera ai genitori di studenti partecipanti

Cari ________________,


Alcuni studenti leggeranno la lettura di romanzi come parte del loro normale istruzione nella loro classe inglese. Gli altri studenti dovranno leggere la lettura di romanzi dopo scuola,. E questi partecipanti vanno due volte in un periodo di tre settimane per una riunione. Nel primo incontro spiego lo scopo dello studio e distribuisco i libri. Nella seconda e terza incontro discuteremo le reazioni di studenti ad esso, come pure le loro impressioni circa gli studenti immigrati. Spero di poter condurre gruppi di focus e interviste per vedere se la lettura del romanzo ha influenzato la percezione degli studenti circa le questioni affrontate dai figli di immigrati.

Sto chiedendo il vostro permesso per avere il vostro figlio/a partecipare allo studio. La partecipazione degli studenti che coinvolgerà i gruppi di foco. Non vi è alcuna necessità di preparare per gruppi di focalizzazione. Gruppi di focalizzazione saranno condotta due volte, circa a metà del romanzo e alla fine del romanzo. I gruppi vanno a discutere dopo la scuola. Gruppi di focus sono costituito da cinque a otto studenti e durerà circa un’ora. Spero di condurre lo studio per un periodo di tre a quattro settimane nel semestre del autunno.

Per garantire precisione, vorrei registrare gruppi discussion o le interviste con un registratore vocale digitale. Le interviste verranno trascritte, analizzato e codificato. Ai fini di proteggere la riservatezza de il vostro figlio, registrazioni e trascrizioni saranno fissate nel mio personal computer che è protetto da password e sarà cabinet bloccato sulla mia proprietà personale. I risultati di questa ricerca potranno essere presentati a conferenze e pubblicazioni in riviste di educazione. La identità di vostro figlio, nonché l’identità del distretto scolastico e gli altri partecipanti di questo studio rimarranno anonimo in qualsiasi e tutte le descrizioni scritte dello studio.

Il vostro figlio può recedere dalla partecipazione allo studio o rifiutare di rispondere a una domanda in particolare senza penalità in qualsiasi momento. Chiederò il vostro figlio ad un paio di domande durante il colloquio o gruppo di discorso, ma le nostre conversazioni si sentiranno più simile a una conversazione amichevole di un colloquio formale. L'allegato modulo di consenso descrive i rischi e i vantaggi della partecipazione a questo studio.

Ho intenzione di completare la mia tesi dottorale nel maggio del 2016. Si sarrebbe interessati a una copia della relazione, sarei lieto di fornire a lei. Apprezzo il vostro consenso per avere il vostro figlio partecipare a questo studio.

Cordiali saluti,

Michael Maloy
Telefono: Xxxxxxxxxx
E-mail: Xxxxxxxxxx
Appendix F
Letter to Parents of Student Participants, French Translation

Lettre aux parents des élèves participants

Chers _________________,

Je suis un étudiant au doctorat à St. John Fisher College de mener une étude sur les défis English Language Learners (ELL) et étudiants immigrants font face dans les écoles publiques des États-Unis. Je voudrais demander aux élèves de lire deux romans graphiques, *Américain né le chinois*, par Gene Luen Yang, et l'arrivée, par Shaun Tan. Ces manuels décrivent les expériences des immigrants et des enfants d'immigrants à mesure qu'ils sont exposés à de nouvelles cultures. Le but de cette étude est de voir si la lecture de romans auront un impact sur les élèves des vues sur les immigrants.

Certains étudiants liront les romans comme partie de leur instruction en salle de classe normale dans leur classe d'anglais. D'autres étudiants seront lissant les romans comme partie d'un livre lu après l'école. Les participants à la suite après l'école livre lu sera demandé à rencontrer deux fois au cours d'une période de trois semaines. Dans la première réunion, je vais expliquer le but de l'étude et distribuent les livres. Aux deuxième et troisième réunions nous aborderons le roman et la réactions des élèves, ainsi que leurs impressions au sujet des élèves immigrants. J'espère pouvoir tenir des groupes de discussion et aux entrevues pour voir si la lecture du roman graphique influencé les perceptions qu'ont les étudiants sur les problèmes rencontrés par les enfants d'immigrés.

Je demande votre consentement à ce que votre enfant à participer à l'étude. La participation de l'élève qui comprendra des groupes de discussion. Il n'est pas nécessaire d'établir des groupes de discussion. Groupes de discussion sera menée deux fois, à environ mi-chemin à travers le roman et à l'achèvement du roman. Groupes de discussion peut avoir lieu après l'école. Les groupes de discussion se composera de cinq à huit étudiants et durera environ une heure. Je souhaite à la conduite de l'étude pendant une période de trois à quatre semaines pour le semestre d'automne de l'année scolaire.

Pour assurer l'exactitude, je vais enregistrer des groupes de discussion ou des entrevues avec un enregistreur vocal numérique. Les entrevues seront transcrrites, analysées et codées. Aux fins de la protection de la vie privée de vos enfants, enregistrements et transcriptions seront garantis dans mon ordinateur personnel qui est protégé par un mot de passe et sera armoire verrouillée sur ma propriété personnelle. Les résultats de cette recherche peuvent être présentés à des conférences et publications dans les revues d'éducation. L'identité de votre enfant, ainsi que l'identité du district scolaire et d'autres participante et participants à notre étude restera anonyme dans toutes les descriptons écrites de l'étude.

Votre enfant peut se retirer de la participation à l'étude ou de refuser de répondre à une question particulière sans pénalité à tout moment. Je vais demander à votre enfant quelques questions pendant l'entrevue ou d'un groupe de discussion, mais nos conversations se sentiront plus comme une conversation amicale qu'une entrevue officielle. Le formulaire de consentement ci-joint décrit les risques et les avantages de la participation à cette étude.

Je prévois terminer ma thèse en mai 2016. Devriez-vous être intéressé par une copie du rapport, je serais heureux de vous la fournir. J'apprécie votre consentement à ce que votre enfant à participer à cette étude.

Sincères salutations,

Michael Maloy
Téléphone : XXXXXXXXXX
E-mail : XXXXXXXXXX
Appendix G

Letter to Parents of Student Participants, Spanish Translation

Carta a los Padres de los Estudiantes Participantes

Estimado ________________

Soy un estudiante de doctorado en St. John Fisher College que realiza un estudio sobre los retos que los Estudiantes de Inglés (English Language Learners) y los estudiantes inmigrantes se enfrentan en escuelas públicas de Estados Unidos. Me gustaría que los alumnos lean dos novelas gráficas, *Estadounidense de Origen Chino (American Born Chinese)*, de Gene Luen Yang, y *La Llegada (The Arrival)*, de Shaun Tan. Estos libros representan experiencias de los inmigrantes e hijos de inmigrantes cuando se encuentran con nuevas culturas. El propósito del estudio es encontrar si la lectura de las novelas tendrá un impacto en las opiniones de los estudiantes sobre los inmigrantes.

Algunos estudiantes se encontrarán leyendo las novelas como parte de su trabajo diario en su aula normal en su clase de Inglés. Otros estudiantes se encontrarán leyendo las novelas como parte de un libro de lectura después de escuela. Se pedirá a los participantes en la escuela después de la lectura de libros para reunirse dos veces durante un periodo de tres semanas. En la primera reunión explicaré el propósito del estudio y distribuiré los libros. En la segunda y tercera reuniones, hablaremos de la novela y sobre las reacciones de los estudiantes, así como las impresiones sobre los estudiantes inmigrantes. Espero formar grupos focales y hacer entrevistas para ver si la lectura de la novela gráfica influye percepciones de los estudiantes sobre los problemas a los que se enfrentan a los niños inmigrantes.

Estoy solicitando su consentimiento para que su hijo participe en el estudio. Esta participación incluye grupos de enfoque. No es necesario prepararse para grupos de enfoque. Los grupos focales se van a reunir dos veces, aproximadamente a medio camino de la novela y a la terminación de la novela. Los grupos focales se reunirán después de escuela. Estos grupos de enfoque consistirán de cinco a ocho estudiantes y durarán aproximadamente una hora. Espero cumplir el estudio durante un periodo de tres a cuatro semanas durante el semestre de otoño en el año escolar.

Para asegurar la precisión, voy a grabar la discusión de grupos o entrevistas con una grabadora de voz digital. Las entrevistas se van a transcribir, analizar y codificar. Para proteger la privacidad de su hijo, grabaciones y transcripciones estarán guardadas en mi ordenador personal que está protegida con contraseña y estará guardado en mi armario personal. Los resultados de esta investigación pueden ser presentados en conferencias y publicaciones en revistas de educación. La identidad de su hijo, así como la identidad del distrito escolar y de otros participantes de este estudio serán anónimas en todas las descripciones escritas del estudio.
Su niño puede dejar de participar en el estudio o negarse a responder a una pregunta sin penalización en cualquier momento. Pediré a su hijo algunas preguntas durante la entrevista o el grupo de enfoque, pero nuestras conversaciones se sentirán más como una conversación amistosa que una entrevista formal. El formulario de consentimiento incluido describe los riesgos y beneficios de la participación en este estudio. Tengo la intención de completar mi tesis en Mayo de 2016. En caso le interesa una copia del informe, estaría contento darselo. Aprecio su consentimiento para que su hijo participe en este estudio educativo.

Atentamente,

Michael Maloy
Teléfono: XXXXXXXXXX
E-mail: XXXXXXXXXX
Appendix H

Permission Form for Parents of Student Participants

St. John Fisher College
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
(for use with minors)

Title of study: Critical Literacy and Graphic Novels: Investigating Student’s and Teacher’s Perceptions of English Language Learners and Immigrant Students

Name of researcher: Mike Maloy

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Marie Cianca, St. John Fisher College

Purpose of study:

The purpose of the study is to assess if the use of graphic novels, coupled with critical literacy theory, can foster deeper understanding of non-ELLs about the issues facing English Language Learners and immigrant students in American public schools.


Some students will read the book as part of their normal classroom instruction with their teacher in English class. Others will read the book in a book club format after school. Participating students will be asked to read the book and take part in either individual interviews or focus groups based on context in which he or she read the book.

Place of study: XXXXXXXXXXX

Length of participation:

Students reading the work as in the context of an after-school book group will read the novel and meet with the researcher over a three week period. Students reading the work as part of normal class instruction with their teachers may take longer to complete book.

Focus groups and interviews are estimated to last one hour.

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:

There are no identified risks or benefits for participation in this study.

Method of compensation, if any:
As a sign of appreciation for sharing their time and insights student participants will provide food and refreshments upon completion of each focus groups and interviews.

**Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:**

Confidentiality will be maintained during the interviews and no identifiers will be used during the interview process. Confidentiality will be maintained by coding the responders’ name. No information will be shared.

Upon completion of transcribing focus group sessions all student names will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Confidentiality statements will be signed by the transcripitonist. Interview data, tapes, and any supporting documentation will be maintained in a locked, secure area in the researcher’s possession for a minimum of three years from the conclusion of the dissertation process.

**Your rights:**

As the parent/guardian of a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to allow your minor child to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you or your minor child.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I, the parent or guardian of ________________________________, a minor _________ years of age, give permission for his/her participation in the above-named study. I have received a copy of this form.

_____________________________    ________________________    _______
Print name (Parent/Guardian)    Signature          Date

_____________________________    ________________________    _______
Print name (Investigator)    Signature          Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you or your child experiences emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, contact the Office of Academic Affairs at 385-8034 or the Health & Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding confidentiality, please call Jill Rathbun at 385-8012. She will direct your call to a member of the IRB at St. John Fisher College.
Appendix I

Consent Form for Teacher Participants

St. John Fisher College
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of study: Critical Literacy and Graphic Novels: Investigating Student’s and Teacher’s Perceptions of English Language Learners and Immigrant Students

Name of researcher: Mike Maloy

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Marie Cianca, St. John Fisher College

Purpose of study:

The purpose of the study is to assess if the use of graphic novels, coupled with critical literacy theory, can foster deeper understanding by non-ELLs about the issues facing English Language Learners and immigrant students in American public schools.

Participating students will read a graphic novel, American Born Chinese, by Gene Luen Yang which depicts the experiences of an American high school student of Chinese ancestry.

Some students will read the book as part of their normal classroom instruction with their teacher in English class. Others will read the book in a book club format after school. Participating students will be asked to read the book and take part in either individual interviews or focus groups based on context in which he or she read the book.

Place of study: XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Length of participation:

Teachers participating in the study will assist the researcher in identifying and recruiting student participants. Teachers may use the graphic novel as part of the curriculum for their classrooms, while other teachers will assist the researcher in organizing book group events. All participating teachers will be asked to take part in an individual interview upon the students’ completion of the reading of the book.

Interviews are estimated to last one hour.

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:
There are no identified risks or benefits for participation in this study.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:

Confidentiality will be maintained during the interviews and no identifiers will be used during the interview process. Confidentiality will be maintained by coding the responders’ name. No information will be shared.

Confidentiality statements will be signed by the transcriptionist. Interview data, tapes, and any supporting documentation will be maintained in a locked, secure area in the researcher’s possession for a minimum of three years from the conclusion of the dissertation process.

Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

Print name (Participant)    Signature          Date

Print name (Investigator)    Signature          Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at 385-8034 or the Health & Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding confidentiality, please call Jill Rathbun 585-385-8012. She will direct your call to a member of the IRB at St. John Fisher College.

Revision 9/01
Appendix J

Assent Script for Student Participants

While consent will have been given by students’ parents, prior to the intuition of either an interview or focus group session the researcher will also gain student assent to participate. The researcher will describe the task the child will be asked to complete in language the child will understand. The researcher will then ask the student if he or she wishes to participate in the task.

“I am going to be asking you questions about your thoughts and reactions to the book, American Born Chinese. I will also ask some questions about your perceptions of or understandings of students who are immigrants to the US or who speak other languages at home. I want you to answer the questions as best as you can. I won’t be giving you a grade for your answers. I hope to help students and teachers understand the challenges of immigrant students better. You don’t have to answer any question you don’t want to and if you want to stop at any time just say "I want to stop now please." If you don’t know the answer to a question it’s okay just to say I don’t know. Would you like to begin now with the questions or would you rather go about your other school activities?”
Appendix K

Observation Field Note Worksheet

The observations of Sally’s classes and the after-school book read are intended to answer research question 1: What kinds of connections and understandings, if any, are forged by non-ELLs as a result of the reexamination of preexisting assumptions through reading a graphic novel using critical literacy theory?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Critical Literacy Dimension</th>
<th>Teacher Actions / Comments</th>
<th>Student Actions / Comments</th>
<th>Researcher’s Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dimension: disrupting the commonplace</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Do participants question “everyday” ways of seeing?</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>-Do participants use language to interrogate “how it is”?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dimension: interrogating multiple view-points</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>-Do participants consider alternate ways of seeing, telling, or constructing a given event or issue?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>-Does the activity involve attending to or considering silenced or marginalized voices?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dimension: focusing on sociopolitical issues</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Do participants challenge power relationships and/or study the relationship between language and power?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Does activity include or create opportunities for subordinate group(s) participation?</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dimension: Taking action and promoting social justice</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Do the activity involve rewriting, redesign, or the taking of new positions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Does participants move from spectator to actor roles?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix L

ELL Student Focus Group Protocol

Interviews with individual ELLs are intended to address Research Question 2: How accurately do graphic novel narratives represent ELLs’ own experiences as recent immigrants to the United States?

Date_______________________________ Student ID_____________________

Introduction
☐ Introduce yourself
☐ Discuss the purpose of the study
☐ Provide structure of the interview (audio recording, taking notes, and use of pseudonym)
☐ Ask if they have any questions
☐ Read student assent script
☐ Test audio recording equipment
☐ make the participant feel comfortable (offer food/beverages)

Questions regarding the participants’ demographics:

One. What country were you born in?
2. What country were your parents born in?
3. How long have you lived in the United States?
4. What language(s) do you speak at home?

Questions regarding the participants’ educational experiences:

6. Did you attend school in your home country?
7. What was the highest grade you attended to?
8. What academic challenges have you faced in American schools?
9. What personal or social challenges you faced?
10. How would you describe your relationship with your school?

Questions about the graphic novels depiction of immigration compared to their own experience.

11. Are there any parts of the graphic novel that you can identify with or think are accurate to your experience? Which parts?
12. Are there any parts of the graphic novel that you cannot identify with or think are inaccurate to your experience? Which parts?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to add?