

St. John Fisher College

Fisher Digital Publications

Education Masters

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

2010

Theory and Practie: Searching for Critical Literacy Skills in Urban Middle School Students

Benjamin Stopka
St. John Fisher College

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters



Part of the Education Commons

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Recommended Citation

Stopka, Benjamin, "Theory and Practie: Searching for Critical Literacy Skills in Urban Middle School Students" (2010). *Education Masters*. Paper 270.

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/270 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Theory and Practice: Searching for Critical Literacy Skills in Urban Middle School Students

Abstract

This action research study examined the critical literacy skills that seventh grade students in an urban middle school demonstrated while reading and discussing *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers. Three themes were identified and analyzed using the four dimension model of critical literacy developed Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002). These themes include: identity construction, bringing culture and personal experience to bear on text interpretation, and the recognition of unequal power distribution including suggestions for social action. Analysis of the data collected indicates that students are entering the middle school classroom with at least a rudimentary critical literacy skill set.

Document Type

Thesis

Degree Name

MS in Literacy Education

Department

Education

Subject Categories

Education

Theory and Practice: Searching for Critical Literacy Skills in Urban Middle School Students

by

Benjamin Stopka

Abstract:

This action research study examined the critical literacy skills that seventh grade students in an urban middle school demonstrated while reading and discussing *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers. Three themes were identified and analyzed using the four dimension model of critical literacy developed Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002). These themes include: identity construction, bringing culture and personal experience to bear on text interpretation, and the recognition of unequal power distribution including suggestions for social action. Analysis of the data collected indicates that students are entering the middle school classroom with at least a rudimentary critical literacy skill set.

Introduction

The focus of this action research project is critical literacy. Historically, the roots of critical literacy are grounded in Rousseau's philosophy of the child as an active participant in the learning process and the work of 20th century educational theorist Paulo Freire. In general, Freire's major contribution to the theory of critical pedagogy is based on the notion that literacy education should be primarily concerned with improving the existential experience of the individual learner through reflection and action upon the world (Freire, 1972). From this theoretical perspective, the improved experience of the individual is prized; however, within the American standardized educational system, critical pedagogy can be problematic as it is in many ways diametrically opposed to the very notion of a standardized education for all individuals. Therein lays the contradiction. As politicians and critics of public schools clamor for higher standards and lambaste teachers for their inability to develop young adults with the critical skills required for active participation among the body politic, critical pedagogy inherently initiates questioning of the standardizing authority. Thus, as students develop critical literacy skills they begin to question the authority and the nature of power relationships. Without being checked, this questioning could potentially lead to the discovery that the very mechanisms in place which define their existential experience are synonymous with the values espoused by the dominant social group and moved forward by standardized education and curricula.

Critical analysis indicates that the power relationships explicated in the traditional texts of American standardized curricula are generally Eurocentric, exclusionary, and often heavily laden with the perceptions and understandings of the dominant social group (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Through a critical literacy approach, students, especially those from traditionally

marginalized social groups, may begin to ask questions which confront these issues as well as the authority of the dominant social groups which purport them. Due to this relationship, critical pedagogy is in many ways directly linked to the success of those groups which have been traditionally marginalized by the dominant culture. Under these conditions, failure to address the status quo of standardized education simply perpetuates the existing power relationships and further fails to develop critically minded young adults. By exploring the role of critical literacy and critical pedagogy in practice, considerable strides may be made in providing all students with an equitable education which seeks to improve the lot of the individual learner rather than attempting to homogenize a distinctly diverse and heterogeneous society into an unnatural amalgam of individual pieces. Generated from this perspective, this action research project will seek to identify if urban middle school students bring any critical literacy skills or rudimentary understandings of critical analytical techniques to the discussion of literature prior to direct instruction or modeling in the classroom. More specifically, this action research study will seek to investigate the ways in which students already demonstrate rudimentary critical literacy skills and identify the importance of organizing these latent skills into an analytical framework that inspires praxis or reflection and action upon the world (Freire, 1972).

What is Critical Literacy?

At the core of critical literacy is a fundamental concern with the ways in which knowledge is constructed and how these particular knowledge constructions are ultimately used to establish power relationships within society. It is within these societal power relationships that education, and therefore literacy, is a tool used by those in power to maintain a specific social order. As the knowledge and values of any given society are quite often named and forwarded by those at the top of the power food chain (O'Quinn, 2006), critical literacy seeks to

work within this continuum of historical, political, cultural and economic power relations to seek social justice for all participants within any given society. As a theory, critical literacy advocates the belief that education can be a vital tool in the quest for social justice by creating a space which affords students the opportunity to recognize the ways in which language is affected by societal power relationships and, in turn, the ways in which language can affect social relations (Behrman, 2008).

Although rooted in the tenets of critical theory advanced in the early twentieth century which sought to critique society and culture (Larson & Marsh, 2005), critical literacy came to fruition in its most recognizable form through the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire just after mid-century. Martusewicz and Reynolds (1994) note that the critical theorists of the early twentieth century advocated a collective struggle to overcome oppression and marginalization, and indicated that education was the key to such collective struggle. Drawing heavily from Marxist theory on social relations, these theorists laid the groundwork for Freire and with the 1971 publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire brought forth the seminal text in the field of modern critical literacy. In this groundbreaking book, Friere (1971) identified the primary purpose of critical literacy as heightening the *conscientização*, or critical consciousness of all participants in a given society in order to transform both the individual and the society itself. In order to effectively transform oneself or the society in which one lives, Freire (1971) proclaimed that one has to be keenly aware of the ways in which class structures ultimately create a dehumanizing and disempowered consciousness of the individual. In this proclamation lies the central link between critical literacy, class struggle, and Marxist philosophy.

Critical Literacy and Marxist Philosophy

As Block (1994) indicates, Marxist philosophy relies on the belief that social institutions and structures are inherently created by the economic conditions, in particular modes of production, of any given society. In basic economic language, there is a highly oppressive and class-based situation created in which there are two distinct groups: those that “have and do not produce” and “those that produce and long to have.” Under the guise of economic prospect and prosperity, a consciousness is created in the later group that essentially disempowers, dehumanizes, and leads to a duality in which “to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor” (Freire, 1971, p.48). It is precisely this consciousness that Freire seeks to illuminate and ultimately transform through education and critical literacy in general.

Given that the goal of any society or social institution is perpetuation of itself, and the fact that education is directly tied to such perpetuation, O’Quinn (2006) notes that politics and school policy are directly tied to both social power relationships and economic systems of business, industry and government. As Block (1994) indicates, from this perspective education is “deeply embedded in the material world; thus, any change in education is seen as demanding a change in the other” (Block, 1994, p.71). It is precisely this change in “the other” which poses the greatest threat to those in power who are responsible for the creation and maintenance of the given power structures. As their goal is perpetuation of the current system, there is an inherent reluctance to offer or allow the space required for students to actively seek the core component of critical literacy which is transformation of both the individual and the society in which they live through heightened critical consciousness (Freire, 1971). To achieve this end, the goal of critical literacy is not solely the recognition of class and power relations; rather, the aim of

critical literacy is to empower the people to work for social, political, and economic changes in the constructs of class-based power and domination, people must seek to discover how and why knowledge gets constructed the way that it does (Martusewicz & Reynolds, 1994). This phenomenon is what Freire (1971) refers to as praxis: reflection and action upon the world.

Fundamental Assumptions of Critical Literacy

Analyses of the fundamental assumptions of critical literacy begin with careful attention to the nature of literacy as a technology in its broadest sense. As Freebody and Luke (1990) note, literacy is not a neutral technology; it is always ideologically situated because it is shaped by power and, in turn, shapes subjects and discourses. Rogers (2007) further extends this concept of non-neutrality to language practices in general. Given these assumptions of non-neutrality and the strong connection between literacy, class-based power relationships, and the educational structures of society described above, it seems reasonable to assert that all texts located in a given society represent a particular cultural and social position (Leland & Harste, 2000). In general, all knowledge and texts are carefully crafted objects that have been written by persons with certain dispositions and orientations to the information being provided (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2000); as such, they are intended to manipulate the reader into internalizing the information or knowledge presented in the text in a given way.

It is this fact that leads to greatest fundamental assumption of critical literacy, if all text and knowledge is constructed by people with particular perspectives and orientations towards the information, and those in power generally decide what texts are presented in educational settings in an effort to perpetuate the status quo of social power relations, then being critically literate means being aware of how texts, and how we are taught to read them, construct us as particular

types of literate beings in a given social power hierarchy (Leland & Harste, 2000). In layman's terms, if literacy is a chain that is binding people to a particular social power class and manipulation is the lock that keeps the chain in place, critical literacy is the key that is required to unlock the chain and liberate individuals from the yoke oppression and marginalization.

Unlocking the Chain: The Goals of Critical Literacy

As described above, at its core critical literacy focuses on the ways in which social power structures are constructed and operate using literacy as a tool for manipulation of the masses. As such, the primary goal of critical literacy is transforming these overarching structures by transforming the existential experiences of the individuals in the society through praxis (Freire, 1971). When analyzing the cultural, economic, political, or educational structures that influence power in a given society, the centrality of social participation in the creation and maintenance of these systems is highly evident. Since all socially constructed systems inherently derive their impetus from the people who create them, participation in the transformation of such structures is central to Freire's notion of critical literacy. For critical literacy, that participation begins by acknowledging literacy as a social practice.

As Freebody and Luke (1990) note, literacy itself is a social practice with the potential to initiate social justice and drive real change. Once literacy has been recognized as a social practice, the tools of critical literacy may be "put to work" making changes in the social structures which mediate, limit, or deny the individual full access to social power. While there are several places to logically begin this transformation, perhaps none is more important than the political realm. Larson and Marsh (2005) note that if literacy is viewed as a social practice then literacy education must be focused first and foremost on exposing implicit inequities and

oppression by placing education in a political context. Politics are power. Whether viewed from the local, state, or federal level, the primary function of government, and politics in general, is deciding who has the power, what power do they have, how can they use it, and how can they keep it. To sidestep the Machiavellian quagmire presented by these conceptions of political power, it is sufficient to note that critical literacy practices have the potential to cultivate political awareness and thus have the potential to initiate social change (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

Once the quest to heighten *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, has established literacy as a social practice and thus moved it into the political realm, to become critically literate requires the student to become aware that they too have a role to play in the way that text positions them in the world. As discussed above, if literacy is a social practice and social practices are generated by those who participate in the society, then just as important as the ways in which those in power construct what counts as knowledge is the ways in which those being marginalized or oppressed engage or participate in literacy practices. The goal of critical literacy is social transformation, and to effectively transform either text or social structures one must be aware that critical literacy involves participation in a set of social practices (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Rogers, 2007). Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) add that in addition to identifying social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and power relationships in place, one must also develop a critical stance or attitudes which allow us to consciously engage the world. When reading from a critical stance, “readers use their background knowledge to understand relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author in the text” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p.53).

Action and active participation in the social practices of literacy are central to critical literacy for without them the component of social justice and transformation is lost; however, in order to become consciously engaged with the world we must first problematize any and all events, name and reframe what is prompting a response, and create a purposeful response plan (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008). Freire (1971) states that any attempt at action without reflection and the formulation of a clear response plan merely reproduces the oppressive situation; true praxis requires both reflection and targeted action which can be brought about through problematizing the nature of power inequity. Rogers (2007) adds that critical literacy, in theory and practice, seeks to critique problematic textual and social practices while simultaneously constructing productive and agentic changes. To become critically literate is to become a participant in social literacy practices and an active agent of change, and the process of doing so begins with the recognition of literacy as a social practice with social, political, cultural, and economic capital (Neito, 20005). To be critically literate is to be able to decide for ourselves how we wish to be positioned in the world (Leland & Harste, 2000).

Beyond the realization that texts and social practices are reflective of cultural practices, positions, and ideologies, critically literate beings will come to realize that it is possible to make decisions on how we want to be positioned in relation to each other, our communities, and the world (Flint, 2000). It is the recognition of this aspect of critical literacy that dissolves the complicity generated by the status quo. As Friere (1971) notes, there is a certain degree of complicity and lack of reflection on both sides of the power divide of an oppressive situation. Those in power become complicit in the fact that certain ways of being constitute power (wealth, land, status, etc.) and fail to reflect on the social toll of such symbols on “others” in the same society without power. Similarly, the “others” without power become complicit in the fact that

there position is prescribed by those in power and fail to reflect on what it means to be free without substituting the same ways of being as those in power, thus recreating the inequity without ever exposing the source. It is this situation that requires critically literate beings to be both reflective and active in order for real changes to occur.

Critical Literacy as Practice

As Larson and Marsh (2005) note, “there is no single normative version of critical literacy; rather, it is formulated in practice in ways that are deeply contextualized and specifically situated” (p.41). Given this difficulty in nailing down a critical literacy standard operating procedure, it becomes difficult to pinpoint specific methods which define the practice of critical literacy. Freire (1971) suggests that the first order of business in the practice of critical literacy is breaking away from the “banking” model of education. In this model, students are viewed as empty vessels which require filling with pertinent knowledge and understandings of the world (Freire, 1971). As discussed above, this model of education is highly problematic given the fact that most, if not all, educational systems are mere appendages of other social structures which are in place to keep power distributed in a way which recreates economic conditions and perpetuates the system in place. At the very least it is difficult to dispute that those in power often create or wield incredible influence over the nature of education in any given society. Under these conditions, language becomes the central focus of critical literacy.

Luke (2000) asserts that the aim of critical literacy is an environment where students and teachers work together to see how the worlds of texts work to construct their worlds, their identities, and their cultures in powerful ways. To work together, students and teachers must be able to communicate in open and honest dialogic discourse (Freire, 1971). Behrman (2008) adds

that to be critically literate students must examine the power relationships inherent in language use, recognize that language is not neutral, and confront their own values in the production of language. Freebody and Luke (1990) further suggest that social uses of language are where we learn our positions as readers and our notions of what for us texts are for. When students are treated as empty vessels in a banking educational model they become conditioned to be passive users of text and knowledge. While this set up may be precisely what existing social structures enjoying the fruits of power and status want, it is exactly what critical literacy theorists aim to thwart. A collective engagement around the use of language opens the space to investigate and ultimately transform dominant social practices and structures by prompting multiple questions and seeking multiple perspectives (Rogers, 2007).

Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze pop culture media, to understand how power relationships are constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). While it is admittedly difficult to label a specific plan of action to bring about such critical changes in the ways people view language use, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) have devised a dimensional approach that offers some guidance in the quest of critical literacy practice. The four dimension model consists of disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and promoting social justice through action (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

In the first dimension, disrupting the commonplace, the goal is for students to recognize implicit modes of perception and to consider new ways to understand experience (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The first dimension is where students begin the important task of

problematizing and naming that which is prompting a response. The very existence of implicit modes of perception indicates the presence of oppression; messages can only be implicit if they are understood as the rule by anyone who must never forget it. In the second dimension, interrogating multiple perspectives, the goal is for students to understand experience and texts form their own unique perspective as well as the perspective of others and to consider these various perspectives concurrently (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). Essentially, this dimension validates the existential experience of everyone in a particular culture. Freire (1971) noted that quite often the experience of the oppressed is never considered relevant or useful; thus, when change does occur it usually just replaces the existing oppression with more of the same without ever acknowledging the value of one's own existential experience. Larson and Marsh (2005) add that student's prior knowledge must be recognized if they are to become critically literate because they are simply not empty vessels.

Once the commonplace has been shaken and the existence of multiple perspectives recognized, the third dimension, focusing on sociopolitical issues, attempts to step outside the personal to interrogate how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). This is where students become what Freebody and Luke (1990) define as a text analyst; a reader who can participate with the text in order to determine for what purpose a particular text was written and how that text is meant to position them in the world. It is this inquiry, interrogation, and investigation that leads to the central aim of critical literacy, transformation of both the individual and the society in which one lives through social action (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008).

As described above, social justice is defined as taking informed action against oppression and marginalization and is the fundamental goal of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). In this dimension, students rise to confront oppression or marginalization by transforming themselves and their role in the social structures which create the balance of power in any given society. As Freire (1971) notes, real transformation must come from the oppressed; it is only through their participation and transformation that structural changes can be made that will result in a more equitable existential experience and avoid the pitfall of merely recreating the oppression by transforming into the oppressor.

Methodology

This action research study will be completed in a mid-sized urban school district in western New York which operates more than sixty schools and serves the educational needs of more than 34,000 children. In general, the demographics and socioeconomic conditions of the metropolitan area mirror those of similar sized urban areas in the region. School X, where this study will take place, provides learning environments for students from kindergarten to eighth grade has been in good academic standing in ELA, Math, and Science in each of the last three school years based on Federal standards. Currently, it is the only K-8 building operating in the district but there are plans to open several others in the 2010-2011 school year using School X as a model for design. At the time of this study, the building houses 690 students, of which, 91% are eligible for free or reduced lunch based on the current district standards. The student body is 89% Black or African American, 8% Hispanic or Latino, and 3% White.

Participants

Six students from School X are scheduled to participate in this action research study; all six are currently in seventh grade. Two of the students have been students at School X since Kindergarten while two others have transferred into School X from another school in the district at the start of previous school years. Of the last two participants, one recently moved to the area from Caruthersville, Missouri and the other from Junco, Puerto Rico. This is their first year in the district and School X. Two of the participants are male and the remaining four are female; each will be discussed in further detail below.

D'ana is a thirteen year old African American female who lives with both biological parents and has been enrolled in School X since Kindergarten. Her mother is very active in the school and volunteers in the building two days each week. D'ana is a very kind, friendly, and outgoing girl who loves to read. She has recently made Honor Roll for the first time this year and is very proud of her academic success; she also notes it as an improvement over years past.

Olesha is a thirteen year old African American female who lives with her biological mother and stepfather and has been enrolled in School X since Kindergarten. Much like D'ana, Olesha's mother is active in School X as well. While she does not volunteer her time, she does make a point of stopping by the school several times per week for conversations and updates about Olesha's academic progress and behavior. Olesha herself is an outspoken and witty girl. From observations of her in a classroom setting, it is easy to see that she is a natural leader; people generally listen to what she has to say when she talks. Much like D'ana, Olesha is on academic Honor Roll and has perennially been a high performing student amongst her peers.

Jalynn is a thirteen year old African American female who lives with both biological parents and has been enrolled at School X for the last two years. Although she was born on Long Island, her parents moved to the area when she was young; as such, she has been a student in the district since Kindergarten. She transferred to School X from another elementary school in the district at the start of sixth grade. Jalynn is soft-spoken and polite girl who enjoys reading and listening to music. From observations of Jalynn in the classroom, she is often quite reserved and proper in her interactions with others, even if others are not so polite to her. Jalynn often gets ridiculed by others for being smart and focused. On two separate occasions I have observed other students tell her that, “She is White” or “Your acting White.” Despite the teasing of others, Jalynn stays the course and consistently produces high quality work in all of her classes.

Jahmyia is a thirteen year old African American female who lives with her biological mother. Much like Jalynn, Jahmyia has been a student in the district since Kindergarten but transferred into School X from another elementary school in the district at the start of fifth grade. Jahmyia has spent most of her life dealing with a severe health impairment that has had a significant effect on her physical development. She has undergone several major surgeries related to her health problems and is currently undergoing continuous treatment for her condition. Despite these physical limitations, Jahmyia is a bright and cheery girl who is full of life. From observations of Jahmyia in the classroom, she often attempts to do the right thing but is easily persuaded to participate in non-academic distractions. She readily admits that she needs to a better job avoiding the distractions of others but finds it difficult to remain focused on schoolwork when others provoke comments or interactions.

Darion is a thirteen year old African American male who lives with his biological mother and three siblings. Prior to the start of the current school year, Darion moved to the area from Caruthersville, Missouri; as such, this is his first year at School X. Darion can best be described a respectful, athletic, and insightful boy. He excels academically but is very quiet and reserved in classroom interactions. From observations of Darion in the classroom, it is easy to see that Darion genuinely cares about his education and academic performance, yet he does not seem to be driven by grades as much as intellectual stimulation. I have had the opportunity to have several in-depth conversations about pressing social issues with Darion, and in most of these situations, Darion has approached me and initiated the conversation. Quite often his insights and level of engagement in the conversation demonstrates thought well beyond his years.

Kevin is a thirteen year old Hispanic male who lives with his biological mother. Kevin and his mother moved to the area from Junco, Puerto Rico prior to the start of the current school year. He has three siblings but each continues to live in Puerto Rico with his biological father. While Kevin is not classified as an English Language Learner (ELL) and does not receive English as Second Language (ESL) support services from the district, he does speak Spanish at home and English at school. Kevin has indicated that his mother in fact does not speak English at all. Aside from relocating prior to the start of seventh grade, this is Kevin's first year of formal instruction in English. While he did take English courses in Puerto Rico, he notes that the majority of his schooling was conducted in Spanish. Kevin could best be described as hard-working and friendly. Despite dealing with the language barrier, Kevin always has a smile on his face and works incredibly hard to produce the highest quality work possible, and while he has not made Honor Roll to this point in the school year he indicates that he is trying very hard to do such.

Researcher Stance

During the course of this action research project I will be acting as an active participant observer, which Mills (2007) defines as being actively engaged in observing the outcomes of one's teaching practice. I currently have an Associate's degree in Liberal Arts and a Bachelors degree in History along with my adolescent Social Studies teaching certification. I am also currently working on my Master's Degree in Literacy for which I am conducting this action research study. Along with pursuing my graduate degree, I am working as a seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher in School X where this action research study will take place. I have been certified for three years; however, I have only been a full time teacher since the start of the 2009-2010 school year.

Method

As the designer of this action research study, I shall seek to observe the critical literacy skills exhibited by the participants in this study during a guided reading of Walter Dean Myers young adult novel *Monster* (2002). The goal is to identify if the participants demonstrate any existing and hereby unnamed critical literacy skills as defined by the four dimension framework described above. Informed assent will be obtained from each participant prior to beginning along with a consent form from a parent or guardian.

To begin the data collection, each of the six participants will be given a copy of the book to look over prior to our first meeting with no further formal instructions. At the first meeting an informal survey will be conducted with each student to identify what each participant has done with the book so far, what the participants preexisting understandings or misconceptions about

the book are, and the nature of their personal connections or disconnections to the content and subject matter presented in the book. The rest of the observations and data will be collected over the course of four subsequent meetings.

Each subsequent meeting will be conducted in the form of literature circle. Participants will first be welcomed and prompted to discuss the following: their progress with the book, their understandings of the power relationships presented in the text, and their personal reactions to the treatment of the sixteen year old main character (Steve Harmon) in the book. Data will be collected from multiple sources at each meeting including anecdotal field notes and transcripts of student interactions during the various discussions. In addition, participants will be asked to complete an exit reflection at the end of each of our last session.

Given the subjective and non-normative nature of the phenomena being investigated in this action research study, the following steps will be taken as research progresses to help insure the validity of the study. First and foremost, to address the concern of credibility which Mills (2007) defines as the “ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study” (p.85), data will be collected using the triangulation principle, or collecting data from multiple sources and not relying solely on one data collection instrument (Mills, 2007). Data collection instruments used during the action research project will include: initial informal interviews, anecdotal field notes, written reader responses, and transcriptions of student discussions during each meeting.

Along with the steps taken to ensure credibility, a concerted effort will be made to ensure the transferability of the data collected by focusing on collecting “detailed and descriptive data that will permit comparison of a given context (classroom/school) to other possible contexts

which transfer might be contemplated” (Mills, 2007, p.86). These criteria will be met through the use of anecdotal notes of each meeting, detailed descriptions of the school and student participants, and data collected during the informal survey at the first meeting. Similarly, the dependability of the data will be ensured by overlapping methods of data collection (Mills, 2007). Each meeting will begin with an open discussion of the material discussed in prior sessions and the data collected during this dialogue will then be used to guide the closing reflection. Finally, the confirmability of the data, or what Mills (2007) defines as the “neutrality or objectivity of the data” (p.86) will be ensured through the use of the triangulation principle described above as well as through the use of a journal in which reflections, musings, and anecdotal observation notes can be recorded throughout the action research process (Mills, 2007). In addition to the techniques described above, I will be working closely with several critical colleagues during data analysis and interpretation to help ensure that I am not misinterpreting the data or skewing the information.

Discussion of Findings

Analyses of my findings focus on instances from the transcripts in which students demonstrated critical literacy skills as defined by the four dimension model discussed above. Following the general breakdown of data in Table 1.1, I discuss examples of three identified themes from the transcripts which demonstrate critical literacy in action. The identified themes include: identity construction, bringing culture and personal experience to bear on text interpretation, and the recognition of the misuse of social power including suggestions for social action to alleviate shortcomings. Each theme was analyzed using both my understanding of what critical literacy looks like in practice and the information I have generated from the literature. In addition to analyzing the data using the four dimension model of critical literacy, I also analyze

the skills which each student brought to this action research study which I believe offered the space for the critical literacy skills to be demonstrated as they deviated from their initial interpretations and understandings and constructed new knowledge of the text when confronted with questions or ideas generated from the discussion.

Table 1.1: Instances of Critical Literacy Skill Demonstration

	Disrupting the Commonplace	Interrogating Multiple Perspectives	Sociopolitical Issues	Taking Action/ Promoting Social Justice
1st Session	0	0	0	2
2nd Session	2	2	1	2
3rd Session	0	1	1	0
4th Session	0	1	1	1
Totals	2	4	3	5

Who am I? - Identity as a Social Construct

Is Steve Harmon a monster or is he the product of a cultural phenomenon in which society and language ultimately determine the identity of each individual? More than just fodder for debate amongst sociologists, this question strikes at the heart of critical literacy and opened a dialogue which created space for the first dimension of critical literacy to be displayed by the participants in this study. It was the general topic of discussion in which the students in this study demonstrated their ability to disrupt the commonplace without modeling or direct instruction in how to do so.

From the very beginning of our discussions, presumptions of innocence reigned supreme from each of the participants, and the main character in the book, as an individual, was considered to be just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thus, his identity was a creation of his own volition and it was individual determinism which landed the character in a bad situation. Consider the following excerpt from the transcript of our first session:

- 1.31) Jalynn:** It's a lot like real life. I think it's kind of like real life.
- 1.32) Teacher:** What do you mean by that?
- 1.33) Jalynn:** Like people really do that and get blamed for something they didn't do
- 1.34) Olesha:** Being in the wrong place at the wrong time

In the section of the transcript, both Jalynn and Olesha indicate that they believe that the main character was simply “in the wrong place at the wrong time” and is being blamed for something that he did not do; thus, his predicament was determined by his own individual fate of being in the store at the time of the robbery. However, when confronted with questions regarding the perceptions of others, the strict individual determinism demonstrated by the participants in the beginning of the discussion rapidly broke down. These questions include:

- 1) What about the people that are testifying and saying he was part of it?
- 2) How would you feel if you were the wife of the drug store owner?
- 3) Was it the society that created the monster or was it the monster that created the society?

In the wake of this collapse, a discussion arose surrounding the recognition of identity as a socially constructed mechanism, and thus, a disruption of the commonplace in which the

student's initial perceptions and understandings were shaken by new information. Consider the following excerpt:

2.88) Teacher: Alright, no problem. Well it obviously is disturbing to Steve to be called a monster, what does it mean that he chose to name his book monster? What does that tell us? What does that mean?

2.89) Darion: I think that's his own view of himself.

2.90) D'ana: Right, he thinks that's what other people think of him, like, his attorney Ms O'Brien, she probably thinks he's guilty, and then the other district attorney Petrochelli... obviously the name had an effect on him, to name his movie that.

2.91) Darion: It's like a different person, like, monster is probably the person he thinks sitting in the cell, and Steve is probably the person he thinks when he is sitting at home with his family.

2.92) Teacher: That's interesting. What do you think Jalynn?

2.93) Jalynn: Yeah, like, when he looks in the mirror in the book, he says that he doesn't recognize himself, so when he's in jail he thinks he's a monster.

2.94) Teacher: So, do you think... there's several people who are using the word monster. There is the prosecuting attorney calling him a monster, the judge is calling him a monster, and he himself is calling himself a mon....

2.95) Jahmyia: Everyone around him is calling him monster, so, now that's what he thinks of himself as because... because... his minds on to like somewhere else. His mind is on so many things that the name that they callin him is going to sink into his mind, so he's like... his... his... his point of view to hisself is he's a mon...well, they keep calling him a monster so, he's like, am I a monster, and like he's like questioning himself.

In this section of transcript, the teacher and the students worked together in order to determine the various ways in which an individual's identity is constructed. In line 2.91 Darion wrestles with the main character's identity crisis. He recognizes that there are two opposing identities in play together; one that is created by the main character based of his life experiences

and one that is created by society's perception of him based on the situation that he is in.

Jahmyia addresses the same duality again in line 2.95 and even specifically refers to "his point of view" of himself. Luke (2000) notes that this type of investigation into identity development is a key tenant of critical literacy, and the ways in which students disrupted their initial notions of identity determination when confronted with questions regarding the power and use of language by people deemed powerful in society clearly demonstrates a disruption of the commonplace. Although they are unaware of the implications, by merely entertaining the notion that an individual's identity can be determined by outside forces the participants are exposing an unequal distribution of power in which the dominant culture holds sway over the existential experience of the marginalized individual. While the exact nature of the relationship between an individual's identity and society's perception remains undetermined at this point in the discussion, the ways in which the students analyzed the power of language to determine how it shapes identity (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) demonstrates the existence of rudimentary critical analysis.

"Snitches Get Stitches"- Using Culture and Personal Experience to Interpret a Text

With little doubt, the single greatest analytical tool that was brought to this action research study by the participants was their ability to make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. The participants in this study readily made connections to other books they have read, stories from their own lives, and situations which have confronted them as residents of an urban area which faces the typical urban struggles with violence in the community.

Consider the following examples from the transcripts:

1.31) Jalynn: It's a lot like real life. I think it's kind of like real life.

1.35) Jahmyia: That's like my cousin, he um, these dudes was trying to rob a gas station and they tried to rob this white boy, but my cousin was in the gas station and he got caught for lookin out but he really wasn't a look out.

2.67) Jahmyia: Yeah, from like shooting it. Like that girl when she got shot in the face (local crime), when the guy was riding by on the bike he shot a girl in the face. I think it was gang related to get him into the gang, because in some gangs you have to shoot somebody or rob somebody to get in the gang. I think that was gang related. This seems like the same situation to me because like Steve, he didn't want to be the look out but he wanted to at the same time, he probably was doing it to get respect.

Through the use of these connections, they were able to engage in the multiple perspective and sociopolitical dimensions of critical literacy by using the culture in which they live and their personal experiences to aid their interpretation of the text.

Perhaps most interesting was their discussion of the reasons that the main character may have done what he did. Among other things, this revealed an interesting duality in their understanding. In previous portions of the discussion, the students had confidently proclaimed the innocence of the main character and stated that he should just tell the truth, but once he was on trial for allegedly committing the crime they scrapped the cries of innocence and began to question the reasons he may have potentially participated in the crime. In the process they grappled with the reality of self-preservation versus potential repercussions from larger social forces. Consider the following excerpt from the transcripts:

2.55) Darion: I feel like he would be confused, the way he's like stuck in the middle or something

2.56) Teacher: Stuck in the middle of what?

2.57) Darion: Like, should he tell on his friends to get himself out, or should he

not and like help them out by letting them go free. But really, he didn't shoot nobody.

2.58) Jahmyia: Snitches get stitches.

2.59) Teacher: So that's an interesting thing you two just brought up. This idea of like, what do I do...snitches get stitches.

2.60) Olesha: If he snitched he just snitched, that's what everybody else did. Everybody else on the stand, they just testified so they could get out of it.

2.61) Teacher: What about those other guys?

2.62) Kevin: They think they're cool by what they're doing.

2.63) Teacher: There's definitely a divide between these characters. You have these guys that seem like career criminals....

2.64) Kevin: Steve is trying to be cool with them, that's the difference between them, they're trying to get, trying to connect to each other, but maybe he could do something else, they say lets rob something, he say like, I don't feel like it but he's doing it so he could get by

2.65) Jahmyia: I think like, like, like some people would do stuff stupid to make them look cool. So, like some people would go to jail to make them self look cool so that then they get out and they are like man I went to jail, even if they only went there for one day, so, and then, if they do like go upstate or something then they be like crying. And that's kind of like Steve's position, but it's not like the same thing.

2.66) Teacher: Is there a culture of respect for those who go to jail. Is that how you get street cred?

2.67) Jahmyia: Yeah, from like shooting it. Like that girl when she got shoot in the face, when the guy was riding by on the bike he shot a girl in the face. I think it was gang related to get him into the gang, because in some gangs you have to shoot somebody or rob somebody to get in the gang. I think that was gang related. This seems like the same situation to me because like Steve, he didn't want to be the look out but he wanted to at the same time, he probably was doing it to get respect.

In this excerpt, the students have interrogated multiple perspectives by moving away from their original proclamations of innocence and identifying a crucial component of critical literacy: the silencing of the individual's voice by larger social forces. In line 2.64 Kevin directly states that "Steve is trying to be cool with them" and the reason that he went along with the plan was "so he could get by." In line 2.67 Jahmyia offers similar analysis when she states, "He didn't want to be the lookout but he wanted to at the same time, he probably was doing it to get respect." In each of these examples the discussion is no longer based on using the power of language to tell the truth; rather, in this portion of the transcript the students have shifted positions to one where the main character is now guilty but they offer reasons why he may have done it. As they make this shift they are interrogating multiple perspectives and sociopolitical issues by reading with a critical stance which McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) define as using their "background knowledge to understand the relationship between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text" (p.53). Without modeling or direct instruction in the techniques of critical analysis, lines 2.64 and 2.67 indicate that both students have in effect problematized the relationship between the individual and larger cultural forces and exposed the ways in which one's voice can be silenced by powerful cultural pressure.

Do Something – The Recognition of Power and Social Action

Throughout all of our discussions, the students readily engaged in proposing social action, thereby making the fourth dimension of critical literacy the most common identified in this action research project. Here again, the ability of the students to make text-to-world connections opened a space for the participants to connect their existential experience with ideas in the book and position themselves as active agents of change in the community. The following

excerpt of transcript was taken from a discussion of the ways in which our local community polices the areas where crimes similar to those in *Monster* are frequently occurring.

2.71) Darion: The cameras on the street are not helping. Because most streets like Hudson, they have a lot of cameras on the street and they are not helping. They probably see them but they don't really come over to actually stop them.

2.72) Jahmyia: These cameras could like really see like the moving objects, like cars when they move so that when they see it they like, they wouldn't be there at the time but they could like get there and then they will see their license plate number but like that, it's not for like shootings and stuff. I don't know what, but they should make something like that for shootings. Then if something goes on like a robbery, but I don't think it's there for that.

2.73) Teacher: Well what can we do as a community then? If we live here and you're saying the cameras don't work, what would be some ideas then ...

2.74) Jahmyia: Make our own cameras and put them on stores

2.75) Jalynn: Undercover cops

2.76) Teacher: Undercover cops?

2.77) D'ana: Yeah like have undercover cops patrol the streets that have the most violence. I mean some cops won't even go near the areas, it's like, that's just creating more problems, if you're not gonna stop it, you're just letting people die, so what's the point. Have undercover cops patrol the areas

2.78) Jahmyia: And the cops try to act like they are doing something when they're really not, and we know they're not, but it's like making it seem like they trying to do the best they can, and if they was trying to do the best they can then they would have more cameras to secure the streets. Like on the old street that I used to live on, they used to like have cops there like 24/7, but now, now, like for all these bad streets around here, they don't have cops there and that's wrong.

In this section of transcript, a text-to-world connection made by a student launched a discussion of ways in which socially powerful institutions, the police force in this particular instance, are misusing their power and thereby making themselves complicit in the actions they are allegedly working against. Here again, the mere recognition of the authority of a police force

over the actions of the individual points to the ability of the students to recognize that power is derived from larger social institutions, but rather than accepting the status quo, the students are calling for social action. As D'ana states in line 2.77 from the excerpt above, "If you're not gonna stop it you're just letting people die." In line 2.71 Darion reflects upon the ineffectiveness of a local effort to install cameras in areas of the city where crimes are frequently occurring. Using his comment as a springboard, Jahmyia suggests that citizens should install their own cameras in line 2.74 and Jalynn suggests that the use of undercover police officers in the area may be an effective solution in line 2.75. Their ability to reflect upon the situation and suggest actions to act accordingly is praxis in its most basic form and exemplifies the goal of transformational education and critical literacy. As inner-city urban children, these students are members of a traditionally marginalized social class that is disproportionately affected by the types of violence depicted in *Monster*, yet these excerpts indicate that they are entering their formative years with the ability to recognize the sources of social power and the courage to believe in the power of the individual to change their existential experience.

Implications and Conclusions

The children in this study demonstrated that middle school students are entering the classroom with rudimentary, even if unknown or unnamed, critical literacy skills. It is these skills which may potentially hold the key to a truly transformative education, social progress, and an improved existential experience. As it currently stands, the school district where this study took place graduates less than fifty percent of high school students in four years. Clearly the system in place is not meeting the needs of these children and therefore helping to minimize their chances to enter their adult life with the tools required to become active agents of change.

Providing the support and space required to develop these basic skills into a unified analytical framework that not only allows but supports agentic changes may hold the key to unlocking the chains of marginalization for these children and other inner-city urban school children who face similar marginalized conditions.

The greatest hurdle in the completion of this study was the student's unfamiliarity with the level and types of discussion that evoke such critical thought about a topic. In the beginning, the students were noticeably uncomfortable with the types of questions that surfaced; however, as we continued to work together in a manner which afforded them the freedom to think, feel, and say what they wanted they began to believe they could do it and things opened up. If this study were to be completed again, I would expose the students to the four dimension model and scaffold their use of it with shorter pieces of text prior to navigating such a difficult and complex text. It seemed at times that they were overwhelmed by both the level of the reading and the depth of the discussion. As I intentionally withheld this information in an effort to identify what each student was bringing to the discussion without guided support, their level of discomfort was directly related to my decision to begin the study without discussing the four dimension model. In hindsight, this condition inadvertently placed pressure on me to be the impetus behind large portions of our discussions.

While these conditions certainly represent a limitation to the study, I do not believe it nullifies or negates the data that was collected. These children clearly demonstrated that they are capable of participating in dialogic discourse about pressing social issues and generating plausible, and implementable, changes that would directly affect their experience as citizens and human beings. This exemplifies praxis and highlights the liberatory and transformative power of

critical literacy to advance social progress. Perhaps more important, the impetus for social change demonstrated by these children is derived from their own construction of knowledge and understandings as well as with their personal experiences with oppression and marginalization. As Freire (1971) notes, true transformative social action must be generated from the class of the oppressed rather than being instituted by the dominant social structures if it is to shape lasting change. Not only do these children have the capacity to be critically literate, but as their teachers, it should be our responsibility to foster the development of the skills showcased by these students. The world is full of people with good ideas; however, there are very few who actually believe they have the power to implement change and this condition is a travesty. Rather than homogenizing and standardizing what it means to be, perhaps we should be looking for ways to open space for individuals to be the change they want in the world. Only then will we as teachers stop being oppressors who promote the agenda of the strongest cultural forces and become intellectual leaders who inspire all students to not only dream big but stop at nothing to achieve.

References:

- Behrman, E. (2008). Teaching about language, power, and text: A review of classroom practices that support critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49(6), 490-498.
- Block, A. (1994). Marxism in Eductaion. In R. Martusewicz & W. Reynolds (Eds.), *Inside out: Contemporary critical perspectives in education* (pp.61-78). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (1990). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural contexts. *Prospects*, 5(3), 7-16.
- Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th Anniversary Ed.). New York: Continuum.
- Jones, S., & Clarke, L. (2007). Disconnections: Pushing readers beyond connections and toward the critical. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 2(2), 95-115.
- Larson, J., & Marsh, J. (2005). *Making literacy real: Theories and practices for learning and teaching*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Leland, C., & Harste, J. (2000). Critical literacy: Enlarging the space of the possible. *Primary Voices K-6*, 9(2), 3-7.
- Lewison, M., Flint., A, & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 382-392.
- Lewison, M., Leland, C., & Harste, J. (2008). *Creating critical classrooms: K-8 reading and writing with an edge*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Loewen, J. (1996). *Lies my teacher told me*. Carmichael, CA: Touchstone Books.

- Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 43(5), 448-461.
- Martusewicz, R., & Reynolds, W. (Eds.). (1994). *Inside out: Cotemporary critical perspectives in education*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- McLaughlin, M., & DeVogd, G. (2004). Critical literacy as comprehension: Expanding reader response. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48(1), 52-62.
- Mendelman, L. (2007). Critical thinking and reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 51(4), 300-302.
- Mills, G.E. (2007). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher* (3rd Ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson.
- Nieto, S. (2005). Social justice in hard times: Celebrating the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 7(1), 3-7.
- O'Quinn, E. (2006). Critical literacy in democratic education: Responding to sociopolitical tensions in U.S. schools. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49(4), 260-267.
- Rogers, R. (2007). A case study of teaching for literacy acceleration within a critical literacy framework: Reconstructing pedagogical approaches. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 2(4), 233-249.