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# Critical Literacy with Young Adult Literature and Students' Perception of Race: A Study of How Critical Literacy with YAL affects the way Students Perceive and Talk about Race

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# Critical Literacy with Young Adult Literature and Students' Perception of Race: A Study of How Critical Literacy with YAL affects the way Students Perceive and Talk about Race

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The research question that led this study is how do students perceive race through using critical literacy when reading young adult literature? Qualitative and quantitative methods were used through interviews, collecting student work, and an audio recording of a critical literacy lesson. Three themes emerged: participants believe police brutality is unjust, and mostly against blacks; reading YAL about racism, with critical literacy is an engaging learning experience; and participants think that racism is when a group has more power over another. Three implications emerged from the data: YAL is engaging to students and promotes learning; race should be discussed in the classroom; and critical literacy can be used to promote social justice.

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Critical Literacy with Young Adult Literature and Students' Perception of Race:  
A Study of How Critical Literacy with YAL affects the way Students Perceive and Talk about  
Race

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Supervised by

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### Abstract

The research question that led this study is how do students perceive race through using critical literacy when reading young adult literature? Qualitative and quantitative methods were used through interviews, collecting student work, and an audio recording of a critical literacy lesson. Three themes emerged: participants believe police brutality is unjust, and mostly against blacks; reading YAL about racism, with critical literacy is an engaging learning experience; and participants think that racism is when a group has more power over another. Three implications emerged from the data: YAL is engaging to students and promotes learning; race should be discussed in the classroom; and critical literacy can be used to promote social justice.

**Critical Literacy with Young Adult Literature and Students' Perception of Race:  
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about Race**

In today's society people think racism no longer exists. There are many communities and school districts that forbid or feel uncomfortable with the discussion of race. Without the discussion and learning of race and peoples' differences, biases and prejudices occur. If teachers are not the ones to educate and promote social justice, then who will? When white students are not exposed to differences it is hard to just have a conversation about it, young adult literature is a conversation starter. It also provides real life experiences that people of different races experience and real life experiences that many young adults encounter on a daily basis. Huang and Kowalick (2014) say these texts help readers in many ways by stating, "they help readers identify cultural heritages, understand sociological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations, and explain imagination and creativity" (p. 16). Discussion of race allows for participants to learn more about each other. Bringing in young adult literature about racism allows for these learning experiences to happen, but sometimes these texts bring a wide range of emotions in the classroom. Fishman and McCarthy (2016) find a lot of assumptions being exposed when diving into these texts. Assumptions are conversation starters. Many people have assumptions and biases, and these assumptions and biases are often never confronted or interrogated by students from the dominant culture as they represent the status quo of the larger society. Young adult literature targets these assumptions and inspires people to think differently or challenge their assumptions and biases. Young adult literature is a resource to use in the classroom to spike conversations around these topics that many people feel uncomfortable discussing. YAL has the power to generate discourse between language participants of varied race, cultures, and belief systems within the classroom. This research will be focused around the

topic of students' perception of race through critical literacy while reading a young adult literature book about racism.

Many school districts' curriculums do not allow room for or incorporate diverse books in the classroom. Often times school teachers' hands are tied when it comes to choosing books in the classroom. When curriculums lack diverse literature, educators find it hard for all students to relate to the current literature. When students are not relating to the current literature in the everyday classroom instruction comprehension and gaining interest in the literature may not happen. YAL can be a powerful tool that can influence students' perceptions. It is important for students to read a variety of literature to broaden their knowledge of the differences in the world and limit their prejudices and biases. The lack of YAL contributes, but is not limited to the pressing social issues in today's society (racism and prejudice). This topic is important because students even in a very rural community, that is not diverse, still need to learn about the differences in the world to be prepared to interact with different people after grade school.

If conversations around race is not explored students are lacking the opportunity to experience people of other races. The people who suffer from this are the people of different races that have the prejudices and biases against them, as well as the young adults who have not been exposed to different races. Without being able to explore and talk about race, people usually have the preconceptions that were passed down from their families and friends.

Feeling comfortable as an educator, to talk about race and differences is crucial. Educators have to be able to accept and talk about topics they may not agree or feel comfortable about. Dong (2005) mentions that teachers need to reflect on their own race, culture, and ethnicity, and their respect for others whose race, culture, and ethnicity differ from their own in order to be ready to teach using young adult literature that portrays racism. It is hard to promote

cultural diversity, social justice and the acceptance of differences in the classroom when the teacher has their own biases. It is important for teachers who use young adult literature to talk about differences and to be aware of biases and not accept prejudices in the classroom. Young adult literature is a vehicle to promote talking about race. When students can read books about topics they can relate to or understand, because it connects to something in their life, they will be willing to discuss the topics more. It may be hard at first for readers to relate to another race, but through critical literacy and conversations it opens up another whole world. When students are more attracted to what they are reading more comprehension is happening, allowing for the critical literacy component to be successful as well.

Using critical literacy, while reading young adult literature, is a vehicle that drives important conversations about race in the classroom. Evans (2010) states that it is essential for students to critically think about a multicultural text and have conversations in order for students to change beliefs and their own biases. But she does mention that there is a heightened awareness and increased empathy to other students and the more students gained knowledge of different cultures, they gained respect not only for people of different cultures, but respect for themselves. Young adult literature promotes critical thinking and allows for conversations to emerge in the classroom around topics that some students may feel uncomfortable talking about. This research will study how reading young adult literature and using critical literacy influences students' perceptions of race. This study will also discover how students talk about race and how conversations occur after reading YAL around that topic.

The research question that led this study is how do students perceive race through using critical literacy when reading young adult literature? Literacy is a social practice and learning and perceptions occur throughout discussions around literature. The theories that supported this

research include the critical race theory and the critical literacy Theory. The central argument of the critical race theory is the idea of how race and racism impact society and that students of color come with cultural deficiencies (Yosso, 2005). The theory's approach is to educate schools about the strengths that communities of color have. The study incorporated introducing white students to people of color and find out their reactions or perceptions. The critical literacy theory is a synthesis of four dimensions. The dimensions include disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. Critical literacy is a gateway to engaging readers in difficult conversations about topics that they may not feel comfortable discussing without being exposed to young adult literature that exposes these topics. Literature around this research question was synthesized into three themes: critical literacy with young adult literature, students' conversations about race, and teachers' role in talking about race. Critical literacy with young adult literature is important to incorporate in the classroom to ensure that students are reading diverse young adult literature and thinking critically about it. It is also important that students are having conversations about race; it allows students to get a better understanding about the differences in the world. Teachers also play an important role in talking about race because they set up a comfortable learning environment and nudge students to have these conversations. The study took place in a rural school district in upstate New York. It took place in a fifth grade classroom with six student participants, four parents, and three teachers. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected through interviews, student work samples and observations. After collecting the data and analyzing it three findings were discussed: participants believed police brutality is unjust, unfair, and mostly against blacks; reading young adult literature about racism, when using critical literacy is an engaging learning experience; and participants think that racism is when a

group has more power over another and that it's mostly common with whites against blacks. The implications of this study were young adult literature is engaging to students and promotes learning and discussions; race and racism should be discussed in the classroom; and critical literacy can be used to promote social justice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Before discussing the importance of talking about race and using critical literacy in the classroom, it is significant to first discuss the definition of literacy. Literacy has been defined in many ways by different theorists, a few of those theorists are Kucer (2009), Gee (1989), and Freebody and Luke (1990). Kucer (2009) defines literacy as being able to successfully, competently, and simultaneously control the linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions of written language in an organized way. This definition means that a person who is successful in literacy needs to be able to control the linguistics, the thought process about what is written or spoken to you, and the impact or importance of the literature, know how language impacts society or culture, and compose sentences and thoughts around literature successfully and meaningfully. Gee (1989) believes that literacy is made up of different discourses, which is relevant to the understanding of literacy. Gee believes that one has a primary discourse and a secondary discourse. According to Gee, a primary discourse is how one identifies their self. A secondary discourse is where one adapts their literacy skills to meet the norms of school, work, or other places than home. Code switching allows people to switch between the two discourses; some teachers refer code switching as how people should talk in school compared to how they talk at home. Literacy plays a very important role in our personal lives, our community membership and in national development. According to Freebody and Luke (1990) literacy is a multifaceted set of social practices, with a material technology,

entailing code breaking, participating with the knowledge of the text, social uses of text, and analysis or critique of the text. Furthermore, literacy is everywhere and students will encounter literacy through holding conversations about literature. As teachers, we should prepare students to be able to socially respond to different types of literature around different points of view of sociopolitical issues. (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Overall literacy enables readers and writers to successfully hold conversations about text and write about text.

Discussing race in the classroom through literature is important. One theory that supports the talk about race is the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and will be used to guide this study. Yosso's (2005) central argument about the Critical Race Theory is focused on challenging the way race and racism impact society and that students of color come with cultural deficiencies. Yosso also mentions that this theory draws on the knowledges that Students of Color are associated with from their homes and communities, as well as what they are able to bring into the classroom. The Critical Race Theory approach is to educate schools about the multiple strengths that Communities of Color have. Yosso mentions that Dubois (1903-1989) had predicted that racism would continue to emerge as one of the United States' key social problems. As a result of the CRT Yosso (2005) mentions that "schools most often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help 'disadvantaged' students whose race and class background has left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities, and cultural capital" (p. 70). Five tenants of the CRT have been identified. The first one is the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination. In this first tenant the CRT states that the premise of race and racism are central, endemic, permanent, and a fundamental part of defining and explaining the ways in which society functions within the United States. The second tenant is the challenge to dominant ideology. In this tenant the CRT challenges white privilege, they challenge the notions of

objective research and expose deficit research that silences, ignores, and distorts epistemologies of People of Color. The third tenant is the commitment to social justice. The CRT is dedicated to social justice and works towards the elimination of racism, sexism, poverty, as well as the empowerment of People of Color and other subordinated groups. The fourth tenant of the CRT is the centrality of experiential knowledge. In this tenant the CRT “recognizes that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). The fifth and last tenant of the CRT is the transdisciplinary perspective. In this tenant the CRT “goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to analyze race and racism within both historical and contemporary contexts” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). The CRT allows people to hear the voices of others and become empowered participants as well as allow outsiders to value the voices and presence of people of color.

The Critical Race Theory connects to the research topic about how students perceive race through reading young adult literature and engaging in critical literacy in many ways. One way it connects to the research topic is that student participants who are reading *All American Boys* will be challenging their views and other people's views on racism and they will investigate and interrogate how racism affects people of color in their daily lives and in society. Additionally, this research will teach students how students of color are disadvantaged and encourage them to talk about how to promote equality and social justice. Students in this study will work to achieve the five tenants when engaging in a critical literacy lesson. In this study student participants will become more aware of how people of color live.

The second theory that will guide this study is critical literacy. Critical literacy is a vehicle for driving conversations around race in the classroom. According to Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) critical literacy has been synthesized into four dimensions and it is

conceptualized as seeing the world through a new lens. The dimensions include disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. Critical literacy drives the conversation around race using YAL as a tool. One dimension is disrupting the commonplace. Disrupting the commonplace is a great way to initiate talk about race through young adult literature. It asks the reader how the text is trying to position them as a reader. It problematizes all subjects of the study, questioning their existing understanding of the content as well as interrogating the point of view of the texts and their own views. Lewison, Flint, and Sluys say that when teachers take on this dimension they are becoming an activist towards their roles and responsibilities as educators in the classroom to critique all sides of the literature. In addition, another dimension of critical literacy is interrogating multiple viewpoints. To interrogate multiple viewpoints, teachers ask the reader whose voices are heard in the YAL and whose are missing. It includes paying attention and seeking out the voices of those who have been silenced and making the differences visible to the reader. Questions to ask the reader would be asking how the scenario would be different in the story if the character was a different race or a different gender. Furthermore, the third dimension according to Lewison, Flint, and Sluys is focused on sociopolitical issues. This dimension takes the literature and goes beyond it while attempting to understand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong, as in, what is going on in society that is recent? This dimension also challenges unquestioned justice of unequal power in relationships. It redefines literacy as a form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society and as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance. The final dimension of critical literacy from Lewison, Flint, and Sluys is taking action and promoting social justice. Taking action and promoting social justice is done through engaging praxis, where the readers

are reflecting on the social, cultural, and political aspect of the literature and taking action upon the world in order to transform it. In this dimension students are using language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question practices of privilege and injustices. In this dimension students are also analyzing how language is used to maintain domination, how nondominant groups can gain access to dominant forms of language and culture, how diverse forms of language can be used as cultural resources, and how social action can change existing discourses. Critical literacy is the key to engaging readers in conversation about difficult topics that may not have come up without reading a piece of literature focused solely on that difficult topic.

The Critical Literacy Theory will be used during this study on how students perceive race through reading young adult literature and engaging in a critical literacy lesson. The students will take part in a critical literacy lesson based on the book *All American Boys*. The book is about an African American who gets accused of stealing a bag of chips and this is beaten by a white cop. During this lesson students will respond and engage with three different dimensions out of four of a critical literacy lesson. Students will start off the lesson by having the commonplace disrupted, then they will have an interrogation of multiple viewpoints of the characters, and then they will close the lesson by learning about sociopolitical issues. This critical literacy lesson will provide opportunities to how students respond to a critical view of the literature and discuss any biases or prejudices that they have.

### **Research Question**

Given that literacy is a social practice and learning and perceptions occur during discussion through critical literacy with the use of young adult literature, this action research

project asks, with the use of critical literacy how do students perceive and talk about race through young adult literature?

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In the following literature review a synthesis of three separate themes will be presented. The first theme shows how critical literacy connects with literature. Critical literacy is a vehicle for students to think analytically about a text. Critical literacy challenges the reader to look at the text through multiple viewpoints and answer questions that disrupt the common piece. Critical literacy is a great way to also promote social justice in the classroom. The second theme depicts different ways that students talk about race when responding to literature. The way students talk about race and respond to texts varies greatly. There are many positives that come out of these conversations, but there are also many complications that can occur along the way. The last theme that will be discussed in this literature review analyzes how teachers implement strategies to talk about race with their students. Some teachers do not do it at all, some struggle with the idea of it, and some teachers excel and work towards and feel strongly about having students talk about race in the classroom. The following literature review was a result in researching about the questions how students perceive race through reading young adult literature and engaging in critical literacy. Young adult literature has the power to generate discourse between language participants of varied race, cultures, and belief systems within the classroom.

### **Critical Literacy with Young Adult Literature**

With our rapidly diverse society growing it is important that students are reading diverse young adult literature and thinking critically about it. In the critical literacy theory many

important concepts came up involving critical literacy including what critical literacy is, the importance of critical literacy in the classroom, and a few ways on how to promote critical literacy in the classroom.

Critical literacy is a way to get more involved with literature. Park (2012) believes that critical literacy involves challenging the notion of the text and creates space for a range of student responses and interpretations of the text. Critical literacy allows readers to recognize the social and cultural contexts in which reading takes place. In other words, critical literacy is a way to challenge the belief of the text and hold deeper conversations around the social and cultural concepts apparent in the literature. In like manner, Davilla (2011) states that critical literacy practices are cultivated from what students are saying and doing in their conversations. Critical literacy stems from the conversations that are held around literature in the classroom.

Comparatively, Park (2012) states that even though teachers of literature must encourage students to wonder what the text means, they must challenge and support students responses through critical literacy and depict what their responses say about them as readers and human beings located in terms of race, class, gender, and age. When teachers challenge students' beliefs and depict what their responses say about them as a human being prejudices and biases start to shine through. Having these critical conversations in the classroom allows students to take a deeper look at their own belief and challenges them to become more accepting of others.

Moreover, Wilson and Laman (2012) have their own belief about what critical literacy is. Wilson and Laman state that critical literacy is about creating opportunities for looking at how texts and images are constructed and constructive, as well as creating opportunities for critical conversations. Creating opportunity for critical conversations provides students with learning opportunities to learn about the prejudices, beliefs, or thoughts about certain people of color.

Equally as important, Park (2012) suggests that critical reading is not just reading the text for a literal comprehension, but reading and understanding the world, and that critical reading suggests that reading can be most relevant and powerful if individuals explore the words they are reading and the world they live in. Sometimes when reading, students read to just understand the text, and leave out critical thought and deeper understanding. Equally important Jones (2006) mentions that critical literacy is a lens that reads the world from the perspective that language, power, and identities are inextricably linked. To reiterate what Jones says, when thinking critically about a piece of literature, you cannot have critical literacy without thinking about different perspectives of language, power, or identities, because they are inseparable.

Critical literacy with focus on race is important to incorporate in the classroom. Epstein and Gist (2016) believe that a critical focus on race provides opportunities to understand how power and privilege operate among and within racialized lens. Understanding how power and privilege operate among people of color allows students to further understand how prejudices and biases among races occur; it may also lead to social justice and acceptance of others in the classroom. In like manner Kumar (2014) found it important that through analyzing different aspects of the literature and critical literacy, it can promote empowerment and social justice in the classroom. Social justice in the classroom minimizes the acts of racism. Social justice in the classroom will then lead to social justice outside of the classroom and into the world. Similarly Kim (2015) mentions critical literacy discussions about race help young children avoid stereotypical interpretations of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. Students come to the classroom already with prejudices and biases about people who are of different color of them; promoting critical literacy around race in the classroom is beneficial. Davilla (2011) makes a strong point that when teachers leave out critical discussion around literature prejudices may be

inadvertently reinforced. If conversations around race are shut down, students may come to think that their prejudices or biases are okay.

Promoting critical conversations around race in the classroom is beneficial. Kim (2015) also mentions that disrupting the commonplace in critical literacy helps young children develop positive attitudes toward racial, ethnic, and cultural diversities. When differences are discussed students start to feel more welcoming and accepting to students that are of different color than themselves. Disrupting the common place has students look at the situation in the story and have students develop a desire to promote social justice for each race. By the same token, Glenn (2012) states that when students reflect on counter-narratives told by people of different races it can provide space and time for readers to disrupt or interrupt the existing discourses that serve to marginalize communities and people of color in their negative, deficit-oriented portrayals. Disrupting the commonplace involves problematizing all subjects of the study. Allowing this conversation provides students with opportunities to see how people of color different than their own are treated differently. Moreover, Kim (2015) says that critical conversations in the classroom around literacy promote social justice, human rights, cultural diversity, and equal opportunity. Some students may never have the chance to share their own beliefs or understand different races if they never have these conversations. Some students may also not even know that their own beliefs are hurtful because that is how they are raced or that is the belief they only know and recognize from family or friends around them. Furthermore, Flynn (2012) states that when teaching critically about literature, it focuses on structural analysis of unequal power of relationships, and analyzes the role of institutionalized inequities, including, but not necessarily limited to racism. Allowing students to have these critical conversations around literature based on race, in the classroom it helps to limit the idea of having more power over another race. In

like manner, Lewis and Tierney (2013) mention that critical literacy in the classroom is important to understanding how students transform signs to take up issues related to social justice. If it is not learned in the classroom it is probably not being learned or talked about at home. It is important to engage in critical conversations about literature involving race in the classroom.

There are many ways to incorporate and practice critical literacy in the classroom. Park (2012) mentions that when students are critically thinking or reading a text in the classroom it can mean speaking back to written texts and considering questions such as, who wrote the text, for whom, and in what context? When students are answering these questions and looking at the text with a critical perspective, it allows them to think in a different way about the text. Equally important, Epstein and Gist (2016) believe that successful teachers promote young adults critical consciousness by teaching students to critique and challenge racism, sexism, and other forms of inequality. When teachers challenge students' beliefs they are promoting critical literacy. When trying to promote critical literacy Jones (2006) presented ideas to incorporate in the classroom. Jones mentions that questions to consider when thinking critically about literature are; what is the text doing to me, whose interests does the text serve, how might the text read differently had it been constructed from a different perspective? When asking these questions students take a critical look at the literature and are able to better understand the different prejudices and biases of race.

When students are thinking critically about literature, it provides for many opportunities for students to learn about the differences of race and it helps promote social justice in the classroom. If critical conversations about race in literature are neglected in the classroom

students may think that their prejudices or biases are okay. There are also many dimensions to promoting critical literacy in the classroom.

### **Student Conversations about Race**

Talking about race is the vehicle that drives students understanding about the differences in the world. Too often in the classroom students spend too much time reading alone, taking computerized tests, and not engaging in authentic dialogue with peers (Wilson & Laman, 2007). When students are reading alone and lack any interaction with someone else about a text, it can limit the possibilities of their comprehension. Wilson and Laman also mention simply having books that talk about different races is simply not enough. Students must be engaging in conversation around these texts with other students in the classroom. It is important to have these texts in the classroom to help students understand social issues, but the importance from these texts comes from the deep conversations students have around them.

There are many positives that come out of students having conversations about race when reading young adult literature. Flynn (2012) points out that when students of color have the chance to share their experiences with racism it gives them a voice and opportunity to maybe change someone else's prejudices about them. When students of color have the chance to discuss their side of living as someone of color, they have real life examples to share to those students who are white. In like manner, Davilla (2011) comments that through day-to-day engagements and group conversations between teachers and students social justice can be enacted in the classroom. Through these conversations around literature, it challenges, confronts, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, class, gender, and other social and human difference. It is beneficial when

students get to discuss different stories and life experiences of people of color. White students become more aware of how people of color are treated, and become more accepting of them. Moreover, Glenn (2012) depicts how having conversation around racism is positive by stating that the use of counter-narratives with students in kindergarten through twelfth grade has shown a promise in helping students of color find connection and meaning in their reading, and the narratives help students in the construction of sophisticated understandings of narratives that situate characters as participants in a highly racialized society. When literature is brought into the classroom that discusses many different realistic events that people encounter it helps students of color relate to their own race and teach other students about their race. It also provides white students the realization of the racism that still thrives today, where as many students may think that it does not exist at all anymore. Wilson and Laman (2007) connect to the ideas of Glenn about how beneficial it is to have discussion about race in the classroom by stating that if a student comments something that the other students are not thinking, it opens up opportunities for the students to take on multiple perspectives of characters and allows them to think differently about the events in the literature. Students who are of different race, that have conversations about race together, allow them to learn from each other and see perspectives from each other's point of view. Furthermore, Flynn (2012) mentions that talking about race is an opportunity to educate others, it is an eye opening, real, and powerful experience. It is important to have a diverse group of students when discussing literature that involves characters of different race, making sure that many perspectives are noticed. Students of different race that come together bring for many perspectives in the classroom. Correspondingly, Davilla (2011) mentions that when students add comments when talking about race it is a good source of illumination to challenge, confront, and disrupt and critically think about racism. Talking about

race disrupts the prejudices and biases that already occur and lead to creating social justice in a classroom.

When students of different races come together and discuss the issues of racism and discover prejudices and biases of the different races it creates great change in the way people think. In fact, Wilson & Laman (2007) acknowledge that reading, talking, and creating meaning together amongst students is a valuable aid to expand on the thinking and understanding of the perspective of others. Talking amongst one another enhances ones knowledge and also challenges their own perspectives. Furthermore, Polleck (2010) suggests that teaching and having conversations about race around YAL can enhance literacy, personal, and social growth. All in all, having conversations about race around literature is beneficial and a great learning experience. Equally important, Glenn (2012) reports that when students talk about race they come to better understand their own racialized identities and how each student who is talking about race embody and enact whiteness in different ways. Being able to discuss one's own beliefs helps them become more aware of their own biases and prejudices, as well as the way other people think towards different races. Not to mention, Wilson and Laman (2007) declare that talking about literature in the classroom allows for students to connect on a personal level. When students are connecting there are opportunities for them to create relationships with students who may be of different color than themselves, again encouraging social justice in the classroom. These relationships may be a result of the conversations they have in the classroom and may never have had a chance to form without having these conversations. Additionally, Rogers and Mosely (2006) state that reading literature about race offers a more dynamic framework for understanding American racism. Having a dynamic framework has a positive impact on allowing students to gain more knowledge on the different prejudices and biases that

still occur in our American society and allow each different race to gain more respect for each other. Equally important Chaudhri and Teale (2013) claim that when young readers are seeking racial confirmation or looking for information about others that are not like themselves, representations in books can explicitly or subliminally influence understanding of racial identity. Having the opportunity to read books connecting to one's race and being able to talk about the characters in the literature is very beneficial for students who are confused of their own race, and curious as to why people may treat them. Also, Epstein and Gist (2016) believe that when students talk about race it promotes young people's academic knowledge, cultural competence and social agency. People may be uneasy with the idea of talking about race with young adults or even children, but the positive impacts that come out of it are clear. Students being able to become more knowledgeable and understanding of other races in the American society promotes and encourages social justice in the classroom and in their everyday lives.

The positive outcomes may be clear to allow students to discuss literature and race in the classroom, but some students react differently to these conversations. Some students may be reluctant, when others may be willing and eager to talk about race. Riseman and Banerjee (2016) found that white students, when talking about race did express prejudicial views, but they filtered them through various semantic moves or rhetorical constructions to avoid appearing racist. Students may think they are not racist, until these conversations around race occur. Having conversations about race allows students to acknowledge their prejudices and biases and discover where these beliefs have stemmed from. In like manner, Alegria (2016) also finds that white people try to avoid talking about race. Avoidance may stem from feeling uncomfortable about one's own belief or prejudice or unsure of the way others may react in the classroom. Furthermore, Scieurba (2014) believes that race, ethnicity, and/or gender influences students'

abilities to connect with literature. When students are able to connect with the literature that they are reading they are more likely to be willing to discuss different topics that come up. Moreover, Enriquez (2013) states that when students are neglected the opportunity to talk about race reading may become avoided, inhibited, or dismissed. Talk about race may be uncomfortable, but must not be avoided in the classroom. White students, who read literature about African Americans, may be more reluctant to have conversations around the literature and vice versa. Having diverse literature in the classroom that all students can connect to is beneficial to literacy education and increases the critical conversations that go on in the classroom.

Allowing students to talk about race around literature in the classroom is important and have many beneficial outcomes. Rogers and Mosely (2006) claim that conversations about race in literacy research are framed in the language of diversity, multicultural education, culturally relevant education, and multiliteracies. When students are having conversation about race coinciding with literature they are involved in diversity, multicultural education, and culturally relevant education. Moreover, Polleck (2010) mentions that constructing meaning in texts is important, but equally important are the aesthetic responses, when students connect their own experiences to the texts to better understand other people and themselves. A goal is for students to comprehend the literature, but more meaning is taken away when students are able to discuss the literature with others and connect their own life to it. Furthermore, Scirba (2014) emphasizes that we cannot know how students connect with texts unless they tell us and engage in conversations about the literature with others in the classroom. When students discuss the literature, teachers get a better understanding of their comprehension of the literature, but also how they connect on a personal level to the literature as well. Equally important, Boston and Baxley (2007) state that talking about race in literature is used as a catalyst for change and

control. Having conversations about race around literature promotes changes in students beliefs about race, and helps limit prejudices or biases that occur in the classroom, and supports social justice for all students in the classroom.

Although there are many clear positives for students to be discussing race around literature in the classroom, there are problems or complications that occur along the way.

Flynn (2012) agrees that talking about race and racism is not easy, and research shows that it is very challenging for people from white, middle class backgrounds, to talk about race. People feel uncomfortable when it comes to discussing race in the classroom, voices are silenced and some are untrue with what they say. In addition, Alegria (2016) mentions that sometimes students display color-blind race talk, color-blind race talk denies the significance of talking about race and displays racial inequality. Some students may put on a show or not discuss their true beliefs when talking about race, because they are unsure that they have racist beliefs and are worried about what others may think. Comparatively, Thomas (2015) stipulates that conversations about race opened up opportunities for some students to participate while constraining and excluding others. Some students feel more comfortable discussing race, while others feel uncomfortable and less willing to participate, afraid they may say something that is offensive to others, getting some students to participate at first may be challenging. To continue on that thought, Alegria (2016) believes that when white students discuss race they do not understand the moral implications of their words and actions. Some white students may not notice that what they say is hurtful or racist. Sometimes they may just talk before realizing what they say may hurt a student of color's feelings. Moreover, Thomas (2015) claims that when discussing literature students may say things to each other that are inaccurate, intolerant, or offensive, leading to disagreement, and heightened emotions. The comments that students say may be a problem when discussing

race in the classroom, because it may make some students feel that they do not want to participate in the conversation, or they may feel like they are being attacked. Similarly, Alegria (2016) claims that many white students have racist attitudes, when talking about race they can identify racial inequality, but not recognize that their attitudes as being racist. If white students have not participated in many conversations about race or have never had their personal beliefs challenged, they may not know that their words do come off as racist. The conversations are a learning experience for both white students and students of color. In like manner, Thomas (2015) mentions that race talk in schools can be fraught with difficulty, leading to problematic conversations, disconnections, and ultimately student disengagement. Talking about race can be uncomfortable, and these problems may occur, but once students become more aware of their own prejudices and biases, and how we live in a racist society, these conversations may become more beneficial. Correspondingly, Rogers and Mosely (2006) affirm that sometimes when white students are reading and talking about a text they use white talk. White talk is using humor to avoid difficult conversations; they use a passive voice to remove responsibility of talking in a group, and using distancing pronouns and silences, and changing the topic. White students may use white talk because they feel uncomfortable having conversations about race in the classroom. It may be difficult for them to take in that some of their responses to the conversations are racist. When they did not realize that they actually had racist beliefs.

When students read about race it is more beneficial to hold conversations around the topic, than just seeing what they comprehended through a test, but again problems and challenges do occur. Flynn (2012) mentions that when teachers and students talk about race they sometimes struggle to see how whiteness is normalized and how race is relevant to their own lives. Some students and adults do not understand that there is white privilege. That even though

white people may struggle, they still have privileges, which people of color do not. Moreover, Thomas (2015) says that there is significant confusion in contemporary society when it comes to talking about race. This confusion can be that some people think that there is no longer racism, or that people just feel uncomfortable discussing any topics around race. In addition, Rogers and Mosely (2006) also mention that white talk can lead to subtle insults directed toward people of color, often automatically and unconsciously. White students have to be conscious of their words when talking about race in the classroom. They may say things that come out as prejudiced and biased in the classroom without even realizing that their words are offensive. Not to be left out, Scieurba (2014) mentions that when students read about someone who looks like them or shares their racial/ethnic affiliation it is not necessarily enough to make that text significant to them. Conversations in the classroom around race have to occur and not be ignored or shut down, in order for there to be deeper understanding of the racism that still occurs in the American society today.

Students have different preferences to what they read and talk about in the classroom when it comes to race. Mosely and Rogers (2011) found that students who are white prefer characters of the same color as them and would rather discuss these books because they can relate to them. These white students may feel more comfortable discussing and reading about books with characters of the same race as them, but have to understand that students of color feel the same way. On the other hand, Flynn (2012) mentions that some students of color feel great relief when given the opportunity to discuss race in the classroom and read books that they can connect to. There has to be a happy medium where students of color and white students have literature that represents them in the classroom. There also must be a happy medium of the

conversations that occur in the classroom as well giving the white students and students of colors opportunities to share both their insights.

There are many ways that race talk can be promoted in the classroom and hold conversation around race in the classroom when using literature. During Flynn's (2012) study, she found four expectations or agreements that guided her students' discussion around race; stay engaged, experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept nonclosure. When guidelines are set in the classroom it allows for a safe environment where students know the expectations and it creates set guidelines when discussing race around literature. Correspondingly, Enriquez (2013) declares that positive interactions with YAL is not an individual practice, but is grounded within the social contexts in which readers interact with others, the world around them, and the text itself in order to construct meaning. Conversations in the classroom need to be true, but respectful of what is said. It is important to be honest about one's beliefs, but the social context of the classroom, must be a safe community. In addition, Polleck (2010) comments that textual meaning and understanding is best constructed in collaborative forms. Conversations in the classroom need to be collaborative in order to promote understanding. Different students bring different perspectives in the classroom allowing for students to learn from each other. Likewise, Park (2012) claims that readers must be part of a community in which readers engage in dialog between and after the acts of reading. Dialog helps promote deeper understanding and critical thinking in the classroom. When students are engaging in discussion they have more opportunities to gain new and deeper understanding of texts.

Overall, students need to be having conversations around race in the classroom. They need to be having conversations with peers and be able to listen to multiple point of views. It

may be difficult for some students, but it is very beneficial. Students react in many different ways when talking about race, but it gets easier once students come to acceptance with their own beliefs, prejudices, and biases.

### **Teachers' Role in Talking about Race**

Teachers play a very important role when talking about race corresponding with literature in the classroom. Although they play a very important role, some teachers are unprepared and feel uncomfortable talking about race. While at the same time others are facilitating meaningful conversations about race in the classroom.

Research has found that some teachers are prepared to hold discussions about race in the classroom when using literature. Thomas (2015) mentions that when teachers talk about race with students there are six paradoxes that occur, these paradoxes include,

- (a) people do and do not belong to simple racial categorizations;
- (b) race does and does not matter;
- (c) the de-raced words people use when discussing plans for racial equality can actually keep them from discussing ways to make opportunities racially equal;
- (d) the more complex inequality seems to get, the more simplistic inequality analysis seems to become;
- (e) the questions people ask most about race are the very questions they most suppress; and
- (f) although talking in racial terms can make race matter, not talking in racial terms can make race matter too. (p. 156)

Educators have their own craft when discussing race in the classroom, but these six paradoxes are most likely to occur. Moreover, when teachers are holding conversations around race Flynn (2012) claims that teachers need to work with students of color to disrupt systems of white privilege and racism in their classroom, school, and society. When conversations are held in the

classroom with diverse students, it is more likely possible for the group to notice white privilege. Whereas when it is just white students having conversations, they are not really hearing the perspectives of other races or noticing that they do sound racist during conversations. Many great things come out of conversations about race when teachers are fully prepared. Davilla (2011) expresses that when teachers are fully prepared to have uncomfortable conversations and to guide exploratory journeys into their students' ideas, it is possible for those students to transcend hegemonic notions that foster structural inequality and discrimination. The more prepared teachers are the more likely conversations in the classroom will be meaningful. Equally important, Hollingworth (2009) believes that teachers play an important role when talking about race; they balance the need to manage the classroom conversations, and need to create a safe classroom environment, to allow students to fully explore issues of racial inequity through classroom discussion. Teachers can help all students feel comfortable when discussing race, and once a safe classroom environment is created, students can hold the conversations and teachers can take a step back and observe the conversation going on, taking a step back will further allow them to analyze the comprehension of the students. In addition, Thomas (2015) acknowledges that teachers need to build social communities that nurture teaching and learning, when social communities are created, conflicts are avoided in racially tense situations and emerged in racially neutral ones. When teachers create these safe social communities in the classroom students of different race can teach each other and learn from one another. Not only are the students learning from each other, but so is the teacher. Teachers need to be prepared and feel comfortable holding conversations around race in the classroom. Furthermore, Epstein and Gist (2016) mention that when teachers practice literacy instruction around race it demonstrates the potential to challenge the misconceptions about race and racism, which students of color bring to the classroom. It is

very important for teachers to feel prepared when practicing literacy instruction around race. It provides many great opportunities for white students and students of color in the classroom. The more teachers are prepared to talk about race in the classroom the better. Correspondingly Glenn (2012) argues that teachers who have the contextualized knowledge of the culture, race, community, and identity of the children and families they work with and associate it with their own knowledge they can accomplish effective teaching practices in the classroom in order to teach to the diverse students in their classroom. Teachers can make great changes in the classroom and promote social justice. The more prepared they are the better the conversations are in the classroom.

Not all teachers promote talking about race in the classroom, but many more teachers are starting to. Park (2012) reports that many English and literacy educators have begun to advocate for more critical and culturally responsive conversations around literature about race in the classroom. Teachers control many of the conversations in the classroom, when they advocate talking about race the conversations will become more beneficial, than when a teacher does not feel comfortable about talking about race in the classroom. Moreover, Glenn (2012) found that when teachers read and reflect on multicultural literature it can provide opportunities for themselves to critically examine assumptions of their self and others relative to racial, cultural, and linguistic identities. The more teachers are more aware of their own assumptions, prejudices, or biases, the easier it will become to discuss race in the classroom. In addition, Wilson and Laman (2007) mentioned important questions for teachers to focus on for themselves when teaching critical literacy and discussing race. These questions include; what personal connections are students making to the text, what questions are they asking each other and of the text, in what ways are they identifying or empathizing with the characters' troubles, in what ways are they

critiquing the text and the world, and what are the exchanges? These questions can help guide conversations in the classroom and help make them meaningful.

Equally important, Dooley (2008) claims that teachers need to help students understand, investigate, and determine how unspoken cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and biases within the discipline influence how knowledge is created. Teachers can help, by holding critical conversations around race in the classroom. In addition, Epstein and Gist (2016) mention that teachers can develop children's critical consciousness by challenging the inaccurate beliefs, limiting harmful ideas about race which students of color believe or act upon in their daily lives. When teachers talk about race in the classroom with their students, it provides for opportunities to limit the prejudices or biases students hold in the classroom, by allowing the students to become more knowledgeable about the differences of race in the classroom and in society. Equally important, Kim (2015) argues that it is important for teachers to provide to students opportunities to talk about race using race-themed books. Although some teachers do not feel comfortable to promoting the conversations, the benefits are clear.

Furthermore, through conversations about race in the classroom Epstein and Gist (2016) claim that teachers continually challenge young people's ideas about race/racial identities and confront students' conscious or unconscious beliefs about exhibitions of internalized racism to contest students' misunderstandings of race. When challenging young people's ideas, social justice is created in the classroom. In addition to having white teachers promote conversations about race in the classroom, Kohli (2013) believes that teachers of color can challenge internalized racism in the classroom. It is important for any teacher to discuss race in the classroom, no matter their race. Sometimes it is more beneficial for a white teacher to promote social justice in the

classroom, and on the other hand, sometimes it is more important for teachers of race to promote social justice in the classroom.

Research claims that many teachers hold great responsibilities when it comes to holding conversations about race around literature in the classroom. Davilla (2011) claims that it is the teacher's responsibility when students are engaged in behaviors that silence or marginalize other students, when discussing race, to step in. It is important for teachers to stop any conversations that are demeaning to students of race, or to inform students when they sound racist. Some students may not understand that their beliefs are racist. Equally important, Wetzel and Rogers (2015) claim that literacy teachers carry a particular responsibility toward the critical analysis of race and it is up to them to raise awareness in the classroom. Students may not understand that their beliefs of other races are them being prejudice or biases. Students take on the beliefs that are passed down from their parents and other members from their family or even their friends. Teachers may be the first people in a student's life to disrupt their common beliefs and challenge their views of racism. Teachers must also be careful to not be biased based on their own beliefs. Moreover, Hollingworth (2009) claims teachers' own beliefs about race influence the classroom discourse about race, racism, tolerance, and stereotypes. Teachers need to welcome all beliefs about racism in the classroom, in order to know what each student believes. In order to stop a stereotype or prejudices student's beliefs need to be challenged. Furthermore, Glenn (2012) claims that teachers make choices when they choose what texts they are going to use in the classroom. Teachers are in control of the texts and the conversations they hold in the classroom. The more prepared and willing students are to promote social justice in the classroom, the better the outcome of them choosing to have multicultural literature in the classroom and hold conversations about race.

Teachers may be willing to talk about race in the classroom, but research finds that some of them are not prepared. Glenn (2012) claims that it has been recognized that there is a need to reform teacher preparation with a more explicit eye toward course work and experiences that better prepare white teachers to engage with issues of race in the attempt to become more culturally responsive educators. Some teachers that go through school to prepare them as teachers, do not encounter classes like diversity that prepare them to become aware of biases or prejudices that students and themselves have. Furthermore, Mosely and Rogers (2011) mention that 85% of teachers in the United States are predominantly white. Some teachers that are white are unaware of white privilege and the struggles that other races have. When they are unaware, it makes them unprepared to discuss race in the classroom. In like manner, Dooley (2008) empathizes that teachers need to examine their own definitions and frames of reference with regard to the topics presented when talking about race. If the examining and challenging of their beliefs does not happen, discussing race in the classroom would be a challenge. On the other hand, Rogers and Mosely (2006) declare that white teachers can engage with multicultural education without ever having to cross-examine the ways that white people are the beneficiaries of discrimination in society. Teachers can avoid the opportunities to discuss these issues in the classroom and tend to when they are not fully prepared to discuss race in the classroom. Moreover, Glenn (2012) mentions that counter-narratives in YAL do not only expose preservice teachers to unfamiliar voices, but also challenges their existing constructions of race. When teachers are unfamiliar with the lives of people of different race, they are not prepared to discuss differences between races in the classroom.

It is also known that some teachers avoid talking about race all together in the classroom. Similarly, Mosely and Rogers (2011) claim that when teachers are reading literature around race

with young adults they often avoid race as a topic of conversation. Avoidance to talk about race may make students think that having prejudices and biases about race are okay to have. It also may make students of color feel uncomfortable. In addition, Gove, Still, Huang and Alexander (2011) believe that teachers have a learning problem and a political problem when trying to learn about other races and debating on what to discuss in the classroom. Some teachers are set in their way and beliefs and are not willing to discuss race in the classroom. Additionally, Davilla (2011) suggests that teachers often avoid the topic of racism altogether because they are afraid of offending others, or being called a racist, and being accused of saying or doing the wrong thing. Teachers need to understand that it is a challenge to discuss race in the classroom, and may sometimes feel uncomfortable, but discussing race is important in order to promote social justice. In the same manner, Kim (2015) states that teachers avoid talking about race with young children because they feel discomfort with any race-oriented dialogue. Teachers and students will both feel discomfort when talking about race in the classroom, but it is not something that should be ignored. In addition, Rogers and Mosely (2006) mention that in classroom, when teachers use children's books that deal with matters of race and racism; they do not actually talk about race. Not talking about race and just reading the literature is not enough for students to challenge their own thoughts about racism and to have a deeper understanding of the literature. It does not allow for students to think critically and hold conversations to better understand the lives of people of different race. Sometimes ignoring the talk about race can lead to prejudices and biases all together. Moreover, Kim (2015) mentions that even though teachers feel discomfort, students are very aware of race and color differences starting at a young age. Just because teachers feel uncomfortable doesn't mean that students are unaware of the differences in race. Instead of

ignoring the conversations all together teachers and students can benefit from holding discussion and conversation about race in the classroom.

Sometimes there are problems that occur when teachers do talk about race and are unprepared or do not feel comfortable doing it. Davilla (2011) claims that not just novice, but experience teachers can feel anxious, unqualified, and/or ill-equipped to guide discussions about racism with students. Teachers need to be better prepared before becoming teachers to discuss race in the classroom. They have to have been put in a situation in college where they discuss race in the classroom and become aware of their own biases before being able to feel comfortable enough to discuss race in the classroom and promote social justice. Furthermore, Wanless and Crowford (2016) state

Educators are well versed in the importance of building relationships with children of diverse backgrounds, but many try to do so using a color-blind approach—that is, they do not directly talk about race or race-related experiences. This approach, although not intended to be harmful, may send the negative message to children of color that their teachers do not recognize or feel comfortable acknowledging a salient and influential part of their identity: their race. (p. 9)

Using a color-blind approach can be a problem in the classroom because we do not want to silence children of color's voices in the classroom. In addition, Flynn (2012) believes that many teachers do recognize the need for a multicultural education in the diverse society of today, but some still struggle with teaching and talking about race. Realizing the need to discuss race in the classroom is a good start to having conversations about race in the classroom. These discussions will be challenging at first, but will become easier in time with practice and learning about one's

beliefs. Comparatively, Thomas (2015) mentions that teaching literature and talking about race is implicit, rather than explicit, because it is implicit, race talk dilemmas may surface for teachers while they are engaged in literary instruction. These dilemmas are something that teachers will become more comfortable with as more and more discussions occur. Moreover, more other problems can occur during discussing race and literature as well. Flynn (2012) depicts that teachers need to recognize that non-white students may have a fear during discussion around race that they may be viewed as defensive victims of white privilege. Teachers are not the only ones who feel uncomfortable during these discussions, and must recognize that it is hard for white students and students of color as well, but it is clear that when students hold these conversations social justice can occur.

Overall, there are many problems and challenges that students and teachers encounter when talking about race. Flynn (2012) believes that many teachers do recognize the need for a multicultural education in the diverse society of today, but some still struggle with teaching and talking about race. It is clear that teachers are aware of the need to promote social justice in the classroom, there may be struggles along the way, but the outcome of having social justice is beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

The decision to talk about race when using young adult literature in the classroom can be controversial. Yes, there are implications to talking about race and using diverse YAL, but the benefits for our young children in schools are clear. There needs to be a change in the English curriculum with an implementation for discussing race using literature. Teachers need to become strong advocates for promoting talk about race and implementing books about different race in

the classroom. Diverse literature in the classroom does not only allow for critical literacy, racial literacy and cultural literacy, but it creates cultural awareness and acceptance amongst students. Young adult literature and critical discussions can promote life-long learners and encourage dialogue between language participants of varied race, cultures, and belief systems within the classroom. The literatures and the discussions can prepare the young adults for the diverse society that we live in. Bach, Choate, and Parker (2011) state “professionals in the field of young adult literature are generally aware of these texts’ potential to promote a life-long love of reading, address issues important to students, and serve as the focus of interdisciplinary lessons” (p. 198). It is clear that young adult literature is a vehicle that drives lessons around many important topics in the classrooms and promotes great love for reading.

## **Method**

### **Context**

Research for this study will take place in a rural district in upstate New York. It will take place in a fifth grade classroom after school, during activity period. According to the New York State Report Card, this school is a Title 1 school. Fifty percent of students were eligible for free lunch in the 2014-2015 school year and 12% received reduced lunch. It is not a very diverse school. According to the NYS Report Card 88% of the makeup are Caucasian students, 1% are African American, 8% are Hispanic or Latino, and 3% are multiracial. Moreover, 2% are English Language Learners, 13% are students with disabilities, and 65% are economically disadvantaged. The community population consists of 1,701 people. 8% of the town’s population is college educated, 78.3% have a high school diploma or a GED, 8.6% are unemployed, 10.2% have a bachelor’s degree and about 58% own houses. The estimated median household income in 2013 was \$30,446. 35.7% of the populations work in production, transportation, and material moving

occupations and 18.8% work in sales and office occupations. In the town where the school is located, 49.4% are male and 52.1% are women. Furthermore, 93.6% of the people are White, 5.4% are Hispanic, 3.0% are African American, and 1.2% is a makeup of two or more races. The classroom the student participants come from has 21 students. Of those students there is one African American student and one Hispanic Student. In the classroom ten students receive free or reduced lunch.

### **Participants**

There were six students who participated in this study, four boys and two girls, three teachers, and four mothers of the six students. All of these students are in fifth grade and are reading at a level Z (F&P) reading level. The students are Taylor, John, Gage, Leo, Gina, and Adam (all pseudonyms). The teachers are Mary, Erica, and Jean. The parents of the students are Kim, Jill, Kathy, and Tina (all pseudonyms).

Taylor is Caucasian and raised Christian. She participates in the school group Challenger. Taylor is a leader in the classroom and she is always willing to participate. She is a high honor roll student. She also plays soccer and basketball and enjoys writing. She participates in student council. Taylor has one older sister and a younger sister. Taylor also has many pets at home.

John enjoys playing basketball and would like to be a scientist one day. If he does not become a scientist his second choice would be to be a professional gamer. He plays the saxophone. John also participates in the student Challenger group. He enjoys reading a lot of nonfiction books and doing math tricks. John has an older sister. Like Taylor, John is Caucasian and raised Christian.

Gage is a phenomenal artist and enjoys creating comic strips. He says he enjoys reading comical books, but would rather be free writing. He wants to become a professional soccer player when he groups up. He also participates in the student challenger group at school. Gage has an older sister. Like Taylor and John, Gage is Caucasian and raised Christian.

Leo thinks he will become a comedian one day; he also enjoys watching professional soccer and basketball. He is on the student challenger group at school as well as participates in student council. He is new to the district this year, but feels like he fit in right away. Leo is the oldest sibling and has two younger brothers. Like the other student participants Leo is Caucasian, but he said that he does not practice a religion.

Gina is a part of Rachel's Challenge, and plays soccer. She is also on the student challenger group. She has one older sister and a younger sister. Gina is Caucasian and she is on high honor roll.

Adam is also a part of Rachel's challenge he enjoys fishing and playing soccer as well. He is a member of student council. He has a younger sister. Adam enjoys writing and reading about history. Adam awesome likes to spend his free time with his family and friends.

The three teacher participants team teach fifth grade. Mary has been teaching for 15 years in the same district. She currently teaches Math, Reading, Science, and Math Extension. She is a member of the curriculum council, school leadership team, and is the team leader. She has two children, a son and a daughter.

Erica has been teaching for 10 years in the same district as well, she teachers ELA, Reading, Writing, and Social Studies. She runs the challenger group for the fifth grade students. She has a daughter who is in preschool.

Jill has been in the district and teaching for three years, she is a Math, Reading, Science, and Math Extension teacher. She also helps run the fifth grade challenger group. This district is the only district she has taught in.

The four parents were all very eager for their students to get a chance to become diversified. They said that there are not a lot of opportunities for their children to join clubs at school and were excited their students were chosen to participate in this book club and study. All six moms are working mothers.

Kim is the vice principal at the school district the study will be at. She is the mother of John. She loves to run and read in her free time. She has her doctorate degree.

Jill is the mother of Taylor. She is 45 years old and is married to Taylor's dad. For work she helps homeless people. Her dad is the judge of the town they live in. She went to college and received her master's.

Kathy is the mother of Gage. For work she styles people's hair. In her free time she enjoys reading love stories. She also enjoys cooking.

Tina is the mother of Adam. She works as a manager at a pet store. In her free time she likes to spend time with her parents and family. Tina also spends a lot of time involving herself in sports and hobbies.

### **Researcher Stance**

Currently I am a graduate student at St. John Fisher College. I am receiving my master's in Literacy birth through twelfth grade. I received my undergraduate degree at St. John Fisher

College as well, graduating with a dual certification in special education and general education birth through sixth grade. During this study, I was an active participant observer, where I actively taught a critical literacy lesson using the book *All American Boys*, while simultaneously observing the outcomes of the study. I also conducted observations through a focus group of students during the critical literacy lesson and during interviews. Mills (2014) states that an active participant observer is an observer of their own teaching practices, who records their observations in an organized way. I audio and video recorded my students as well as took notes during the lesson and our discussions.

### **Methods**

During my research, I collected both qualitative and quantitative data to determine how students perceive race while reading young adult literature and engaging in critical literacy. With my six student participants I taught, observed, and audio recorded a critical literacy lesson (Appendix A). This lesson took place during two 40 minutes sessions after school. This type of data collection is the experiencing method. I was an active participant because I taught the lesson to the six students and I observed their reactions and recorded their insights. During the critical literacy lesson (Appendix A) I focused on three dimensions; disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and focusing on sociopolitical issues. To disrupt the commonplace I started off by asking a series of questions for students to start thinking about the treatment of blacks by police officers. Some examples of the questions include; do cops treat black people equally and how, and also how do you think cops will treat blacks verse how they treat whites. Then I showed a police brutality video and asked students to record their immediate reactions to the video, as well as I recorded their body language and what they said verbally. After that, I interrogated the multiple viewpoints about the book *All American Boys*. I asked a

series of questions including; what if Rashad was white, What if the cop was black? The final part of the lesson was focused on socio political issues. I displayed to the students some recent statistics of police brutality and crimes with blacks verse whites. To conclude the lesson, I asked the students to brainstorm what they could do in order to promote social justice. With the students I also used the method of enquiring to collect data. I held a focus group where I will ask the students a series of interview questions (Appendix B). During the focus group students were asked a series of interview questions and I asked for clarification when needed. I audio recorded the student's answers as well as collected notes during the interview. Some questions that I asked the students include, "Do you prefer reading the books we have read this year in ELA or a book like All American Boys? Why?" and "How does your perception of race change after reading All American Boys?" Other data that was collected with students is how they responded during discussion to All American Boys.

With the parent participants I used the examining method as well to collect data. I sent them interview questions through email (Appendix C). I used this examining method with the teacher participants as well; I send them interview questions through email (Appendix D). I let parents and teachers know that if I needed more clarification that I will send a follow up email asking them to tell me more about one of their responses. Some questions I asked the parents are; "how do you feel about your child reading literature that deals with racism? and "how do you feel about your child talking about the issues dealing with racism, such as police brutality in the classroom?" Some questions that I asked the teachers of the fifth grade team will be; "Do you feel comfortable when students talk about race in your classroom? Why or why not?" and "Do you address any biases or prejudices that occur? If yes, how do you address it?"

I also incorporated the examination method to collect my data. For the examination method I have collected and have examined student work during a critical literacy lesson during *All American Boys*. The student work that is the student participants did was to write down their responses to a video on police brutality and to answer pre-questions on paper about racism before reading *All American Boys*.

### **Quality and Credibility of Research**

During research it is important to have quality and credibility. In order to ensure that quality and credibility is accounted for one must focus on transferability, dependability, confirming ability and determining credibility. Each of these four components addressed by Mills (2014) will be addressed in this study. In order to ensure honesty and trustworthiness this study will be conducted by following these four implications.

In order to ensure credibility in my research it is important to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with the patterns that are not easily clarified (Mills, 2014). Mills states some suggestions in order to ensure credibility in the study through the ideas of Guba (1981). Guba emphasizes the importance of practicing triangulation during research this. Practicing triangulation is comparing a wide variety of data sources and conducting different research methods. I examined, experienced, and enquired data in order to cross-check data. Guba also mentions in order to ensure credibility one should collect data items; such a video recordings, audio recording, artifacts, and raw data. I collected student work during a critical literacy lesson, audio recording, and collecting interviews through email. Certainly, collecting many different forms of data to support the study's outcomes is an essential component in establishing credibility.

Along with credibility, transferability is an important component to maintaining a credible and quality study. Guba (1981) in Mills (2014) states that “transferability refers to qualitative researchers’ beliefs that everything they study is context bound and that the goal of their work is not to develop ‘truth’ statements that can be generalized to a larger groups of people” (p. 116). In order to practice transferability in a study one must collect detailed descriptive data and develop detailed descriptions of the context (Mills, 2014). In my study I audio recorded the lessons and interview with my student participants and transcribed all the words said in order to collect detailed descriptive data. In turn, implementing transferability in this study is ideal.

Correspondingly with credibility and transferability, dependability is also vital when ensuring a quality study and ensuring trust within it. Dependability is the stability of the data (Mills, 2014). In order to confirm dependability in a study one must overlap methods and establish an audit trail. When overlapping methods in my study I used two or more methods to make sure that if one method is weak, the other method will compensate the other. For example, I collected student work during a critical literacy lesson as well as interview the students. Overall, dependability is important when ensuring credibility in a study.

A final component in this study is to ensure confirmability of the data collected. In order to guarantee confirmability in a study one must practice triangulation and practice reflexivity. I practiced triangulation by performing three different methods of data collection in my study and also collecting qualitative as well as quantitative data. To practice reflexivity in one’s study you must “intentionally reveal underlying assumptions or biases that cause the researcher to formulate a set of questions in a particular way and to present findings in a particular way”

(Mills, 2014, p. 116). All of these four implications are imperative to having a quality and credible study.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

When conducting a study it is very important to get informed consent from all the participants as well as protect the rights of all of the participants. There are many steps I took in my study in order to receive consent and protect the rights of the participants. Before conducting my research, I informed all of my participants of the purpose of the study and what we would be doing. I then had parents sign permission forms to give consent that their child could participate. (Appendix E). On the parental permission form I provided parents with the purpose of the study, risk and benefits of the study, their rights as well as a place for them to write their child's name and their signature that they provide permission. After I have received parental permission for their child to participate I then gave the children each a child's written assent form (Appendix F). On this form I also included the purpose of the study, their risks and benefits, their rights, and a place for them to sign their name for assent. In addition to my student participants, I also have parent and teacher participants. For the adult participants I provided them with an informed consent form (Appendix G). On this form I also provided the purpose of the study, their risks and benefits, their rights, as well as a place for them to sign and date their name. Moreover, in order to further protect the rights of the participants all names in this study are pseudonyms as well as the location is anonymous and any marks that identify the participant on an artifact has been removed. Concluding, it is very important to receive consent for all participants as well as protect their privacy while conducting a research study.

### **Data Collection**

A goal of this study is to obtain a wide perspective of research and results. In order to do ensure this goal, many types of data were collected. The data I used for this study was a transcribed critical literacy lesson that was recorded, parent interviews through email, teacher interviews through email, student work samples from the critical literacy lesson, pre-reading assessment for *All American Boys*, post reading assessment for *All American Boys*, and student interview questions.

The critical literacy lesson took place over two days. The lesson was audio recorded and then transcribed. During this lesson all four components of critical literacy were addressed. There were six student participants.

The parent interviews were given through email and clarification of responses were sent back and forth. There were five parents who participated in the interviews. There were a total of seven questions.

The teacher interviews were also given through email. There were three teachers who agreed to participate in the study. Clarifications of some questions were emailed back and forth. The teachers were emailed eight interview questions.

Student work samples were also collected from the critical literacy lesson. Students were asked to write a response to the police brutality video that was shown. They also were asked pre and post questions about *All American Boys*.

The six student participants also participated in an interview. This was done in a small group. Ten questions were asked to the group. They elaborated off of each other. We have

already and community like environment, participants said they felt comfortable sharing their responses.

### **Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, I went through and did an analysis, in order to develop three themes that stood out, and commonalities between data collected. Many steps were taken in order to analyze the data. The first thing I did was analyze my three interviews. After the interviews I listened to them and transcribed every word. After transcribing the interviews I went through and carefully reread the transcripts while coding the parent, teacher, and student participant interview responses. I analyzed the interviews by looking for consistent answers. When consistent answers were found, I would highlight them in matching colors.

Another piece of data I analyzed was my pre-reading assessment for the student participants. There were some yes or no questions, so I highlighted the entire “yes’s” in pink and the entire “no’s” in yellow and then created a table to further look at the answers. Like the interviews, I also went through and coded the students’ responses to the questions, trying to find a like theme between them. Responses that were similar to each other were highlighted in a like color.

A third piece of data I analyzed was the students’ work samples from the critical literacy lesson. There responses were from a police brutality video. I first went through and coded each student’s response to the video and looked for similarities between each. If there was a similarity I highlighted it in the same color.

A final piece of data I analyzed was the students' discussion during a critical literacy lesson. I held a critical literacy lesson and asked question throughout the lesson. I recorded the lesson and transcribed the conversations. When I reread the transcript, I went through and coded the responses or comments from the students. After coding the responses I went through and grouped codes that were alike.

After looking at all the data, I looked for similarities and differences. I looked for information that consistently came up amongst all of it. After looking through all of the data and coding it, I was able to come up with three different themes.

### **Findings and Discussions**

After the data was thoroughly analyzed three themes emerged. These themes will be further described with examples from the data collected. The themes will also be interpreted and connected back to the literature review that was done during this study. The first theme is participants believe police brutality is unjust, unfair, and mostly against blacks. The second theme is reading young adult literature about racism, when using critical literacy is an engaging learning experience. The final theme is participants think that racism is when a group has more power over another and that it's mostly common with whites against blacks.

#### **Participants Believe Police Brutality is Unjust, Unfair, and Mostly against Blacks**

The student participants I did the study with are fifth graders. The book *All American Boys* may be perceived to be too above the students' age or maturity level, but was used in a comfortable and nurturing learning environment and the students were well prepared for what they may be exposed to in the book. The parents all gave preapproval to letting their children read *All American Boys*. Parents were excited to have an opportunity given to their students to be

diversified. *All American Boys* is about an African American who gets brutality beat by a white police officer for a crime that he did not do, but was accused of. The crime was stealing a bag of chips at a convenient store.

The collection of data pointed to the fact that participants do believe that police brutality is unjust and unfair, and they believe that it is mostly happening against blacks. When describing thoughts and feelings about police brutality Taylor states

Police brutality is most likely going to be the white cops treating the black people unfairly. Black people are nicer than people think. Some cops just think oh, well that's a black person he is doing something bad. They are always questioning the black people.  
(Critical Literacy Lesson, June 6, 2016)

This comment was from a fifth grade student who has never seen police brutality or hardly has been around black people. Our society has created this stigma that all black people are bad. Walking down the street cops assume that black people are doing something wrong, or white people may even turn the other way, because of the assumptions and prejudices that society has created black people get a bad reputation. After Taylor's comment about police brutality she goes back and makes a connection to an African American student in her classroom that she thinks is the nicest person in the world and how she cannot believe it could happen to her someday just because of the color of her skin. Taylor stated, Aleigha is black and she is the nicest person in this class. She doesn't act differently, she just has a different skin color" (Critical Literacy Lesson, June 6, 2016). Similarly, Gage also mentions how police brutality seems to be against black people. When answering what he has seen or heard about cops, Gage said, "I heard that some cops let white people go, but hold black people back" (Pre-read activity, June 5, 2016). By

saying this Gage is making the assumption that the white cop is treating the white person with more respect over the black person. Using the CRT can challenge the idea of white privilege (Yosso, 2005). Maybe the other questions that led up to this question made Gage have in his head whites verse blacks, but the only previous were about what is racism, and if cops were good or bad. When Gage thought about racism and police brutality he quickly jumped to the conclusion of it being whites treating black people poorly. Additionally, John also talks about how police brutality is unjust, unfair, and usually occurs between a white cop against a black person. John said “That makes me mad because police are signed up to do one job and that is to stop people from breaking the law. Not to stop black people from roaming down the street” (Critical literacy lesson, June 6, 2016). Through media and the news we see black people constantly getting shot or arrested, and that they are in the wrong. Seeing this in the news may make people actually afraid of black people. John’s response was in response to a video he watched when a young black teenager was crossing the street quickly to the bus stop because he did not want to miss the bus. He was j walking and eight cops took him to the ground; hit him, to arrest him for j walking. When asked how the parents felt about their child talking about the issues dealing with racism, such as police brutality, all parents felt that the conversation was beneficial and a good way for students to learn about what is going on in the world. Jill stated, “I appreciate children being able to share their views in a safe and comfortable environment. I do think a directed discussion may be helpful to children as it could assist them to share their own ideas versus those of their parents or the media” (Parent Interview, June 8, 2016). Teachers need to create a safe and comfortable environment to be able to have any in depth discussion in the classroom. Teachers need to hold conversations that disrupt the misconceptions and the prejudices that society has created. Connecting back to the literature, Flynn (2012) mentions four

guidelines or expectations when promoting talk about race in the classroom. When guidelines are set in the classroom it allows for a safe environment where students know the expectations and it creates set guidelines when discussing race around literature. Jill thought that the environment needed to be safe and comfortable for students to be able to discuss these issues in society. Jill's statement is coupled with Davilla's (2011) idea that it is beneficial when students get to discuss different stories and life experiences of people of color. White students become more aware of how people of color are treated, and become more accepting of them. Another parent, Kim, says "I am okay with my child discussing police brutality as long as it is in a structured setting and my child has a solid understanding of what he is talking about" (Parent Interview, June 8, 2016). It is clear that this parent is accepting of her child discussing police brutality, but it must be in a structured setting and their child must have a clear understanding of what they are talking about. Police brutality is something that is evident and current in the world and should be discussed in the classroom. Parents think that police brutality does happen and that it is important to talk to children with when the discussion happens in a safe and comfortable learning environment.

### **Reading Young Adult Literature about Racism, when using Critical Literacy is an Engaging Learning Experience**

Parents were asked how they felt about their child reading young adult literature that deals with racism, Jill responded with

I think that it is important for our children to read literature that highlights racism to open their eyes to prejudice that did and/or does in fact exist. Truth be told, a middle class child from our school district can live a pretty sheltered life and have no idea what certain

people have experienced in their lifetime as a result of racism. Reading is knowledge and knowledge is power. (Parent Interview, June 8, 2016)

Racism is something that needs to be discussed in the classroom. Many students live sheltered lives and never have a chance to challenge the misconceptions or biases that have against a certain race. Reading YAL and having discussions through critical literacy can give students the knowledge they need to eventually promote social justice. Connecting to Dooley (2008) teachers can help students gain this knowledge by holding critical conversations around race in the classroom. The students in this study live in a very rural town, with few African Americans, and have been exposed to little racism, besides what they have seen or heard on social media. I agree with Jill that it is important to expose their children to real life events, and things that they will mostly likely encounter in the future. Moreover, when asked what their experience was like when reading a young adult literature book about racism, Gage responded with "My experience was that I was more interested in this book than any other. It kept my attention and I didn't want to stop reading it" (Post-reading questionnaire, June 16, 2016). Based on Gage's comment I can interpret that YAL is engaging for students, and is also a motivator to keep them reading. When students are more attracted to what they are reading more comprehension is happening.

Comprehension comes when engagement happens. Gage actually took notes when reading *All American Boys*, to be able to keep track of events that were happening in the book, he was not asked to do this, he just wanted to. *All American Boys* is an engaging book that students can relate to, students at this district read books that were chosen from New York State and written in the modules. The books were interesting, but young adult literature is something these students have not been exposed to, and it caught their attention right away. Connection to the literature, Polleck (2010) says that teaching and having conversations about race while using YAL can

enhance literacy, personal, and social growth. When Gage was self-motivated to take notes while reading the YAL, it promoted growth with his literacy skills. In like manner, When Taylor was asked about her experience when reading a young adult literature book about racism she responded

My experience was awesome the book had learning points where you actually had to infer and not have been told directly what is going on. Also because there was a realistic event in the story, I learned how awful blacks are treated, it's unfair. (Post-reading questionnaire, June 16, 2016)

To interpret Taylor's words she feels empathetic for African Americans. She liked reading this book because it portrayed realistic events that Taylor was able to connect to. Taylor expresses her excitement with reading the young adult literature and it demonstrates how engaged she was with the reading. She also expresses how she has learned about how African Americans are treated unfairly and how it happens more often than she thought. Taylor's response connects to the idea of Park (2012) that critical reading is not just reading the text for a literal comprehension, but reading and understanding the world, and that critical reading suggests that reading can be most relevant and powerful if individuals explore the words they are reading and the world they live in. Taylor learned about realistic events in the world when reading *All American Boys* when reading for comprehension. Moreover, when Gina responded to the question about what her experience was like reading a young adult literature book dealing with the topic of racism, she responded "It was interesting to read this book because I got to see how racism affects many people around the world" (Post-reading questionnaire, June 16, 2016). Through reading *All American Boys*, Gina was able to learn that racism does still happen every day. Would she have been able to know this without the literature, maybe through lessons, but

YAL is a great way to start conversations about racism. Gina expresses how reading the young adult literature was interesting to her, and how she has learned about how racism still exists. The book illustrated racism in a realistic way. In addition, parents were asked how they felt about their child reading literature that deals with racism. Kim responded "I believe it is good for him to read and learn about it in a guided, structured setting where there are opportunities to ask questions and expand ones view of all individuals in this world" (Parent interview, June 8, 2016). As long as the setting is guided and structured Kim is comfortable with her child discussing racism. Discussing race allows for her child to ask questions and get to learn more about people who are different color than them. Talking about race is the vehicle that drives students understanding about the differences in the world. Wilson and Laman (2007) mention that students must be engaging in conversation around these texts with other students in the classroom rather than reading alone and not sharing ideas and thoughts at all. It is important to have these conversations in the classroom to help students understand social issues, but the importance from these texts comes from the deep conversations students have around them. These conversations happen better in a nurturing and community like environment, where students feel comfortable discussing maybe touchy subjects. Teachers were interviewed as well when asking about discussing race in the classroom, if they did it and if they thought it was important. A fifth grade teacher Erica responded,

Yes, especially with our student population as it has limited diversity. Discussing race gives them a broader view of the world outside of their small town and helps to teach lessons in tolerance and acceptance. It is also a huge part of our country's history and therefore should be learned about and discussed. (Teacher interview, June 8, 2016).

Sometime the curriculum we teach in schools have one belief and doesn't leave interpretation for the students. Students who are from a very small district without a lot of diversity can benefit from discussing different races, and reading about people who are different than them. Erica makes a good point about how students can learn lessons on tolerance and acceptance when having conversations about race, but racism is not only a huge part of our country's history, but is still happening today. Yes, it is great to discuss what has happened in the past, but racism happens every day still, and students need to be exposed to how others who are mistreated feel. Engaging in critical literacy and reading young adult literature provide these great learning experiences for students.

### **Participants Think that Racism is when a Group has More Power Over Another and that it's Mostly Common with Whites Against Blacks**

It is clear that participants believe that racism is when one race treats another race like they are inferior to them, but throughout the study participants often used examples of racism with whites against blacks, but did not talk about other races. When asked what racism is, Leo responded with "When black people get judged by the color of their skin" (Pre-read activity, June 5, 2016). It is clear that in society different races still put themselves above others. People in society create certain misconceptions or biases about other races before even getting to know them. These misconceptions and biases get passed down to younger children in our society and it is important for a teacher to disrupt this belief that children have. Maybe he associates this with just black people because that is all he has had experience with. Leo's comment shows how he knows that because people have different skin colors they can be judged or treated differently. Leo sharing his thoughts and discussing race when reading young adult literature provides many opportunities for students to understand racism more.

When literature is brought into the classroom that discusses many different realistic events that people encounter it helps student learn about difference races. It also provides white students the realization of the racism that still thrives today, where as many students may think that it does not exist at all anymore (Wilson & Laman, 2007). Moreover, during the student participant interview (June 9, 2016) Taylor stated,

When I think of racism I usually think I don't even need to hear who it was. I generally think it is a white person against someone who is black; ugh I hate saying that word it just pops in my head. (Student Participant Interview, June 9, 2016)

Society still has this idea of white privilege. White people still think they have power and are entitled to things other races are not. Racism is still so strong in society that these students almost feel like they are walking on egg shells. They feel uncomfortable calling someone black or African American. She even states, "When I even just say African American I feel like I am being racist (Student Participant Interview, June 9, 2016). Taylor has associated saying African American as being a racist. It is clear that even talking about African Americans makes her feel like a racist. Taylor states "they are just people just like us why do we have to call them black or African American, why can't we just call them by their name" (Student interview, June 9, 2016). It seems like Taylor feels conflict when talking about African Americans and does not feel comfortable calling them that. She wants to just refer to them as people. Taylor feels weird or uncomfortable when referring to African Americans as black or as African American, having to refer to African Americans as a different skin color or name seemed like racism to her. During the student interview I asked what racism meant to the student participants. Leo responded with

When people say racist I actually think about someone treating a black person like they don't have the same equal rights like we do. Like they treat them unfairly and poorly. They treat them basically the opposite they would treat a white person. (Student Interview, June 9, 2016)

With this comment it seems as Leo is talking about how white people have privilege over other races. Again, our society has almost put white people on a podium. White people get pulled over for speeding and often get let go, as where a black person may get pulled over, and not get let go. Social justice needs to be promoted in the classroom. It takes a white person sticking up for a black person to make someone realize that what they said is wrong. Leo recognizes that white people are treated better than other races and that black people often get treated unfairly and poorly. Many of the participants do not mention any other race besides whites and blacks when discussing racism. Maybe because they live in a very rural town, with little diversity and the only time they hear or witness any racism has to deal with whites verse blacks. Flynn (2012) mentions that talking about race is an opportunity to educate others, it is an eye opening, real, and powerful experience. Flynn also mentions that it is better to talk about race and racism with a diverse group, unfortunately all the participants of my study were white, next time I would like to do it with a more diverse group. It is important to have a diverse group of students when discussing literature that involves characters of different race, because it makes sure maybe not all, but different perspectives are noticed. Students of different race that come together bring for many perspectives in the classroom. In addition, when asked to define what racism means to them, John responded with

Whenever I hear the word racism I usually think of someone being rude, illegal, or some other awful thing to another race. So like if I was very rude to an African American just

because their black. Usually I'm not sure why but I typically see whenever I see a black person I usually feel bad, and I'm not sure why I think it has happened after we have read *All American Boys*. (Student Interview, June 9, 2016)

John gives an example of racism as if he was being rude to an African American and he is white. So again, the participants in this study tend to think of racism being white against blacks. John also mentioned that after reading this book he has started to feel bad for an African American whenever he sees one. Because of his experience with reading the young adult literature about racism and being exposed to a critical literacy lesson, John has become more aware of how other races are treated and how whites think of themselves as superior to other races. Davilla (2011) mentions that when students add comments while talking about race it is a good source of enlightenment to challenge, confront, and disrupt and critically think about racism. Talking about race disrupts the prejudices and biases that already occur and lead to creating social justice in a classroom. John mentioned that he started to feel bad whenever he saw black people, this lead us to have a discussion about what they could do in order to promote social justice. I asked the students during the critical literacy lesson (June 6, 2016) what we could do to make a change. Taylor mentioned "We can commit to speaking up to blacks. We give them a voice through our own" (Critical literacy lesson, June 6, 2016). Taylor thinks that if we stick up for African Americans and say when things are wrong or racist we can promote social justice. Leo states "usually it's your parents that influence you on whether you or racist or not" (Critical Literacy Lesson, June 6, 2016). Leo makes a great point, parents teach their children their own personal views on racism, but teachers play a huge role in promoting social justice as well. Polleck (2010) mentions when teachers hold conversations about race around YAL, it can enhance literacy,

personal, and social growth. All in all, having conversations about race around literature is beneficial and a great learning experience.

Overall, using YAL about racism in the classroom, while teaching critical literacy promotes conversations about racism and learning experiences for students as well as the teacher. Racism is still existent today, and teaching about it is evident when promoting social justice to stop racism. Uncomfortable conversations and situations may happen, but it is a learning experience for all.

### **Implications**

There are many implications that came out of this study. Three in particular are that young adult literature is engaging to students and promotes learning and discussions; race and racism should be discussed in the classroom; and critical literacy can be used to promote social justice. Each teacher has their own teaching styles, but these three implications should not be ignored; they promote learning, growing, and social justice in and out of the classroom.

Young adult literature is engaging to students and promotes learning and discussion in the classroom is my first implication. Young adult literature is a wide variety of texts that has many scenarios young adults can connect to. Glaus (2014) defines YAL as texts in which teenagers are the main characters dealing with issues in which teens can relate to and can include adolescents of ages 10-19. It is a great tool to open up conversations that teachers and students may feel uncomfortable discussing. In my classroom I am mandated to follow a curriculum, but after this study it is clear incorporating more young adult literature in the classroom would be highly beneficial. Glaus (2014) mentions that many educators doubt that students are reading books that are assigned to them. Students not reading books that are assigned to them can be a

result of many things, students can't relate what is happening in the text, not being able to relate can lead to lack of comprehension and no motivation to read.

I will also offer more book clubs in the next year where students can choose what young adult literature they would like to read. If teachers are not the ones educating students on issues about race and even more topics that young adult literature covers, we do not know who will. Teachers should find ways to incorporate these texts that young adults can relate to. If they have a book they need to teach they can find another book to connect to it or a graphic novel.

My second implication is that race and racism should be discussed in the classroom. After analyzing the data from this study it is clear participants understand racism as one race holding more power or thinking they are more superior over another race. Many participants in this study only thought about this as whites thinking they hold more power over blacks and were unfamiliar of other races. From the data it is clear that teachers need to hold more discussions about different races in the classroom as well as have discussions about how to promote social justice. Many educators opt for a color-blind approach when educating children and discussion racial oppression and racial identity (Husband, 2012). When teachers have a color-blind approach when teaching it only leads to children obtaining a false consciousness of race and racism. From research it is also clear that teachers need to put their own biases and prejudices behind them when discussing race and racism with children.

My final implication is that critical literacy can be used to promote social justice. Teachers need professional development on how to incorporate critical literacy with literature in the classroom. From my three teacher participants' interview, they mentioned that they do not even know what critical literacy is. Critical literacy allows readers to recognize, relate, and

become more accepting of the social and cultural contexts in which reading takes place. In other words, critical literacy is a way to challenge the belief of the text and hold deeper conversations around the social and cultural concepts apparent in the literature, as well as educate students of other cultures and races. In like manner, Davilla (2011) states that critical literacy practices are cultivated from what students are saying and doing in their conversations and is a way to promote social justice. Moreover, Epstein and Gist (2016) believe that a critical focus on race provides opportunities to understand how power and privilege operate among and within the different races in the world.

Discussing race, promoting social justice, and incorporating new literature in the classroom may seem challenging, but teachers need to step up to the challenge and do right by students. Young adult literature is a gateway to new engaging learning experiences. It is also a gateway to get students to start talking about uncomfortable topics.

### **Conclusions**

The research question that led this study is how do students perceive race through using critical literacy when reading young adult literature? Literacy is a social practice and learning and perceptions occur throughout discussions around literature. The theories that supported this research include the critical race theory and the critical literacy Theory. The central argument of the critical race theory is the idea of how race and racism impact society and that students of color come with cultural deficiencies (Yosso, 2005). The theory's approach is to educate schools about the strengths that communities of color have. The study incorporated introducing white students to people of color and find out their reactions or perceptions. The critical literacy theory

is a synthesis of four dimensions. The dimensions include disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. Critical literacy is a gateway to engaging readers in difficult conversations about topics that they may not feel comfortable discussing without being exposed to young adult literature that exposes these topics. Literature around this research question was synthesized into three themes: critical literacy with young adult literature, students' conversations about race, and teachers' role in talking about race. Critical Literacy with Young Adult Literature is important to incorporate in the classroom to ensure that students are reading diverse young adult literature and thinking critically about it. It is also important that students are having conversations about race; it allows students to get a better understanding about the differences in the world. Teachers also play an important role in talking about race because they set up a comfortable learning environment and nudge students to have these conversations. The study took place in a rural school district in upstate New York. It took place in a fifth grade classroom with six student participants, four parents, and three teachers. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected through interviews, student work samples and observations. After collecting the data and analyzing it three findings were discussed; participants believed police brutality is unjust, unfair, and mostly against blacks, reading young adult literature about racism, when using critical literacy is an engaging learning experience, and participants think that racism is when a group has more power over another and that it's mostly common with whites against blacks. The implications of this study were young adult literature is engaging to students and promotes learning and discussions, race and racism should be discussed in the classroom, critical literacy can be used to promote social justice.

I feel like I received some successful data during this study, but there is always more to be collected. If I were to do this study again, I would like to do it with a whole class with more diverse students. The students that participated in this study were all White Americans. I would have liked to have more races involved in the study. The district the study took place in is not very diverse at all so the student body resources were limited. If I were to do this study again, I would like to observe teachers' conversations with students about race while using a young adult literature book that talks about different races. I would like to observe and analyze how the teachers hold the discussions and how students respond. It would also be interesting to do a critical literacy lesson with the students and their parents and see how parents respond to the lesson.

There were also some limitations in this study. I did this after school and students volunteered to participate, so my participants were limited and not very diverse. Another limitation is how some teachers did not respond to the interview questions, so there were only few teacher participants.

Some questions that still linger in my head are why are teachers so tied to what they can teach and use in the classroom when it comes to literature? Much research shows the benefits of using young adult literature in the classroom and discussing race, so why is it not used more? Also if students are lacking interest in reading, why aren't we using more texts that are geared to young adults? My goal is to promote social justice through literature and continue to hold literature groups and bring in more young adult literature in the classroom.

Racism is still present in today's society. Racism can be the result of many things, but the more students are exposed to other races and hold discussions around different races, the more

knowledgeable they become. Prejudices stem from assumptions that occur. Using young adult literature in the classroom to ignite talk about race is a great tool and critical literacy disrupts one's beliefs and challenges students to think of ways to promote social justice.

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## Appendix A

**Title of Lesson:** All American Boys

**Grade:** 5th grade - small group of 7 students

**Topic or Main idea:**

1. Focusing on 3 dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and focusing on sociopolitical issues
2. Topic: Police Brutality

**Objectives:**

1. Students will be finding out their own biases and prejudices as well as others.
2. Students will dive deeper and depict the multiple viewpoints of what happened in *All American Boys*.
3. Students will also focus on Sociopolitical Issues around police brutality.

**Materials:**

- *All American Boys*

**Procedure:**

1. Disrupting the Commonplace: We will first start off with a series of questions:
  - a. Who do you go to if something is wrong?
  - b. Cops mean safety.
  - c. How does this book position you as a reader?
  - d. Do you think everyone treats black people equally and how?
  - e. What do you think about cops?
  - f. Do cops treat everyone equally?
  - g. How do you think cops treat blacks vs whites?
  - h. Do you think the truth will set you free?

Show a video on police brutality against blacks: ask students to record their reactions.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgbTyHAHEms>

2. Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints: Going to ask a series of questions
  - a. What if Rashad was white?
  - b. What if the cop was black?
  - c. What if it was Quinn?
  - d. What if cop was female? black or white
  - e. What if Rashad was a female? black or white
  
3. Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues:
  - a. What are the recent statistics of police brutality?
  - b. Statistics of crime for whites and blacks
  - c. Why does police brutality exist?
  - d. Why do cops get away with it?
  
4. Teach Statistics: using powerpoint
  
5. Brainstorm with taking action and promoting social justice:
  - a. Ask students what can we do to make a change and brainstorm ideas

**Assessment:**

1. What is one thing you can take away from today to make a change?
2. What is one thing you learned from this lesson?
3. What is one thing you want to know more about?

**Title of Lesson:** All American Boys

**Grade:** 5th grade - small group of 7 students

**Topic or Main idea:**

1. Focusing on 3 dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and focusing on sociopolitical issues
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**Objectives:**

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2. Students will dive deeper and depict the multiple viewpoints of what happened in *All American Boys*.
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**Materials:**

- *All American Boys*

**Procedure:**

1. Disrupting the Commonplace: We will first start off with a series of questions:
  - a. Who do you go to if something is wrong?
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  - c. How does this book position you as a reader?
  - d. Do you think everyone treats black people equally and how?
  - e. What do you think about cops?
  - f. Do cops treat everyone equally?
  - g. How do you think cops treat blacks vs whites?
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  - a. What are the recent statistics of police brutality?
  - b. Statistics of crime for whites and blacks
  - c. Why does police brutality exist?

- e. Why do cops get away with it?
  
- 4. Teach Statistics: using powerpoint
  
- 5. Brainstorm with taking action and promoting social justice:
  - a. Ask students what can we do to make a change and brainstorm ideas

**Assessment:**

- 1. What is one thing you can take away from today to make a change?
- 2. What is one thing you learned from this lesson?
- 3. What is one thing you want to know more about?

## Appendix B

1. What do you know about race?
2. Define racism.
3. Do you think all races are treated equally? Please explain.
4. How does your perception of race change after reading All American Boys?
5. Do you feel comfortable discussing race in the classroom? Why or why not?
6. Through the critical literacy lesson, what social justice do you want to promote dealing with race after reading All American Boys and watching the Police Brutality video?
7. How do you feel about reading books like All American Boys?
8. How do you feel about police brutality towards African Americans?
9. What do you know about white privilege?
10. Do you prefer reading the books we have read this year in ELA or a book like All American Boys? Why?



6. What are your worries or fears with your child reading young adult literature in the classroom?

7. If you feel comfortable sharing what are your prejudices or biases please do.

## Appendix D

1. How do you discuss race in your classroom? If you do not discuss race, please explain why.
2. Do you think it is important to discuss race in the classroom? Why or why not?
3. What prejudices or biases do you hold against people of different race than you?
4. Do you know what critical literacy is? If yes, how do you teach it in your classroom?
5. What types of literature do you use in your classroom?
6. Do you feel comfortable when students talk about race in your classroom? Why or why not?
7. Do you address any biases or prejudices that occur? If yes, how do you address it?
8. What additional comments can you add about discussing race in the classroom?

## Appendix E

**St. John Fisher College**  
**PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM**  
**(for use with minors)**

Title of study: **A Study of How Critical Literacy with YAL Effects the way Students Perceive and Talk about Race.**

Name(s) of researcher(s): ***Sarah Oeschger***

Faculty Supervisor: Joellen Maples, PhD Assistant Professor St. John Fisher College/Marty Murray, Instructor

Phone for further information 585-943-7366

Purpose of study: ***To investigate how students perceive race through YAL.***

This study has been approved by the John Fisher College Institutional Review Board.

Place of study: ***North Rose Wolcott Middle School*** Length of participation: ***1 month***

Risks and benefits: This study presents no risks to your child. The benefits are the opportunity for improved teaching.

Your child's name and the location of the research will be changed in order to protect your child's anonymity. All data will be kept in a locked location and accessible only to the researcher. The findings from this study will be shared with other professionals at the St. John Fisher College Capstone Presentation conference.

**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 the results of the study.

I, the parent or guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, a minor \_\_\_\_\_ years of age, consent to his/her participation in the above-named study. I have received a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 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 Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

## Appendix F

**St. John Fisher College**  
**CHILD'S WRITTEN ASSENT**  
**(for use with minors)**

Title of study: A Study of How Critical Literacy with YAL Effects the way Students Perceive and Talk about Race.

Name(s) of researcher(s): *Sarah Oeschger*

Purpose of study: *The purpose of this study is to investigate how students perceive race when reading young adult literature.*

This study has been approved by John Fisher College.

Place of study: *North Rose Wolcott Middle School* Length of participation: *1 month*

Risks and benefits: This study presents no risks to you and it will help me become a better teacher.

Your name and the name of the school will be changed to keep your identity a secret. Only my professor and I will be able to see the data I collect. The findings from this study will be shared with other professionals at the St. John Fisher College Capstone Presentation conference.

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

1. You have the right to know what the study is, what the risks are and what the benefits are.
2. You can decide not to participate. It will not affect your grade or anything else in school.
3. You can decide not to answer any questions I ask.
4. You can ask to hear about what I learned.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_

Print name (Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

Appendix G  
**St. John Fisher College**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM (for use with adults)**

Title of study: Study of How Critical Literacy with YAL Effects the way Students Perceive and Talk about Race.

Name(s) of researcher(s): *Sarah Oeschger*

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Joellen Maples, Assistant Professor

Phone for further information: *585-943-7366*

Purpose of study: *The purpose of this study is to investigate how students perceive race when reading young adult literature.*

This study has been approved by the John Fisher College Institutional Review Board.

Place of study: *North Rose Wolcott Middle School* Length of participation: *one month*

Risks and benefits: This study presents no risks to you. The benefits are the opportunity for improved teaching.

Your name and the location of the research will be changed in order to protect your anonymity. All data will be kept in a locked location and accessible only to the researcher. The findings from this study will be shared with other professionals at the St. John Fisher College Capstone Presentation conference.

**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 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 Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals. .

\_\_\_\_\_

Print name (Investigator)                      Signature                      Date

If you have any questions, please let me know. If anything about this study makes you uncomfortable, let your parents know so they can contact people who can help you.