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# Leading African American Boys Towards Critical Literacy

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**LEADING AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS TOWARDS CRITICAL LITERACY**

by

**STILES SIMMONS**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION**

2016

MAJOR: READING, LANGUAGE &  
LITERATURE

Approved By:

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Advisor

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Date

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation project to my family and the Baldwin Community Schools' Board of Education. A feeling of gratitude to my parents, William and Frances Simmons, who instilled in me the value of education and always stressed the importance of being the best me that I could be. My siblings Yvonne, Rodney, and Julie who are very special.

I, especially, dedicate this dissertation to my lovely wife, Wendy, and three beautiful daughters, Jasmine, Alyssa, and Jayla. Their unconditional support and love motivate me to be the best husband and father that I can be. They will forever be my joy and inspiration. I could not have reached this milestone without them by my side.

I dedicate this work and give special thanks to the Board of Education for supporting my dissertation project. I am forever appreciative of your support and belief in me.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

As a child, my mother spent an inordinate amount of time working to ensure that I possessed the required knowledge, skills, and disposition to read printed text before the age of five. She succeeded. As long as I can remember, I have had the ability to read text with minimal effort. For years, well into my adult life, I assumed that reading was an act that everyone could do with relative ease. However, two weeks into my student teaching practicum, I quickly realized that I was wrong.

As a student teacher, working with second-grade students in an urban setting, I noticed students struggling to recognize and pronounce words such as “it” and “was.” Initially, I thought that these problems could be addressed by providing additional opportunities to read the words. Sometimes this method worked, but for the most part many of our struggling readers continued to struggle, despite my efforts.

I, also, began to notice that the vast majority of the struggling readers in this particular classroom happened to be African American boys. I spoke with the classroom teacher, a veteran of 25 years, about my concerns. She assured me that I would continue to see this pattern. I presented my supervising teacher with what I was noticing as well and he offered a similar response. At this point, I wanted to learn more about reading processes and effective methods to help children become better readers.

Although, my initial focus was aimed towards children, after my second year of teaching I noticed many of my colleagues struggling to help students improve their reading skills. This realization was extremely troublesome. I felt compelled to support my fellow teachers. My desire to support my colleagues led to a number of opportunities to work as a literacy consultant for a large urban school district and eventually as a Reading First Literacy Coach.

My experience as a literacy coach began with high hopes and expectations. I was truly excited about being a part of an initiative that focused on improving reading, solely. However, after two years, I became disenchanted with the impact of the program on our struggling and proficient readers. I found teachers and students placed undeserved emphasis on decoding skills as opposed to reading comprehension skills. Unfortunately, my observations were validated by the United States Education Department's (2008) report of the federally funded Reading First Impact Study, which examined the impact of the Reading First program across 248 schools in 13 states. The findings in the study were

- The Reading First program produced a positive impact on decoding among first-grade students.
- The Reading First program had no significant impact on student reading comprehension for Grades 1, 2, and 3.

Fast forward to today, after years of study and practice, I still find myself asking why so many of our African American boys struggle to become proficient readers. After countless hours of study and contemplation, I have come to the conclusion that many of the barriers to improved reading for boys, African American boys in particular, derive from sociocultural practices, academic priorities and expectations, as well as the organization of schools. In general, schools expect that students must acquire a set of skills and essential knowledge to become proficient readers and largely ignore students' reading interests and what students bring to the reading process.

Although many African American boys continue to struggle with reading, several studies provide guidance and a ray of hope that educators can use to improve reading achievement for African American boys. Literacy researchers (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002;

Strickland, 1994; Tatum, 2005; Taylor, 2005) have identified and studied the effects of educators' current academic priorities and reading expectations on African American boys. Other researchers (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Jones, 2005; Sullivan, 2004) also looked at school-based reading expectations, but focused more specifically on the reading tasks and behaviors African American boys were expected to achieve. Taken together, their studies conclude that an overemphasis on teaching reading to help African American boys perform better on standardized tests has proven to be detrimental, but can be ameliorated if educators reconsider their priorities and respond to the needs and preferences of African American boy readers.

### **Statement of Problem**

In recent years, the gender gap in reading achievement has captured the attention of literacy researchers and educators alike. A 2009 report released by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that boys in elementary through high school scored significantly lower than girls on standardized measures of reading achievement across industrialized nations. In a similar report, the OECD (2009) revealed that girls outperformed boys in reading continuous text—prose organized in sentences and paragraphs—on the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) across all industrialized nations.

The latest national test scores show that girls have met or exceeded the reading performance of boys at all age levels (Taylor, 2005). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the Nation's Report Card, reveals that the gap observed between reading scores of fourth-grade males and females in previous years continues to be significant and was larger in 2011 than in 2009. In 2011, NAEP results continue to illuminate the gap in reading achievement between fourth-grade males (218) and females (225) across the

nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Additionally, the NAEP results published in 2015 show that the scores were stable, but the reading achievement gap between fourth-grade males (219) and females (226) remained significant (NCES, 2015). The Center on Education Policy (2010) reported that boys underperformed compared to girls by as much as 10 percentage points on standardized measures of reading in some states.

The most recent NAEP results for the State of Michigan show that female students continue to outperform their male counterparts in the area of reading at all grade levels. At the fourth-grade level, the gender gap in reading continues to exist; however, the 2015 results (214 males, 219 females) reveal a slight narrowing of the gap as compared to 2011 results (216 males, 222 females). However, both fourth-grade males and females in the state performed below national averages (NCES, 2015).

Unfortunately, the gender gap in reading manifests itself in other ways. The NCES (2000) reported that boys outnumber girls in corrective and remedial reading programs. A fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, Sommers noted that “more boys than girls are in special education classes. More boys are prescribed mood-managing drugs” (as cited in Von Drehle, 2007, p. 3). The aforementioned statistics and research findings illuminate the gender gap in reading achievement on international, national, and local levels. However, the recent attention given to the gender gap in reading achievement remains controversial, especially when placed in a historical context.

The gender gap in reading achievement has led some critics to question the political aims of those who advocate for special provisions for boys aimed at addressing this issue. Cohen (1998) noted, “Boys have underachieved when compared with girls in literacy since the seventeenth century” (p. 8). Other researchers skeptical of the recent urgency given to this

issue also note the historical evidence of girls outperforming boys in the area of literacy. Holbrook (1988) indicated that evidence for female reading superiority dates back to the 1930's. In fact, according to Brozo and Zambo (2010), this history of underperformance of boys in reading achievement is well documented. However, despite the facts, attempts to refute the statistics brought to bear in support of the *boy crisis* remains a challenging task, indeed.

The current *boy crisis* appears more troubling when factors of race and socioeconomic status are entered into the equation. Research has indicated that African American males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds suffer from chronic underperformance on measures of reading achievement. Many educators, policy makers, and researchers have investigated and documented this pernicious gap in reading achievement between not only African American and Caucasian males, but also African American males and females as well.

Key indicators such as student achievement and persistence data reveal that school tends to be more of a challenge for African American boys as compared to their counterparts. According to an article written by Gabriel (2010) in the *New York Times*, the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian boys was far worse than originally thought. The article highlights 2009 NAEP scores that reveal 12% of fourth-grade African American boys scored proficient in reading as compared to 38% of Caucasian boys. In addition, the article reveals a more troublesome statistic; that Caucasian boys who qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch perform the same as African American boys who do not qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch. The 2009 NAEP results also show a 30% or greater gap in reading achievement in some states between African American and Caucasian boys. In Michigan, only 6% of eighth-grade African American boys gained proficiency in reading as evidenced by the NAEP in 2009 compared to a 31% proficiency rating for Caucasian males.



Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2010) reported data to highlight the persistence levels among African American students (male and female) and Caucasian males. The report indicated that African American males Grades kindergarten through 12 (K-12) are more likely to be retained than African American female students. The NCES also reported that African American males in Grades 6-12 are more likely to be suspended or expelled than African American female students, and twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as compared to Caucasian males. Furthermore, the Schott Foundation (2015) recently reported the 2012-2013 national high school graduation rates for African American (59%) and Caucasian (80%) (Black boys report, 2015). These statistics suggest that “schools seem to be failing [African-American] boys in literacy education” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p.3).

Tatum (2005) noted, “Schools are perceived as hostile environments by many African American males...these perceptions have an impact on their reading achievement” (p. 12). The schools that these boys (and girls) attend were characterized by “unqualified teachers” and “poor [literacy] instruction,” which negatively affects the reading achievement of male and female students alike (Tatum, 2005, p.15). To ameliorate the reading achievement gap, many school district officials have purchased commercial reading programs designed by outside experts to help students acquire the skills required to improve reading.

As the reading achievement gap continues to grow progressively wider, the educational community has witnessed the proliferation of commercial reading programs in classrooms across the nation. As a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), teachers have been mandated to teach from federally approved reading programs. More recently, the Race to the Top grant program incentivizes the use of reading programs and assessments aligned with the

new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). According to a report issued by the National Council of Teachers of English (2006), these commercial reading programs are based on a limited set of research methodologies. Teachers are expected to follow a rigid predetermined instructional sequence of literacy skills and strategies, while ignoring the cultural and emotional literacies of their students. The wide-scale implementation of commercial reading programs contradict what the professional literature related to reading instruction confirms.

Tatum (2005) asserted that in order for most African American males to experience success in school, reading instruction must move beyond a skills-based pedagogical approach towards responsive high-quality instruction designed to nourish the multiple literacies—academic, cultural, emotional, and social—of African American males. These commercial reading programs require students to conform to the cultural values and norms of the dominant culture. To facilitate the development of the personal and cultural identities of African American male students, literacy instruction must address their issues and concerns in a way that leads them to critically examine their own lives (Tatum, 2005). Perhaps the inability of commercial reading programs to encourage African American males to critically examine their lives suggests the need for literacy practices that promote critical analysis through active reading.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of critical literacy activities within a social learning context on elementary-aged African American boys' development towards critical literacy. An additional purpose was to explore African American boys' thinking about their lived-experiences in relation to mainstream texts and the roles assumed by an African American male participant observer to support African American boys'

development towards critical literacy. The focus of inquiry for this research project was guided by the following questions:

1. What, if any, impact does critical literacy activities embedded in a literature discussion group context have on African American boys' development towards critical literacy (consciousness)?
2. How do African American boys talk in a literature discussion group? To what extent might their talk change across texts and critical literacy activities?
3. How do the roles assumed by the teacher impact/affect African American boys' development towards critical discussions about and around texts?

### **Significance of the Study**

The professional literature points to the efficacy of critical literacy as a pedagogical approach to promote active reading. Heffernan (2004) writes that critical literacy practices encourage students to analyze and critique the relationships between their lived experiences and societal structures. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) discuss the importance of comprehending text from a critical stance. Reading text from a critical perspective enables the reader to “actively” engage in the reading process, thus, encouraging reflexive thought and action. Across the course of this study, in carefully designed “Critical Literacy” sessions, I used specific critical literacy activities such as “problem posing,” as recommended by McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b), to engage the boys in critical discussions around and about texts. Studies suggest that literature circles can serve as the space for critical discussions to occur.

Researchers over the past decade have investigated the practice of literature circles. Some researchers have found that the practice of literature circles increases engagement

(Almasi, 1995) promotes higher level thinking (Eeds & Wells, 1989) and improves comprehension (Sweigart, 1991). While others have found that literature circles (Daniels, 2002) provide the time and space for students to engage in meaningful discussions (Evans, 2001) around critical literacy texts (Heffernan, 2004). These findings suggest that literature circles might provide an environment conducive to meaningful and critical discussions about and around texts. That is why I used the literature discussion group setting as a space to facilitate meaningful interaction and construct meaning beyond a superficial level in six of the nine planned sessions.

This study explored African American boys' development towards critical literacy through analysis of their lived-experiences and mainstream texts within a social learning context. As an example, in a number of Critical Literacy sessions, I sought to challenge the boys to analyze selected texts to note their connection or disconnection to the author's and illustrator's portrayal of setting and characters' behavior and social practices. During the course of this study, the boys had multiple opportunities to critique and/or support the portrayals presented in selected texts and to discuss their interpretations amongst the group members.

Previous researchers have investigated the effect of critical literacy texts and activities on the interactions of students during literature circle discussions. However, only a few studies involving critical literacy texts and activities, within a literature circle setting, have included fourth- and fifth-grade African American males as participants. Even fewer critical literacy studies involving African American male students have examined the influence of an African American male instructor on African American boys' thinking about and around texts. This study is meant to add to the growing body of research on critical literacy and African American

males as investigated in literature discussion groups.

After an exhaustive search of the professional literature, no studies were found on the interactions and discussions involving members of this particular population within a literature circle context. Therefore, this study may add significantly to the current body of research related to the aforementioned topics.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

For this study, several assumptions were made, the researcher assumed the selected population was capable of discussing and comprehending selected text; the researcher assumed that the lived-experiences of the selected population contrasted the portrayals of experiences presented in selected text; lastly, it was assumed that the role and actions of the researcher influenced the participants' actions and interactions with one another and selected text. A discussion of each assumption is found in subsequent paragraphs.

First, it was assumed that the selected participants were capable of discussing and comprehending selected text for several reasons. One reason had to do with pairing fifth-grade boys to text written one grade level below their grade level. Selected text also contained vivid illustrations to support comprehension. Next, current classroom instruction at Phoenix Academy (pseudonym) supported meaningful discussion about text almost daily. Therefore, it was assumed that discussion of text would not be viewed as a foreign activity.

Second, it was assumed that selected participants have different lived-experiences as compared to the experiences of characters presented in texts selected for this study. The researcher carefully selected texts consisting of characters engaged in mainstream behaviors and routines within a traditional family structure. The selected participants for this study live in a high-poverty environment (94% free and reduced-price lunch rate) where 80% of the

households are headed up by single mothers. These statistics reflect a reality that increases the likelihood that participants of this study might engage in nonmainstream behaviors and routines within nontraditional family structures.

Finally, it is assumed that my position, race, and gender would influence the actions and interactions of the selected participants throughout the study. The position of Superintendent does command certain behavioral expectations. This might lead to a lack of willingness of the participants to share their thoughts and opinions freely. On the other hand, my position as Superintendent might lead to fewer off-task behaviors and a desire on the part of the participants to perform at a high level. My race and gender leads to the assumption that participants might feel comfortable expressing their lived-experiences as compared to experiences portrayed in selected texts. In short, it was assumed that the selected participants might feel a cultural connection to the researcher, thus encouraging more authentic dialogue.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

“Literacy instruction must address the issues and concerns held by boys, African American males in particular, in a way that will lead them to examine their lives, actively engage in the reading process, and deepen their understanding of texts.” (Tatum, 2005, p.15).

Understanding the literacy learning problems experienced by boys, African American boys in particular, requires an investigation of several bodies of literature. As will become clearer in what follows, there is a dearth of empirical research on African American boys and critical literacy, particularly within a small group context (literature circle), thus, I have read widely across the areas of boys and reading, the reading achievement gap, literature discussion groups, and critical literacy. My perspective as an African American male educator and my understanding of urban and rural African American male students and of literacy learning are represented here in four conversations: an overview of the problematic relationship between boys and reading; a discussion of African American males’ literacy challenges and barriers to reading achievement; a discussion of critical literacy as a way to promote self-examination, engagement, and critical understanding of mainstream texts; and a discussion of literature circles as a model of empowerment. In what follows, I present these ideas to illuminate the problematic relationship between boys, African American boys in particular, and reading as well as to explore the impact of critical literacy within a social learning context on their thinking in relation to texts. First, I consider the research on the gender gap in reading to introduce the challenge facing public school educators across the nation. Second, I focus on the pernicious reading achievement gap and literacy learning challenges that confront African American boys, specifically, to frame my argument for particular learning contexts and critical literacy as possible solutions to improve the

reading achievement of African American boys.

### **Boys and Reading: A Problematic Relationship**

As a male educator, I am deeply concerned by the recent trends in reading achievement scores when comparing boys to their female counterparts. International and national research reports present the underachievement of boys in reading as an immutable expectation. Numerous studies implicate educators as unknowing conspirators who perpetuate the reading discrepancy between boys and girls. However, I believe that if we ask the right questions about and around this issue we will find that boys' underperformance in reading doesn't have to be a foregone conclusion. In the following sections, I first discuss the gender gap in reading and present contributory causes. Next, I present findings from my review of the literature regarding the reading preferences and practices of boys, after which, I narrow my discussion to focus specifically on the reading achievement challenges facing African American boys.

**The gender gap.** Across the past two decades, educators have acknowledged and wrestled with the problem of underachievement of boys within formal educational settings. The growing concern on the part of educators regarding the gender gap in reading achievement is well-documented and supported by numerous research studies. According to Klecker (2006), statistical analyses of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment results across a span of two decades for fourth, eighth, and twelfth-grade students in reading revealed a negative relationship between boys and reading achievement. For fourth-graders, the NAEP data indicated an achievement gap between males and females that has fluctuated between 5 and 11 points across an 18-year period. In addition, the NAEP data representative of eighth-grade students revealed a wider gap in achievement (9-15 points) between males and females across the same time period. The results of this statistical analysis are consistent with



findings from other studies focused on the reading achievement discrepancy between males and females within formal educational settings (NCES, 2009).

Unfortunately, the gender gap in reading is not confined to our national borders. According to the international group, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2010), boys in the K-12 setting scored significantly lower than girls on standardized measures of reading achievement. To measure student achievement internationally, member countries of the OECD administered a battery of assessments under the auspices of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to 15-year-old students. The assessments, while designed to predict students' capacity to meet the rigors of the twenty-first century, also revealed that girls outperformed boys by substantial margins on measures of reading and writing in each of the 32 member countries. Many top ranked countries such as Finland and Canada have discovered 51- and 32-point gaps in reading achievement, respectively. In the United States, the gap (28 points) is less pronounced, but still significant, nevertheless.

**Misaligned expectations and priorities.** The gender gap in reading is indisputable. A preponderance of evidence has been presented to show that boys underperform in the area of reading when compared to their female counterparts. In light of this supporting evidence, educators and researchers alike have posed and pondered the following questions:

1. What are the contributory factors to this problem?
2. What can be done to resolve this issue?

To begin, several studies have been done across the past decades to explore and describe factors that contribute to the underperformance of boys in the area of reading. Many educational researchers (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Strickland, 1994; Tatum, 2005; Taylor, 2004) implicate school-based curricula and concomitant instructional practices and priorities as contributory

causes for low reading achievement on the part of boys. Far too frequently, boys are the victims of ill-conceived academic priorities, which overemphasize preparation for high-stakes standardized tests. These researchers agree that curricula and instructional practices guided by test preparation aims often lead to a focus on rote memorization of basic skills and strategies taught in isolation. As such, studies have shown that these priorities severely limit the opportunities for boys to engage in more authentic and higher-functioning reading activities.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002), in their seminal study, *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, found that schools tend to inundate boys with a preponderance of superficial literacy tasks unrelated to their immediate needs and interests, because of an intense focus on preparation for high-stakes standardized assessments. According to Smith and Wilhelm, the overemphasis of test preparation compels schools to ignore the present literacy needs of boys and demands that boys conform to narrowed reading curricula and instruction. In fact, the boys in *Chevys* indicated that school-based literacy instruction didn't value their reading practices and preferences, thus leading them to believe that teachers simply did not care. Although, they held this view of school-based literacy instruction; they remained committed to the idea of school as necessary and positive, overall. This declaration of support for the concept of school implies that boys believe that more relevant reading curricula and instructional practices are warranted to make schools more inclusive settings. The findings of this study illuminate the dissonance between school-based literacy and the literacy practices and preferences that boys engage in outside of school. In addition, these findings charge educators with the task of reconsidering our focus on test preparation, so that reading curricula and instruction is more inclusive and sensitive to the needs of boys.

Similarly, Strickland (1994) in her study of trends in literacy instruction stated that efforts

aimed at school reform for African American students have encouraged schools to establish rigid learning structures whereby reading skills are primarily taught in isolation and at the expense of writing. According to Strickland (1994), some schools have found success in the form of increased standardized test scores as a result of the implementation of “basic skills” reforms (p. 151). However, as she articulated, the literacy skills required to achieve success on standardized assessments might not always translate to future success in life as the demands of an increasingly complex and global society may require students to possess sophisticated knowledge and skills (Strickland, 1994, p. 151). The following quote from Strickland (1994) adequately describes the position students are placed in when we make improved test scores our top priority, “When students are repeatedly served a steady diet of low-level, impoverished basics, they accumulate a kind of knowledge that is neither empowering nor self-improving” (p. 151).

Along with ill-conceived academic priorities, schools hold boys to literacy-related expectations that fail to accommodate boys’ reading needs and interests (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Potvin, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sullivan, 2004). To begin, a number of studies have shown that teachers often expect all students to engage in reading as a solitary activity, as opposed to a social activity (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sullivan, 2004). The boys in *Chevys* expressed their lack of opportunity to build reading competence through participation in social contexts (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Blair and Sanford’s (2004) research findings support the thoughts expressed by the boys in Smith and Wilhelm’s study.

Blair and Sanford (2004), in their 2-year case study of boys in urban and rural elementary and middle schools explored how boys reshaped their school-based literacy tasks to suit their needs and interests. They learned that the boys in their study preferred to interact socially with their peers around particular texts. For example, during a routine classroom visit, the two

researchers observed a group of sixth-grade boys huddled around a single sports text-sharing information and various insights about the topic. Several interviews confirmed that the boys viewed reading as a social practice. They also learned that boys prefer to re-shape texts to fit their ideas of text and reading activities to make literacy tasks more meaningful and appealing. However, despite these findings, schools continue to expect boys to engage in reading as a solitary activity (Jones, 2005), maintain a sedentary posture while reading (Sullivan, 2004), and to become analysts of literary texts (Blair & Sanford, 2004). Taken together, these studies highlight the need for educators to re-examine the existing educational expectations and priorities imposed on boys and seek alternative practices to meet the literacy needs of our boys within formal educational settings.

Given the challenge facing educators in relation to improving the reading achievement of boys, one could surmise that educators lack the knowledge and resources to narrow the gender gap in reading. However, this is simply not the case. To the contrary, decades of research and classroom practice have revealed the preferred reading texts and activities of boys. Numerous studies on the reading preferences and practices of boys find that informational texts and stories containing action narratives are preferred by boys (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Farris, Werderich, Nelson, & Fuhler, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sullivan, 2004; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

**Reading preferences.** The study conducted by Farris et al. (2009), found that fifth-grade boys selected short informational texts with pictures, photographs, and drawings. Moreover, the boys preferred informational texts used by the classroom teacher to support or refute information learned within a particular unit of study. The opportunity to make connections or challenge authority motivated them to seek additional resources.

Literacy researchers and writers agree that boys prefer to read informative texts that enable them to understand how things work and why. Sullivan (2004), in his article, “Why Johnny Won’t Read” articulates the inherent impulse of males to figure out the inner workings of physical objects and abstract concepts. As examples of preferred texts, he lists print media, instructional manuals, and other abridged fact-based texts. According to Sullivan, these kinds of texts satisfy the boys’ need to understand the world in which they live.

Similarly, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) pointed out a few general findings related to boys preferred reading materials. Smith and Wilhelm mention that standardized measures of reading achievement reveal that boys perform better than girls on information retrieval and work-related literacy tasks. Therefore, boys are more inclined to choose informational texts, particularly texts that emphasize how-to-instructions and factual information around certain topics. The boys in *Chevys* stated that they chose texts closely related to their favorite activities, which gave them a sense of competence and control.

Studies have shown that boys are inclined to gravitate toward texts with action narratives in both formal and informal settings (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Farris et al., 2009; Worthy et al., 1999). In their 2-year ethnographic case study, Blair and Sanford discovered that their participants—elementary and middle school boys—preferred informational texts and texts with action narratives (i.e., comic books, graphic novels, and serial texts). During interviews, the boys reported selecting “visual, humorous, and active texts” (p. 456) that transformed school-based reading into a fun activity. Interviews also revealed that boys preferred reading action-oriented reading materials outside of school. In fact, many of the preferred titles read outside of school could not be found within their classroom and/or school-based libraries. The boys shared their enjoyment in transforming, imitating, and simply admiring particular characters included in these

action-oriented texts.

Similarly, the study on the reading preferences of fifth-grade boys conducted by Farris et al. (2009) found that boys preferred action and adventure texts. The 16 adolescent boys from an urban environment where 64% of the students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, were frequently observed reading nonfiction texts containing characters engaged in “precarious and life-threatening activities” (p. 183). In addition, interviews revealed the boys’ affinity for serial books whereby the activities of a particular character could be followed. The characters of choice were flawed in some way, but possessed enough strength and wit to overcome significant challenges. The researchers also found that these boys almost invariably shared particular action scenes, character exploits, and informational items with their boy partners. This finding highlights boys’ tendency to approach reading as a social activity as opposed to a solitary activity.

**African American males and reading: A national disgrace.** The current “boy crisis” widens substantially when factors of race and socioeconomic status are entered into the equation. African American males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds suffer from chronic underperformance on measures of reading achievement (Tatum, 2005). Many educators, policy makers, and researchers have investigated and documented this pernicious gap in reading achievement not only between African American and Caucasian males, but also between African American males and females as well. In fact, the reading achievement gap that exists between African American males and females manifests itself in many ways, such as the high number of African American males in special education as compared to the numbers of African American females, and in high school graduation rates.

In a report published in 2006, the Manhattan Institute revealed the dropout rate for

African American males typically exceeds the dropout for African American females (<http://manhattan-institute.org>). National percentages showed that 59% of African American females graduated, while only 48% of African American males graduated (a gap of 11 percentage points). This gap is especially troublesome when drawing comparisons to the gap between Caucasian males and females—a difference of 5 percentage points. The Schott Foundation (2015) revealed in a report focused on the graduation rates of African American males that “large city school districts” such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit graduated less than 45% of its African American boys in 2011-2012 (Black Boys Report, 2015).

These grim statistics suggest, “Schools seem to be failing [African American] boys in literacy education” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p.3). In the Detroit Public Schools system, the Schott Foundation (2015) reported that African American males graduate at a rate of 23%. The report also revealed that the state of Michigan graduates just 53.7% of African American males compared to 79.6% of Caucasian males. These reports certainly suggest that schools are indeed failing miserably to educate African American boys.

**School-based impediments to reading achievement.** The literature reveals several external factors such as—poverty, poor diet, and negative self-image—that contribute to the chronic underperformance of African American boys in reading. In paragraphs to follow, I discuss the in-school factors and not the out of school factors that contribute to the subpar reading achievement of African American boys and I present more progressive modes of reading instruction within a social learning environment as a more suitable alternative.

Unfortunately, the social organization of schools in which the vast majority of African American boys are enrolled contributes greatly to the lack of success experienced by African American boys. Schoolhouse factors such as low teacher expectations, poor instruction, along

with nonresponsive pedagogy and curriculum significantly impact their achievement levels (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005; White, 2009). In fact, researchers have learned that boys and African American boys in particular view the schoolhouse and traditional school-based practices as barriers to their reading achievement. Tatum (2005) noted, “Schools are perceived as hostile environments by many African American males...these perceptions have an impact on their reading achievement” (p. 12).

Researchers have cited several reasons why African American males hold these views towards school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005; Taylor, 2005). To begin, the schools that these [African-American] boys attend are characterized by incompetent, uncaring teachers who hold low expectations for African American male students, specifically, and low expectations for economically disadvantaged boys in general (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005). According to Taylor (2004), the tide of low expectations generally manifests itself in the form of rote learning of basic skills, which might dampen the motivation of African American boys to meaningfully engage in schoolhouse literacy activities.

Next, empirical evidence has suggested that teacher expectations play a significant role in student achievement and performance (White, 2009). Chenoweth (2006) traveled across the nation to find schools characterized by high poverty where student achievement was consistently high. In her book, *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Places*, Chenoweth uncovered a number of shared practices and beliefs held by staff at these schools. However, the belief that all students will learn if provided with high-quality teachers stands out as the most profound and pervasive.

Similarly, the boys in *Chevys* expressed their disdain for school-based literacy practices that were too often inconsistent with their interests and failed to provide them with an



appropriate challenge, which led the boys to draw comparisons between school and prison. In addition, the imposition of uninteresting reading tasks led the boys of this study to believe that their teachers simply did not care. Essentially, these schools ignore the literacy needs and preferences of boys, especially African American boys, and focus their energies around curriculum and instructional orientations designed to simply help African American males acquire the basic skills necessary to pass standardized state assessments and to function and participate in industrial and service-oriented labor markets.

Functionalism underpins the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), which ushered in an era of increased accountability in the form of standardized testing, standards-based curricula, and literacy practices. Consequently, public school educators across the nation are faced with the daunting task of ensuring that all students, despite their background, historical experience, and present situation, meet or exceed state standards and benchmarks as evidenced by standardized test scores. Because of their perceived lack of school readiness and overall cognitive abilities, African American males from urban and rural environs are often the recipients of low quality instruction focused on memorization of skills and strategies to prepare them for standardized assessments and eventually the world of work (Tatum, 2005). These practices are rooted in functional literacy that has a notable downside—children can learn to call the words on the page, but not learn how to comprehend them.

The functional literacy approach focused primarily on students' acquisition of knowledge and skills deemed necessary to participate successfully in school and to become a productive member of the workforce and society at-large (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002). This politically idealistic approach aims to produce functionally literate individuals capable of completing job applications, state and federal forms, write checks, read local newspapers, and engage in other

low-level practices. In the school setting, the functional approach, essentially, negates issues of culture and power and totally disregards the historical and social contexts of students' lives (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002). In short, functional literacy, in its effort to seek compliance, incapacitates those learners in need of empowering pedagogy to support their development as engaged literacy learners and critical consumers of texts. African American boys subjected to these school-house impediments need and deserve instructional practices that acknowledge their cultural values and that seek to engage them in more powerful ways.

### **Critical Literacy: Promoting Self-Examination, Engagement, and Critical Understanding**

In this section, I argue the importance and need for critical literacy as an instructional method to promote self-examination, engagement, and critical understanding to improve the literacy development of African American boys. First, I begin by asking the question, "What is Critical Literacy?" Second, I discuss the promise of critical literacy to promote self-examination, engagement, and critical understanding of texts for African American boys. Next, I discuss some of the lessons learned by researchers when attempting to lead students toward critical literacy. Before concluding this section, I discuss the importance of the suggested roles (facilitator and participant) to be assumed by the instructor as well as the rationale for selecting "mainstream texts" as the materials for leading African American boys toward critical literacy. To conclude, I review the main points of this section and begin to discuss the most suitable context to facilitate African American boys' development towards critical literacy.

**What is critical literacy?** Critical literacy as a field of study is fairly new. The novelty of critical literacy compels many educators to ask: "What is critical literacy?" As an emerging field of study, critical literacy has eluded attempts of scholars and practitioners to assign a universal definition. The term *critical literacy* seems to assume multiple definitions without

conflict. In other words, the term *critical literacy* is fluid in meaning (Iyer, 2007). Some scholars use a sociopolitical framework in which to define critical literacy. For example, Friere (1970) described critical literacy as practice which illuminates systemic oppression and seeks to transform such systems. He viewed illiteracy as a construct wielded by the dominant culture to systematically oppress particular groups. Likewise, Foucault (1977) asserts that the dominant culture uses its power to exert considerable influence to shape forms of knowing and discursive practices. From his perspective, critical approaches should include disciplined questioning of ways that power works through the discursive practices and performances of schooling. This variation of critical literacy is drawn from critical theory which views educational institutions as sorting and selecting machinery designed to maintain the status quo.

On the other hand, some scholars define critical literacy as theory with implications for instructional practice, because of its ability to defy being placed in a coherent curricular framework as a rigid set of instructional strategies (Behrman, 2006). This provides license for educators to locally adapt and reinvent critical literacy (Comber, 2001; Luke, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b), which leads to a multiplicity of classroom practices (Behrman, 2006) such as critiquing dominant social practices through resistant reading activities (Davies, 1993; Luke & Freebody, 1997). However, despite the seemingly fluid nature of critical literacy there are common principles and goals that bind various schools of thought.

In theory, social justice and democracy for all are common goals shared across multiple and varied interpretations of critical literacy (Behrman, 2006; Cadeiro-Kaplan, 2002; Davies, 1993; Edelsky, 1999; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Young, 2000). Cervetti et al. (2001) claimed that “critical literacy, through critique of social and political problems, works to minimize human suffering and to create a more just world” (p. 6). Similarly,

Shannon (1995) asserted that critical literacy may be the most hopeful force to help build a more just future. In other words, critical literacy is a literacy that engages individuals in what Friere (1970) referred to as praxis—”reflection and action upon [society] in order to transform it” (p. 36).

Overall, according to the literature, the principles on which critical literacy rests invites individuals to question, examine, and challenge relationships of power. As a consequence of the review of literature, I believe critical literacy holds tremendous promise for the participants of this study (African American boys) to move beyond a literal understanding to a critical understanding of text and to empower them to reflect on and examine their lived-experiences as well as question and critique the social and cultural practices of the larger society as presented in mainstream texts. The promise of critical literacy for African American boys is discussed in further detail in subsequent paragraphs.

**The promise of critical literacy for African American boys.** As stated previously, numerous research studies, educator testimonials, as well as federal and state reports have confirmed that significant numbers of African American boys educated in urban and rural schools are confronted with literacy practices that encourage students to achieve basic reading skills and do little to promote reading engagement beyond a surface level. It is also noted that African American boys in urban and rural schools are rarely provided opportunities to engage with texts in such ways—challenge “authorial power” and transform texts to reflect their reality—to promote deeper levels of comprehension. To improve the reading performance of African American boys, I argue that educators in urban and rural schools should re-consider current literacy practices and look to incorporate critical literacy practices in their instructional routines to develop critical understanding, self-examination, and engagement. In subsequent

paragraphs, I provide both empirical evidence and theoretical arguments to support my assertion that critical literacy holds many promises to improve the reading performance of African American boys educated in urban and rural school systems.

To begin, critical literacy practices move readers beyond a basic understanding to a deeper understanding of texts. Critical literacy researchers and practitioners have discovered and theorized about the capacity of critical literacy activities to help readers understand text from a critical perspective and to promote deeper levels of comprehension (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b). McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) theorized about the capacity of critical literacy activities to move readers beyond basic understandings of text to a more critical understanding of texts. They described critical understanding as thinking beyond the text to not just understand printed words, but also the context and purpose of the text. McLaughlin and DeVogd posited the use of strategies such as *questioning authorial power*—the author’s prerogative to compose text on a particular topic from a particular angle, and to include some ideas while excluding others—and *problem posing* as tools to facilitate critical understanding, and thus deeper comprehension of texts (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b, p. 13).

To extend their theoretical argument, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) asserted that when readers are afforded opportunities to engage in critical literacy activities such as disrupting and questioning the author’s message, they become increasingly empowered to become critical text users. These opportunities to critique and challenge authorial power might also enable readers to more closely examine their language use, cultural values and beliefs, and life experiences, thus, providing a deeper and more critical understanding of the text. As a consequence of this process, readers are thrust into the role of active meaning makers with the

capacity to critically understand the function and context of the text under study.

Additionally, McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004a) provided as an example an instructional technique referred to as problem posing to support their theoretical argument for the capacity of critical literacy to help readers move beyond basic comprehension of texts. They asserted that problem posing, as both an instructional technique and process, leads the reader beyond initial understanding of text by posing a series of queries on a particular theme and/or topic followed by substantive discussion amongst students, facilitated by the teacher, about and around topic-related issues. With problem posing, readers might be asked questions such as “Why do you think the author wrote this story?”, “Why do you think the author wrote the story with these characters?”. The queries are designed to provoke critical thinking amongst participants, which they argue might lead readers beyond a superficial understanding of text to a more critical understanding of text. It is my desire to see readers move beyond a basic understanding of text to a deeper level of understanding. This is why I chose to incorporate problem posing into this particular study.

Another means of attaining deeper comprehension is highlighted in a critical literacy study conducted by Leland and Harste (2000), where they found that reading from a critical perspective might lead the reader to examine his/her lived-experiences as a consequence of challenging the values and assumptions embedded in texts. As part of their 2-year investigation, Leland and Harste sought ways to help classroom teachers seamlessly enter into critical discussions with their students. In large part to help initiate the process, they used “social issues” print material—texts that illuminate particular sociopolitical issues to heighten the awareness of students. They found that subsequent discussions reflected and reinforced students’ understanding of the text. As a result, students’ talk about and around these texts changed to

reflect their newly found sense of empowerment. They began to not only re-examine their personal beliefs and assumptions, but to challenge the values and practices of the dominant culture, which led to a more profound understanding of texts and the topic under study.

Additionally, as substantiated by the literature, I believe that critical understanding and students' examination of their lived-experiences will lead to a deeper and more profound engagement with text. Much of the literature regarding critical literacy indicates that students engage in reading and other literacy activities in powerful ways when provided the opportunity to participate in critical literacy activities (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Leland & Harste, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b).

One such example of students powerfully engaged in literacy comes from a research project conducted in a third-grade classroom where Heffernan (teacher) joined Lewison (Assistant Professor) to help implement a critical literacy curriculum in the classroom (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000). Heffernan and Lewison provided a detailed description of the journey taken to lead third-grade suburban students towards critical literacy beginning with the use of social issues texts and concluding with students writing letters to their senator. Through the process, the third-grade students learned that language is a non-neutral tool loaded with political capital and most importantly they learned that their voice can influence the actions of those in power. The students in this third-grade classroom acquired more than a general understanding of the texts and issues under study. Taken together, the students in each study learned how to use critical literacy strategies to read from a critical perspective, and they learned to examine their assumptions, which led them to take action never before considered.

I believe that this type of reading experience is important for all children, especially African American boys. My belief is substantiated in the studies and theoretical arguments

presented in previous paragraphs. The National Governor's Association and the authors of the Common Core State Standards also believe that readers should think beyond printed text and critically analyze issues to be prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century. However, this presupposition required further study and exploration. This is why, I intended to engage the boys in my study in strategies and activities that I hoped would move them beyond a basic level of understanding and engagement with text to more critical and deeper levels of understanding and engagement.

**Leading towards critical literacy: Lessons learned.** Studies have shown that leading students towards becoming critically literate is marked with challenge, conflict, disappointment, and promise. There is a significant body of research to teach us the pitfalls to avoid and pathways to pursue to successfully facilitate students' development towards critical literacy. I share three critical literacy studies in particular to provide insight as to what practices to avoid and what action steps to emulate when attempting to lead students towards critical literacy (Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Rogers, 2002; Young, 2000).

Rogers (2002), after conducting a 2-year critical literacy study with a group of low-income African American students in upstate New York, learned that leading students towards critical literacy can be a daunting task for a number of reasons, especially when the desired goal is to lead participants to critique their social worlds. At the outset, she notes that critical literacy teachers should keep in mind the fact that they are "part of the same set of asymmetrical power relations that they seek to critique," so one should take certain precautions when attempting to engage students in critical literacy (Rogers, 2002, p. 775). Despite understanding the potential impact of her status (Caucasian middle-class female teacher educator) on the participants of her study, she often struggled with prompting critical responses from the students through teacher-



generated close-ended questions, which led them to believe that there was a correct response to the question/prompt. Additionally, the expectation of the students to critique their own social world was another challenge for Rogers. Ladson-Billings (1994) asserted that asking students to critique their own social worlds might lead to dissonance and ultimately resistance. As a result of reflexive thinking, Rogers did, however, realize these challenges and took steps to increase the use of open-ended questions and questioned the usefulness of imposing her beliefs on other's belief systems. According to Rogers (2002), these adjustments led to greater critical understanding and critical action on the students' part towards the end of the study as compared to the outset of the study. At the end, Rogers did point out that while she did not achieve her desired goal, she learned hard lessons to be used to inform future studies and to serve as notes for others looking to lead students towards critical literacy.

Young (2000) learned a similar lesson as a consequence of attempting to impose her worldview and values on four adolescent males. In her study, "Boy Talk: Critical Literacy and Masculinities," Young (2000), in a homeschooling educational experience where she shared teaching responsibilities with the mother of two participants, attempted to have four adolescent boys question their notions of masculinity and transform their awareness of gendered identities by critically examining the linguistic patterns used in particular texts. As part of the language arts and social studies curriculum, she facilitated critical literacy activities and discussions to provide the space and opportunity for the four boys to re-examine their ideas about gendered identities. At the conclusion of the 18-week project, she found that although the boys learned to recognize how authors used language to convey certain messages about masculinity and how their own notions of masculinity influenced their comprehension of the text, their "awareness of gendered identities and inequities was unstable and at times uncertain" (Young, 2001, p. 6). In short, the

boys at particular times would resist questioning their notions of masculinity since it is a position of power that provides privilege. Young (2001), offered a few possible factors that may have led to such an outcome. Young believed that her attempt to impose a feminist agenda—illuminate and reduce hegemonic masculine behaviors—on adolescent males coupled with maternal urges to celebrate maleness in the traditional sense might have contributed significantly to the boys’ unstable awareness of gendered identities. Young also indicated that her attempt to have the boys critique their position of privilege or social status might have contributed to their inconsistent desires to transform practices of masculinity. Again, similar to Rogers’ study, Young provided insight into the perils of imposing one’s beliefs on others and asking participants to challenge their social status when attempting to lead towards critical literacy.

A more recent study by Lalik and Oliver (2007) provided another lesson for critical literacy researchers attempting to steer participants towards an intended conclusion. In their study, Lalik and Oliver investigated the differences and tensions in implementing pedagogy of critical literacy with adolescent girls. The study was conducted in a small politically conservative southern town with four adolescent females—two African American and two Caucasian—as participants. Both researchers noted that their agenda was not aligned to the social and political values of the setting. They sought to support the critical literacy development of 4 adolescent females in the curricular area of physical education as they were engaged in a study of the female body. The study showed that while Lalik and Oliver engaged the participants in carefully planned activities, reflective of their interest in social justice, they were only partially successful in attempting to support the girls’ critical literacy development. The following quote summarizes the findings of this study, “We were unable to sustain a learning environment reflective of our best hopes for critical literacy” (Lalik & Oliver, 2007, p. 67). Taken together,

the results of these three critical literacy studies provide valuable lessons for those attempting to lead students towards critical literacy. These studies warn critical literacy instructors and researchers to avoid imposing their social agenda onto students as well as to guide students towards preconceived conclusions. This is why I plan to engage boys in the critique of social worlds unlike their own and to assume roles that promote the use of open-ended questions to facilitate critical literacy development of the participants of this study.

**Instructor's role in leading towards critical literacy.** As one might surmise, the role(s) assumed by the instructor plays a tremendous part in students' development towards critical literacy. The literature concerning the instructor's role highlights the importance of the instructor in mediating students' development towards critical literacy as well as the challenges that instructors must overcome when helping students work towards critical literacy. To add, some key studies suggest specific roles that critical literacy instructors might assume to encourage students' development towards critical literacy. In the subsequent paragraphs, I discuss in more depth the centrality of the instructor in the development of students' critical literacy skills along with roles to be assumed when leading students towards critical literacy.

To begin, there are a number of studies that shed light on the importance of the instructor's role and the challenges that one must overcome when teaching students to become critically literate (Hall & Piazza, 2008; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Leland & Harste, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b; Young, 2001). When planning to lead students towards critical literacy, the instructor must first have the capacity to read from a critical perspective and must be willing to embrace the principles of critical literacy. At a basic level, this requires instructors to recognize their personal views and biases as well as to challenge preexisting assumptions and beliefs. This initial step can challenge the most skilled and well-intentioned instructor (Heffernan

& Lewison, 2000). For example, in a year-long study, Lewison (teacher educator) and Heffernan (third-grade teacher), worked together to help students negotiate a newly implemented critical literacy curriculum in Heffernan's classroom. According to Heffernan and Lewison, the initial phase of the project produced some feelings of discomfort and angst on their part. These rather intense emotions led them to realize the need to reassess their position, move beyond their feelings of reluctance, and share their cultural beliefs with their students. This course of action helped Lewison and Heffernan to realize the importance of their activity and ultimately encouraged their students to overcome feelings of hesitance and to begin reading and discussing books from a more critical perspective.

Similarly, Hall (Hall & Piazza, 2008), in a study involving pre-service teachers, investigated the extent to which participation in literature discussion groups influenced pre-service teachers' thinking about how they would choose and use texts to facilitate critical literacy development with the children in their respective classrooms. As a result of their participation, the pre-service teachers were able to articulate several ideas that they would consider to support students' development towards critical literacy. One such idea placed emphasis on the importance of teachers understanding their own beliefs and biases. The pre-service teachers noted that without such understanding they might have selected texts and led discussions based on their assumptions and prejudices. Most importantly, this study helped to empower each teacher to understand that developing students' critical abilities begins with them. Overall, this study, akin to the Lewison and Heffernan study, found that instructors are essential and their actions help to develop students' critical literacy abilities or to inhibit their development towards becoming critically literate.

Empirical evidence from three studies conducted by teacher researchers (Hall & Piazza,

2008; Short, 1999; Young, 2001) and theoretical argument (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a) suggested that to enhance students' development towards critical literacy, instructors of critical literacy must prepare to assume and vacillate between two key roles—facilitator and participant. Hall and Piazza (2008) argued that teachers first assume a facilitative role, a role that includes modeling critical thinking about texts through the use of think-alouds followed up with open-ended questions to encourage inquiry. Next, they suggested that instructors assume a more participatory role by contributing personal examples or anecdotes to the discussion. According to Hall and Piazza (2008), this might lead students to reflect on and share their own real-life examples, thus, enriching the discussion and creating a pathway to more critical discussions.

Likewise, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004a) and Young (2001) recommended that critical literacy instructors assume and move between multiple roles when attempting to develop students' critical literacy abilities. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004a) and Young (2001) agreed that critical literacy instructors must first assume a facilitative role to guide students towards critical consciousness. In their seminal text, *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text*, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004a) highlighted the developmental nature of becoming critically literate and emphasize the demands placed on the teacher to facilitate students' development towards critical inquiry. They underscored the need for instructors to engage in facilitative practices such as building student background knowledge, scaffolding student learning, modeling activities to stimulate critical thinking (i.e., think-alouds), and applying questions that challenge authorial perspective. According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b), these practices across a period of time might push students further along the critical literacy continuum.

In addition, Young (2001) in a discussion of a previous study, "Boy Talk: Critical

Literacy and Masculinities,” discussed several ways in which she could have improved particular critical literacy activities conducted in her study. In her discussion, Young (2001) provided recommendations to those researchers and educators who might consider the use of critical literacy activities with boys. Several recommendations are focused primarily on the role(s) of the teacher and the importance of re-examining and revising teacher practice to facilitate the development of critical literacy for boys. First, Young acknowledged that more modeling and guided practice through think-alouds is required to demonstrate, more explicitly, the act of social critique. Young also admitted that she could have asked more open-ended questions to help the boys in her study explore particular texts from a more critical perspective. Lastly, Young talked about the use of texts with “built-in critique” to avoid asking students to engage in resistance reading as well as the importance of creating and sustaining a safe space for participants to openly share their opinions and interpretations. Overall, Young believed that these improvements would have enabled her to assume a more facilitative role, which could have possibly led to greater critical response.

To further support learners’ development towards critical literacy, it is imperative that critical literacy instructors move beyond a facilitative role towards a more participatory role during discussions about and around text and related issues. Short et al. (1999) conducted a study to examine the type of talk teachers engaged in during literature discussion groups with students and how their talk influenced student actions and understanding of text-based topics. Short and a team of teacher researchers worked with four groups of upper elementary students (grades 3-6) in Tucson, Arizona to discover “categories of different types of literary talk and the social roles taken by group members” (Short et al., 1999, p. 378).

Data analysis revealed four distinct roles that each teacher researcher assumed during the

literature discussion sessions. Amongst the four roles (facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener), the research team found that “teacher as facilitator”—encouraging productive discursive practices—was the role most often assumed by the teachers, especially at the start of the project. However, as time passed, the team discovered that role of “teacher as participant”—sharing personal thoughts and opinions related to the text—encouraged students to move beyond discussion generated through facilitative talk (p. 13). In fact, the participatory role assumed by the teacher served to stimulate and guide students’ thinking, help clarify perplexing concepts, encourage continuous dialogue about and around text, and challenge students to view the topic of study from diverse perspectives. Beyond facilitative talk, Short et al. (1999) found that participatory talk created zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), thus enabling the teacher researcher to more readily extend and push students’ thinking past their current level of competence to their potential level of competence. This is why I planned to move beyond a facilitative role towards the role of participant.

Taken together, these studies reveal the expanded importance of the teacher’s role and teacher’s influence on students’ development towards critical literacy. Though the participants of these studies were not exclusively African American boys and the teachers were primarily middle-class Caucasian females, this research provided insight that guided my actions and talk as a facilitator and then as a “high-status participant” in literature discussion groups (Short et al., 1999, p. 377).

**The use of mainstream texts in leading towards critical literacy.** As with any instructional event, the materials used are important to the learning process. Because critical literacy defies curricular and instructional unification, the range of materials used in studies and classrooms are quite diverse. Three types of text are generally advocated for and used in critical

literacy studies: (a) social issues, (b) multicultural, and (c) mainstream (traditional). In isolation, within critical literacy studies, it has not been demonstrated that any one of the three text types generated critical reading or inhibited such reading on the part of students. Therefore, it is not necessary to argue against the use of social issues, multicultural, and mainstream texts, but it is important to provide details about the three text types and to provide an explanation for the use of mainstream texts in this particular study.

To begin, some critical literacy researchers and educators advocate for the use of social issues texts, because of the “built-in critique” which they argue facilitates critical literacy development (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Leland & Harste, 2000; Lewison et al., 2008; Rogers, 2002). According to Leland and Harste (2000), social issues texts work to illuminate differences, the plight of marginalized groups and individuals, and the impact of dominant systems on Others. To transform students’ attitudes towards critical literacy learning, Heffernan and Lewison (2000) used social issues texts to facilitate conversations around racism. They used the text *White Wash* to engage students in reflexive thinking and critical conversations about race. This process helped their students in the transition from personal reflection and transformation to political action. In essence, students in this study became critically literate through the process of interacting with social issues text.

Some critical literacy researchers and educators have used multicultural texts as part of their studies (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b; Rogers, 2002). Many of the multicultural texts typically selected to engage students in critical discussions, often focus on an important social issue such as racial discrimination, slavery, and civil rights. Many researchers advocate the use of such texts because of their capacity to stimulate lively and insightful discussions about important social problems and topics that center on racial and gender



issues.

For instance, Rogers (2002), in her study involving four African American adolescents (three female, one male), used multicultural texts centered on themes of African American freedom/oppression and literacy/illiteracy. The results of the 2-year study suggest that the texts with built-in critique may expand students' capacity to read critically. She also asserts that multicultural texts which promote compelling social themes may encourage students to make connections without forcing them to critique their immediate social worlds. Although many studies promote the use of multicultural texts in critical literacy activities, some critical literacy educators find the exclusive use of such texts problematic.

Jones (2006) argued against the sole use of multicultural texts in critical literacy activities. She asserted that the overuse of multicultural texts can potentially lead to the "multicultural trap" (p. 115). This practice strips students of the opportunity to critique and challenge mainstream texts. Mainstream texts often times portray certain characters, cultural practices, and events as normal, although the lives of the reader may be quite different. In most instances, these texts reflect the values, beliefs, and biases of the dominant culture. In her book, *Girls, Social Class, & Literacy*, Jones (2006) shared the idea of empowering students to discuss their disconnections with children's literature. She stated that disconnections may lead to "insightful and provocative conversations around assumptions and stereotypes based on gender, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural practices" (p. 13). This raised questions about whether having the students of this study share their disconnections with particular mainstream texts would lead them to analyze and critique their sociocultural practices in contrast to those portrayed in the text.

Boutte (2002) claimed that many educators unwittingly present mainstream texts as

neutral, innocuous, and inherently good. As such, the ideology and perspective of the author is consumed by the reader without question, thus illuminating particular practices as normative and others as deviant. Furthermore, Boutte (2002) asserted that children's literature can have a profound impact on the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of children, which is why she and other critical literacy educators argued that students need to learn how to examine mainstream texts from a critical perspective (Boutte, 2002; Iyer, 2007; Luke & Freebody, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b; Rogers, 2002). I, too, believe that students should possess the ability to and be afforded the opportunity to critically analyze all texts, especially texts that typically elude such analysis. Overall, the positions stated by Jones and Boutte—inviting students to consider how their experiences differ from normal experiences portrayed in mainstream texts and to challenge the author's portrayals—explains why I selected mainstream texts for this particular study.

**Summary.** Across this section, I have presented an argument outlining the purpose and need for African American boys to achieve critical literacy as well as how to lead them towards critical literacy. As a result of a thorough review of the literature, we have learned that critical literacy promotes deeper comprehension of text and thus greater levels of engagement on the part of readers. Also, we have learned about the numerous challenges faced by critical literacy researchers when attempting to lead students towards critical literacy and the lessons learned from their experiences. Lastly, I have discussed important steps to be considered when planning to lead students towards critical literacy.

At this point in the review of literature, it is important to transition to a discussion about the appropriate context for the development of critical literacy to occur. The appropriate context should encourage independent thought, facilitate meaningful dialogue and understanding, and should help to engage students at high levels. After an exhaustive and substantial review of the

professional literature, I found that literature discussion groups might provide a context to facilitate African American boys development towards critical literacy.

### **Literature Discussion Groups: A Context for Critical Conversations**

In this section, I argue the importance and need for literature discussion groups as a context to improve the literacy development of African American boys as well as to cultivate and facilitate their development towards critical literacy. First, I begin by defining literature discussion groups. Second, I discuss the capacity of literature discussion groups to promote engaged reading, improve students' understanding of texts as members of a community of literacy learners, and ultimately to facilitate critical discussions about texts and related issues. Next, I describe the two predominate forms of literature discussion groups—peer-led and sustained teacher-led models—and discuss challenges presented by both models as well as how both models can aid in the development towards critical literacy. Then I discuss why the teacher-mediated literature-discussion approach was selected for this particular study. Finally, I touch on the dearth of studies involving and studying African American boys within this particular instructional context.

**What are literature discussion groups?** Literature discussion groups are groups of four to six students who come together to read and discuss a shared piece of literature (Maloch, 2002). Currently, literature circles are commonly referred to as literature studies, book clubs, and literary circles; also, each term holds slightly divergent meanings, which alters the look and function of literature discussion groups from classroom to classroom (Daniels, 2002).

Contemporary versions of literature discussion models originated in Smith's fifth-grade classroom circa 1982. She found her students gathered together in small groups discussing old novels. Her students were so engaged in their newly discovered activity that Smith decided to

invite other educators into her room to observe her students. Two educators, Short and Kaufman, after observing this phenomenon coined the term *literature circles* (Daniels, 2002). Since then, literature circles/discussion groups have enjoyed increasing popularity as a pedagogic method of choice amongst classroom teachers across this nation (Evans, 1996).

**The benefits of literature discussion groups.** For many students, in urban and rural school settings, the traditional mode of literacy instruction is often characterized by mundane, irrelevant, and disengaging rote learning of basic skills (Darling-Hammond, 1998). This particular mode of instruction often *disempowers* students leaving them without a sense of agency and motivation to participate in school-based literacy activities. Classrooms in which they find themselves are often void of empowering instructional practices that incorporate peer discussions around and about meaningful topics and texts that prompt learners to engage and understand at deeper levels. Learning contexts such as literature discussion groups (a) possess the capacity to promote engagement (Long & Gove, 2003); (b) improve students' comprehension of texts (Swiegert, 1991); and (c) nurture and facilitate students' development towards critical literacy (DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006).

In a study designed to “challenge, arouse interest, and awaken in children a passion for reading,” Two teacher educators, Long and Gove (2003) used provocative literature with two complementary processes—literature circles and engagement strategies (p. 350). Their investigation sought to discover if the use of engagement strategies and literature circles could motivate 16 urban fourth-grade students to actively engage in challenging and thought provoking literature. In this study, Long and Gove, along with the classroom teacher taught and used engagement strategies immediately following literature circles across four 3-hour sessions. They used texts with topics centered on the plight of African-Americans in the segregated south. The

engagement strategies were introduced and enacted in three distinct forms. Each form was used to encourage students to ask questions about issues surrounding social justice, elicit student interpretations, and create relevant and authentic learning experiences through dramatic enactments. Despite the abbreviated length of time used to conduct this study, Long and Gove (2003) found that the participants demonstrated increased motivation to participate in text-based conversations and enthusiastically engaged in the reading process as a result of the combination of well-chosen literature, literature circles, and engagement strategies. Given that this study shares many commonalities with my study, I was hopeful that I would achieve similar results in a short period of time with the boys in my study.

Researchers have also found that literature discussion groups empower students to gain greater insight and comprehend text at deeper and more profound levels (Almasi, 1995; Almasi et al., 2001; Daniels, 2002, 2006; Long & Gove, 2003; Short et al., 1999). Daniels (2006) asserted that literature circles provide space and opportunity to teach reading strategies explicitly—making connections, inferring, and visualization—to help improve students’ reading comprehension levels. To support his advocacy for literature circles, Daniels (2002) cited the results from a 3-year reform initiative involving several schools within the Chicago Public School system as support for the capacity of literature circles to improve students’ understanding of texts. According to his report, both the reading and writing scores from participating schools outpaced other schools within the district by substantial margins—14% third-grade reading, 10% eighth-grade reading, 25% third-grade writing, and 27% eighth-grade writing (Daniels, 2002).

In a previous study, Short et al. (1999), while exploring the relationship between teacher-talk and student participation, found that diverse forms of talk—”literary and life talk”—across various literature discussion groups encouraged students from multi-age classrooms (ages 9-11)

to focus more on personal connections, intertextual connections, and increased literary talk (p. 380). These connections to lived experiences and other texts (e.g., hypermedia) combined with meaningful social interaction led to greater insight and more vigorous meaning-making. Taken together, these two studies demonstrate the capacity of teacher-mediated discussion groups to empower students to understand text beyond surface levels and possibly lead to a more critical understanding of text. This led me to think that I could achieve similar results if I integrated critical literacy activities within a literature circle context with elementary-aged African American boys.

Additionally, when investigating the nature of fourth-graders' sociocognitive conflicts, Almasi (1995) found that peer-led literature discussion groups empowered participants to think reflexively about their interpretations of text and sometimes modify their interpretations in light of new information and/ or responses presented by their peers, which led to deeper understandings of text and related issues. Students in peer-led literature discussion groups experienced greater opportunities to expand on their learning, because of increased exposure to multiple and divergent views about the text. Almasi (1995) concluded that peer-led discussion, as a result of sociocognitive conflicts, offered students opportunities to engage in higher-level thought processes and to explore issues that are personally relevant. I believed that similar opportunities for the boys in my study to understand text at deeper levels might lead them to engage in critical reading and thinking.

Literature discussion groups also provide a context for participants to engage in critical conversations about text and related issues. DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006), working in a fourth-grade classroom in a multi-ethnic urban elementary school, found that literature circles provided space for critical discussions and understanding of text. The students, four minority females,

were eager participants in the newly introduced literacy practice of literature circles. They experienced a *critical encounter* as termed by the researchers when they encountered a racist term and scene within the text they were reading. Critical encounters are instantaneous disruptions that occur while reading as one comes across a specific term or issue that appears problematic. The researchers, girls and the teacher worked together to move beyond this encounter. As a result of the critical encounter, the girls began to draw on cultural knowledge to move beyond simple responses to the literature to comply with the teacher's expectations to a more spontaneous form of language which led to a deeper understanding of the text and related issues. The findings in DeNicolo and Franquiz's study supports the claims put forth by researchers about the capacity of literature discussion groups to facilitate deeper comprehension of texts and critical conversations about and around texts.

The review of literature clearly shows that literature discussion groups provide a context to promote engagement, facilitate deeper comprehension, and foster students' development towards critical literacy. In subsequent subsections, I discuss various literature discussion group models and how each model works to facilitate comprehension and critical conversations about text and related issues.

**Literature discussion models: How they might facilitate critical conversations.**

Literature discussion groups as a social learning context can be experienced in two primary formats—peer-led and sustained teacher-led. Peer-led discussion groups (Almasi, 1995; Almasi et al., 2001; Alvermann et al., 1996; Evans, 2002; Maloch, 2002) are “decentralized participation structures” that are typically conducted by students without the direct supervision of an adult (Almasi, 1995, p. 315). These small group contexts provide space and opportunity for richer and more complex discussions of literature and support peer-leadership development by empowering

students to voice their thoughts and interpretations (Almasi, 1995; Daniels, 1994, 2002; Maloch, 2002). On the other hand, sustained teacher-led discussion groups are centralized participation structures that are typically conducted by an adult supervisor. These instructional contexts are often characterized by explicit teaching of comprehension skills through the use of role sheets and controlled conversation around a central theme or topic (Almasi, 1995; Daniels, 2002). In subsequent paragraphs, I discussed the efficacy of both models and how they might support critical conversations.

The two seminal studies conducted by Almasi (1995, 2001) found that more authentic discussions of literature and related issues occur when students learn to lead literature discussion groups. In fact, Almasi (1995) found that peer-led discussions of literature led to increased verbalization between students, which led to greater instances of conceptual change in comparison to students participating in teacher-led discussions of literature. Additionally, Almasi, O’Flahaven, and Arya (2001) when exploring the influence of conversational coherence on literature discussions found that disruptions such as teacher intrusions led to incoherent and unproductive discussions of texts. Clearly, the Almasi studies point to the benefits of peer-led literature groups as compared to other forms of literature discussion models. Although the literature suggests that the peer-led discussion model provides increased opportunities for deeper comprehension and critical conversations, it is important to note that researchers have reported difficulties with implementing peer-led discussion groups.

For instance, Almasi, O’Flahaven, and Arya (2001) found that the implementation and sustainability of peer discussions required a “lengthy nurturing period” (p. 99). According to Almasi et al. (2001), the complexities inherent in peer-led discussion groups—limited teacher control and potential negative influence of social markers—have led many classroom teachers to



ask what is required to implement and sustain peer-led discussions of literature successfully. In this study, the researchers examined two groups of fourth-grade students to conduct a comparative analysis of more and less proficient peer discussions of literature. Over a period of 4 months, they discovered that more proficient peer discussions of literature required topic coherence and effective group management skills, while less proficient peer discussion groups were stifled by teacher intrusions and digressions on the part of students. The teacher of the more proficient peer discussion group skillfully guided her students towards making connections between old and new topics and taught how to recognize and resolve conflicts amongst group members. The findings of this particular study showed that teachers explicitly teach students how to participate in peer-led discussion groups and then slowly relinquish control as they guide students towards increased autonomy.

Some researchers challenge the efficacy of sustained teacher-led or whole-group literature discussion groups to provide the space and opportunity for students to fully express their views and response to text and to interact with peers in a democratic forum (Almasi, 1995; Almasi et al., 2001). However, the review of literature reveals the prevalence of “teacher-led” literature discussion groups in classrooms across the country, despite the noted shortcomings. In *Literature Circles*, Daniels (2002) recommended that teachers play a central role in training students to participate in literature circles (p. 55). In fact, Daniels described *five key steps* for teachers to take to help students move towards productive peer-led discussions of literature. Similarly, in *Moving Forward with Literature Circles*, Day, Spiegel, McClellan, and Brown (2002) strongly suggested that teachers explicitly direct and guide student behaviors and activities to prepare students to participate in literature circles. Again, like Daniels, Day et al. (2002) prescribed a “5-Step” process for teachers to use to support students development as

independent discussants of literature (p. 32). In both texts, Daniels and Day et al. note that the explicit teacher direction at the beginning stages of literature circles led to successful literacy experiences for students (Daniels, 2002; Day et al., 2002).

The professional literature is clear. Educators should strive to help students operate in peer-led discussion groups. However, because the peer-led literature discussion model places significant demands on the instructor when attempting to implement and sustain such learning contexts, many researchers note the importance and need for teacher mediation when attempting to implement and sustain peer-led discussion groups (Clarke, 2007; Daniels, 2006; Day et al., 2002; Maloch, 2002; Short et al., 1999). Furthermore, the professional literature also has suggested that classroom teachers exercise various strategies aimed at improving students' discursive practices to facilitate productive and critical conversations among students (Almasi et al., 2001; Alvermann et al., 1996; Burns, 1998; Clarke, 2006, 2007; Daniels, 1994, 2002; Evans, 2002; Short et al., 1999). The inherent challenges with implementing peer-led discussion led me to search for a model better suited for the context of this study.

**Leading literature discussion groups: A transitional process.** My search for the most effective model for leading literature discussion groups led to one model and its various permutations. O'Flahaven (1994) advocated the use of the conversational discussion group model, a procedural approach, to serve as a guide to facilitate the development of productive student interactions. This particular model encourages instructors to assume two roles—"scaffolding and coaching"—to promote productive conversation among students (p. 354). Within this framework, based on the students' actions, the teacher must determine when and how to intervene to provide effective assistance for the group. For instance, the teacher would exercise scaffolding techniques such as eliciting, framing, and/or group process for a group that

struggled to engage in productive discussions of literature because of a lack of perspective on a given topic or negative social interactions amongst group members. For groups capable of pursuing productive discussions of literature, the teacher may only need to assume a coaching role. O'Flahaven asserted that coaching should typically occur before or after the literature discussion event to teach particular strategies beforehand or assess student performance afterwards. I agree that this particular framework encourages teachers to choose their role in response to the needs of the group in order to lead students to engage in productive discursive practices and possibly critical conversations about text and related issues.

Evans (2002), in conjunction with a fifth-grade classroom teacher, adapted and implemented O'Flahaven's discussion model; the 5-step *Literature Study* framework to mediate positive and productive discussions and interactions within peer-led discussions of literature. The literature study structure includes teacher-read aloud, mini-lessons, independent reading response in literature log, literature discussion groups, and whole-class debriefing. This particular method provided the space and opportunity for the researcher to gradually build the skills and knowledge required for students to properly engage in peer-led discussion groups. The researcher in this study incorporated explicit strategy instruction, during the initial phase, and then transitioned to a more facilitative role, while co-teaching appropriate strategies with the classroom teacher during whole group situations. Students reported, during interviews, how various strategy lessons helped them develop requisite skills (i.e., questioning and turn-taking) to optimize the discussion experience. The findings of this study revealed, as a result of this particular framework, that students had a clear notion of the conditions conducive to effective discussions, which suggested that I engage in a similar process if I intended to lead African American boys towards critical literacy.

Clarke and Holwadel (2007) also adapted The Conversational Discussion model (O’Flahaven, 1994) to enable the teacher to play a more active role in the implementation and sustainability of literature discussion groups. Clarke (2006) called for teachers to use positive discussion strategies and powerful mini-lessons on group process to proactively scaffold students’ discussion of literature. In the final year of a 3-year longitudinal study, Clarke and Holwadel (2007) observed an excessive amount of negative behavior—teasing, taunting, and fist fighting—amongst experienced literature discussion group participants within the sixth-grade urban classroom where she conducted her study. She learned that although the students in her study had extensive experience with participating in literature discussion groups they still required ongoing support to maintain productive discursive practices.

To resolve issues brought on by racial and gender tensions as well as discontinuity of instruction, Clarke and Holwadel (2007) and the classroom teacher planned and implemented a series of positive discussion strategies to mediate productive discussions of literature. They developed an action plan that incorporated powerful mini-lessons—sharing airtime and giving compliments—to teach teamwork, respect, and pro-social behaviors. As the participants progressed, Clarke and the classroom teacher decided that additional support was still required, so they modified their roles and reentered the literature discussion groups as critical coaches. In this new role, they were able to improve students’ interactional skills by explicitly modeling appropriate discursive practices and guiding student conversations, in a nonthreatening manner, as a member of the group. This practice was reinforced during whole-group literature discussion sessions as well. According to Clarke and Holwadel (2007), the explicit application of these suggested strategies helped to improve the social dynamics of the groups, which led to increased skill development, deeper comprehension, and greater engagement with texts. These suggested

strategies have been documented in critical literacy studies as well.

Similarly, Maloch's (2002) study explored the impact of teacher involvement on student participation within literature discussion groups and concluded that teachers must serve as facilitators and mediators, as opposed to group leaders, when scaffolding students' development as independent discussants of literature. While working in a third-grade classroom within a suburban school located in a working- and middle-class neighborhood, the teacher and researcher noticed that their students experienced difficulty in shifting from a teacher-led discussion format to a student-led discussion format. To help the students overcome their limited experience in discussing literature in a student-led format, Maloch (2002), in partnership with the classroom teacher, implemented a variety of strategies such as sharing personal responses, inviting others to share, asking initial and follow-up questions, guiding inter-topic discussion, and facilitating topic related discussions. The individual and collective development of students as independent discussants determined the type and level of intervention provided by the teacher. She also found that the use of explicit instruction in the form of repeated explanations and directives helped students acquire appropriate discursive practices within the literature discussion group context. As a result, the students were able to engage in greater exploratory talk as well as approximate productive forms of discursive practices within a student-led discussion format. These findings provide further support for the importance of teacher mediation in the transitional process from teacher-led discussion formats to more student-led discussions of literature.

As suggested in Maloch's (2002) study, the professional literature encourages teachers to employ methods that facilitate the gradual release of responsibilities to students once they have demonstrated a satisfactory level of discursive competence (Almasi et al., 2001; Alvermann et al., 1996; Burns, 1998; Daniels, 2006; O'Flahaven, 1994). Like Clarke (2006, 2007), Daniels

(2006) strongly suggested that teachers depart from the old, *build it and they will come*, mindset and prepare to teach actively and explicitly the social skills necessary to implement and sustain peer-led discussion groups. In each of the aforementioned studies, the researchers found that teacher mediation was required to help students transition to peer-led discussions of literature; the studies also revealed that the role assumed by the teacher and the intensity of the intervention was determined by the needs of the students. This is why I decided to serve as both facilitator and participant to help the boys form productive discursive practices to facilitate their development as critical consumers of texts as well as transition from a teacher-dependent instructional model to a more independent framework.

**Literature discussion groups: The influence of social markers.** As a social learning context, literature discussion groups are impacted by the social characteristics of its participants. Some researchers have found that social markers such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status can play a significant role in how literature discussion groups function (Clarke, 2006; Evans, 1996). For example, studies conducted by Evans (1996) and Clarke (2004, 2006) illuminate the influence of gender and socioeconomic status on students' discursive practices within literature discussion groups. In fact, Evans (1996) found that social markers such as gender, cultural background, and status profoundly influenced how students interacted with text and their peers. More specifically, in her attempt to examine the capacity of small group contexts to promote equity, she discovered that boys used their symbolic power to position female participants as powerless through incessant teasing and taunts.

More recently, while investigating the impact of social influences on students' discursive interactions within a literature circle context, Clarke (2006) found that the female students positioned their male peers in a subordinate position, as a consequence of embracing school-

based literacy practices, while the boys conformed to out of school working-class masculine narratives. In each study, Clarke (2006) and Evans (1996) discovered the extent to which gender influences social interactions amongst participants within the context of peer-led literature discussion groups. Moreover, social talk in the form of teasing, taunting, and other forms of verbal assaults led to significantly decreased literary talk and a lowered sense of self-respect for those mistreated.

However, there is evidence to suggest that social markers such as race and gender may not prohibit African American boys from participating in literature discussion groups in productive ways. For example, in a study involving inner-city African American boys as participants, Long and Gove (2003) in collaboration with a fourth-grade teacher sought to promote critical response through the use of literature circles and engagement strategies. The study included 16 students (8 males, 8 females), two Caucasian teacher educators, and one African American female teacher from a middle-class background.

Although the study did not focus primarily on the influence of particular social markers such as race and gender on group dynamics or student outcomes, the study did highlight examples of dialogue among students and their teacher. These excerpts show that the African American male participants made significant contributions to the discussions of texts as well as topics or themes related to the text. In some verbal exchanges, Long and Gove (2003) noticed evidence of critical responses to various texts on the part of some male participants. They also noted an increase in emotional involvement amongst all participants, especially whenever the teacher facilitated group discussions. In addition, there is no mention of adverse social behaviors between the male and female participants, but as stated earlier the influence of gender was not the focus of this study. However, the meager evidence of productive participation of African

American boys within a literature discussion group context provides inspiration and led me to believe that I might experience similar success in my study. Taken together, these three studies (Clarke, 2006; Evans, 1996; Long & Gove, 2003) shed light on the need for more studies involving African American boys engaged in literature discussion groups as well as the dire need for research projects that actually study African American boys within these particular contexts. The conspicuous absence of studies of this nature has led to this present study.

For this present study, however, the questions remain as to what kind of talk might African American boys engage in and how the various roles assumed by the teacher might impact their talk and interactional patterns. In addition, another and perhaps more global question relates to the capacity of the literature discussion group model to support and promote critical discussions about and around texts and related issues. Although, there are some important studies that draw significant comparisons between peer-led and teacher-led models of literature discussion groups, as well as provide evidence for teacher mediation to support the implementation and sustainability of peer-led discussion formats, and substantiate the cascading benefits of literature discussion groups, few included and actually studied African American boys (Clarke, 2004, 2006, 2007; Evans, 2002; Long & Gove, 2003; Maloch, 2002). Further review of the professional literature reveals a lack of studies conducted involving African American boys exclusively. The dearth of studies on literature discussion groups involving African American boys coupled with their persistent underachievement in reading provides the impetus for this study.

**Summary.** As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, to address the problematic relationship between African American boys and reading, it is imperative to hold conversations around and about significant issues such as the gender gap in reading and impediments to the



reading achievement of African American boys from urban and rural realities. As a consequence, these conversations call for well-conceived potential solutions to meaningfully address the reading challenges facing African American boys in urban and rural classrooms. It is my firm belief that African American boys, like all children, must have access to a high-quality education intended to increase their life chances. This belief cannot be achieved in the absence of relevant, rigorous, and progressive modes of literacy instruction. That is why I argue for greater prevalence of critical literacy activities and literature discussion groups (social learning contexts) within urban and rural classrooms as instructional contexts and practices to ameliorate the relationship between African American boys and reading.

The most recent national test scores reflect a 10-year trend that shows the persistent gap in reading between boys and girls. The gender gap in reading is prevalent at all levels throughout the K-12 experience. Studies find at the end of each testing cycle that female students outperform their male counterparts at every grade level in reading and writing. Similarly, international studies find that boys struggle to keep pace with their female peers. While these findings are troubling, the reading achievement gap becomes significantly more severe when variables such as race and class are considered.

The relationship between African American boys from economically challenged backgrounds and reading can readily and consistently be described as problematic. The underperformance of African American boys is persistent and pervasive as evidenced by national, state, and local test scores. Dismal high school graduation rates serve as further evidence of this problematic relationship. In addition, the professional literature describes possible barriers to the reading achievement and subsequent educational outcomes of this particular population. However, my review of the literature related to the reading achievement of

African American boys revealed a dearth of empirical studies conducted exclusively with African American boys, especially studies that offered specific reading activities which African American boys might find meaningful, purposeful, and empowering. These findings suggest that literacy educators reconsider the curricular orientations and pedagogical approaches implemented in urban and rural classrooms across our nation.

Although critical literacy is an emerging field of study on the K-12 educational landscape that defies curricular and instructional unification, it shares the following common goals: (a) self-examination, (b) engagement, and (c) critical understanding. However, these common goals are not easily achieved. As the professional literature confirms, becoming critically literate is a developmental and laborious process that requires sacrifice and a deep affinity for democratic ideals such as freedom, justice, and equality for all. In the school setting, becoming critically literate calls for educators who embrace core democratic ideals, skillfully assume various roles and combine particular instructional materials with appropriate critical literacy activities to empower learners to achieve a sense of critical inquiry. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) asserted that critical literacy can help teachers and students expand their reasoning, deepen understanding, and explore text from multiple perspectives. Similarly, Gutherie and Wigfield (2001) stated that critical literacy can empower learners to engage in the reading process at deeper levels. I argue that African American boys deserve and would benefit tremendously from becoming critically literate.

In my call for educators to reconsider their current pedagogic approaches, I offered literature discussion groups as a possible model of empowerment for African American boys. Literature discussion groups provide a context in which African American boys might blossom into engaged learners capable of understanding texts at more profound levels and view texts from

multiple perspectives. The professional literature suggests that “diverse forms of talk” and productive social interactions (discursive practices) might empower African American boys to engage in and understand text beyond surface levels (Clarke, 2006; Maloch, 2002; Short, 1999). Literature discussion groups also provide time and space for not only empowering readers, but to facilitate the development of learners as critical consumers of texts. That is why, I intend to use the literature discussion group model in my proposed study.

I strongly believe that we are obligated as members of the educational community to marshal our talents and skills as well as leverage the information provided by the reading research community to lift African American boys out of their current predicament. We can ill afford as a society to conduct business as usual, while another generation of African American boys underachieves in the area of reading. I believe that we must consider the use of learning models and literacy instruction that challenge, arouse, and empower African American boys to strive towards a sense of critical inquiry. That is why; I believe this proposed study will begin to provide educators with the knowledge, resources, and direction required to increase substantially and enhance the literacy education of our most vulnerable student population—economically disadvantaged African American boys.

### CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This interpretive case study used qualitative data to examine the responses of elementary-aged African American boys to critical literacy activities within a social learning context. This study included a sequence of instructional activities divided into three primary sections: (a) pre-interview and instructional activity section, (b) critical literacy activity sessions, and (c) post-interview. The timeline for the instructional activities included nine sessions in total and extended for a 7-week period. During this period, I endeavored to assume the participant-observer role engaging in reading, discussing, and responding to mainstream texts with a small group of African American boys using critical literacy activities such as disconnections and problem posing (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). Additionally, I conducted individual interviews at the outset and end of the research project to gain greater insight into the boys' thinking about the texts as well as the critical literacy activities used throughout this study. The following questions guided my research.

1. What, if any, impact might critical literacy activities embedded in a literature discussion group context have on African American boys' development towards critical literacy?
2. How do African American boys talk in the literature discussion group? To what extent might their talk change across texts and critical literacy activities?
3. How do the roles assumed by the teacher impact/affect African American boys' development towards critical discussions about and around texts?

To facilitate this inquiry, I used qualitative research methods—interpretive inquiry and case study—for analysis and reporting. The interpretive approach to research is inherently participatory because it presumes that meaning can be constructed only through social

interaction, which requires researchers to actively participate in the research project (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Case study is a form of qualitative research in which a single individual, small group, or example is studied through extensive data collection and used to formulate interpretations applicable to the specific case or to provide useful generalizations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

I begin with a discussion about the research framework, followed by a description of the research setting and selection criteria for participants, then data collection and analysis methods, and conclude this chapter with a discussion of the plans to achieve and sustain rigor. Lastly, this chapter includes detailed descriptions of each participant (profiles), activities, setting, as well as inductive data analysis.

### **Research Paradigm**

To generate a deep understanding of a particular social context or observed phenomenon, one typically gathers information that “thickly describes events...and pursues in-depth inquiry that captures the perceptions and experiences of the participants [under study]” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 430). Qualitative research methodologies enable inquirers to achieve such goals. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Holloway (1997), qualitative research is a multi-method form of social inquiry, which typically involves two primary approaches—interpretive and naturalistic—that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their reality. Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding...that explores a social or human problem” (p. 15). In addition, Berg (2009) noted that qualitative research enables inquirers to examine how people learn and make sense of themselves and others. As will be presented in subsequent sections, an interpretive case study is well suited for examining the literature discussion group where critical literacy activities are

used.

Case study is a qualitative method used to write about and examine specific individuals, corporations, organizations, or agencies (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Berg (2009) offered a more explicit definition: “Case study is an approach capable of examining simple or complex phenomenon, with units of analysis varying from individuals to large corporations” (p. 317). This definition supports the use of case study methodology in this study to capture the nuances, perceptions, and interactions of the participants through systematic analysis that leads to “thickly described” findings. Case study methodology also supports theory building (grounded theory) through a cyclical research process that involves inductive analysis of data, and constantly comparing emerging findings to subsequent data collected.

The interpretive case study approach is well suited for this study because it seeks to examine complex human activity and to generate detailed descriptions required to support grounded theory. This particular approach will help to facilitate the examination of meaning constructed through social interaction (group discussion), elicit insider information as to how the boys interpret and make sense of text and their reality, and allows for the use of the participants’ actions and interactions to be used as an expression of meaning (cultural data). In addition, the interpretive case study approach will seek to create in-depth findings to facilitate understanding of the group dynamics and the boys’ thoughts about mainstream texts and their lived experiences.

### **Setting**

Phoenix Elementary School (*pseudonym*) is situated in a small rural community characterized by unique demographics for the northwestern region of a Midwestern state. Phoenix Community Schools has a significant African American population—42% in the

elementary, 48% in the junior high, and 38.7% in the high school. At the elementary level, African American males traditionally underperform on the state assessment in reading compared to Caucasian and African American female students.

Abject poverty is another characteristic that distinguishes the student population of Phoenix Community Schools from their peers in surrounding school districts. The Village of Phoenix is the county seat of Look-see County, which is reported as the poorest county in the state. Here, 48.8% of children live in poverty, the greatest proportion in the state, which averages 17.3%.of children living in poverty At the elementary level, 94% of students qualify for free-and-reduced-price lunch (2012 figures).

All meetings occurred at Phoenix Elementary School (K-6). I met with the participants in a properly furnished fourth-grade classroom, so as to keep students in a print-rich environment with such resources as bulletin boards, posters, and students' work. We met twice weekly for 60 minutes per session for a 7-week period. Because this setting was familiar to parents and participants, holding groups there eased potential fears or apprehensions that parents might have had regarding their sons' whereabouts during after-school hours. However, we did hold two sessions during the school day.

### **Participants**

As stated in previous chapters, this study sought to gain insight into African American boys' thinking about their lived experiences as compared to the sociocultural practices portrayed in "mainstream" texts. I elected to study elementary-aged African American boys because of the persistent reading achievement gap that exists between them and their Caucasian, Hispanic, and female counterparts, as well as the dearth of critical literacy studies that include this population exclusively. It should be noted that such reading achievement gaps exist in the setting chosen for

this particular study.

After seeking and gaining the approval of the Board of Education at Phoenix Community Schools, the office secretary invited all parents of eligible fourth- and fifth-grade male students to an informational meeting to share the particulars of the proposed research project. At the meeting, I informed parents and students that participation was voluntary.

I presented the oral assent script to the boys prior to the start of the sessions. The script outlined why I was meeting with them, provided assurances of confidentiality, and explained the voluntary nature of their participation and prerogative to discontinue at any time.

I randomly selected five African American boys from a pool of nine eligible candidates to participate in this project, not as result of convenience, but because they represent a cross-section of typical African American male fourth- and fifth-grade students. They demonstrated unique human qualities, but they also shared common experiences outside of school that come along with living in an impoverished small town where 48.8% of children live in poverty. These young men were selected purposefully to participate in this study because of their race, age (9-11), gender, ability to read text written above a beginning third-grade level as evidenced by the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and extensive experience in urban and/or rural social milieu. The use of such social markers in the selection process made it possible to fill a gap in the literature and to focus on elementary-aged African American males from urban and rural settings. Thus, this study was used to examine a literature discussion group, and how these particular boys responded to pedagogy intended to teach critical literacy, that is to understand one's own positioning by texts, as well as to find one's self in certain texts, opportunities often absent in their daily school-based literacy experiences.

As the Superintendent of Schools, I have come to know these boys and their parents over



a period of four years. My role as Superintendent limits the number of teaching and learning interactions I have with the boys. However, I do maintain high visibility, make frequent forays into their school buildings, and exercise an open-door policy during and after school hours. In what follows, I provide a detailed description (profile) of each boy.

Student One is being raised by a single parent (father) and has an older brother. He comes from a low-income household. At the time of the study, he was a fourth-grade student at Phoenix Academy. He was an honor roll student who had minimal discipline issues. As observed throughout this study, Student One is hesitant to talk without prompting.

Student Two is being raised by a single parent (mother) and has older sisters. He has been raised by his mother for the majority of his life. He comes from a low-income household. At the time of the study, he was a fifth-grade student at Phoenix Academy. He was not an honor roll student. In fact, he struggled do well in school, especially in the area of reading. As observed throughout this study, Student Two was hesitant to participate in the writing activities, but felt comfortable expressing his opinions and beliefs and challenging others.

Student Three is being raised by a single parent (mother) and has an older brother. His father has been deceased for five years. His mother works full time and attends evening classes at the local college. At the time of the study, he was a fifth-grade student at Phoenix Academy. He was an honor roll student who had minimal student discipline referrals. As observed throughout this study, Student Three is thoughtful and not shy about expressing his opinions and beliefs.

Student Four is being raised by a single parent (mother) and has an older brother. His father lives in a neighboring state and has a second family. He comes from a low-income household. At the time of the study, he was a fourth-grade student at Phoenix Academy. He was

not an honor roll student, but performed fairly well in all subject areas. He has minimal discipline issues. As observed throughout this study, Student Four is loquacious and has strong opinions about gender roles and responsibilities.

Student Five is being raised by a single parent (mother) and has a younger brother. He has minimal contact with his father. He comes from a low-income household. At the time of the study, he was a fourth-grade student at Phoenix Academy. He was retained in first grade because of poor reading. He had no student discipline referrals. As observed throughout this study, Student Five is not shy about expressing his thoughts and opinions. He was also willing to serve as group leader in the final session.

### **Materials**

For this study, the selection of children's literature was paramount, although the selected texts were not the intended focus of this study. However, it was imperative to choose texts that had potential to lead or offer opportunities for participants to pursue critical discussions around and about the author's portrayal of gender, race, setting, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural practices. Critical literacy enables readers to learn to examine their social worlds, as well as to critique the sociocultural values, practices, and behavioral patterns of the dominant class. Mainstream texts—those that depict the sociocultural practices of the dominant class as normal, as opposed to multicultural and social issues texts, were used in the literature discussion groups, even though they are less often used in critical literacy studies (Boutte, 2002).

To encourage robust dialogue and reduce the influence of secondary variables, I carefully considered the following when selecting texts: (a) readability level, (b) gender of characters, (c) story setting, (d) sociocultural identity and practices of the characters, (e) theme (authorial message), and (f) genre. While readability formulas differ, which raises issues about whether

they provide accurate information regarding student reading levels, the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula was used to provide baseline comparisons in text structures and overall level of difficulty across the four pieces of literature. I selected texts written at or below a fourth-grade level in an attempt to reduce the impact of reading difficulties on the literal and critical understanding of each text. I also incorporated oral reading activities in particular sessions, which aided in the literal comprehension of each text.

I selected four texts that prominently present male or female characters engaged in traditional family practices along with vivid descriptions of story setting. To support the development of critical literacy, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) suggested that texts lend themselves to the “switching technique” whereby readers choose a particular element of the story—characters, setting, theme—to modify. For example, a text that may feature a female protagonist can be re-imagined by substituting the male protagonist for the female protagonist. To encourage the switching of story setting, the same process is followed. However, it should be noted that two of the three texts used as part of the critical literacy sessions include female protagonists to give the participants an opportunity to deconstruct texts that they have been presented within the classroom for the bulk of their elementary experience.

The selection of texts that adequately frames mainstream social and cultural practices is important to this study, because they encourage dialogue about normal behaviors and allow opportunities to critique such sociocultural patterns. That is why I selected texts that prominently feature, through both print and vivid illustrations, characters engaged in mainstream sociocultural behaviors set against a particularly descriptive and visible background.

To provide consistency and coherence across the various activities of this study, I selected texts with a shared theme and of the same genre. Participants of this study read and

discussed storybooks that highlighted family and all that is collaterally connected to this institution from a traditional perspective. For example, the selected texts include parents, siblings, a family pet, and a typical problem-resolution structure. As such, these kinds of texts are generally categorized as realistic fiction—untrue, but could possibly happen and some characters, settings, and events may in fact be real. Stories belonging to this particular genre naturally lend themselves to the mainstream social and cultural practices that provide opportunities for participants in this study to learn to critique.

The selected texts for the critical literacy intervention of this study were as follows: *Do Like Kyla* written by Angela Johnson, *Henry and Mudge: And the Happy Cat* written by Cynthia Rylant, and *When Lightning Comes in a Jar* written by Patricia Polacco. *Do Like Kyla* is centered around two young African American female protagonists. The story is set in a small town located in the Midwest during the winter season. An inquisitive younger sister is enamored by her older sister, Kyla, and wants nothing more than to emulate her. Both the younger sister and Kyla begin the day by performing their normal routines. However, on this particular day, the younger sister decides to follow Kyla's lead and mimics her every action.

The second text, *Henry and Mudge: And the Happy Cat*, is centered around a young Caucasian boy and his dog. The story is set in a traditional suburban community during the spring season. The main characters Henry (boy) and Mudge (dog) get permission to take in a stray cat that shows up at their doorstep. The cat appears shabby and uncomfortable at first, but quickly acclimates to her new environment. The happy cat and Mudge get along quite well: in fact, she teaches him many lessons that he appreciates. However, the happy cat's owner does find her, and she goes home, but not without teaching Mudge one final lesson.

The third text, *When Lightning Comes in a Jar* (Polacco, 2002), is centered around a

Caucasian female (Trisha) and her grandmother (Gramma) who are looking forward to their family reunion. Trisha is bubbling with excitement over seeing all of her relatives and participating in a host of family rituals. To add to Trisha's excitement, Gramma promises to do a new activity—she will show everyone how to catch lightning in a bottle. This will certainly be a family reunion that Trisha will never forget. Taken together, all three texts fit the aforementioned criteria for this particular study (i.e., traditional social and cultural practices).

Finally, I used a modified version of the Burke Reader survey to capture participants' thoughts about the reading process and reading in general. The survey consisted of 11 questions and provided baseline data for this research project. I administered the survey at the start of the data collection process. The information gleaned from this tool was then used to inform the final interview protocol.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

This study spanned across a 7-week period to include nine sessions—two interview sessions and seven instructional sessions—wherein a small group of elementary-aged African American boys engaged in reading “mainstream” texts, discussing, and re-shaping these texts to reflect their lived experiences. As a participant-observer, I used different modes of data collection—field notes, video and audio recordings, interviews, and student artifacts—to obtain key insider information regarding the social situation and actions and interactions of the participants in it.

The data collected derived from two primary sources—participant observer field notes and transcriptions of video and audio recordings from the critical literacy sessions and individual interviews. Secondary data sources included semi-structured and ethnographic interviews, reader survey, and student artifacts. According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999),

case studies typically include multiple data collection techniques to allow corroborating findings across different data sets. I also triangulated these data sources to support my interpretations and findings.

**Pre-interview.** During the pre-interview, I used a modified version of the Burke Reader survey (see Appendix A) to interview each participant individually to elicit their thoughts about the reading process and reading in general. Interview sessions were audio-taped and did not extend beyond 30 minutes in length to protect against fatigue on the part of the interviewee. The semi-structured design of this interview format used pre-formulated questions developed to encourage open-ended responses that could be enhanced by the prudent use of probes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The information generated from this initial interview served as a baseline to capture the ways in which participants read, respond, and think about texts, and aided in developing a qualitative base for the construction of an ethnographic survey that was used towards the end of the project (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

**Audio and video recordings.** For this study, I used audio and video recordings to expand on field notes taken while in the field. These enhanced field notes were used to determine activities and questions in subsequent instructional/critical literacy sessions. Also the audio and video recordings were used to develop detailed transcriptions after leaving the field. As a check against researcher bias and to protect the identity of the boys, during each session, I aimed the video camera towards myself to capture my physical actions and facial expressions; however, the camera sometimes captured the back of the boys' heads but not their faces. Additionally, to provide another layer of protection, the video recordings were secured in my home office during the study, and they were destroyed at the end of this project.

To capture student responses during individual interviews, I used a digital audio

recorder. As previously stated, audio-recorded interviews occurred at the outset and end of this research project. Each audio recording was secured in my private office and were destroyed at the end of this project if permission for use beyond the study was not granted through the consent process.

**Critical literacy sessions.** In this section, I define and describe the three primary phases of each critical literacy session and the two primary critical literacy activities—disconnections and problem posing—practiced throughout this study. To begin, each critical literacy session consisted of three primary phases—introductory/review, discussion, and debrief/student reflection—to provide the structure and guidance required to ensure consistency and coherence across the sessions. The introductory/review phase is divided into two subsections—introduction and review. During the introduction section, students received explanations for the planned activities to occur in subsequent phases. Also, the instructor used this time to provide coaching for the students to encourage positive group processes. The review section consisted of activities to remind students of previously taught or discussed group process techniques and to revisit prior activities to clarify any misconceptions.

The discussion phase of each critical literacy session included the reading of text, critical literacy activities, and discussion of the text. The reading of text occurred in a variety of ways—round robin reading, silent reading, and teacher read aloud—to ensure that each student experienced the story. The critical literacy activities helped facilitate student discussion of the text and related issues. The two primary critical literacy activities—disconnections and problem posing—became more complex as responsibility shifted from the instructor to the students. As mentioned, discussion of the text and related issues occurred through the critical literacy activities. The boys assumed greater responsibility to facilitate discussion with less participation

from the instructor across the six sessions.

The debrief/student reflection phase was divided into two subsections—debrief and student reflection. During the debrief subsection, the instructor and students discussed student learning, group interaction, and expectations for subsequent sessions. Also, this verbal exchange presented opportunities for the group to share concerns and clarify misconceptions to ensure productive sessions moving forward. The student reflection subsection provided time for the boys to offer written responses to the critical literacy activity for that particular session. During this time, the boys worked individually to produce an artifact to capture their thinking about the text in relation to their lived experiences.

The two primary critical literacy activities, disconnections and problem posing, used in this study were selected because they were purported to facilitate discussion of texts and related issues as well as to help the boys move beyond a basic understanding of text towards a more critical understanding. Disconnections is a concept and activity introduced by Jones (2006), whereby students are challenged to identify and speak about ways in which the text or portions of the text differ from their personal experiences. In her study, Jones found that disconnections encouraged critical discussions about social class, the performance of members from different social classes, and alternative perspectives. In addition, she found that talking across differences eventually led students to examine their lived-experiences in relation to the text, which led to critical understandings of the text.

Problem posing is a critical literacy strategy introduced by McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) designed to help students challenge authorial power by deconstructing (analyzing) and reconstructing (reshaping) text through inquiry. McLaughlin and DeVogd asserted that problem posing questions help the reader to identify the author's message and encourage the reader to



disrupt the author's message by reconstructing text from an alternative perspective. Additionally, problem posing empowers the reader to view the text from multiple perspectives, thus, encouraging the reader to insert his/her reality in place of the author's portrayal of reality.

Taken together, these two critical literacy strategies were believed to empower readers to critically analyze and reshape text. Disconnections is an effective strategy to begin to open the space for students to have critical conversations that will lead them to deconstruct and reconstruct texts. Problem posing encourages students to move beyond discussions across differences by explicitly identifying the author's message and empowering students to disrupt the author's message. Theoretically, disconnections coupled with problem posing might encourage readers to not only reconstruct text, but to begin to challenge authorial power by "asserting their own [experiences] and changing the story" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b). In addition, Jones (2006) and McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) frame their strategies as useful tools to begin to move students beyond a literal understanding of text to a more critical understanding. For this study, disconnections were used to open a space for critical conversations while problem posing was used to empower students to identify and disrupt the author's message.

***Pre-session.*** Before the instructor began to engage the participants in critical literacy activities, he first needed to establish a baseline to discover how they typically responded to and discussed text. Therefore, he had each participant take a turn in reading the selected text and led them in a discussion of the text. He also emphasized the use of basic comprehension strategies—predicting, making connections, asking questions—to support and establish a basic understanding of the selected text. Again, particular attention was paid to how students discuss text, the type of comments offered, and questions generated in response to the text. Students recorded thoughts and feelings in their journals. At the end of this session, the instructor

collected and analyzed data gathered through field notes, audio, and video recordings.

*Critical literacy session 1.* To begin developing appropriate discursive practices to facilitate meaningful discussion of text and related issues, the instructor used a derivative of O’Flahaven’s (1994) Conversational Discussion Group structure. This instructional context consisted of the following three phases: (a) Introductory/review phase; (b) Discussion phase; (c) Debrief phase, as suggested by Almasi et al., (2001). Within each phase, he incorporated strategies and techniques to build positive group processes and to, ultimately, facilitate critical literacy activities.

In the first critical literacy session, the instructor introduced Book 2, to begin the intervention phase of the study. Before they entered into the discussion phase, the instructor began with an explanation of the literature discussion group context as well as initiated a discussion to establish basic group process expectations (i.e. turn taking). He informed the boys that they would begin by taking turns reading the text and that he would ask them to pause to make connections where appropriate. He suspected that the strategy of making connections was one in which the boys would be familiar, since it’s highlighted in the reading series provided by the district. At the same time, he explained the concept of disconnections, a critical literacy activity, which he suspected was more likely to be unfamiliar. Next, he entered into the discussion phase.

To begin the discussion phase, the instructor led the boys in a round-robin reading exercise. As they took turns reading the story aloud during the first few scenes, he modeled and asked questions to encourage the boys to identify parts of the story that reflected their experiences (connections) as well as the portions of the story where the author’s portrayal was different from their lived-experiences. After the boys demonstrated understanding of the activity,

they continued to read through the text individually, stopping to use post-it notes, yellow to write disconnections and pink to record connections, to note and discuss a few scenes where similarities and dissimilarities between the text and their lived experiences were realized.

At the end of this session, they debriefed for five minutes to reflect on and discuss student learning, group interaction, and expectations for the next session. Afterwards, the instructor asked the boys to write about two disconnections from the reading in their journals. He collected and analyzed data gained through his field notes—hand, audio, and video recordings—as well as student artifacts (photocopied versions of the text). He used the student artifacts to formulate problem posing questions to be asked during the next session.

***Critical literacy session 2.*** In the second critical literacy session, the instructor used the literature discussion context, outlined in the previous session to engage the boys in further discussion of the initial text and to introduce the boys to a second critical literacy activity—problem posing. He also reviewed the previously taught positive discussion technique (turn-taking) to reinforce expectations for productive group processes. After the introductory/review phase, they entered into the discussion phase.

To facilitate the discussion phase, the teacher began by asking “Who can tell me what they remember about the story?” This question encouraged the boys to share their thoughts and recollections with the group. The instructor then asked the boys if they wanted share any of their connections or disconnections made during the previous session.

After five minutes to further discuss the text, the instructor spent time in the discussion phase, engaging the participants in a new critical literacy activity, problem posing, where he asked questions designed to help them challenge authorial power (e.g., “Why do you think the author wrote this story?” and “Why do you think the author wrote the story this way?”).

However, the instructor suspected that the boys might not be accustomed to such questions. Therefore, he asked follow-up questions such as, “What do you think the author wants you to think?”, “If there was an older brother in this story do you think the story would be different?”, to facilitate their understanding of questions regarding the author’s message and intent. Furthermore, since the boys began to offer comments that diverged from the author’s depictions, the instructor assumed the role of facilitator to push the boys’ thinking and to encourage them to expand on their comments. In short, the boys’ response determined the instructor’s role.

To move the boys towards a clearer understanding of the author’s message, the instructor continued the problem posing process by encouraging the boys to view the text from an alternative perspective. To achieve this task, he asked the boys to talk about how the story might change if the main characters were boys or brothers. They spent 10-15 minutes discussing their versions of the text. Afterwards, he asked the boys to think about the author’s message as discussed previously. He then asked the boys to talk about how their alternative versions of the text changes the author’s message and intent. As the boys offered responses, the teacher used open-ended questions to facilitate the discussion.

At the end of this session, they debriefed for five minutes to reflect on and discuss student learning, group interaction, and discuss expectations for the next session. Afterwards, students wrote their response to the following prompt—“If you were the author, how might the story change?”—in their journals. Afterwards, the instructor collected and analyzed data achieved through his field notes, audio and video recordings, as well as student artifacts.

***Critical Literacy Session 3.*** In the third session, the instructor introduced Book 3, although the text bore similar features as the initial text such as genre, vivid illustrations, and readability level. To continue developing appropriate discursive practices, in the

introductory/review phase for this session, he introduced a new positive discussion technique (sharing airtime) and reviewed turn-taking. The instructor shared the new text and explained the expectations for this particular session, especially the fact that the boys needed to talk about their disconnections and connections with minimal support from the instructor. Additionally, he informed the boys that they would spend time noting disconnections and connections throughout the text individually. The teacher asked if there was anyone who didn't remember the activity from the first session.

To begin the discussion phase, the boys read text silently. The use of basic comprehension strategies ensured that the boys had a literal or basic understanding of the text, which is a prerequisite to critical understanding. As part of the discussion phase, the instructor encouraged the boys to go through the text for approximately 10 minutes using yellow post-it notes to identify and note disconnections and pink post-it notes to identify and note connections.

The instructor believed at this time that the boys would be more comfortable with talking to one another and with the group processes. Therefore, the instructor informed the boys that he planned to step back from facilitating the discussion and that he expected them to talk to each other about their connections and disconnections. However, the boys were not asking questions of each other, so he intervened to facilitate the session.

At the end of this session, they debriefed for five minutes to reflect on and discuss student learning, group interaction, and discuss expectations for the next session. Afterwards, the boys wrote about two disconnections from the reading in their journals. The instructor collected and analyzed data achieved through his field notes, audio and video recordings, as well as student artifacts.

***Critical literacy session 4.*** In the fourth critical literacy session, the instructor continued

to use the literature discussion context, outlined in previous sessions, to engage the boys in further discussion of the photocopied version of the third text. In the introductory/review phase for this session, he reviewed the previously taught positive discussion technique (sharing airtime). The instructor shared the new text and explained the expectations for this particular session. The boys did not need to review the previous reading. After the introductory/review phase, they entered into the discussion phase.

To begin the discussion phase, the boys individually reviewed and discussed the text read in the previous session. After five minutes of group discussion, the instructor used the remaining time in the discussion phase to engage the boys in a problem posing activity, where he asked questions designed to help them challenge authorial power (e.g. “Why do you think the author wrote the story this way?” and “What does the author want you to think?”). However, the boys were not able to formulate articulate responses to such questions. Therefore, he asked a few questions such as, “So, if this were your family, how would the story go?”, “Does this look like your family?”, “Why do you think the author wrote the story with this particular family and not yours?” to facilitate their understanding of questions regarding the author’s message and intent. Towards the end of the discussion phase, the instructor assumed the role of participant to offer an example of how to respond to the questions. In short, the boys’ response determined his actions.

To move the boys towards a clearer understanding of the author’s message, the instructor continued the problem posing process by encouraging the boys to view the text from an alternative perspective. To achieve this task, he asked the boys to talk about how the story might change if the characters were members of their family. They spent 10-15 minutes discussing their versions of the text. Afterwards, he asked the boys to think about the author’s message as discussed previously. The instructor then asked the boys to talk about how their alternative

versions of the text changed the author's message and intent. As the boys offered responses, the instructor used open-ended questions to facilitate the discussion.

At the end of the session, they debriefed for five minutes to reflect on and discuss student learning, group interaction, and discuss expectations for the next session. Afterwards, students responded to the following prompt—"How might the story change if you were the author?"—in their journals. Afterwards, the instructor collected and analyzed data achieved through his field notes, audio and video recordings, as well as student artifacts.

***Critical Literacy Session 5.*** In Session 5, the instructor used a fourth text. He continued to use the three-phased permutation of O'Flahaven's (1994) Conversational Discussion Group format to facilitate discussion and critical literacy activities. In addition, before moving beyond the introductory/review phase, he informed the boys that he expected them to read the text silently and afterwards spend time discussing disconnections and connections throughout the text. The boys demonstrated that they were familiar with the activity, so no coaching was required by the instructor.

To begin the discussion phase, the boys read the text silently. Next, the boys went through the text asking if the author's depictions of setting and characters' behavior and social practices were consistent with their personal experiences. They noted their connections and disconnections. The boys remembered the task from previous sessions, so there was no need for further instructions from the instructor.

At this time, the teacher expected the boys to be more comfortable with one another, him, and the group processes. Therefore, the boys spent 15 minutes discussing their disconnections and connections with each other while the instructor recorded notes to capture their thinking about the social and behavioral practices portrayed in the text in relation to their lived-

experiences.

At the end of this session, they debriefed for five minutes to reflect on and discuss student learning, group interaction, and discuss expectations for the next session. Afterwards, students wrote about two disconnections from the reading in their journals. The instructor collected and analyzed data achieved through his field notes, audio and video recordings, as well as student artifacts.

***Critical Literacy Session 6.*** In the sixth and final critical literacy session, the group continued to use the literature discussion context, outlined in previous sessions, to help facilitate further discussion of the photocopied version of the fourth text. Before moving beyond the introductory/review phase, the instructor informed the boys that he expected them to discuss the text and spend time asking and responding to the following problem posing questions. The instructor asked if anyone wanted to lead the discussion and problem posing activity. The instructor quickly checked for understanding and moved to ask the boys who wanted to serve as group leader. After the introductory/review phase, they entered into the discussion phase.

To facilitate the discussion phase, Student Five the selected group leader began by asking, “Who can tell us something about the story that we have been reading?” and “What did we talk about last time as we read through the book?” These questions encouraged the boys to share their thoughts and reflections with the group. Additionally, those who responded were reminded to pose the question to a group member who has not had an opportunity to respond. However, when discussion became fragmented, the instructor intervened to facilitate dialogue amongst the boys.

After 20 to 25 minutes of discussion, the instructor assumed facilitative duties and used the remaining time in the discussion phase to engage the boys in problem posing. The instructor



asked a question designed to help them challenge authorial power such as (e.g., “How did you guys feel about the relationship between the cat and the dog in this story?” “What do you see the dad do in this story?” “What do you think the author wants you to think about the dad?” and “Why don’t you think the author had more females play a bigger part in the story?”). The boys were getting accustomed to these particular questions at this point in the study. Therefore, the instructor expected them to articulate the author’s message and intent with minimal assistance. However, this was not the case. The instructor made attempts to encourage the boys to transform the author’s message by asking them to express their opinions and beliefs about the author’s portrayals of particular characters in the story. The boys spent 10-15 minutes discussing their opinions about the author’s depictions.

At the end of this session, they debriefed for five minutes to reflect on and discuss student learning, group interaction, and discuss expectations for the next session. Afterwards, students recorded and responded to the following prompt—“How might the story change if you were the author?”—in their journals. Afterwards, the instructor collected and analyzed data achieved through his field notes, audio and video recordings, as well as student artifacts.

**Final interview.** The instructor conducted a final ethnographic interview 10 days after exiting the field with each participant to achieve a more complete theoretical summary, so that more pertinent questions are included in the final interview protocol (see Appendix B). The interview protocol contained some of the same questions from the pre-interview, but the primary questions emerged from the data collected and analyzed throughout the course of this project. He interviewed each boy individually for approximately 30 minutes. The purpose of this final interview was to provide greater insight into students’ thinking about reading, to deepen his understandings of the events that occurred during the literature discussions, and to clear up

confusions or fill gaps in the field notes, as well as give the boys an opportunity to speak about the author's portrayals in relation to their lived experiences, as well as the critical literacy activities used in this study.

***Participant observations.*** Field notes generated from observations served as the focal point of the data collection process. To achieve accurate transcriptions, the instructor began creating a condensed account (i.e., key words & phrases) of happenings in the instructional/critical literacy sessions and individual interviews. Immediately after each instructional/critical literacy session, he reviewed the video recordings of the session to analyze the boys, himself, and their interactions along with his condensed field notes to write an expanded account. This was done before re-entering the field. He repeated this process until the fieldwork was completed.

In addition, to generate accurate field notes, the instructor adhered to Spradley's (1980) recommended three principles—language identification, verbatim, and concrete—for developing an ethnographic record. As stated previously, he used video recordings, aided by video logs to expand the condensed account taken in the field to generate a coarse-grained account of happenings in the field. As a result, the expanded accounts included verbatim language used by the instructor and the boys to avoid bias and to capture the unfiltered words of the boys (Spradley, 1980). Additionally, the process used to generate the expanded accounts was followed to develop concrete descriptions of the observed actions and interactions in the field. To conclude, the aforementioned course of action to generate expanded accounts served to create accurate descriptions of happenings in the field and helped maintain the integrity of the research process while in the field.

To achieve a thickly-described account after leaving the field, the audio and video

recordings were used to produce detailed transcriptions of the field notes to support a more fine-grained analysis. The audio recordings were transcribed completely to capture important details that were not included in the ongoing analysis while in the field. Also, transcribing the audio tapes in total ensured the use of verbatim language throughout the ethnographic record. Next, the video logs were used to locate select scenes of the instructional/critical literacy sessions to capture detailed actions and interactions of the instructor and the boys. I emailed my notes and discussed via telephone the activities and observations of the sessions. Peer debriefing occurred once a week with Dr. Karen Feathers of Wayne State University. Taken together, the full use of audio and video recordings to create detailed accounts of the social situation and the actors within led to rich descriptions required for transferability.

*Student artifacts.* At the end of each instructional/critical literacy session, the boys had opportunities to produce written responses as well as alternative versions of the text—writings that represented a perspective that was different from the author’s original perspective—that were collected and analyzed for themes and categories. Students’ written responses included recordings of their personal connections and disconnections to selected texts. Students’ written responses also included self-generated alternative versions—written versions of how the story might have changed if they [boys] were the author—of the text. These written responses provided an opportunity for students to modify the original version to better represent their lived-experiences.

I collected and analyzed journals of both forms of written responses (personal connections and disconnections and alternative versions) after each instructional/critical literacy session to gain further insight into the students’ thinking. Students’ written responses were used to corroborate information in the expanded field notes, to formulate questions for the

final interview, and to measure transformations, if any, in their thinking about texts.

### **Researcher's Journal**

The purpose of the researcher's journal was to help establish trustworthiness by making an account of potential researcher bias and thoughts that might influence the outcomes of the research project (Spradley, 1980, p.72). First, the instructor used this journal to record notes of import such as information about himself as a tool in the research process and critical decisions made with respect to methods chosen to advance the research project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, as suggested by Spradley (1980), the researcher's journal contained personal reflections, fears, mistakes, confusions, and moments of inspiration.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, as suggested by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007), the instructor used domain analysis during the data collection phase. Analysis began with field notes generated from observations from the field, enhanced by audio and video recordings, and corroborated by student artifacts. At the end of the data collection, he conducted a more thorough analysis to identify and fully develop each domain. Taxonomic analysis commenced once the domains were identified and developed. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) cited Spradley (1980) as defining a taxonomic analysis as a process to help the researcher understand the relationship among domains. Lastly, he performed a componential analysis to discover contrasts among key domains to better understand variances between participants across texts and sessions.

The instructor's first recorded field notes were derived from a pre-interview session, where he used a modified version of the Burke Reader survey, and an initial literature discussion session. Data was collected and analyzed to establish a baseline to describe the participants view of the reading process, the act of reading, and how they responded to and discussed text.

At this point, it is important to note that the task of achieving fine-grained transcriptions and complete data analysis during the data collection process would retard the teaching and learning processes embedded in this study. Therefore, the instructor used video recordings of salient selections from each session to expand on condensed accounts to stand in for fine-grained transcriptions. The expanded accounts included descriptions of activities performed by the boys, the instructor, and the interactions between the boys and instructor to identify primary domains. Relevant information discovered in student artifacts were used to confirm transcribed accounts and included as part of the identified primary domains. The instructor performed preliminary semantic domain analysis to gather essential included terms in primary domains, followed by a more thorough analysis conducted at the conclusion of the data collection phase.

### **Domain Analysis**

According to Spradley (1980), domain analysis is defined as the search for meaningful units of cultural experience (domains) within a given social situation. This analysis technique begins with the researcher's field notes and involves a 6-step process to discover cultural categories as well as obtain a global understanding of the context under study (Spradley, 1980, p. 96). Spradley recommended that researchers use the semantic relationships to initiate the search for cultural domains. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) suggested that researchers use domain analysis to support and clarify ongoing data analysis and to support researchers' understanding of "relationships among concepts" (p. 571). The aforementioned paragraphs summarize the ongoing data analysis methods and processes that I conducted during the course of this study.

After leaving the field, a more intensive search for domains was coupled with a taxonomic analysis to understand the relationships among the domains (Spradley, 1980). The taxonomic analysis was used to further the search for patterns of similarity and thus to help

clarify the data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). This process not only helped begin to provide answers to the research questions, but also led to the final form of analysis—componential analysis.

As previously stated, the instructor conducted a componential analysis of key domains to search for nuanced differences among participants across texts and sessions. According to Spradley (1980), componential analysis is the systematic search for the components of meaning associated with cultural categories. This process helped explicate, more clearly, the unique clusters of differences found in key domains. Such information is vitally important to my research plan and to provide answers to my research questions.

As previously stated, the plan to conduct domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis led to answers to the questions of this research project (see Table1). As depicted in the Research Questions and Data Sources table, data sources marked as “X” served as primary data and sources marked as “XXX” served as secondary data to be analyzed. The instructor analyzed primary data sources to uncover categories and themes that pointed to the boys’ development towards critical literacy, how they talked about text in a group setting, and the role(s) of the instructor to help affect the boys’ development towards critical literacy.

Analysis of the data led to the emergence of two major categories—student actions and teacher actions—that define and describe the behavior of the participants of this study (See Appendix D). The student actions category included two primary sub-categories—student-to-student interactions and student-to-teacher interactions. These two sub-categories consist of clusters of codes that describe the specific actions of the boys in detail. Furthermore, the clusters of codes include a number of codes (basic units of meaning). For example, one such cluster, “boys’ development towards critical literacy”, includes two subordinate clusters of “application

of reading and critical literacy strategies” and “boys’ talk” that describe the boys’ learning and use of critical literacy strategies as well as their talk across the sessions.

The teacher actions category included one primary sub-category—teacher-to-student interactions. Like the student actions sub-categories, this sub-category is divided into clusters of codes that describe the specific actions of the teacher in detail. These clusters are teacher as leader, teacher as facilitator, and teacher as participant. Moreover, the clusters of codes consist of a number of codes (basic units of meaning). For example, the teacher as leader clusters a collection of codes that describe specific actions taken by the teacher to support the boys’ development towards critical literacy. The major and subordinate categories were generated through a constant re-reading of transcriptions and thick descriptions developed out of the instructional sessions.

**Table 3.1 Research Questions and Data Analysis**

| Research questions  | Pre    | Critical Literacy Sessions |       |       |                  | Post                   |                    |
|---|--------|----------------------------|-------|-------|------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
|   | Survey | Field Notes                | Audio | Video | Student Artifact | Ethnographic interview | Researcher journal |
| What, if any, impact might critical literacy activities embedded in a literature discussion group context have on African American boys’ development towards critical literacy? | XXX    | X                          | X     | XXX   | XXX              | XXX                    |                    |
| How do African American boys talk in the literature group? To what extent might their talk change across texts and critical literacy activities?                                | XXX    | X                          | X     | XXX   | XXX              | XXX                    |                    |
| How do roles the teacher assumes impact/affect African American boys’ development towards critical discussions about and around texts?  |        | X                          | X     | X     |                  | XXX                    |                    |

All secondary data sources were analyzed to confirm the findings from the analysis of the primary data sources. For example, the instructor looked for evidence of recognition of social and cultural practices, evidence of questioning the author, and critique of social and cultural practices when analyzing student artifacts and interview data.

### **Trustworthiness**

The primary purpose of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to aid the argument that the research findings are “worthy of the consumer’s time and attention” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). This notion is antithetical to more traditional experimental designs, which focus on and attempt to demonstrate internal and external validity, reliability, and statistical significance. In any qualitative research project, parallel issues that provide insights into the quality of a particular piece of research, or its trustworthiness include (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability; and (d) confirmability.

**Credibility.** As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), for naturalistic investigators establishing credibility is analogous to building internal validity into statistical research projects. Credibility assures the consumer that the research findings represent a “credible” interpretation of the data drawn from the participants’ original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Credibility is built into a researcher study through data collection activities, as well as during analysis. Central to the trustworthiness of this project is the triangulation of findings across multiple data sets (triangulation for methods) and across different participants (triangulation for sources). In addition, credible findings are improved through peer debriefing.

**Triangulation.** According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the inquirer must triangulate findings across multiple data sources (participants) and methods (observation, interviews, survey, and artifacts) to improve the likelihood that findings and interpretations will be found



credible. In this study, I collected observational data—audio tape, video tape, and notes—from our critical literacy group sessions, along with individual and group interviews and student artifacts to verify emerging patterns of similarity. In this study, I used diverse instructional methods—disconnections, group discussion, and student-created alternate texts. Collecting and analyzing data from four different boys provided insights into shared understandings across the participants. These methods and sources were triangulated to reveal and confirm patterns and themes of similarity that arose from the data as well as to build rigor into the proposed research project (Tonso, 2006).

**Peer Debriefing.** To ensure that interpretations and findings are credible, the inquirer must debrief with a knowledgeable peer. This technique, referred to as peer debriefing, exposes the inquirer and his/her research to a peer outside of the study for the purposes of analyzing and exploring aspects of the inquiry. Through the process of analytical probing, a debriefer can help the inquirer uncover taken for granted biases, perspectives, and assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the instructor debriefed with Dr. Karen Feathers every other week to reveal patterns that may otherwise seem implicit and to prevent his biases from “overshadowing the logic of evidence” (Lenzo, 1995, p. 18). Dr. Feathers was the coordinator of Reading, Language, and Literature education program at Wayne State University. Since, they shared similar research interests, her questions, pointed observations, and suggestions proved invaluable. These activities and techniques contributed to the production of a credible study.

**Transferability.** Transferability can be compared to the concept of external validity, often pursued in conventional research projects, in the sense that both concepts speak to the replication of original studies to subsequent studies. However, transferability, in naturalistic studies, is not a responsibility that rests with the original inquirer, but with subsequent

investigators. The sole responsibility of the naturalist inquirer to facilitate transferability is “to provide sufficient data to enable subsequent investigators to make intelligent decisions regarding the possibility of transferability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, transferability was achieved by providing rich, descriptive detail in the findings, the site, and of the participants to help readers and inquirers to form opinions about how widely this study might apply to another site.

**Dependability and confirmability.** Dependability and confirmability rely on a well-documented audit trail that links data to analysis worksheets and findings. To achieve dependability and confirmability, my dissertation committee methodologist conducted a research audit prior to accepting the dissertation. In addition, to address dependability and confirmability, I have included in the appendices several of codes used to generate findings that answer the research questions. The complete set of data analysis documents will be on file and made available upon request. This access to the inquiry’s *paper trail* gives other researchers the ability to verify the conclusions of my study, or to repeat, as closely as possible the procedures of this project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter describes the findings of research that investigated the impact of critical literacy strategies on African American boys' development towards critical literacy. Additionally, this chapter describes the findings of research that explored the impact of the roles assumed and actions taken by the instructor on the boys' development towards critical literacy. Specifically, this study answers the following questions:

1. What, if any, impact does critical literacy activities embedded in a literature discussion group context have on African American boys' development towards critical literacy?
2. How do African American boys talk in a literature discussion group? To what extent might their talk change across texts and critical literacy activities?
3. How do the roles assumed by the teacher impact/affect African American boys' development towards critical discussions about and around texts?

As presented in chapter three, the instructor conducted interviews and seven instructional sessions (pre-session and critical literacy sessions) with five African American boys. The data analysis looked at the boys' collective response to the activities in the instructional sessions as well as the individual reactions of the boys. Furthermore, the data analysis examined the actions of the instructor and the influence of his actions on the boys. In addition, the data revealed salient information about the influence of the boys' actions on the teacher and the teacher's actions on the boys.

### Description of Data Analysis

I used multiple methods to conduct data analysis. The various methods included re-

reading and coding data sources such as interviews and notes taken from the field. The coded data from the interviews were organized into Microsoft Word tables. The coded field notes were organized into Microsoft Word tables, initially, and then uploaded into the Atlas ti 7 software program to organize and quantify data from the instructional sessions. The coded data sources were thoroughly analyzed and interpreted to help develop data analysis memos to highlight specific vignettes/sequences that revealed themes of importance.

As a continuation of the ongoing data analysis process initiated in the field, I re-read transcriptions of field notes, thick descriptions generated from audio and video recordings, and data generated from the initial and final interviews to identify and develop domains. First, I read the transcriptions for each instructional session multiple times searching for domains and identifying similar actions on the part of the boys and the instructor to collapse into units of meaning (codes). The initial coding of the instructional sessions were in conjunction with Dr. Karen Feathers to establish inter-rater reliability (85% agreement) for the identified codes. This process also included the use of Microsoft Word tables to organize the data and manual coding to reach 85% agreement on the codes to be used to analyze subsequent sessions. There were additional codes identified as a result of the analysis of subsequent sessions and thick descriptions.

Next, I read the thick descriptions for each instructional session multiple times searching for observational data to support or challenge the domains identified from the analysis of the instructional transcriptions. I analyzed the coded transcription and thick description for each instructional session in a side-by-side comparison to uncover data from the thick description not revealed in the transcription. This was done primarily to mine data involving the actions of the instructor, since the thick descriptions were derived primarily from the video taken during

the instructional sessions. As a consequence of the search for domains, I was able to establish detailed codes to describe both the boys' and instructor's behavior or actions, which resulted in the identification and development of two major categories—student actions and teacher actions.

Following the analysis of the instructional transcriptions and thick descriptions, I analyzed the initial and final interview data. I began the process by developing matrices to capture and organize the initial and final interview results. The initial interview results were analyzed first. I read across the student responses for each question to identify their perceptions of reading, perceptions of themselves as readers, their reading preferences, and if they felt comfortable changing their favorite story. I then analyzed the final interview data. As I read across the student responses for each question, I highlighted the responses that demonstrated their learning as an outcome from the instructional sessions. The non-highlighted information represented responses to questions linked to the initial interview. To arrive at more definitive conclusions, I then merged the data from both matrices to create a single initial and final interview matrix.

The questions from both interview protocols were collapsed to develop categories needed to help answer the research questions. For example, the category “changes as a reader” was derived from the following three questions: “how have you changed as a reader”, “what’s different in how you discuss books”, “how do you see lived experiences fitting in a story or not”. I then inserted the appropriate information under each category for each boy. Next, I read across the boys’ responses to identify common threads to learn about their perceptions of reading, their perceptions of themselves as readers, their preferred reading practices, their thoughts about the critical literacy activities practiced during the instructional sessions, and

their perceptions of the instructor.

After each instructional session was coded, I uploaded the transcriptions into the Atlas ti 7 software program to organize and quantify the information for each session. I also used the Atlas ti 7 software program to create a hermeneutic unit consisting of each transcribed session, which allowed me to generate reports needed to help answer the second research question. The software also assisted with the process of collapsing codes to create broader units of meaning as well as the creation of quotes to be used to corroborate specific findings.

The program aided the data analysis process used to highlight specific vignettes and sequences that revealed patterns and themes required to respond to each research question. Additionally, I used the software to identify broader units of meaning or vignettes for the purpose of additional analysis and interpretation. I then created a full memo outlining the key codes and supporting evidence for the major patterns and themes discovered in each session. Afterwards, I identified similar patterns and themes across the instructional sessions and conducted a componential analysis to identify and explain unique differences found in key codes. Simply stated, this analysis helped determine if there were any positive changes in the boys' thoughts about reading and their development towards becoming critically literate.

### **The Boys' Development Towards Critical Literacy**

To address the first and second research questions of this study—what, if any, impact does critical literacy activities embedded in a literature discussion group context have on African American boys' development towards critical literacy?; and, how do African American boys talk in a literature discussion group? To what extent might their talk change across texts and critical literacy activities?—I first provide an operational definition of critical literacy for the purposes of this study. In subsequent paragraphs, I discuss the changes experienced by the

boys, more specifically their talk, across seven instructional sessions, four texts, and several activities. I describe where the boys were prior to the introduction of critical literacy strategies and activities.

Next, I describe the impact of critical literacy strategies—disconnections and problem posing—on the boys’ development towards critical literacy across the instructional sessions. I give special attention to the boys’ talk across the sessions as evidence of their development towards critical literacy. More specifically, I present excerpts from the transcriptions of each session, in tabular form, to highlight the quantitative and qualitative differences in the boys’ talk across problem posing activities. Taken together, the aforementioned discussion points describe what the boys were able to do as a result of our work across the instructional sessions. Most importantly, the discussion points help form the premise that the boys did not become critically literate per the operational definition of this study, but evidence reveals that the critical literacy strategies/activities did place them on a path towards becoming critically literate.

**What is critical literacy?** As currently understood, critical literacy is fluid and defies being singularly defined, and as noted by several researchers and authors, is achieved over time through deliberation, practice, and reflection (Behrman, 2006; Iyer, 2007; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b). However, for the purpose of this study, the definition of critical literacy is captured by definitions offered by authors McLaughlin and DeVogd and Jones. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) attempted to present critical literacy in practical terms to better support the implementation of critical literacy practices by classroom teachers. Therefore, they defined critical literacy as critical understanding, which is “thinking beyond the text to not just understand printed words, but also the context and purpose of the text” (p. 13). However, to

achieve critical understanding, McLaughlin and DeVogd theorized that readers must read from a critical perspective. “Reading from a critical perspective is defined as the ability to analyze and evaluate texts...meaningfully question their origin and purpose, and take action by representing alternative perspectives” (p. 23). Jones (2006) defined reading from a critical perspective as the ability to “deconstruct and reconstruct texts and work towards socially just understandings” (p. 127). Based on these definitions, I looked for evidence that the boys could read from a critical perspective and take action by transforming the author’s message to reflect their cultural and social realities.

**From the beginning—interview.** To gather information to establish a baseline, a modified version of the Burke Reader survey was used to interview each participant individually. The initial interviews were conducted to elicit the boys’ thoughts about the reading process and reading in general.

The analysis of the initial interview revealed the impact of the school district’s elementary reading program on the boys’ thoughts and views of reading. At the time, the school district used a commercial reading program that focused on word identification and comprehension in isolation. More importantly, the reading program, along with particular reading assessments, gave primacy to word identification skill development. Not surprising, the boys’ responses to the interview questions revealed a heavy focus on word identification and reading as a decoding process. Needless to say, the reading program did not focus on critical literacy skills or practices designed to help readers understand text beyond a literal understanding.

Evidence of this claim was found in remarks such as “I ask for help or I sound out the word,” “I just skip over the word,” “I ask one of my classmates if I am stuck on a word,” when



asked “When you are reading and you come to something you don’t know, what do you do?” The boys’ responses to the question, “Do you think you are good reader? Why or why not?” further illustrates this point. For example, they offered responses such as “Yes, because...I stay at my level,” “Yes...I am up to 120 words a minute,” or “Almost, because I mess up on a couple of words.” Additionally, when asked how they might support a struggling reader, the boys gave the following remarks: “I’ll help them...sound the word out,” “I would try to sound it out for them,” “I would give them a couple of hints about the word and have them spell out the word.” Strikingly, in the boys’ remarks there is no mention of understanding or comprehension as something that readers focus on as a goal.

**From the beginning—pre-session.** The pre-session was conducted to discover how the boys read, responded to, and discussed text, and an instructional session prior to the critical literacy sessions was conducted. The analysis of the pre-session revealed the boys’ familiarity with particular reading strategies—making predictions and connections—and their unfamiliarity with critical literacy strategies—disconnections and problem posing. Also, the analysis of the pre-session showed the impact of the school district’s elementary reading program, which views comprehension as a by-product of word identification. To teach comprehension, the program recommends that teachers use seven comprehension strategies including making predictions, making connections, and asking questions. Additionally, the analysis showed the boys’ dependency on and expectation of teacher-led discussions of text. As mentioned previously, the reading program does not emphasize critical literacy strategies to help readers become critical consumers of texts.

At the outset, the boys looked to the instructor to control the activities and discussion, because of the actions taken by the instructor to establish himself as facilitator or group leader.

There were no implicit or explicit objections to the instructor's actions since the boys were accustomed to classroom teachers and instructional aides assuming such roles to facilitate reading activities and discussions in class. As the instructor led the boys through the text, the boys did not appear to have any difficulties reading the text. They each had opportunities to read and discuss portions of the text and did so with relative ease as evidenced by a single miscue made by Student Five.

The instructor engaged the boys in familiar reading strategies—making predictions and connections—to support their comprehension of the text as well as to understand how they responded to and discussed the text. The instructor stopped the boys at pre-determined portions of the text to make predictions about what might occur next. When asked to do so, they demonstrated their familiarity with making predictions by offering detailed predictions using printed text and illustrations as points of reference. There was one instance where their prediction also led to their demonstration of knowing the features of the realistic fiction genre (Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1 Pre-session: Predictions and realistic fiction genre**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | Instructor: Do you guys think...what do you predict here? Will Mudge be okay or not?                               |
| 2  | All boys respond "yes."  |
| 3  | Instructor: What do you predict?   |
| 4  | Student Two: I think he'll be okay.  |
| 5  | Instructor: You think he'll be okay?   |
| 6  | Student Three: I think he (Mudge) might go home and start reading comic books.                                     |
| 7  | Instructor: Okay. He might go home and start reading comic books. So what makes you guys think that he'll be okay? |
| 8  | Student One: It's just the way every story ends.   |
| 9  | Instructor: Every story ends like this?  |
| 10 | Student One: Stories like this.  |
| 11 | Instructor: Stories like this? Just like this ending on a good note or something.                                  |
| 12 | Student Two: Good feeling stories.   |

The responses in lines 8, 10, and 12 in Table 4.1 showed that implicitly or explicitly, the boys understood the features of the realistic fiction genre. More specifically, the boys understood how realistic fiction works when characters are cast in traditional roles and when the story is placed in a traditional setting. It is possible that their knowledge of this particular genre and familiarity with the comprehension strategy aided in their ability to make predictions with a level of confidence.

As the boys read through the text, we would stop at pre-determined scenes to see if the boys might relate to the author's portrayals. At these points, the boys showed their familiarity with making connections to the text. For example, in one particular scene, illustrated in Table 4.2, where the main character is at home, sick, eating popsicles, the boys were asked if they could relate to the author's portrayal.

**Table 4.2 Pre-session: Familiarity with making connections**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Instructor: Let's stop right here. Let's make a connection. Now what happens when you're sick at home? We see what happens here. Can you relate to this? Can you make a connection? |
| 2  | Student Five: I usually stay in the bed too, but once I got ice cream, not popsicles, when I was sick.  |
| 3  | Instructor: So you get ice cream?   |
| 4  | Student Five: Yeah!   |
| 5  | Instructor: Student Four. What's your connection?   |
| 6  | Student Four: It was this one time when I got sick and I could only eat ice cream.  |
| 7  | Instructor: So you got ice cream too? Anyone else? Can anyone else make a connection?   |
| 8  | Student Two: I do have something. But it's not anything like this.  |
| 9  | Instructor: Popsicles?  |
| 10 | Student Two: No, that's all right.  |

Noted in lines 2 and 6 in Table 4.2, Student Four and Student Five connected to a portion of the scene, but also expressed differences between what they eat whenever they are sick versus what the main character ate. Despite expressing their deviation from the author's portrayal, they never articulated the term disconnection nor did they spend any significant length of time talking across their difference or whether it was an important difference. This might have occurred because of their unfamiliarity with the term disconnection. Also, in this particular sequence, as noted in line 8, Student Two announced that he had something to share, but it was not similar to the scene, so he declined to share. Jones (2006) found that initially students have a difficult time talking across difference when it comes to discussing text; so Student Two may have felt his experience was too different to be acceptable. The actions taken by these three boys might suggest that students in elementary classrooms may refuse to or are reluctant to share their experiences if it does not align to the text.

While the boys did not overtly use the comprehension strategy—asking questions—to

improve their understanding of the text, they did respond to the open-ended questions posed by the instructor. For instance, later in the same session, in response to the question, “I wonder why Mudge did not want to go to the doctor?” Student Two stated that Mudge probably thought the doctor would give him something that might make him feel worse. Student Two went on to share that something similar happened to him. Student Four replied, “Because he’s afraid to go to the doctor because he thinks he’s going to get a shot. I think he’s afraid of needles like I am.” In this particular sequence, the boys used their lived experiences to relate to the author’s depictions and to respond to the instructor’s open-ended questions, thus demonstrating that they were capable of engaging with text more deeply. Simply stated, it showed that the boys were able to connect and offer logical explanations for behavior within the story.

Although the boys demonstrated the capacity to make predictions, connections, and respond well to open-ended questions, they did not demonstrate the same capacity when asked to evaluate the author’s purpose. For example, in line 1 of Table 4.3, after reading through several pages, the instructor posed an open-ended question to invite the boys to acknowledge the author and her intent.

**Table 4.3 Pre-session: Opportunity to acknowledge author & author's intent**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Instructor: What do you think that means...and he didn't even want to read comic books? Why do you think the author wrote that?   |
| 2 | Student Five: Umm, probably he likes to read comic books.   |
| 3 | Instructor: Okay. Mudge probably likes to read comic books. Student three.  |
| 4 | Student Three: He's always looking at comic books, but now that he's sick he doesn't want to do that.   |
| 5 | Instructor: Okay. Normally he does, but now that he doesn't feel well he doesn't want to look at comic books. Yes.  |
| 6 | Student Three: Maybe, cause Henry's getting comic books his mom was just joking when she said he doesn't even want to read comic books. Now they know not to bring him comic books. |

As noted in lines 2, 4, and 6, the boys' opinions and beliefs were primarily text-based and did not acknowledge or question the author or her intent. Instead, they simply offered responses that seemed to align with the storyline. It is possible that neither boy acknowledged the author nor the author's intent, because they were not aware that the author's portrayals could be questioned. Despite the type of responses offered by the boys in the pre-session, their responses to open-ended questions did require more than a simple "yes or no" response, which supports the previous claim that they were capable of offering logical responses to questions about text.

The paragraphs above effectively describe the measures taken to determine where the boys were prior to the critical literacy sessions as well as the boys' response to those measures. The boys' perceptions of the reading process focused primarily on reading as a decoding process first and understanding as a by-product. As expected, they demonstrated relative ease with the use of comprehension strategies found in the district's elementary reading program. Additionally, the boys' use of lived experiences and text-based opinions as opposed to simple

“yes or no” answers in response to open-ended questions posed by the instructor revealed that they were capable of engaging with text more deeply. However, the boys struggled to acknowledge the author and thus the author’s intent when asked a question about the author’s purpose. The acknowledgement of the author and his/her intent is a prerequisite for questioning and critiquing the author’s purpose. The ability to question and critique the author’s intent is a key skill in becoming critically literate.

### **Steps towards critical literacy**

In this subsection and subsequent paragraphs, I described the impact of the critical literacy activities—making disconnections and problem posing—on the boys’ development towards becoming critically literate. The disconnection activity was taught in the first critical literacy session and was subsequently conducted in critical literacy sessions three and five. The boys learned to use disconnections to analyze and align texts to their lived experiences as well as challenge authorial power. The problem posing activity was taught in sessions two, four, and six as part of the second reading of text introduced in the previous session. In these sessions, the boys learned to use problem posing to recognize the author’s intent and to challenge authorial power. Taken together, both activities led the boys beyond a literal understanding of texts as evidenced by their discussion of texts and related issues and placed the boys on the path towards becoming critically literate.

**Disconnections.** Jones (2006) describes disconnections as a tool for changing the text to align more with students’ experiences. She also found that disconnection can allow entry to critical discussions around printed texts, images, and social practices. In this study the boys learned to use disconnections to articulate differences between their reality and the author’s portrayals of normative behavior, and thus, used disconnections to assume authorial power by

reshaping texts to align to their lived experiences and to leverage disconnections to engage in more critical discussions.

The disconnection strategy was taught in the first critical literacy session and subsequently conducted in sessions three and five. Across these sessions, there were changes in both oral (to include written disconnections expressed orally) and written disconnections that demonstrate the boys' development toward critical literacy as shown in Table 4.4. More specifically, the changes in oral and written disconnections point to the intent of the disconnection strategy, which is to serve as an entry point to more critical discussions, as well as to the impact of the discussion on the boys' thinking and actions.

Additionally, Table 4.4 and subsequent tables of the sessions, highlight how the quantity and quality of the boys' disconnections developed across time and how their use of disconnections may have supported their talk in the sessions where problem posing was emphasized. In general, Table 4.4 illustrates the boys' use of oral disconnections across all sessions as well as their written disconnections and those written disconnections that were expressed orally across sessions one, three, and five.



**Table 4.4 Disconnections across the sessions**

| Student   | Category         | Pre-session | Session 1 | Session 2 | Session 3 | Session 4 | Session 5 | Session 6 | Total |
|-----------|------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Student 1 | Oral             | 0           | 2         | 0         | 1         | 1         | 1         | 3         | 8     |
|           | Written/<br>Oral |             | 1         |           | 0         |           | 1         |           | 2     |
|           | Written          |             | 6         |           | 2         |           | 12        |           | 20    |
|           |                  |             |           |           |           |           |           |           |       |
| Student 2 | Oral             | 0           | 9         | 2         | 0         | 2         | 0         | 3         | 16    |
|           | Written/<br>Oral |             | 4         |           | 0         |           | 0         |           | 4     |
|           | Written          |             | 4         |           | 0         |           | 3         |           | 7     |
|           |                  |             |           |           |           |           |           |           |       |
| Student 3 | Oral             | 0           | 1         | 0         | 4         | 4         | 2         | 4         | 15    |
|           | Written/<br>Oral |             | 1         |           | 0         |           | 1         |           | 2     |
|           | Written          |             | 5         |           | 2         |           | 8         |           | 15    |
|           |                  |             |           |           |           |           |           |           |       |
| Student 4 | Oral             | 0           | 5         | 0         | 3         | 3         | 1         | 3         | 15    |
|           | Written/<br>Oral |             | 4         |           | 1         |           | 0         |           | 5     |
|           | Written          |             | 4         |           | 4         |           | 9         |           | 17    |
|           |                  |             |           |           |           |           |           |           |       |
| Student 5 | Oral             | 1           | 7         | 2         | 2         | 2         | 1         | 1         | 16    |
|           | Written/<br>Oral |             | 5         |           | 2         |           | 0         |           | 7     |
|           | Written          |             | 7         |           | 7         |           | 4         |           | 18    |
| Totals    | Oral             | 1           | 24        | 4         | 10        | 12        | 5         | 14        | 70    |
|           | Written/<br>Oral | 0           | 15        |           | 3         |           | 2         |           | 20    |
|           | Written          | 0           | 26        |           | 15        |           | 36        |           | 77    |

**Impact of disconnections: A quantitative view.** At first glance, when looking at the oral disconnections category, Table 4.4 suggests that the boys initially lacked familiarity with the term and concept of disconnection as it pertains to reading and talking about text. There was one

disconnection made during the pre-session as compared to session one, where 26 written disconnections and 24 oral disconnections occurred after the term and concept was formally introduced and taught. Additionally, 15/26 of the written disconnections were also expressed orally in session one. To add context to the raw numbers, it is likely that the formal introduction and teaching of the disconnection strategy in session one resulted in 24/69 (35%) oral disconnections made across all six critical literacy sessions, and 15/20 (75%) written disconnections that were expressed orally across sessions one, three, and five. Again, these quantities suggest that the teaching of disconnections may have had a significant impact on the boys' use of the strategy.

A deeper analysis of the oral and written/oral disconnections categories reveals a pattern of diminishing disconnections. Analysis of the oral disconnections category shows a marked decrease in the number of disconnections made across sessions one, three, and five, 35%, 26%, and 13%, respectively. Similarly, a review of the written/oral category reveals a significant decrease in the amount of written disconnections that were expressed orally across sessions one, three, and five, 75%, 15%, 10%, respectively. As will be explained in the "Impact of Disconnections: A qualitative view" subsection, the pattern of diminishing disconnections does not constitute regression on the boys' part. In fact, this pattern suggests that the boys leveraged the disconnection strategy to launch into more critical discussions about and around texts.

The number and pattern found for written disconnections support the suggestions made regarding the pattern of diminishing disconnections. At a glance, the percentages of written disconnections across sessions one, three, and five, 34%, 19%, 47%, respectively, shows an increase from session one to session five with highest percentage found in session five. This trend is in stark contrast to the pattern associated with oral and written/oral disconnections.

There are a couple of theories as to why this pattern occurred. First, it is possible that the format of the text (full page illustrations and limited text) and the ease of the text used in session five led to an increase in the total number of disconnections noted throughout the text. The same theory is posited to explain the decrease in written disconnections as compared to sessions one and three. The text used in session three included full page illustrations, but also contained significantly more printed text. Additionally, there were fewer oral and written/oral disconnections offered in session five, because the boys departed from making general statements of difference and used the disconnection strategy to wonder about and question the author's depictions. This occurrence will be explained in greater detail in the "Impact of Disconnections: A qualitative view" subsection.

The data included in Table 4.4 also sheds some light on the development of each individual boy. As can be expected, participants in such a learning context will have varying starting points and will respond differently to the teacher and to instructional practices used by the teacher. Naturally, such differences often result in uneven development on the part of the participants, despite the most sincere efforts by the teacher to avoid such differences.

For example, Table 4.4 shows that Student One offered the least oral disconnections, 8/69 (11%), across all six critical literacy sessions. To add, the low number of oral disconnections offered by Student One is consistent across each session. Conversely, as shown in Table 4.4, Student One recorded the highest number of written disconnections. In fact, he made 20/77 (26%) written disconnections across sessions one, three, and five. The number of oral to written disconnections offered by Student One suggests that he might have felt uncomfortable participating in the discussions, but understood and was engaged in the disconnection and reading activities.

Student Two offered 16/69 (23%) oral disconnections, which is the highest amount (tied with Student Five) of oral disconnections made across the six critical literacy sessions. The highest number (9) of oral disconnections was made in session one, but decreased significantly across the six sessions. On the other hand, as shown in Table 4.4, Student Two recorded significantly fewer written disconnections as compared to oral disconnections. It is worth noting that the absence of Student Two in session three most likely resulted in fewer oral and written disconnections. Therefore, it is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusion from a comparison of oral and written disconnections. However, it can be concluded that Student Two's pattern of oral disconnections offered across the sessions is consistent with the pattern of diminishing disconnections observed for the group.

Unlike Student Two, Student Three offered 15/69 (21%) oral disconnections across the six critical literacy sessions. However, a deeper analysis reveals a pattern that is not consistent with the overall group pattern. First, Student Three made the fewest amount of disconnections (oral & written) combined in session one, 6/50 (12%), as compared to the other boys. Second, he offered more oral disconnections in sessions four and six (problem posing emphasized) as compared to sessions one, three, and five where the disconnection strategy was the focus. In the "Problem Posing: A qualitative view" subsection, I offer an explanation as to how questions posed by the instructor might have led to this occurrence. Also, he recorded fifteen written disconnections across three sessions the same as oral disconnections across six sessions. This pattern suggests that he understood how to use the disconnection strategy, and possibly used the concept to launch into other forms of talk.

Table 4.4 reveals that Student Four offered 15/69 (21%) oral disconnections across the six critical literacy sessions. The highest number of oral disconnections were offered in session

one as compared to subsequent sessions. Similarly, Student Four recorded 17/77 (22%) written disconnections the most occurring in session five. Like the other boys, Student Four made more written disconnections in session five. The theory posited to explain this pattern was discussed earlier in the subsection. It is possible that Student Four leveraged the disconnection strategy to engage in other forms of talk. It is also worth noting that Student Four's pattern of oral disconnections across the sessions is consistent with the pattern of diminishing disconnections observed for the group.

Analysis of Table 4.4 shows that Student Five was the only boy to make a disconnection in the pre-session, despite not being formally introduced to the term and concept. The table also reveals that Student Five contributed 16/69 (23%) of the oral disconnections with most instances occurring in session one. Similar to Students One and Four, Student Five recorded more written disconnections (18) across three sessions than oral disconnections (16) across six sessions. As observed with some of the boys, this pattern might suggest that he used the disconnections strategy to engage in other forms of talk. Additionally, it should be noted that Student Five's pattern of oral disconnections offered across the sessions is consistent with the pattern of diminishing disconnections observed for the group. In the subsection to follow, I describe the qualitative changes of the boys' disconnections as a group across sessions, one, three, and five.

***Impact of disconnections: A qualitative view.*** In the first critical literacy session, the boys followed along in the text as the instructor read aloud, periodically stopping to make connections and disconnections. This was done to teach the concept of disconnections and to model how to note connections and disconnections for the purposes of this study. After a few attempts, the boys were able to note their connections and disconnections. It is likely that the

formal introduction and teaching of disconnections led to the significant increase in the number and kind of disconnections made as highlighted in Table 4.4.

As evidenced by the first disconnection offered by Student Five in the first critical literacy session, the quality of the disconnections offered by each boy thereafter evolved at an accelerated pace. The boys' initial disconnections were simple statements that reflected the boys' lived experiences. For example, Student Five stated, "If I did have a sister, it would be creepy for her to be in my room looking out of my window." This was in response to the first scene in *Do Like Kyla*, where the younger sister imitates the older sister's early morning wake-up routine. Students One and Four offered the following comments, respectively, "I do have a big sister but she doesn't live with me" and "I don't live with my big sister." In each disconnection, the boys explained what they do or would do as opposed to what transpired in the text. In these examples, the boys did not spend a significant amount of time talking across their differences.

However, in the same session, the boys used disconnections to open the door for race and gender. As illustrated in Table 4.5, a discussion around gender differences ensued when Student Five mentioned in line 1 that he chooses not to wear purple boots, unlike the female character in the story, because boys don't wear purple stuff. Student Four joined him in making gender-based assertions (lines 18, 22, & 25), while Students Two and Three challenged their comments (lines 13, 19, & 24).

**Table 4.5 First critical literacy session: Making disconnections**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | Student Five: I don't wear purple boots nor do I play in the snow.                                       |
| 2  | Instructor: So what do you wear? Did you have a disconnection?   |
| 3  | Student Five: Yeah. Boys really don't wear purple stuff.   |
| 4  | Instructor: Boys don't wear purple stuff? (Surprised by the response)                                    |
| 5  | Student Five: They wear men's stuff.   |
| 6  | Student Four: (pointing at Student Five's T-shirt) You know that shirt has a little bit of purple in it. |
| 7  | Instructor: So, let me understand. Boys can't wear purple stuff?   |
| 8  | Student Five: Not that much, not over 50% purple.  |
| 9  | Instructor: Okay. So if it's over 50% purple then men shouldn't wear it?                                 |
| 10 | Student Five: Yes, they shouldn't wear it.   |
| 11 | Instructor: Okay. So what do you guys think of purple boots?   |
| 12 | Student Five: They are bad for the environment.  |
| 13 | Student Two: They are better than purple sweaters, but I would wear pink boots.                          |
| 14 | Instructor: Okay. Why do you think pink is better?   |
| 15 | Student Two: I don't know.   |
| 16 | Student Five: I think all the colors are fine. It's just that pink and purple are for girls.             |
| 17 | Instructor: Okay   |
| 18 | Student Four: Have you seen girls wear men's colors?   |
| 19 | Student Two: No. But that's because there is no such thing as men's colors.                              |
| 20 | Student Four: Yes, there are.  |
| 21 | Instructor: So, what are men's colors?   |
| 22 | Student Five, Student Two, and Student Four: There is red, black, yellow, green, gray, and brown.        |
| 23 | Instructor: Okay. So let me understand. Every color is a man color except for purple and pink.           |
| 24 | Student Three: Anyone can wear purple.   |
| 25 | Student Four: Because pink and purple they use that for the ladies.                                      |
| 26 | Student Five: So what happens if you wear to school something pink—people will laugh at you.             |
| 27 | Instructor: Sometimes I wear purple. Like a purple tie.  |
| 28 | Student Five: Was it over 50% purple?  |

As noted, the disconnection made by Student Five stimulated an active and spontaneous debate about gender stereotypes. The disconnection also reflects strong beliefs held by Student Five, which one might surmise was learned over time and supports the author's use of purple-colored boots for young females. On the other hand, the disconnection revealed the beliefs of the other boys around gender. In fact, Students Two and Three seem to have a more open mind about the use of color and gender, which is in stark contrast to the beliefs espoused by Students Four and Five. Also, it is worth noting that this gender-based discussion carried over into the second critical literacy session where problem posing was emphasized.

During the third critical literacy session, the boys began by reading the text silently and noting their connections and disconnections as they read through the story. They used disconnections to open the door for discussions around their lived experiences and the author's portrayal of a family reunion. More specifically, Students One, Three, and Four made disconnections in response to a series of questions from the instructor that called for descriptive responses. For example, Students One and Three described how some of the activities at their family reunions differed from the activities portrayed in the story. Student One stated, "We went to a movie and a football game." Student Three stated, "We didn't do as much stuff as they did. Like we didn't play baseball, but we played football and all the grown-ups were inside cooking." They also described how the food served at their reunions differed from that enjoyed by the characters in the story. Overall, the boys felt empowered to compare their lived experiences to the author's portrayal of a family reunion through the use of descriptive responses that disconnected from the parts of the text, which is a pattern that carried over into session four (problem posing). However, while the boys pointed out differences, they did not take the next step to ask why these differences exist.



In the fifth critical literacy session, the boys began by reading the text silently and taking mental note of their connections and disconnections throughout the story. The subsequent discussion of connections and disconnections revealed significant growth with their use of disconnections. However, when given the opportunity to provide explicit disconnections from the text, the boys elected to discuss their issues with the author's portrayal of the cat and the dog. For instance, in line 5 of Table 4.6, Student Four questioned the author's depiction of the relationship between Mudge and the Happy Cat by wondering, "How could a cat be a mother to a dog?" His question led to a lengthy discussion about the relationship between the cat and the dog as well as the cat and its owner.

**Table 4.6 Fifth critical literacy session: Moving beyond disconnections**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | Instructor: Okay. Let's stop right here. So at this time we will go ahead and talk about our connections and disconnections. Let's have Student Three start us off and you guys can chime in or Student Three you can call on people to share. Okay. |
| 2  | Student Three: I have a disconnection. My dog would not lick milk from a cat's chin.   |
| 3  | Student Two:(interrupting) Your dog would have killed that cat.  |
| 4  | Instructor: His dog would have killed the cat?   |
| 5  | Student Four: I wanted to know how could a cat be a mother to a dog.   |
| 6  | Student Five: It could be a stepmother and feed the dog.   |
| 7  | Instructor: It could be a stepmother and feed the dog?   |
| 8  | Student Five: Yeah.  |
| 9  | Instructor: What do you guys think about that? About a cat being a step mom.   |
| 10 | Student Three: It's weird.   |
| 11 | Instructor: It's weird? Okay.  |
| 12 | Student Four: The cat could act like a dog.  |
| 13 | Student One: Because the cat treats the dog like a son, plus the cat may be older than the dog, but it doesn't look like the cat is older than the dog.  |
| 14 | Student Two: Because the cat treats the dog like one of its own.   |
| 15 | Instructor: Because the cat treats the dog like one of its owners?   |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 16 | Student Two: No, because the cat treats the dog like one of its own like kids.   |
| 17 | Instructor: Okay.  |
| 18 | Student Five: The cat was treating Mudge like one of its own kittens.  |
| 19 | Student Five: I have a connection and disconnection. I watched TV with my stepdad. My cat would not drink two gallons of milk. The pictures showed that the cat was really skinny when he first appeared. Then later on the cat looked fat. See, look on this page. It looks like the cat had been swimming in a dumpster. |
| 20 | Student Two:(laughs)   |
| 21 | Student Five: Who would let their cat eat in the trash?  |
| 22 | Student Two: It's a stray cat. No one owns it.   |
| 23 | Student Five: Look here at the cat and here's the owner. (Pointing to a picture in the story.)   |
| 24 | Student Two: He was probably driving and the cat jumped out of the window.   |
| 25 | Student Five: Why? Did he hate his owner?  |
| 26 | Instructor: Good question. Maybe he hated his owner.   |
| 27 | Student Three: Well, why would he jump into his hands?   |
| 28 | Student Two: Yeah, why would he do that?   |
| 29 | Student Four: Why would he jump into his hands?  |
| 30 | Instructor: Where do you see the cat jumping into his hands?   |
| 31 | Student Three: You see the picture with the police officer on the page close to the end. The cat jumped into his arms.   |
| 32 | Student Four: Yes, see right here, the cat jumped into his hands. If he didn't like them then he wouldn't have done that.  |
| 33 | Student Three: Yeah, he probably ran...  |
| 34 | Student Four: The cat was probably outside when he left.   |
| 35 | Student Two: Yeah, he was probably playing around outside and left.  |
| 36 | Student Four: Yeah, right, like the cop was at home and the cat was outside playing and the cop forgot to lock him in and he jumped over the fence and the cop was probably trying to chase him.   |
| 37 | Student Three: He probably took him to work with them and that's when he ran away.   |

Unlike the start to previous making connections and disconnections sequences, one of the boys decided to depart from general claims to wondering about a specific depiction by the

author. This led to a litany of comments (see lines 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17) by the boys attempting to rationalize the author's decision to frame the relationship between the Happy Cat and Mudge in such a way. Their comments are in keeping with the pattern established from the Pre-session, where the boys provided commentary in support of the author's prerogative as opposed to directly confronting the author. However, in previous sessions, the boys did not attempt to wonder about the author's depiction of the relationship between Mudge and the Happy Cat.

Also, later in this sequence, the boys departed from a simple connection and disconnection to wondering about the author's depiction of the cat. This wondering led to a discussion about whether the cat had an owner and then questions about the relationship between the cat and its owner. During this discussion, there was robust student to student interaction as well as interaction with the text as noted by the number of turns taken by the boys without interjections from the instructor as illustrated in lines 2, 3; 12-14; and 18-25. As the boys engaged in the discussion, they often referred to illustrations in the text to support their claims. This activity was not displayed in the first and third sessions.

Additionally, in a related sequence, the boys responded to an open-ended question asking them to describe what might happen if a stray cat found its way onto their front porch.

**Table 4.7 Fifth critical literacy session: Leveraging disconnections**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | Instructor: For you guys who have dogs or have had a dog, if a stray cat showed up on your porch and I guess rang the doorbell, what would happen?   |
| 2 | Student Three: I would kick him off.   |
| 3 | Student One: My dad would not let him in.  |
| 4 | Student Four: I would let the cat in and if no one showed up to get the cat for at least a week I would get to keep it.  |
| 5 | Student Three: I... Okay you can go first. (speaking to Student Five)  |
| 6 | Student Five: I would yell for him to get off the porch.   |
| 7 | Student Two: I would spray him with water.   |
| 8 | Instructor: You would spray him with water. (laughing)   |
| 9 | Student Five: I wouldn't let him in my house because you don't know if he has rabies, ticks, or that he might bite you in the middle of the night and have you in the hospital. If I had a cat, I would bring a baseball bat in the middle of the night and yell "get the heck off my property." |

While the boys did not explicitly state that they were disconnecting from the text, their responses clearly differed from what transpired in the story. The actions of the boys highlighted in Tables 4.6 and 4.7 suggest that the boys have become more sophisticated with their use of the disconnection strategy. It appears that they have moved beyond the use of disconnections to simply articulate differences towards leveraging the strategy to wonder about the author's depictions and to share what might happen in their realities (see lines 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9). Their responses look similar to the responses given in the final critical literacy session where problem posing was emphasized.

Additional analysis of the boys' responses across sessions one, three, and five supports the claim that the boys have become progressively sophisticated in their responses. In the first critical literacy session, the boys did not attempt to provide evidence to support their claims. In session three, the boys provided descriptions that disconnected from the text to answer the

instructor's questions and there were several instances where the boys provided an example or explanation to answer the instructor's question. However, their explanations were not grounded in the text.

However, analysis of the fifth session showed that the boys departed from making oral disconnections in general, but instead offered statements of wondering, affirmation and explanations. Furthermore, they referenced the text to support their comments about whether the Happy Cat had an owner and the relationship between the Happy Cat and its owner. Again, the departure from oral disconnections to wonderings about the author's portrayals and the use of text-based explanations were not displayed in critical literacy sessions one and three, which demonstrates growth from making disconnections based on conjecture or loosely based on their lived experiences. However, the boys' responses do suggest that they leveraged the disconnection strategy to deconstruct texts and to engage in more critical discussions about the author's depictions. This occurrence will be discussed in greater detail in the problem posing subsection. Despite their growth, the boys did not demonstrate the ability to transform the author's message to reflect their cultural and social realities.

**Problem posing.** Problem posing is a critical literacy strategy that can be used with narrative and informational text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2006). According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b), the intent of problem posing is to help readers to identify the author's message and encourage readers to disrupt the author's message through a series of questions such as:

- 1) Why do you think the author wrote this story?
- 2) Why did the author use these particular characters and not other characters?
- 3) How might the story be different if the main characters were of a different gender or

if the story was set in a different location?

These are just a few of the kind of questions that the boys were asked to encourage them to challenge the text.

***Impact of problem posing: A quantitative view.*** In critical literacy sessions two, four, and six, the boys were given the opportunity to review the assigned text for a second time and to engage in problem posing activities. Across these sessions, the boys demonstrated development towards becoming critically literate as evidenced by their talk. Table 4.8 and subsequent tables of the sessions highlight how the quantity and quality of the boys' responses developed across the sessions. More specifically, Table 4.8 reflects students' opinions and beliefs, instances when they answered another boy's question, references to text to support their claims, and instances where they challenged another boy's opinion or belief, as well as the frequency wherein these actions and interactions occurred.

*Table 4.8 Boys' talk and problem posing*

| Category  | Student               | Pre-session | Session 1 | Session 2 | Session 3 | Session 4 | Session 5 | Session 6 | CL Total   |
|---|-----------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Opinion/<br>belief<br>related to<br>teacher<br>question | 1                     | 4           | 0         | 3         | 1         | 1         | 1         | 6         | 16         |
|   | 2                     | 3           | 1         | 12        | 0         | 2         | 2         | 6         | 26         |
|   | 3                     | 3           | 0         | 5         | 1         | 7         | 1         | 5         | 22         |
|   | 4                     | 3           | 4         | 6         | 1         | 5         | 2         | 19        | 40         |
|   | 5                     | 2           | 5         | 10        | 1         | 7         | 1         | 7         | 33         |
| <b>Category Total</b>                                   |                       | <b>15</b>   | <b>10</b> | <b>36</b> | <b>4</b>  | <b>22</b> | <b>7</b>  | <b>43</b> | <b>122</b> |
| Opinion/belief<br>response<br>to student<br>question    | 1                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 3         | 3          |
|   | 2                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 3         | 3          |
|   | 3                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 3         | 4          |
|   | 4                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 4         | 5          |
|   | <b>Category Total</b> |             | <b>0</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>2</b>  | <b>13</b>  |
| Referenced<br>text                                      | 1                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 2         | 0         | 0         | 2          |
|   | 2                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 2         | 2          |
|   | 3                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 1         | 1         | 3          |
|   | 4                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 4         | 1         | 3         | 8          |
|   | 5                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 1         | 2          |
| <b>Category Total</b>                                   |                       | <b>0</b>    | <b>0</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>8</b>  | <b>2</b>  | <b>7</b>  | <b>17</b>  |
| Answers<br>student<br>question                          | 1                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 4         | 7         | 8          |
|   | 2                     | 0           | 2         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 4         | 6         | 12         |
|   | 3                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 3         | 1         | 5         | 9          |
|   | 4                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 2         | 1         | 5         | 8          |
|   | 5                     | 0           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 1          |
| <b>Category Total</b>                                   |                       | <b>0</b>    | <b>2</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>6</b>  | <b>7</b>  | <b>23</b> | <b>38</b>  |

|   |          |           |          |          |          |          |          |           |           |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| <b>Challenge student opinion/belief</b> | 2        | 0         | 5        | 1        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 5         | 11        |
|   | 3        | 0         | 2        | 2        | 0        | 0        | 3        | 5         | 12        |
|   | 4        | 0         | 2        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 1        | 1         | 4         |
|   | 5        | 0         | 1        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 1         | 2         |
| <b>Category Total</b>                   | <b>0</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>12</b> | <b>29</b> |

At first glance, Table 4.8 reveals the increased frequency whereby the boys expressed opinions and beliefs related to the instructor's questions beginning with the pre-session and across critical literacy sessions two, four, and six. Also, the table shows increased frequency of opinions and beliefs in response to questions posed by the boys in sessions five and six. The combination of these two categories—opinions and beliefs related to teacher question and opinion and belief response to student question minus the pre-session—equates to 137 instances where the boys stated their opinions and beliefs across the critical literacy sessions. However, further analysis reveals that 83% (114 of 137) of the instances occurred in sessions two, four, and six. This analysis demonstrates significant growth in the quantity of the boys' stated opinions and beliefs across sessions two, four, and six (explanation of decrease from session two to four is provided in the "Problem Posing: A qualitative view" subsection) as compared to the quantity in the pre-session.

Further analysis of Table 4.8 reveals significant growth on the part of the boys to reference text and challenge the opinion of one another when drawing comparisons between the pre-session and the critical literacy sessions. There were no instances of the boys referring to the text to answer a question or support a claim during the pre-session and the same is true for instances of challenging opinions and beliefs offered by one another. Additionally, analysis



of the number of instances where the boys referenced the text across the critical literacy sessions reveals that there were no instances before session four and that of the total number (17) across sessions four, five, and six that 85% (15 of 17) occurred in sessions four and six.

However, analysis of the number of instances where the boys challenged the opinions and beliefs offered by one another reveals a slight increase in the number of instances across the critical literacy sessions. In fact, the number of instances in sessions one and five, where the disconnection strategy was the focus, equaled 14 as compared to 15 instances occurring in sessions two and six, where problem posing was the focus. A deeper analysis shows that Students Two and Three combined for more than 70% of the challenges in sessions one and six where the greatest number of instances occurred, however, the data do not explain why this happened. Again, the quantitative differences noted here when looking across the critical literacy sessions are slight and more than likely of no significance.

The data included in Table 4.8 also sheds some light on the development of each individual boy. As can be expected, participants in such a study will have various starting points and will respond differently to the teacher and to instructional practices employed by the teacher. Naturally, such differences often result in uneven development on the part of the students, despite attempts by the instructor to avoid such differences.

For example, Table 4.8 shows that Student One offered far fewer stated opinions and beliefs in response to questions asked by the teacher as compared the other boys. In fact, he offered 12% of the opinions offered by the boys. This is a fairly low participation rate considering that an expectation of an even distribution of participation would be 20% per boy. Also, at no point in the study did he challenge the opinion or belief shared by one of his peers, despite many opportunities to do so. However, as noted in the Table 4.8, Student One did offer

a fair amount of opinions in response to student questions, which is consistent with the number of instances where he answered questions posed by one of his peers. Overall, Student One had the fewest number of verbal interactions in all six critical literacy sessions (see Tables 4.4 & 4.8). It is possible that Student One felt intimidated by the instructor or by the situation.

Student Two and Student Three, the older boys of the group, challenged their peers more than anyone else. Table 4.8 shows that they accounted for 79% of the challenges to students' questions. The instances are highest in sessions one and six. As shown in subsequent paragraphs, there were provocative statements made by other students that might have prompted their challenges. In addition to challenging their peers, further analysis showed that they participated well in response to student questions (opinion/belief response to student question and answers student question). Based on the data presented in Table 4.8, it is likely that they felt empowered to respond to and challenge statements offered by their peers, because of their age status among the boys.

In stark contrast to Student One, Student Four offered the most stated opinions and beliefs in response to questions asked by the teacher. In fact, he contributed 30% of all stated opinions and beliefs offered across the sessions. Looking across the sessions, it seems that he experienced significant development in offering his opinion and beliefs in response to the teacher's question. As will be discussed in subsequent paragraphs, Student Four offered many provocative opinions and beliefs. The data in Table 4.8 also reveals that Student Four was the most active participant across the five categories. A similar pattern is highlighted in Table 4.4.

Student Five contributed 24% of the stated opinions and beliefs offered in response to questions asked by the teacher. This is the second highest contribution. When looking across the sessions and categories listed in Table 4.8, one might deduce that Student Five was not an

active participant. However, Table 4.8 does not include all of the codes uncovered in this study. For example, the table does not include Student Five's participation as a group leader in session six. This might explain why his development across the sessions appear uneven in the categories opinion/belief related to teacher question and student question, answers student question, and challenge student opinion/belief. His time spent focusing on leading the discussion placed him in a position to have others respond to him more specifically in the final session. The following paragraphs will speak to the qualitative differences of the boys' talk as a group across the pre-session and sessions two, four, and six.

***Impact of problem posing: A qualitative view.*** In the second critical literacy session, the boys were invited to evaluate the author's purpose when the instructor asked "Why do you think the author wrote this particular story?" The boys' opinions and beliefs were fairly similar to those offered in the pre-session in the sense that they were speculative and not evaluative. Their opinions and beliefs supported the author's prerogative and failed to address how the story might change if the characters were members of their families. For instance, Student Three stated, "Maybe she [author] wanted to write a good book for kids," and Student Five suggested, "She wanted people to think about taking care of their little sister...to show respect." In response to the teacher's question, at no point did the boys speak to how the story might change. However, these comments demonstrate the boys' recognition of the author as well as the author's intent, which is a step towards becoming critically literate.

Also, during the same session, in a second attempt to have the boys acknowledge and challenge the author's intent, the boys were asked a question similar to the first problem posing question. When asked "Why do you think the author wrote the story this way?", the boys offered their opinions and beliefs similar to those given previously. For example, Student Five

stated, “She was probably treated that way when she was a little girl.” Student Two affirmed Student Five’s response by stating, “Yeah, she was probably thinking back to when she was a little girl.” Student Four simply replied “...maybe she wrote it this way because it’s in order.” Again, the boys’ statements supported the author’s prerogative, although the intent was to encourage the boys to challenge authorial power. However, the boys’ recognition of the author and the message represents development towards critical understanding as compared to their demonstrated understanding during the pre-session where they failed to mention the author.

The content in Table 4.9 shows that the boys continued to develop their problem posing acumen as the second critical literacy session continued. In line 5, the boys were asked, “What would happen if you replaced the older sister with an older brother?” as we discussed what the author wanted them to think. Student Two immediately opined, “It would be a different story, because boys would do things differently” (Line 6). The question posed by the instructor and the opinion offered by Student Two initiated the problem posing activity known as gender switching.

**Table 4.9 Second critical literacy session: Opinions and beliefs through gender switching**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | Instructor: Yeah, I think someone mentioned that earlier that the author was probably writing about her time as a little girl. Okay. Now what do you guys think the author wants you to think? Think about the story. Think about the characters and what they did. What do you think the author wants you to think? |
| 2  | Student Four: Maybe she wants you to think that older brothers and sisters are kind and not mean.  |
| 3  | Instructor: Okay. Older brothers and sisters are nice and not mean. Did she include an older brother in this story?  |
| 4  | Student Four: Well, she talked about her older sister but some people have older brothers.   |
| 5  | Instructor: Okay. So maybe if you have an older brother you might replace the sister in this book and put your brother in the story.   |
| 6  | Student Two: Then it would be different. It would be a different story because boys would do things differently.   |
| 7  | Instructor: What? So let me understand. Did you guys hear what Student Two just said?  |
| 8  | Boys reply "yes."  |
| 9  | Instructor: Okay. So, if she's giving the example that older brothers or sisters can do good things, but if there was an older brother in this story do you think it would be different. Tell us why.  |
| 10 | Student Two: (begins laughing) Because boys wouldn't do stuff as girls. Boys...  |
| 11 | Student Four: Boys are smarter.  |
| 12 | Student Two: Yeah, boys are smarter than girls and would do things better.   |
| 13 | Instructor: So boys are smarter than girls and would do things better. So help me understand. They woke up in the morning and they looked out of the window. They tapped on the window and looked at the birds. So boys would do what? First thing in the morning...   |
| 14 | Student Two: They would brush their teeth and hop on a videogame.  |
| 15 | Instructor: Play a videogame.  |
| 16 | Student Two: Yeah.   |
| 17 | Student Three: I would wake up, eat breakfast, get dressed first and then play videogames and watch TV.  |
| 18 | Instructor: Help me understand. What kind of videogame would you play? Would you play a game where there is may be a young lady skipping through a field picking flowers?  |
| 19 | Boys began laughing.   |
| 20 | Student Two: He would play (referring to Student Three) the Power Puff game.   |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 21 | Student Three: I would play an action game or a sports game.   |
| 22 | Student Two: (speaking while Student Three is speaking) He would play the Power Puff game or his Dora game. (Laughing) |
| 23 | Instructor: Remember respect and turn taking. Okay. So what's the Power Puff game?                                     |
| 24 | Student Two: The game that Student Three be playing.   |
| 25 | Student Three: I don't play the Power Puff game.   |
| 26 | Instructor: Student Two, can you describe the Power Puff game.   |
| 27 | Student Two: Power Puffs are these little girls.   |
| 28 | Student Three: See you know (referring to Student Two) because that's what you play.                                   |
| 29 | Student Five: I'll tell you what we be playing. We play awesome games. We play men games.                              |
| 30 | Student Three: We play <i>Call of Duty</i> and NASCAR.   |
| 31 | Student Four: Yeah, <i>Call of Duty</i> .  |
| 32 | Student Two: I play <i>NBA 2K 14</i> .   |

In lines 10-12, Students Two and Four offered their thoughts and opinions as to why the story would be different. Then the boys began re-shaping the beginning portion of the story by interjecting themselves into the story (Lines 14-17). Afterwards, the discussion devolved into an unproductive interaction between Student Two and Student Three as well as a discussion about the type of masculine video games they choose to play. In this sequence, the boys leveraged their thoughts and opinions on gender roles to re-shape text by switching characters and activities.

As the second critical literacy session progressed, the boys continued to display their development towards critical literacy. After the boys transformed portions of the story, I asked the boys to explain why their version differed from the author's version (Table 4.10).

**Table 4.10 Second critical literacy session: Leveraging perceptions through problem****posing**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Instructor: Okay. Now, we just talked about how things might go if the characters were boys. Right, if they were two brothers. So why do you think the author did not write the story the way you described it? |
| 2  | Student Four: Because if she put boys it would have been harder to decide what boys might do, because she's a lady.   |
| 3  | Instructor: Because she's a lady? So what do you mean by that? Are you saying that it might be harder for ladies to understand boys and what they would do?   |
| 4  | Student Four: Yeah.   |
| 5  | Instructor: Okay. Can you give me an example. Student Three.  |
| 6  | Student Three: Girls probably don't have the same ideas as boys. They would think about doing girl stuff.   |
| 7  | Instructor: So tell us about some girl stuff that they might think about doing.   |
| 8  | Student Three: They would probably think about ponies and stuff.  |
| 9  | Instructor: Okay. So boys would think about what?   |
| 10 | Student Three: Games, basketball, and other sports.   |
| 11 | Instructor: Okay.   |
| 12 | Student Five: Girls would probably talk about ponies and sales like 50% off. Boys would talk about equipment that they could play on.   |
| 13 | Instructor: So any other ideas? But I think that's a good point that Student Four raised. Women may not fully understand what boys will do and why they would do it. Do you feel that way?                      |
| 14 | Student Two: Yeah, because girls wouldn't play video games and boys like to play video games.   |

The statement in line 2 of the Table 4.10 suggests that Student Four believed that the author would experience difficulty with composing a similar story with males as the main characters because of her gender. Statements in lines 3 and 4 confirmed the statement offered by Student Four in line 2. However, it can be argued that statements offered in lines subsequent to line 5 might reflect general thoughts about gender roles and more specifically, gender-based activities, especially considering that the term “author” was never referenced. But, if the

context of the sequence is considered where the author was originally referred to as a “lady” by both Student Four and the instructor, and then subsequently referred to as “ladies” and “girls” (perhaps a poor choice of words), it can be argued that the statements subsequent to line 5 helped to support the statement provided in line 2. Therefore, given this particular context, my analysis revealed that the boys’ responses expressed traditional stereotypes, similar to opinions expressed in Table 4.10, regarding the interests of males and females and their responses challenged authorial power by leveraging their perceptions to engage in a discussion about gender roles. The sequence illustrated in Table 4.10, showed the boys’ transition from recognizing the author towards questioning the author’s ability to have composed a similar story with males as the main characters.

In the fourth critical literacy session, the boys were provided another opportunity to explain why they thought the author wrote the story, *When Lightning Comes in a Jar*, in a particular way. Students Three, Four, and Five stated their opinions and beliefs. However, their statements did not seem to challenge the author’s position, but instead supported the author’s prerogative. For example, Student Three stated that the author wrote the story to help motivate family members to get together. Student Four remarked, “Maybe the author wanted to show how people from different settings live.” Student Five believed that the author was retelling an experience from her childhood. Again, the boys’ recognition of the author and the message represents development towards critical understanding as compared to their demonstrated understanding during the pre-session.

As the session progressed, the boys began to offer more descriptive responses, possibly as a consequence of the type of questions posed by the instructor, which might have resulted in the decrease in the amount of stated opinions and beliefs as compared to the second critical



literacy session as observed in Table 4.8. The boys were asked direct and intentional questions, as shown in line 1 of Table 4.11, designed to refer them back to the text and to eventually transform the text. As highlighted in Table 4.11, the type of responses offered were based on their experiences at family reunions and other family gatherings as opposed to their opinions and beliefs. As a note, it is likely that the descriptive questions and responses offered in the preceding critical literacy session where the disconnection strategy was emphasized resulted in a continued conversation about personal experiences at family reunions and gatherings.

**Table 4.11 Fourth critical literacy session: Descriptive responses**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Instructor: So if this were your family how would the story go? Student Three?  |
| 2  | Student Three: Well, we would probably have food like chicken and other stuff. We would play basketball instead of baseball.  |
| 3  | Student Four: The kids would probably be goofing off, running around, riding bikes, play basketball, or running into stuff.   |
| 4  | Student Five: They probably would be goofing around. They would probably go over to their friends' house. Because you know how kids are sometimes. They act wild.   |
| 5  | Instructor: Okay. So that's how the story would go if this were your family? What about you, Student One? What if this were your family?  |
| 6  | Student One: We would goof off too.   |
| 7  | Instructor: Okay. Anything else? If this were your family, how would the story go? Student Four.  |
| 8  | Student Four: We would wait for more family members to come and go in the house to play Xbox for little while.  |
| 9  | Student Three: If I had wrote the story, I would have a different setting, more people, the grown-ups would be cooking, the kids would be outside playing, and when the food was all done we would set up tables outside and have dinner. And we would all sit at the tables and eat. |
| 10 | Instructor: Let me ask you guys this. I've been to a few family reunions and I've seen people play other games such as cards, Gin Rummy...  |
| 11 | Student Four: (interrupting the teacher) Oh yeah, we will play Blackjack and Solitaire.   |
| 12 | Student Five: We would play go fish games.  |
| 13 | Student Three: We would play Monopoly.  |
| 14 | Instructor: Okay. Any other games? At my reunion, we used to play dominoes.   |

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 15 | Student Two: The game of Life. Candyland.   |
| 16 | Student Three: And we would have music playing so people can dance around.  |
| 17 | Instructor: What kind of music? What kind of music do you think they played in the story?   |
| 18 | Student Four: Not rap music.  |
| 19 | Instructor: So, they didn't play rap music in the story. How can you tell?  |
| 20 | Student Four: Because probably it's on a farm and they listen to country music.   |
| 21 | Instructor: Okay. Student Five?   |
| 22 | Student Five: It's probably back in the day where they only had country music.  |
| 23 | Instructor: So what makes you think it was back in the day?   |
| 24 | Student Five: (pointing at the picture) The cars look different. They don't look like the cars that we drive now.   |
| 25 | Instructor: All right. So, we are going to stop right here and then we will take about five minutes to write in your journals. Now, I have to say this. I read your journals and some of you do an excellent job of writing down your thoughts and some of you write something down real quick and that's it. I want you to write about how the story might change if you were the author? Take your time, you have five minutes. |
| 26 | All boys writing in journals.   |
| 27 | Instructor: So, before we leave, let me ask you guys. What are your thoughts about what we did today?   |
| 28 | Student Five: I think it was good. We got to write in our journals about what happened and we wrote down what we would do if we were the author.  |
| 29 | Student Three: Good. Because we got to tell what our family reunions would be like if we were the author.   |
| 30 | Student One: Good. Because you know...we got to change how the story might go.  |
| 31 | Student Two: I wrote down I would change their family reunion by putting my family in there [story] and change playing baseball to football and basketball. And I wrote that we would have girls versus boys in football and basketball. I would have different food.   |
| 32 | Instructor: Okay, what kind of food?  |
| 33 | Student Two: Fried chicken and the big ham that you cook in the oven. Peach cobbler.  |

The boys' statements in lines 2, 3, 4, 9, and 31 are examples of the boys leveraging problem posing queries to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences at family gatherings that disconnected from the author's depictions. Additionally, as an unintended

consequence, the boys occasionally used, directly and indirectly, the author's depictions before they offered their response as illustrated in lines 9, 20, and 24. It is likely that the frequency of descriptive responses and references to the text in response to the questions posed by the instructor resulted in fewer instances of stated opinions and beliefs related to the instructor's questions as seen in session two. However, the fewer instances of opinions and beliefs on the boys part does not necessarily constitute a lapse in their development towards achieving critical literacy. On the contrary, it could be argued that the detailed descriptions based on specific experiences that disconnected from the author's depictions demonstrates progress from statements of opinion and belief loosely based on their lived experiences and perceptions.

Looking back at Table 4.8, another possible explanation for the decrease in stated opinions and beliefs from session two to session four might be the absence of Student Two in session three. As a result, his first encounter with the text, *When Lightning Comes in a Jar*, was the second read for the other boys. His limited exposure to the text could have possibly led to the ten fewer stated opinions and beliefs from session two to session four observed in Table 4.8. Taken together, the type of question posed by the instructor and the absence of Student Two might have led to fewer instances of stated opinions and beliefs offered by the boys in this particular session.

As a second reading of *Henry and Mudge and the Happy Cat*, in the final critical literacy session, the boys were provided a final opportunity to evaluate the author's purpose, when the instructor asked "Why do you think the author wrote this particular story?" The boys' stated opinions and beliefs were fairly similar to those offered in the pre-session and critical literacy sessions two and four in the sense that they supported the author's prerogative and failed to challenge the author's intent. For instance, Student One stated, "Because maybe he had a dog

or his son had a dog,” and Student Two suggested, “The author probably wrote the story for kids or it probably happened to her.” However, these opinions continued to demonstrate the boys’ ability to recognize the author as well as the author’s intent.

Additionally, in the final session, the boys were asked, “Why do you think the author wrote the story this way?” The boys offered stated opinions and beliefs similar to the types given when asked the question previously. Students One and Four’s comments clearly demonstrated their awareness of authorial power, but fell short of challenging authorial power directly. For example, Student One stated, “Because she [author] wanted to make a difference for cats and dogs to get along and not fight each other.” Student Four stated, “Maybe she’s [author] just saying that since cats and dogs don’t get along in real life, maybe they should.” Again, the boys’ stated opinions and beliefs supported the author’s prerogative, although the intent was to encourage the boys to challenge authorial power. However, the boys’ recognition of the author and the message represents continued development towards critical understanding as compared to their demonstrated understanding during the pre-session.

Towards the end of the final session, the boys demonstrated continued growth in their ability to question the author’s portrayals through the imposition of their lived experiences onto the story. When given an opportunity to state their opinions and beliefs about the lack of female voice and presence in the story, they debated the actual presence and then the importance of the female presence. The boys quickly referenced the text to count the number of female characters and to identify how many female characters had speaking roles. As a result, we found that the male voice was disproportionately represented as compared to the female voice. Afterwards, the boys shared their thoughts and opinions about this issue.

In line 1 of Table 4.12, the boys were asked why they thought the author gave

prominence to the male voice and not the female voice. The gender-biased comments made by Student Four in lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 certainly did not challenge the author's decision to suppress the female voice and presence in the story. However, as illustrated in lines 10 and 15, his comment did provoke strong opposition from Student Two. In response, Student Two remarked, in line 15, that some women are tough, which is a different characterization compared to the women depicted in the text. He offered his mother as a prime example of a tough woman and an explanation as to why he considered her as tough. He also stated that his mom would have a bigger role if he were the author (Line 33). Student Three offered a similar example and explanation of tough women (Line 34). It's likely that the fact that both boys are being raised by single mothers contributed to their belief that some women are tough and should have played a larger role in the story.

**Table 4.12 The author's portrayal of women**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | Instructor: Why don't you think the author had more females in the story that played a bigger part?  |
| 2  | Student Four: Maybe, because this is a manly story.  |
| 3  | Instructor: Okay. Well, who is the story written by?   |
| 4  | Student Four: A lady, but she might like men.  |
| 5  | Instructor: What do you think she thinks about men?  |
| 6  | Student Four: That men are strong and handsome.  |
| 7  | Instructor: Okay. So what do you think she thinks about women?                                       |
| 8  | Student Four: That they are puny and that they need body guards which are men.                       |
| 9  | Instructor: Okay.  |
| 10 | Student Two: Not all women.  |
| 11 | Student Five: I think she thought men were tougher and handsomer. So that's why she put in more men. |
| 12 | Instructor: (directing question to Student Two) Now you said something about females being strong.   |
| 13 | Student Four: Okay, some are puny and some are strong. Is that better?                               |
| 14 | Instructor: Student Two, talk a little bit about what you said.                                      |
| 15 | Student Two: He said all ladies need body guards and I said not all of them because some are tough.  |
| 16 | Instructor: Do you know any tough women?   |
| 17 | Student Two: Yeah.   |
| 18 | Instructor: Okay name one.   |
| 19 | Student Two: (pause)   |

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 20 | Student Five: He don't know one.  |
| 21 | Student Two: I got to think about it.   |
| 22 | Instructor: Okay.   |
| 23 | Student Three: Umm...   |
| 24 | Student Two: My mother...   |
| 25 | Instructor: Yeah, and why do you think your mom is tough?   |
| 26 | Student Three: Because she is scary...  |
| 27 | Student Two: I don't know...  |
| 28 | Instructor: I think my mom is tough, too.   |
| 29 | Student Three: (mumbles) I think my mom is tough.   |
| 30 | Instructor: I think my mom is tough because she raised four kids by herself in a tough neighborhood in Detroit and she made sure we did everything we were supposed to do. She also went to school while we were in school, so that she could afford a better life for us. That's why I think my mom is tough and I would want her to have a big part if she were in this story. So why do you think your mom is tough. |
| 31 | Student Two: I guess because she keeps us out of trouble and she stays on us about our work.  |
| 32 | Instructor: Okay. Would you have your mom in this story and would you have her play a bigger part in the story?   |
| 33 | Student Two: Yeah.  |
| 34 | Student Three: I think my mom is tough because she has to work every day. She has to go to work and then she has to go to school. She also has to come home and clean the house so she can't stay up too late. Then she raises us right. She makes sure we are not doing anything that we should not be doing.  |

As stated previously, the gender-biased opinions and beliefs offered by Student Four and affirmed by Student Five were consistent with statements offered in previous sessions, even in sessions where the disconnection strategy was the focus. These statements invariably supported the author's prerogative and provoked a strong response from either Student Two or Student Three. The responses offered by Students Two and Three regarding their mothers certainly disrupt the traditional roles assigned to females in this particular story and further demonstrates their capacity to leverage their lived experiences to challenge authorial power. However, in the

final analysis, the boys never directly questioned or transformed the author's message/intent, despite their development towards becoming critically literate.

**Summary of findings.** From the beginning, the boys expressed a limited view of reading. Their views of reading, at the time, placed great emphasis on decoding and minimal emphasis on comprehension. However, the boys did demonstrate the capacity to use basic comprehension strategies—making predictions and connections—to aid in their understanding of the text as well as to show the ability to connect to text through their lived experiences and offer logical explanations for the author's portrayals. But in the pre-session, the boys failed to consider and/or evaluate the author and his/her intent.

As a consequence of the critical literacy sessions, where the boys were introduced to and taught the disconnection and problem posing strategies, the boys demonstrated progress towards becoming critically literate. The data analysis revealed that the boys moved from noting differences, after first learning about the disconnection term and concept, to talking across their differences, articulating wonderings about the author's depiction, and using text-based explanations to support their wonderings. Furthermore, analysis showed that the boys learned to leverage their knowledge of the disconnections strategy to engage in more critical discussions, especially during the sessions where problem posing was emphasized.

Further analysis revealed that during the problem posing sessions, the boys moved from no acknowledgement of the author and his/her intent to not only recognizing the author but offering theories regarding the author's intent, along with questioning an author's ability to compose text with male protagonists. Additionally, data analysis showed that the boys were able to transition from offering stated opinions loosely based on their lived experiences and perceptions to formulating detailed descriptions based on specific experiences that differed



from the author's depictions.

Taken together, the aforementioned paragraphs reveal that the two critical literacy strategies helped to place the boys on a path towards becoming critically literate. The boys learned to consider the author and his/her intent as well as assume authorial power by reshaping texts and to wonder about an author's depiction and to question an author's capacity. Additionally, the boys seized the opportunity to compare their lived experiences to the authors' portrayals to demonstrate understanding of text beyond a literal sense. However, as discussed throughout this section, the boys did not achieve critical literacy despite their learning and use of disconnections and problem posing activities.

### **Leading towards critical literacy: The instructor**

At this point, it is important to focus on the instructor and the impact he had on the boys' development towards critical literacy. Data analysis revealed that the instructor assumed various roles within and across the instructional sessions including—Instructor as Leader, Instructor as Facilitator, and Instructor as Participant. To address the third research question of this study—How do the roles assumed by the teacher impact/affect African American boys' development towards critical discussions about and around texts?—I first define each role assumed by the instructor for the purposes of this study. Within the discussion of the various roles, I briefly describe what was done to gradually release responsibility from the teacher to the boys to aid in the process of becoming critically literate. I then describe how particular roles and transitions to other roles impacted the boys' development towards critical literacy. At the same time, I discuss instances where I struggled to assume the appropriate role and how my actions might have inhibited the boys' development towards critical literacy. Furthermore, I use quotes and tables to highlight specific instances where my actions seemed to push the boys' along the path towards

critical literacy as well as where I might have impeded their development. Taken together, the aforementioned discussion points describe the impact of the actions and roles assumed by the instructor on the boys' development towards critical literacy.

To conduct a thorough and objective analysis of the data, I attempted to view my instruction and actions from an outside perspective. Therefore, I refer to myself throughout as “the instructor” or “the teacher”.

**Leading towards critical literacy: Instructor roles.** At the outset, the goal of the instruction was to support the boys' development towards critical literacy. To support this aim, the gradual release strategy was incorporated to move the boys from being dependent on the teacher to becoming less dependent on the teacher over time. The different roles assumed by the instructor at varying points throughout the study were intended to work to support the boys' development in becoming critically literate. The analysis of the instructor's actions revealed several key roles—leader, facilitator, and participant—taken on by the instructor at various times throughout the study.

As defined by the professional literature, the instructor as leader dominates and controls the discussion and interactions, thus placing the students in a dependent role. Maloch (2002) asserted that the majority of literature discussions are led and controlled by teachers. This action on the teacher's part usually results in the students playing a less independent and responsible role (Camden, 1988), which might appear to be counterproductive to becoming critically literate. However, some studies suggest that explicit direction and instruction at the outset is important to help students learn productive discursive practices and strategies required to successfully participate in literature discussion groups and to become less dependent on the teacher (Clarke, 2007; Daniels, 2002; Day, 2002; Maloch, 2004). For the purpose of this study,

the instructor as leader gave directions, asked questions, evaluated the boys' responses, and controlled the discussion through verbal and non-verbal interactions.

Short et al. (1999) defined the instructor as facilitator as one who encourages student talk, utilizes strategies to promote positive group processes, and puts forth questions and comments to encourage students to share more of their thinking. She also states the need for teachers to request additional information, restate comments offered by students, use comments and questions to maintain productive conversations, and to challenge students' comments (Short et al., 1999). Additionally, Short et al. (1999) described how the instructor might use facilitator talk to encourage students to share their lived experiences and perceptions in connection to text. She defined this form of talk as "life talk." For the purpose of this study, the definition presented by Short and associates adequately describes the actions of the instructor as facilitator.

Short et al. (1999) defined the instructor as participant as one who interacts with students by sharing personal connections [or disconnections], opinions, and questions that stem from the text or their lived experiences. The instructor as participant role is thought to encourage students to share their thoughts, feelings, and connections at deeper levels, because the instructor shows that he/she is part of the group and is willing to be vulnerable (Short et al., 1999). At the times where the instructor assumed the role of participant, he modeled the use of strategies and procedures, shared personal experiences, and communicated his opinions and evaluations.

**Leading towards critical literacy: Key steps taken.** The instructor's role in leading the boys towards critical literacy can be described as complex and fluid. As previously stated, the instructor assumed the roles—leader, facilitator, and participant—at different times throughout

the study to influence the boys' development. There were times when taking on a particular role was pre-determined and other times when the actions of the students determined the transition to another role to better support their needs. The various roles worked in isolation and in concert to lead the boys towards critical literacy; however there were instances when it was difficult to assume the appropriate role and the instructor's actions might have inhibited the boys in their development. The examples provided are intended to be illustrative and not exhaustive.

At the very beginning of the pre-session, to help establish a foundation, the instructor assumed the teacher as leader role. He set behavioral expectations and standards. He explained the procedures for the session and future sessions. He even directed the boys to organize themselves according to his seating chart. He then selected two boys to distribute the instructional materials and briefly explained the purpose of each item. Furthermore, the instructor sat at the outside center of the semi-circle table facing the boys. This positioning communicated that he would control the session and that all questions and comments would come through him.

Since the purpose of the pre-session was to establish baseline data as to how the boys read, discussed text, and behaved, the instructor did not explicitly teach any reading or social interactional strategies. Although, he did begin to use verbal cues to elicit responses from the boys, he remained in the role of leader to guide their actions. He encouraged the boys to use reading strategies—making predictions and connections—with which the boys were familiar. The instructor asked the boys to make predictions and asked several open-ended questions to gauge how the boys might respond. He found that the boys were more willing to offer responses to open-ended questions as opposed to making predictions. Also, the instructor noticed that the boys often stated their opinions and beliefs or shared their lived experiences

when responding to an open-ended question. This helped him to understand that boys were capable of making meaningful connections to the text.

At times during the pre-session, the instructor attempted to assume the role of facilitator, but primarily served as leader. Such attempts to shift to the role of facilitator are highlighted in Table 4.3, where he posed a question to encourage the boys to evaluate the author's intent (Line 1). He also used the facilitative practice of restating comments for clarification as shown in lines 3 and 5 (Table 4.3). However, as illustrated in Tables 4.2 and 4.3, it is likely that the boys perceived him to be the leader, because the boys appeared to respond to his questions and not to questions or comments offered by another boy. Although the boys' responses failed not only to evaluate the author's intent, but also fell short of acknowledging the author, the instructor did not ask follow-up questions or provide additional prompts to encourage the boys to evaluate the author. Instead he moved to the role of leader and accepted and evaluated their answers and directed them to continue reading. Although, his intent was to learn what the boys were able to do in a literature discussion group, by not following up it is possible that he did not learn as much about the boys' capability. Overall, he did learn that his efforts as leader to establish expectations and productive protocols, along with attempts to serve as facilitator worked to discover what the boys were willing and capable of doing in such a setting. This information helped to determine the instructor's actions in subsequent sessions.

The instructor's actions in the first critical literacy session demonstrate how transitioning to different roles helped the boys learn a critical literacy strategy and its application. As shown in Table 4.13, line 1, the instructor began by assuming the teacher as leader role by giving directions, explaining the procedures for the session, and then introducing the concept of disconnections. Line 3 shows the steps taken to help the boys gain a general understanding of

the disconnection concept and to teach them the procedures for making disconnections and connections. He also explained the rules to ensure positive group processes.

**Table 4.13 First critical literacy session: Explaining disconnections**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | Instructor: Okay, the first thing we want to talk about is what we're going to do today. Okay, first, I just want to introduce you to our second book, <i>Do Like Kyla</i> , and then I'm going to explain what we will do. I'm going to do a little reading today with you guys but we're also going to stop and make connections where we can make connections and were also going to do something a little bit different that I don't think you've done before. We're going to make disconnections. Who can tell me what a disconnection is?  |
| 2  | Student Four: A disconnection is when you see someone making snow angels, but you don't make snow angels.  |
| 3  | Instructor: Okay. Good. A part of a story that you cannot relate to something that you don't do. Okay. I'm going to begin reading and then I will stop whenever I have a connection or disconnection to make. Then we will do it together. On your Post-it notes I am going to ask you to write your connection or disconnection. Then we will share and talk about our connections and/or disconnections. Okay. We have two rules that we need to pay attention to. First, we need to make sure we respect one another. Second, we need to take turns when we're speaking, because we don't want to interrupt someone while they're speaking. We want to make sure that we hear what everyone has to say. Okay. You guys understand that?                                 |
| 4  | Boys: Yes.   |
| 5  | Instructor: (Reading the text)   |
| 6  | Instructor: Okay. Student number one, you need to make sure you're on the first page.  |
| 7  | Student Four: Are we going to take turns reading or are we just going to read?   |
| 8  | Instructor: No, whoever likes to read can just begin reading the text.   |
| 9  | Instructor: (Reading the text)   |
| 10 | Instructor: I want to stop right here for a moment. I have a disconnection to make. When I get up in the morning I don't look at my big sister, because I don't have a big sister. And secondly, because my sister does not live with me anyway. So when I get up in the morning I don't copy my big sister or emulate my big sister nor do I go to the window to look out. Typically, what I do when I get up in the morning is grab my phone and check my emails and the sports scores to see who won the game last night. So that's what I do. (Student Three smiles in agreement.) So I'm going to take a yellow Post-it note and write down my disconnection and place it on the page. Now, do you guys connect with this scene or do you disconnect with this scene? |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 11 | Student Five: I have a disconnection. If I did have a sister, it would be creepy for her to be in my room looking out of my window.  |
| 12 | Instructor: Okay. So, one, you don't have a sister and two, if you did she wouldn't be in your room. Right? Okay.  |
| 13 | Student Four: I have a disconnection. Well, I don't have a big sister and when I get up I usually get dressed and I use my brother's phone and sometimes I call my friends or just make a bowl of cereal and watch TV. |
| 14 | Instructor: Okay. Good. Anyone else? Connections or disconnections here? Go ahead, speak up.   |
| 15 | Student Three: I don't live with my sister.  |
| 16 | Instructor: Okay. You don't live with your sister. So there's no way you can do this even if you wanted to. Okay. Anyone else? Connection or disconnection?  |
| 17 | Student Two: I wouldn't just wake up looking out the window tapping on the glass looking at the birds. I do have an older sister but I would not let her in to look at the birds. I just get up and brush my teeth.    |
| 18 | Instructor: So that's what you do when you get up in the morning?  |
| 19 | Student Two: (Nods head yes)   |
| 20 | Instructor: Okay.  |
| 21 | Student One: I do have a big sister, but she doesn't live with me. I would get up wash my face and brush my teeth.   |
| 22 | Instructor: Good. Okay, let's take one minute to write down either our connection or disconnection.  |

Based on the boys' response to the instructor's previous actions, he transitioned to the role of participant, as noted in line 10, to help the boys gain a clearer understanding of the disconnection strategy and how to apply the strategy for the purposes of this study. It was his intent to share a personal example to encourage the boys to connect and disconnect with the text at deeper and more profound levels. However, it is possible that the boys might have seen him as leader, because he was modeling which is considered by some as a traditional

instructional practice within the leader role.

As indicated in lines 12, 14, 16, and 22, the instructor transitioned back to the teacher as leader role—evaluating the boys’ responses and controlling the discussion—to further support the boys’ understanding of the disconnection strategy and procedures. He believed his role as leader and as participant worked in concert to support the boys’ understanding and application of the disconnection strategy.

The instructor’s use of facilitative practices during a particular sequence in the second critical literacy session contributed to a significant shift in the boys’ development towards critical literacy. After asking the boys to think about why the author wrote the story in an attempt to encourage them to challenge the author’s message, he observed their struggles to do so. Therefore he posed a prompt and a different type of question to encourage the boys to share their lived experiences or perceptions in connection to the text (Table 4.10, Line 1). Also, as shown in Table 4.10, the instructor restated comments offered by the boys, and continued to pose prompts and follow-up questions (Lines 3, 7, 9, and 13) additionally, there was only a single instance where he evaluated a comment offered by one of the boys (Line 13). However, it is possible that the boys perceived him to be the leader, despite the facilitative practices used in this particular sequence. Throughout the sequence, highlighted in the table, the instructor posed all the questions and prompts. It appears that in many instances the boys were responding to him as evidenced by the lack of student turns present. These examples illustrate the challenge of transitioning from a teacher-centered discussion model to a model where the students have more independence to shape and control the discussion.

Additionally, as illustrated in Table 4.10, the instructor’s shift to questions and prompts that encouraged the boys to incorporate their lived experiences into the discussion led to



comments about gender stereotypes and the author's capabilities. More specifically, the boys through their opinions relegated the author, Angela Johnson, to a subordinate status by claiming that she was not capable of writing a similar story with males as the key characters. At this point, the instructor believed that the boys were capable of moving beyond recognition of the author's message, if he continued to use similar facilitative practices in subsequent sessions.

Another key example that illustrates the instructor's influence on the boys' development towards critical literacy was found in the fourth critical literacy session. In this fourth session, the instructor assumed the role of leader, facilitator, and participant to help the boys reshape parts of the story. At the beginning, he assumed the role of leader to express the procedures for the session and to teach a new discussion strategy—sharing air time—to empower the boys to share their thoughts, feelings, and questions, since he had intended not to dominate the discussion. From his seat at the outside center of the semi-circle table, he directed the boys to flip through the book, *When Lightning Comes in a Jar*, to remind themselves of what the story was about. He then asked the boys to share their thoughts. Afterwards, as shown in Table 4.14, he led the boys in a review of their disconnections from the previous session and a discussion about disconnections in general.

**Table 4.14 Fourth critical literacy session: Leading discussion on disconnections**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Instructor: Okay. Good job. I could tell that you guys got a real good understanding of what the story is about. Excellent job. Your comprehension is pretty good. Now last time we were talking about this connections and connections and one of you guys said something that was really thoughtful. The comment was I like connections and disconnections because we get to compare the story to our real-life. Do you guys remember that? And so I just want to ask you to think about that comment. What do you think of that? |
| 2  | Student Four: I think that it helps to show people what you think about the books. Like one person can say that the book was good and another person can say that the book wasn't that good. And then the people with power decide what other people think about books.   |
| 3  | Instructor: And let me ask you this. Do you disagree with the comment that connections and disconnections allow you to compare your real-life to the story?   |
| 4  | Student Four: I agree.  |
| 5  | Student Two: I agree.   |
| 6  | Student Three: I agree.   |
| 7  | Instructor: Anyone else? So what do you guys think of that? Being able to compare your real-life to the story. What are your thoughts on that?  |
| 8  | Student Five: My thoughts are I agree because some of this stuff happens in real life like catching fireflies in a jar. And that people live on farms and they play games and stuff like that.  |
| 9  | Instructor: Okay. What about disconnections? Because you just pointed out a connection between your real-life and the story, but what about when there is a disconnect? How do you feel about disconnections? Is it a good way to compare your life to the story? Student Three.  |
| 10 | Student Three: Probably good, because if you have a disconnection you can say that you don't do that.   |

Analysis of the sequence, highlighted in Table 4.14, revealed that the instructor started by evaluating the boys' comprehension of the story and their comments about connections and disconnections offered in a prior session. He then moved to solicit their thoughts about making connections and disconnections (Line 1). As shown in line 2, one of the boys shared a response that included a phrase, "—then the people with power get to decide", that the instructor failed

to explore. This was a missed opportunity to move to the role of facilitator to encourage the student to expand on his comments. Instead, the instructor maintained the role of leader by controlling the discussion with questions and prompts designed to solicit the boys' thoughts about a single strategy. Although, he did learn that the boys understood that making connections and disconnections could lead to thoughts of their lived experiences, this sequence serves as an example of what might happen when an instructor has limited practice in leading literature discussions designed to foster student independence and critical literacy.

Later in the session, the instructor transitioned to the role of facilitator to ask the boys to describe how the story might go if their family were inserted into the story. This question encouraged the boys to use what Short et al. (1999) called "life talk", talk that encourages students to share their real life experiences, issues, and perceptions. He also restated the question, as indicated in lines 5 and 7, to encourage all the boys to respond. As displayed in Table 4.15, the boys leveraged their lived experiences to generate descriptive responses that departed from the author's portrayal (Lines 2-4; 9). It is also worth noting that he refrained from using evaluative statements in response to boys' answers.

**Table 4.15 Fourth critical literacy session: Problem posing**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Instructor: So, if this were your family how would the story go?  |
| 2  | Student Three: Well, we would probably have food like chicken and other stuff. We would play basketball instead of baseball.  |
| 3  | Student Four: The kids would probably be goofing off running around riding bikes play basketball or running into stuff.   |
| 4  | Student Five: They probably would be goofing around. They would probably go over to their friends' house. Because you know how kids are sometimes. They act wild.   |
| 5  | Instructor: Okay. So that's how the story would go this were your family? What about you, Student One? What if this were your family?   |
| 6  | Student One: We would goof off too.   |
| 7  | Instructor: okay. Anything else? If this were your family how would the story go? Student Four.   |
| 8  | Student Four: We would wait for more family members to come and go on the house to play Xbox for little while.  |
| 9  | Student Three: If I had wrote the story, I would have a different setting, more people, the grown-ups would be cooking, the kids would be outside playing, and when the food was all done we would set up tables outside and have dinner. And we would all sit at the tables and eat. |
| 10 | Instructor: Let me ask you guys this. I've been to a few family reunions and I've seen people play other games such as cards, Gin Rummy...  |
| 11 | Student Four: (interrupting the teacher) Oh yeah, we will play Blackjack, Solitaire.  |
| 12 | Student Five: We would play go fish games.  |
| 13 | Student Three: We would play Monopoly.  |
| 14 | Instructor: Okay. Any other games? At my reunion, we used to play dominoes.   |
| 15 | Student Two: The game of Life. Candyland.   |
| 16 | Student Three: And we would have music playing so people can dance around.  |

As shown in lines 10 and 14, the instructor transitioned to the role of participant by

sharing personal experiences at his family reunions that departed from the author's portrayal. This move also encouraged the boys to engage in life talk by sharing specific types of activities that take place at their family gatherings. It seemed that Student Four was excited to share his personal experience and felt comfortable enough to interrupt the instructor as he chimed in to share his personal experience (Line 11). It is possible that he viewed the instructor as one of the boys when the instructor participated. It appears that the instructor did a better job assuming the role of facilitator and participant in this sequence as opposed to preceding sequences and sessions. Additionally, as evidenced by the increased frequency of student turns, and the authenticity of their responses, it is possible that they viewed the instructor as facilitator and participant.

Although the instructor's many attempts to encourage the boys to challenge the author's message did not succeed, the actions taken by the instructor did seem to empower the boys to share their thoughts (line 14) and to encourage the boys to incorporate their lived experiences and perceptions into the story to reshape parts of it. At this time, it seemed clear that the boys were more inclined to reshape the text if they were asked to impose their reality onto parts of the story. However, it was not clear what could be done to push the boys to directly challenge the author's message.

Another example that illustrates the struggles of the instructor to release responsibility to the boys was found in the fifth critical literacy session. He began the session by giving an explanation of the procedures for the session. He then reminded the boys of the importance of turn taking, especially since he planned to not talk as much, but to allow Student Three to facilitate the discussion. As shown in line 1 of Table 4.6, the instructor stated that Student Three would take the lead and call on others to share. However, as indicated in lines 4, 7, 9,

and 11, he maintained facilitative responsibilities. It is possible that his actions confused Student Three, because he never attempted to ask a question, pose a prompt, or call on another boy throughout the entire sequence. Despite the instructor's best intentions, he failed to release facilitative responsibilities to the boys. In this particular sequence, it is possible that his actions worked against moving towards a student-led discussion model.

However, after realizing the failure to relinquish facilitative responsibilities, the instructor did a much better job of working in the role of facilitator. Beginning at line 11 with his question, he started to step back and allowed the boys to make comments, respond to each other, and even challenge one another's comments. In fact, a review of Table 4.6 revealed that the instructor offered six questions or comments from line 9 to line 37. The other 22 lines represent questions and comments offered by the boys. As facilitator, the instructor believed that stepping back at that particular time in the session helped to encourage the boys to engage in a robust discussion that led to wondering about the author's depictions. Again, despite his failure to relinquish facilitative responsibilities, it appeared that his actions as facilitator were much improved compared to previous sessions.

To start the final session, the instructor relinquished control of the discussion to Student Five, who assumed the role of leader. He did his best imitation of the instructor throughout the sequence. In fact, at one point, he even used hand gestures similar to the gestures used by the instructor at various times throughout the study (Table 4.16, Line 32). It is possible that he viewed the instructor as a role model and that he wanted to do good job as group leader. Moreover, it is likely that he perceived the instructor to be the leader of the discussion group throughout the study. The boys responded to Student Five in the same manner as they responded to the instructor when he assumed the role of leader across the sessions. This also

indicated that he took on the role of leader.

As indicated in Table 4.16, the instructor interjected on four occasions, three times to give direction (Lines 3, 5, & 28) and once when he was called on to share why he thought the author wrote the story this way (Line 42). As illustrated in the table, it was evident by the frequency of student-to-student interactions that the boys did not view the instructor as leader or facilitator at that moment. However, as highlighted in this sequence, the boys were not engaged in a critical discussion.

**Table 4.16 Student as Leader**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | Student Five: Today, I am going to ask the questions. Okay. Who has a question about the book, like if this ever happened to you before? Like have you ever found a cat like on your porch or something like that. Or, if you found a cat that had no home. And you brought it into your house and gave it milk and helped it. |
| 2 | Boys give quizzical looks.   |
| 3 | Instructor: Okay. I think you need to ask a question.  |
| 4 | Student Two: You are telling us about the story...   |
| 5 | Instructor: You can't tell us about the story. You have to ask a question. The question might be "Who remembers what the story is about?"  |
| 6 | Student Five: Who remembers what the story is about? (Pause because each hand is raised.)<br>Student One.  |
| 7 | Student One: First they were watching TV and then the doorbell rang and then Henry...I mean Mudge...sniffed the cat out so the dad opened the door and saw this cat. It was real shabby and then he took it in. They got to know him (the cat) and then the owner came at the end.   |
| 8 | Student Five: Good job! Anybody else? Student Three.   |
| 9 | Student Three: Umm! This boy, the dad, the dog, and the cat. It was a knock on the door...no wait...the doorbell rang and the cat was at the door. They kept the cat for a little bit and then the dog started to like the cat. Its fur looked like mashed prunes. So the boy and the dog kept on playing with the cat.        |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 10 | Student Five: Good. Student Four.  |
| 11 | Student Four: First, Henry, Mudge and his dad was watching TV and they heard the doorbell ring. Mudge ran to the door and Henry's dad opened it and they saw the cat. It looked shaggy and his fur color was like mashed prunes. They let it in and it taught Mudge manners. And at the end, the cat found its owner. Its owner was a cop. Then a couple of days later the cop sends out a box that had dog treats for Mudge and a badge (imitation police badge) for Henry. |
| 12 | Student Five: Good job! Student Two, do you want to tell something about the story?  |
| 13 | Student Two: (Shakes his head no and looks down towards the table.)  |
| 14 | Student Five: Okay. Moving on. Umm... (pause) Okay. I have a question...say yes or no...why do you...what were some of your disconnections? (Seemed confused about what to ask.) Student Three.  |
| 15 | Student Three: I don't have cats come to my steps.   |
| 16 | Student Five: Student Four.  |
| 17 | Student Four: One was my dog's fur never stood up.   |
| 18 | Student Five: (pointing at Student Two) Do you have one?   |
| 19 | Student Two: I would close the door if I seen a cat, because I don't like cats.  |
| 20 | Student Five: Student One, do you have a disconnection?  |
| 21 | Student One: I don't have a dog.   |
| 22 | Student Five: Okay. Okay. How did you feel about this story? (Pause because each hand is raised.) Student Four.  |
| 23 | Student Four: I feel that it's a good story and kinda funny because the cat looked like mashed prunes.   |
| 24 | Student Five: Do you have one, Student Three?  |
| 25 | Student Three: It was like good and funny to me that the dog thought the cat was his mom.  |



|    |  |
|----|--|
| 26 | Student Five: Student One, how did you feel about this story?  |
| 27 | Student One: Umm...good, because we could make disconnections...   |
| 28 | Instructor: You need to speak up.  |
| 29 | Student One: And (speaking louder) it was funny it wasn't boring. That's it.   |
| 30 | Student Five: Thank you...Student Two, do you have something? How did you feel about this story?   |
| 31 | Student Two: No.   |
| 32 | Student Five: (using hand gestures) You didn't have anything about how you felt about it. Like, did you like this story, did you hate this story? What did you feel about it?  |
| 33 | Student Two: I liked it.   |
| 34 | Student Five: Okay, moving on. Why do you think the author wrote this story? Student Four.   |
| 35 | Student Four: Probably for fun.  |
| 36 | Student Five: Okay. Student One.   |
| 37 | Student One: Because, like maybe he had a dog or his son had a dog.  |
| 38 | Student Five: Okay. Student Two.   |
| 39 | Student Two: They probably wrote the story for kids or it probably happened to them.   |
| 40 | Student Five: Okay. Student Three.   |
| 41 | Student Three: Umm, she could have been telling us how some dogs and cats get along together.  |
| 42 | Student Five: Okay. Next the question will be for you, Mr. Simmons. Why do you think the author wrote the story this way?  |
| 43 | Instructor: Well, I feel that the author wrote the story this way to send a message that this is how a family with a dog treats other animals in a small town and this is how, umm, people or how dogs and cats should behave towards one another in the author's mind and then also I thought that it was interesting that the author had the police officer be the owner of the cat, |

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | which in my mind is a little different so that's why I think the author wrote the story this way. To show that this is how cats and dogs should behave with one another and this is how families should act towards one another and I guess that there is nothing wrong with a police officer owning a cat even though I find that very strange. |
|--|--|

Since the boys did not engage in a critical discussion, towards the end of the final session, the instructor assumed the role of facilitator to push the boys' thinking on the author's portrayal of women, and then assumed the role of participant to encourage one of the boys to share personal information about his mother. As shown in line 1 of the Table 4.12, he began by asking the boys to share their thoughts about why the author did not have female characters play more prominent roles. Two boys shared their reasons why they thought the author did not choose to feature female characters (Lines 2, 8, and 11). He then turned to Student Two to explore his comment (line 10) that seemed to challenge the previous comments. From line 12 to line 29, he used questions and comments to further explore his comment about "some women being tough." At one point (line 30), the instructor entered the discussion as a participant to share his personal thoughts about "tough women," more specifically, he talked about the toughest woman he knew—his mother. As shown in lines 31 and 34, Students Two and Three responded by sharing why they considered their mothers to be tough. Overall, it is possible that the actions of the instructor—posing questions, prompts, and sharing personal information—throughout this sequence helped to encourage Student Two and Student Three to leverage their lived experiences and perceptions to present opinions that were in stark contrast to the author's depictions.

And yet, these attempts to transition from teacher-led discussion model to more student-led model, and to ultimately lead the boys to achieve critical literacy, were not completely successful. As discussed throughout this section, it is not easy for someone who does not work

with students on a daily basis to lead a literature discussion and then transition the group from dependence to independence in an attempt to lead students towards critical literacy. In fact, the literature suggests that everyday practitioners and researchers are challenged to accomplish similar tasks (Clarke 2007; Maloch, 2002). But, as discussed throughout this section, the instructor's efforts were not in vain. The boys demonstrated significant progress towards becoming critically literate in response to his actions.

The instructor transitioned between three roles and gradually released responsibility to help the boys' transition from a teacher-led discussion model to a student-led model to aide in the process of becoming critically literate. Tables 4.17 and 4.18 highlight these roles enacted by the instructor across the sessions.

As shown in Table 4.17, and discussed in previous paragraphs, the instructor exhibited more teacher as leader behaviors in the early sessions (pre-session and first three critical literacy sessions) as compared to the final three critical literacy sessions. This is understandable, since explicit instruction was needed to teach positive group processes and critical literacy strategies. Although, the instructor did begin to incorporate facilitative practices in the early sessions, as indicated in Table 4.18, the struggle to move from the role of leader to facilitator is confirmed by the patterns displayed in Tables 4.17 and Table 4.18.

*Table 4.17 Role as Leader*

| Category  | Pre-session | Critical Literacy Session 1 | Critical Literacy Session 2 | Critical Literacy Session 3 | Critical Literacy Session 4 | Critical Literacy Session 5 | Critical Literacy Session 6 | TOTAL |
|---|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Teacher evaluates student response                    | 2           | 5                           | 8                           | 7                           | 4                           | 2                           | 1                           | 29    |
| Teacher giving directions                             | 8           | 15                          | 5                           | 5                           | 2                           | 5                           | 9                           | 49    |
| Teacher teaching/reinforcing positive group processes | 0           | 4                           | 0                           | 2                           | 1                           | 2                           | 0                           | 9     |
| Teacher teaching/reinforcing use of strategy          | 2           | 2                           | 1                           | 1                           | 0                           | 2                           | 2                           | 10    |
| TOTALS:   | 12          | 26                          | 14                          | 15                          | 7                           | 11                          | 12                          | 97    |

It appears that the instances of the teacher giving directions did not decrease over time, but instead remained fairly consistent across critical literacy sessions 2-5 and increased

noticeably in critical literacy session 6. It would be expected that fewer directions would be needed in the final two sessions, especially considering that the instructor set out to gradually release responsibility to the boys. The values representing the Teacher Giving Directions code in sessions 5 and 6 deserve explanation. The value found in session five is accurate and it is a result of the instructor's failure to relinquish facilitative responsibilities to one of the boys. This failure is noted in the aforementioned discussion of the instructor's actions in the fifth critical literacy session. However, the value representing the Teacher Giving Directions category in session six is not a result of the instructor failing to remember to relinquish control, but because there was no indication that the boys were ready to assume such responsibility at the time.

The pattern found in the Teacher Giving Directions category should not overshadow the trends found in the other teacher as leader categories. Analysis of the Teacher Evaluates Student Response category shows a significant decrease across the sessions. This trend highlights the instructor's attempt to become more facilitative. Also, analysis of the Teacher Teaching/Reinforcing Positive Group Processes and Teacher Teaching/Reinforcing Use of Strategy categories shows a decrease and a fairly low and even distribution of instances across the sessions. This trend highlights the fact that the boys required minimal guidance with respect to their behavior and few reminders of how to use the critical literacy strategies. Overall, the patterns for each code reflect the instructor's efforts to move out of the teacher as leader role to a more facilitative role.

**Table 4.18 Role of Facilitator**

| Category   | Pre-session | Critical Literacy Session 1 | Critical Literacy Session 2 | Critical Literacy Session 3 | Critical Literacy Session 4 | Critical Literacy Session 5 | Critical Literacy Session 6 | Total      |
|--|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| Teacher asking question asks for evaluation                              | 3           | 6                           | 8                           | 0                           | 8                           | 1                           | 0                           | 26         |
| Teacher asking question for additional information                       | 4           | 0                           | 3                           | 8                           | 5                           | 4                           | 8                           | 32         |
| Teacher asking question for clarification                                | 5           | 10                          | 24                          | 5                           | 4                           | 0                           | 5                           | 53         |
| Teacher asking question invites response                                 | 4           | 18                          | 24                          | 8                           | 15                          | 4                           | 14                          | 87         |
| Teacher asking question invites response to transform story              | 0           | 0                           | 7                           | 1                           | 3                           | 1                           | 4                           | 16         |
| Teacher asks question to encourage students to challenge authorial power | 0           | 0                           | 9                           | 0                           | 2                           | 1                           | 9                           | 21         |
| <b>TOTALS:</b>   | <b>16</b>   | <b>34</b>                   | <b>75</b>                   | <b>22</b>                   | <b>37</b>                   | <b>11</b>                   | <b>40</b>                   | <b>235</b> |

As shown in Table 4.18, the instructor engaged in more facilitative practices as compared to teacher as leader behaviors (Table. 4.17). The most prevalent forms of facilitative practice were Teacher Asking Question for Clarification and Teacher Asking Question Invites Response. These two forms of facilitative practice highlight the instructor's efforts to

crystallize student understanding and to encourage student discussion on specific topics. However, it should be noted that many of the instances when the instructor asked a question to invite a response occurred in the first and second critical literacy session where the predominate role assumed by the instructor was that of leader.

The categories Teacher Asking for Evaluation, Teacher Asking Question Invites Response to Transform Story, and Teacher Asks Question to Encourage Students to Challenge Authorial Power each represent times when the instructor posed questions to facilitate the boys' development towards critical literacy. As discussed in the "Problem Posing: A qualitative view" subsection, these questions helped the boys make progress towards critical literacy. Again, it should be noted that there were times when these types of questions were posed when the instructor struggled with the transition from the role of leader to fully assume the role of facilitator. However, the instructor demonstrated marked improvement in maintaining the role of facilitator in the final two critical literacy sessions as shown by the data in Tables 4.17 and 4.18.

**Summary of findings.** Throughout this section, I focused the discussion on three interrelated actions performed by the instructor—the roles assumed by the instructor, the development of the instructor across the sessions, and the impact of the instructor's actions on the boys' development towards critical literacy. Several examples were shared to describe how the instructor assumed particular roles at varying times to help lead the boys towards critical literacy. In many instances the actions of the students determined the role taken on by the instructor and in other instances the role of the instructor was pre-planned. More importantly, data analysis showed that all three roles—leader, facilitator, and participant—contributed to the boys' development towards critical literacy. However, it was also found that there were times

when the instructor failed to assume or transition to the appropriate role. It is possible that this failure might have contributed to the boys not achieving critical literacy.

### **Conclusion: Major Findings**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of critical literacy activities within a social learning context on elementary-aged African American boys' development towards critical literacy. Additionally, the study sought to explore the impact of the instructor on the boys' development towards critical literacy. A thorough analysis of the data have revealed two major, interrelated findings. The first major finding was that the boys did not fully achieve critical literacy, but they did leverage critical literacy strategies within a literature discussion group to make progress towards critical literacy. The progress made by the boys was evidenced by their talk within and across the sessions.

The second major finding was that the roles assumed and actions taken by the instructor contributed to the boys' progress towards critical literacy, but also may have contributed to the boys not fully achieving critical literacy. The instructor assumed particular roles in isolation and in concert to gradually release responsibility to the boys to support their development towards critical literacy. In many instances this strategy proved effective. However, in some instances, the instructor struggled to assume or maintain the appropriate role at pertinent times throughout the study. As stated previously, these two major findings are interrelated. Throughout the study, the actions of the instructor influenced the boys' actions and the actions of the boys determined the instructor actions. These two findings are discussed in chapter five along with the implications.



## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of critical literacy activities within a social learning context on elementary-aged African American boys' development towards critical literacy. Additionally, the study explored the impact of the instructor on the boys' development towards critical literacy.

As discussed in chapter four, the boys demonstrated progress towards critical literacy in response to the application of critical literacy strategies and the actions of the instructor. Also, while the actions of the instructor supported the boys' growth, those actions also may have contributed to the boys not fully achieving critical literacy. Moreover, data analysis revealed that the two major findings are interrelated. In short, the actions of the instructor influenced the boys' actions and the actions of the boys affected the instructor's actions. The following is a discussion of the two major findings of this study presented through the themes—*the boys' development towards critical literacy and leading towards critical literacy*.

### **The Boys' Development Towards Critical Literacy**

The first major finding in this study was that the boys did not achieve critical literacy, but instead leveraged critical literacy strategies within a literature discussion group to make progress towards critical literacy. For the purpose of this study, critical literacy is defined as reading from a critical perspective and taking action to transform the author's message to reflect alternative social and cultural realities (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b; Jones, 2006). Leland and Harste (2000) found that reading from a critical perspective might lead the reader to examine his/her lived experiences as a consequence of challenging the values and assumptions embedded in texts. The boys in this study would often share their lived experiences, but they never examined their lived experiences, nor did they critique the social and cultural practices portrayed in the

texts. Additionally, the boys never explicitly contested the author's prerogative. In fact, when presented with opportunities to challenge the author's prerogative, the boys elected to support it. However, despite falling short of achieving critical literacy, the boys did demonstrate progress towards critical literacy as seen in the impact of the two critical literacy strategies—*disconnections and problem posing*—on their progress towards critical literacy.

The application of the disconnections strategy contributed to the boys' progress towards critical literacy in two powerful ways. First, the boys learned to note and articulate differences between their reality and the author's portrayals. Like my study, Jones (2006) found that initially students have a difficult time talking across difference when it comes to discussing text. However, after a formal introduction of the term "disconnection" and its application, the boys shared their lived experiences and perceptions in comparison to the author's portrayals throughout various times in the study. Additionally, there were a few occasions where their talk across differences led to spontaneous and vigorous discussion about gender stereotypes. This is consistent with Jones' (2006) statement that disconnections may lead to "insightful and provocative conversations around assumptions and stereotypes based on gender..." (p. 13).

Second, as the study progressed, the boys moved from using disconnections to note and articulate differences to using disconnections to enter into more critical discussions. More specifically, the boys departed from talking about their disconnections to wondering about the author's depictions of various characters and the relationships between particular characters in the text. Similar to my study, Jones (2006) found that disconnections can allow entry to critical discussions around printed texts, images, and social practices. Just like the fifth-grade girls in Jones' (2006) study, it was interesting to observe the boys in my study leverage making disconnections as a springboard to other forms of talk and thinking about texts. Clearly, the

disconnection strategy helped the boys engage in more critical discussions and aided their ability to use problem posing to push their development towards critical literacy.

The application of problem posing activities contributed to the boys' progress towards critical literacy across the sessions as evidenced by their talk. First, the boys made significant progress in their ability to respond to problem posing queries across the sessions. The boys transitioned from no recognition of the author to acknowledgement of the author and her intent. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) theorized that problem posing queries might lead readers to recognize the author's message. This pattern continued throughout the study.

Additionally, in response to problem posing queries, the boys in my study expressed their opinions and beliefs to re-shape portions of the text to fit particular gender stereotypes. The boys talked about how the story might be different if the main characters were boys as opposed to female. In fact, at one point, they interjected themselves into the story to talk about how the story would be different. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) referred to this activity as gender switching. They theorized that gender switching would lead the reader to contemplate how the author's message might change if the gender of the character(s) were changed (p. 47). The boys in my study did not change the author's message as they switched the main characters' gender, but they did discuss how boys and girls engage in different behaviors and enjoy different activities.

Also, analysis of the boys' talk in critical literacy sessions where problem posing was emphasized revealed that the boys shared lived experiences and perceptions that show contrasts between their reality and the author's portrayals. At times throughout the study, the boys talked about experiences at family gatherings that differed from the experiences of the characters depicted in the text. The experiences that differed from the text were largely cultural and social.

They talked about making changes to the story to incorporate the type of food enjoyed at their family gatherings, the genre of music that was listened to at their gatherings, and the kind of games that were played at their family gatherings. This was similar to the findings of Blair and Sanford (2004), who concluded that boys prefer to reshape texts to fit their ideas of text. However, while the researchers worked with fifth and sixth-grade students and teachers to explore how boys reshape school-based reading tasks to meet their needs and interests, in my study, we see how the fourth and fifth-grade boys leveraged their lived experiences to think about how they would change the story to suit their needs and interests.

At the final session, in a final attempt to powerfully engage the boys in reading through problem posing, the boys talked about why they thought the author chose to assign less prominent roles to the female characters in the story. This led to disagreement among the boys about the author's depiction of female characters in the story. For instance, Student Two and Student Three not only expressed their dissatisfaction about the role assigned to women in the story, they also talked about their mothers being tough and the reasons as to why they hold such beliefs. Student Two went as far as to state that he would have wanted his mother to play a bigger role in the story. It is possible that Student Two and Student Three have this perception of women being tough and deserving of prominence because they are raised by single mothers who work multiple jobs and attend school part-time to support their families. The boys certainly demonstrated their willingness to engage in reading as well as the ability to use their perceptions to support the author's prerogative and to disagree with the author and their peers. Like my study, Heffernan and Lewison (2000) sought to powerfully engage students in reading through critical literacy. They worked together to help third-grade suburban students become critically literate. Unlike my study, Heffernan and Lewison's (2000) students accomplished this feat over a

two-year period and used social issues texts that highlighted problems experienced by certain populations within our society. Perhaps the boys would have achieved similar outcomes had this study extended across a two-year time period and included an instructor with more experience and support from a university researcher.

### **Leading Towards Critical Literacy**

The second major finding in this study was that the roles assumed and the actions taken by the instructor contributed to the boys' progress towards critical literacy, but also may have contributed to the boys not fully achieving critical literacy. To support the boys' development towards critical literacy, the instructor used the gradual release strategy and at the same time assumed various roles—leader, facilitator, and participant—during each session and throughout the study. However, there were times when the instructor struggled to assume or maintain the appropriate role at critical times. It is possible that the instructor's struggles might have inhibited the boys' development towards critical literacy.

One way the instructor sought to support the boys' development towards critical literacy was to gradually release responsibility of leading the discussion group to the boys. The instructor assumed control and engaged in direct instruction in the initial sessions—the pre-session and the first two critical literacy sessions—to teach productive discursive practices and critical literacy strategies. As the boys demonstrated progress, the instructor moved to assume less dominant roles to encourage the boys to have robust discussion about and around texts with fewer interjections from the instructor. There were times throughout the study where the instructor failed to relinquish control of the discussion, although he announced that he had intended to do so. Additionally, in the final session, the instructor stepped back to allow one of the boys to lead the discussion during the first half of the session, but he resumed responsibility for leading the

discussion for the remainder of the session. Similarly, Almasi, O’Flahaven, and Arya (2001) found that the implementation and sustainability of peer-led discussions required a “lengthy nurturing period” (p. 99). Specifically, Almasi et al., as they examined the development of the teachers in their study and found that one teacher, Ms. Johnson, struggled to relinquish facilitative duties. She experienced difficulty from the start of the study to the end of project with teaching students to manage topics and group processes independently. However, in my study, it is possible that the instructor with more time and practice would have learned to help the boys lead and manage their own discussion of texts.

Throughout the study, the instructor assumed the role of leader, facilitator, and participant in isolation and in concert to support the boys’ development towards critical literacy. The instructor purposely took on the role of leader at the beginning of the study to ensure that the boys learned how to conduct themselves and learned the disconnection strategy and how to apply it. The boys demonstrated that they understood the positive discursive practices that the instructor taught, but also demonstrated that they understood the disconnection concept and how to apply it across the sessions—not unlike Daniels’ (2002) study where he found that the use of direct instruction methods to teach students reading strategies and how to participate in literature circles resulted in positive student outcomes. Although Daniels’ (2002) findings were the result of a 3-year reform initiative involving multiple schools within the Chicago Public Schools, the impact of the teacher as leader was similar. In the same way, Day et al. (2002) suggested that teachers explicitly direct and guide student behaviors to support their development as independent discussants of text. However, as recommended by Maloch (2002) it is important to transition away from the teacher as leader role as the dominant role towards the role of facilitator when scaffolding student talk in literature discussion groups.

Leading the boys towards critical literacy required the instructor to assume the role of facilitator. As previously stated, the instructor assumed the role of leader at the outset of the study, but incorporated facilitative practices such as asking open-ended questions to eventually move to the role of facilitator and away from traditional teacher-student interactions, similar to the instructional shift that Rogers (2002) made as she struggled to lead the students in her study towards critical literacy. In my study, the shift from teacher as leader to teacher as facilitator led to more robust discussions with fewer interruptions from the instructor and also helped to encourage the boys to discuss gender stereotypes as well as share real-life experiences that differed from the author's depictions. However, there were critical times throughout the study where the instructor failed to transition from the role of leader to facilitator. For example, at the beginning of the fifth critical literacy session, the instructor failed to relinquish facilitative duties to Student Three despite informing the boys that he would do so, unlike what was observed in Maloch's (2002) study, where the classroom teacher made clear directives to inform the students that they were in charge of leading their own literature discussion groups. The instructor in my study did not follow through on his expectations, nor did he explicitly define the role that the students were to take. This inaction on the instructor's part probably inhibited the boys' ability to become independent discussants of text. Maloch (2002) does suggest that scaffolding students' talk and behaviors to help them become less dependent on the teacher is complex and not easily achieved without adequate preparation, intentionality, and time.

Additionally, leading the boys towards critical literacy also required the instructor to assume the role of participant at various times throughout the study. The instructor assumed the role of facilitator most often, but occasionally he would assume the role of participant. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) theorized that instructors of critical literacy must prepare to

assume and vacillate between two roles—facilitator and participant. In my study, whenever the instructor assumed the role of participant, he did so from the role of facilitator. On the two occasions when the instructor entered the discussion as a participant, he shared personal experiences and information to encourage the boys to talk about their lived experiences and family members at a deeper, more profound level. Plus, evidence from the transcriptions suggest that the boys viewed the instructor as one of the boys each time the instructor assumed role of participant. Short et al. (1999) asserted that teachers should encourage students to move beyond discussion generated through facilitative talk (p. 13). Likewise, Hall and Piazza (2008) suggested that instructors assume a more participatory role by contributing personal examples or anecdotes to the discussion. Like my study, Short et al. (1999) found that teachers primarily used facilitative talk as opposed to participant talk at the end of the first year of their study. It is possible that the instructor in my study would have moved from the role of facilitator to participant more frequently had the study extended beyond seven instructional sessions.

The roles assumed and the actions taken by the instructor contributed to the boys' progress towards critical literacy, but also may have contributed to the boys not becoming critically literate. The gradual release strategy employed by the instructor is widely known and discussed as a strategy or framework to help shift responsibility from the teacher to the student. Although the instructor in my study made progress with regards to shifting responsibility to the boys, he was not able to fully complete the transition. Frey and Fisher (2010) found that expert teachers used the gradual release of responsibility model to scaffold student understanding during small-group guided instruction. They learned that these highly-skilled teachers made instructional moves that led to student learning. Perhaps novice teachers or former classroom teachers require more time and experience before setting out to implement the gradual release



strategy. In my study, it is likely that the lack of time on the instructor's part spent utilizing teaching practices or strategies to help improve literacy outcomes for students contributed to the boys not fully achieving critical literacy.

The instructor assumed multiple roles to lead the boys towards critical literacy. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) and Young (2001) recommended that critical literacy instructors assume and move between multiple roles when attempting to lead students towards critical literacy. Throughout this study, the instructor transitioned from various roles to meet the needs of the boys. On many occasions, the instructor assumed the role most appropriate to move the boys along the critical literacy continuum. However, there were times when the instructor failed to transition to the appropriate role and failed to relinquish responsibility to the boys. Like my study, the findings of Short et al. (1999) suggests that teachers must be aware of the different roles that they can assume and must know when to assume the appropriate role. Unlike my study, however, Short et al. (1999) calls for teachers to use less facilitative talk and to assume the role of participant more often. She argued that it is important for teachers to demonstrate the kind of talk that we expect students to use to discuss text. As discussed previously, the instructor in my study entered into the discussion as a participant on two occasions. Considering the study of Short et al. (1999) and its findings, it leads one to wonder why the role of participant was not assumed more throughout the study. Additionally, Young (2001), as she reflected on possible improvements for future research studies, concluded that she would next time assume the role of participant to model her thinking as she critically examined printed text. She would wonder aloud about the depictions in the text to provide a more explicit example of what she expected the boys in her study to do. Perhaps, if the instructor in my study entered into the discussion to share personal examples and anecdotes or modeled his thinking as he critically examined the

author's portrayals, the boys may have experienced more progress towards achieving critical literacy.

### **Contribution to the field**

This research study adds to the field by providing insight on the impact of two critical literacy strategies and the roles assumed and actions taken by the instructor on African American boys' development towards critical literacy. This was accomplished through analysis of transcriptions, field notes, and thick descriptions of instructional sessions, and interviews of students that produced evidence of the boys' development towards critical literacy.

The professional literature suggests that boys from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds, especially African American boys, suffer from chronic underperformance in reading and might require progressive literacy practices such as critical literacy and literature circles to improve their performance in reading (Klecker, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005). My study confirms the suggestion that economically-disadvantaged boys, African American boys in particular, might benefit from progressive literacy practices like critical literacy and literature circles. Data from the transcriptions and interviews indicate that the critical literacy strategies learned within the literature discussion group context helped the boys in my study to understand text beyond a surface level and to develop a more accurate understanding of the reading process. My study suggests that progressive literacy practices such as critical literacy and literature used in tandem might lead to improved reading outcomes for economically-disadvantaged boys, especially African American boys.

The existing literature also suggests that critical literacy strategies may help students engage in reading in powerful ways to move beyond a basic understanding of text (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Leland & Harste, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd,

2004b). My study confirms that critical literacy strategies may improve reading engagement among students to move them beyond a literal understanding of text. Moreover, in this study, data from the transcriptions adds to the existing literature by highlighting the impact of critical literacy strategies. My study revealed that the use of the disconnection strategy prepared the boys for problem posing queries, which enabled them to not only move beyond a literal understanding of text, but to engage in more critical discussions about and around texts. Furthermore, this suggests that teaching students to articulate their differences to texts might lead them to form and express opinions and beliefs that differ from the author's depictions. In other words, my study suggests that disconnections and problem posing can work as complementary strategies to facilitate African American boys' development towards critical literacy.

Current literature presents and supports the use of three types of text to use in critical literacy studies: (a) social issues, (b) multicultural, and (c) mainstream (traditional). As presented in the professional literature, critical literacy educators and researchers argue the merits of their preferred type of text (Boutte, 2002; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Iyer, 2007; Jones, 2006; Leland & Harste, 2000; Lewison et al., 2008; Luke & Freebody, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b; Rogers, 2002). However, several critical literacy educators argue that mainstream texts should be used to invite students to consider how their lived experiences vary from the experiences portrayed in mainstream texts (Boutte, 2002; Iyer, 2007; Jones, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b). My study confirms the legitimacy of the arguments regarding the efficacy of each of the three types of texts. The use of mainstream texts did not result in the boys of this study examining their social and cultural practices and contrasting them with sociocultural practices displayed in the texts. However, data from the transcriptions indicate that the use of mainstream texts encouraged the boys to make

disconnections which resulted in the boys sharing lived experiences that were dramatically different from the experiences depicted by the author. This finding confirms Boutte (2002) and Jones (2006) argument for the use of mainstream texts and, furthermore suggests that teaching students to make disconnections might be more effective with mainstream texts when sociocultural differences are more apparent.

The professional literature illuminates the importance of the roles assumed and actions taken by the instructor in mediating students' development towards critical literacy (Hall & Piazza, 2008; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Leland & Harste, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b; Rogers, 2002; Short et al., 1999; Young, 2001). My study confirms that the instructor plays a central role in students becoming critically literate. More importantly, data from the transcriptions adds to the current literature by revealing the importance of experience and skill in leading African American boys towards critical literacy above race and gender. My study found that the physical traits shared by the instructor and boys could not overcome the challenges that come with leading students towards critical literacy. Simply stated, this suggests that experience in leading literature discussion groups and moving students towards critical literacy is more important than shared physical traits and will mostly likely lead to desired outcomes.

Current literature suggests that the literature discussion group model is effective as a context to facilitate deeper comprehension of texts and critical conversations about and around texts (Almasi, 1995; Almasi et al., 2001; Daniels, 2002, 2006; DeNicolò & Franquiz, 2006; Short et al., 1999). My study confirms that literature circles as a space can facilitate deeper understanding of text and promote critical discussions about and around texts. Data from the transcriptions and interviews indicate that the boys' talk about texts within the literature circle

became more critical as well as less dependent on the instructor's opinions throughout the study. Additionally, information from the transcriptions suggests that participation in the literature circle helped the boys move beyond a literal understanding of texts. This finding suggests that critical literacy strategies embedded in a literature discussion group model might facilitate a deeper understanding of text and promote critical discussions about and around texts.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have several educational implications for elementary school teachers and district administrators. In this study, African American boys learned to use two critical literacy strategies—disconnections and problem posing—embedded in a literature discussion model to make progress towards critical literacy. As suggested by the professional literature, the literature discussion group model served as a suitable context to learn and apply strategies to help students expand their comprehension and to engage in critical discussions about and around texts. As noted in this study, the boys first learned to use the disconnection strategy to articulate differences between their reality and the author's depictions. It is important to help boys make connections and disconnections, if elementary school teachers seek to move students beyond a literal discussion of text to a more critical discussion of text. Teaching disconnections is not difficult to do, as shown in this study, especially with fourth and fifth-grade boys. Analysis revealed that the boys in this study used the disconnection strategy to engage in more critical discussions about and around text, which aided their ability to engage in problem posing activities. In this study, the boys learned to use problem posing activities to discuss the author and his/her intentions. In far too many elementary classrooms, the students simply learn the job function of the author often in comparison to the illustrator. To move boys beyond the simple recognition of the author and his/her job duty, elementary teachers should use problem

posing questions to help students theorize about the author's intent. Also, as found in this study, problem posing encouraged the boys to talk about their lived experiences and perceptions that differed from the author's portrayals. Elementary teachers that use basal readers are typically restricted to asking students to draw references from the text when responding to questions about the story. Teachers should be encouraged to help students leverage their lived experiences and perceptions when responding to questions about the story. As shown in this study, students might learn to express their dissatisfaction with the author's depiction of certain characters in a story, and this might lead students to draw sharp distinctions regarding their thoughts about the author's prerogative, which might compel students to argue or vehemently state their position. This type of discussion about and around text might help increase the level of interest in reading, especially among fourth and fifth-grade African American boys. In this study, the impact of the two critical literacy strategies learned within a literature discussion model suggests that elementary teachers should strongly consider teaching both strategies in tandem within a literature discussion model.

However, for elementary teachers looking to lead their students towards critical literacy, the combination of disconnections and problem posing will present challenges. As noted in this study, the use of disconnections and problem posing did not lead to the boys becoming critically literate. Studies have concluded that achieving critical literacy is a difficult, non-linear, and time-consuming task (Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Rogers, 2002; Young, 2000). Elementary teachers looking to move students towards critical literacy must take into consideration their beliefs about critical literacy, the requisite skills, the allotment of time needed, and the genre of text to be used. This also suggests that district administrators need to consider the disruption to the scope and sequence of the established curriculum and instructional guide and provide allowances for

classroom teachers to deviate from the planned curriculum. Furthermore, district administrators should plan to allocate sufficient resources to support the professional learning of classroom teachers and school administrators when looking to lead students towards critical literacy.

In this study, the instructor used mainstream texts to facilitate the boys' development towards critical literacy, however, as noted in the findings, the boys did not critique the social and cultural behaviors depicted in the text nor did they transform the author's message to closely align with their realities. This suggests that elementary teachers and school administrators should refer to the professional literature on critical literacy studies before making a decision on the genre of text to be used. Some critical literacy researchers have suggested that the use of texts with built-in critique might be more effective when looking to support students' development towards critical literacy (Leland & Harste, 2000; Rogers, 2002). Also, it is suggested that asking students to examine their social worlds to critique the social and cultural behaviors of the dominant society requires students to engage in resistance reading (Rogers, 2002; Young, 2001). This type of reading might require more time and a particular level of expertise. As previously stated, for elementary teachers a considerable amount of professional learning and practice might be needed to support a critical literacy project involving the use of mainstream text. For district administrators, a sufficient level of moral and financial support might be needed to support teacher development.

The instructor in this study set out to gradually release the responsibility of leading the discussion group to the boys to foster their development towards critical literacy. As noted in the findings, he experienced minimal success with the implementation of this strategy. This suggests that the gradual release strategy is not easily implemented. Studies suggest that novice teachers and former classroom teachers looking to use the strategy may be especially challenged to do so

(Frey & Fisher, 2010). The implementation of the gradual release strategy requires teachers to intuitively make a series of instructional moves to successfully shift responsibility from the teacher to students. To successfully implement the strategy, elementary school teachers should invest time in increasing their knowledge of the strategy possibly through professional reading, observing a mentor teacher, and using video to record and monitor their attempts to gradually release responsibility to students. District administrators should help foster a learning environment that encourages classroom teachers to take instructional risks and to occasionally “fail forward.”

Finally, in this study, the instructor assumed and moved between multiple roles—leader, facilitator, and participant—to contribute to the boys’ progress towards critical literacy, but at the same time the instructor’s struggles to assume and maintain the appropriate role at a critical time may have inhibited the boys’ development towards critical literacy. This suggests that leading a discussion group, while attempting to develop critical literacy, takes time and experience in this kind of work to do it effectively. This is nuanced and difficult work. Elementary classroom teachers looking to help students become critically literate must first learn the various roles and then learn to vacillate between the three roles as each role is key to students’ development towards critical literacy. In this study, the teacher as leader provided the explicit instruction needed to help the boys display positive discursive practices and to learn how to use the critical literacy strategies. The teacher as facilitator helped reinforce positive discursive practices, push students’ thinking, and encourage the boys to expand on their thoughts and opinions. Although assumed less frequently, the teacher as participant role helped model the kind of talk expected of students, and allowed the boys to view the instructor as one of the guys. Again, the boys in this study made progress, but they did not achieve critical literacy. That is why classroom teachers



should invest the time necessary, because it is vitally important that they become fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each role and learn when it is most appropriate to assume each one. This will require elementary classroom teachers to participate in intensive professional learning opportunities. Based on the findings and the professional literature, I would recommend that schools seek out literacy researchers experienced with literature discussion groups to work with classroom teachers individually in their classrooms. District administrators should make a financial investment to purchase professional reading material and professional learning opportunities for teachers. Both teachers and administrators should not be concerned with achieving success in the short term, but instead should expect to spend considerable time going through the process before achieving expected outcomes.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study is the small sample size. There were five boys and the instructor, for a total of six participants. A larger sample of boys would have better represented the reading preferences, abilities, and lived experiences of the male population within the student body. Provided the small number of participants, caution should be used in generalizing to a larger group of African American boys and/or boys in general.

Additionally, the participants of the study were selected on the basis of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Having participants from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds might produce different results.

Another limitation is related to the number of instructional sessions (pre-session and critical literacy sessions) conducted. There were seven instructional sessions in total across a six-week time period. The boys might have continued to progress towards conducting group discussions with minimal support from the instructor as well as developed the ability to

transform the author's message had there been more instructional sessions across a greater span of time. Furthermore, the instructor might have continued to make instructional improvements to better facilitate the gradual release of responsibilities to the boys and to lead the boys towards critical literacy if he had more time to study his practices and make the necessary adjustments.

The experience of the instructor is another limitation. The tasks of implementing the gradual release strategy and assuming and moving between various roles to lead students towards critical literacy is challenging for the most experienced instructor. For a district administrator who has been removed from the classroom environment for the past seven years to set out to lead elementary-aged African American boys towards critical literacy was rather ambitious. Having an experienced classroom teacher work with the boys might have resulted in more progress on the boys' part.

The instructor as interviewer is also a limitation of this study. For the final interview, the boys might have provided responses they believed that the instructor wanted to hear. It is possible that the boys might have answered the questions differently had someone else interviewed them using the same protocol. Also, it is possible that someone else would have asked no follow-up questions or at the very least, different follow-up questions. This might have led to less or more information from the boys.

Finally, the texts used in this study were a limitation. The use of mainstream texts to encourage boys to read and critique the social and cultural practices of the dominant culture might have put the boys in an unfamiliar position. As found in this study, it is not easy to ask boys to criticize behavior that is considered normal or engage in resistance reading (Davies, 1993). Having used texts with controversial or provocative issues built into the narrative (i.e. homelessness) might have helped the boys think about these kinds of topics from a critical

perspective.

### **Thoughts for Future Research**

This study focused on the impact of two critical literacy strategies within a social learning context on African American boys' development towards critical literacy. At the same time, this study explored the impact of the roles assumed and actions taken by the instructor on African American boys' development towards critical literacy. It is my hope that this study will be a springboard for more extended, in-depth research about the development of boys towards critical literacy and how teachers can support their development. Future research that engages the teacher with students over a longer period of time is needed for the students and teacher to fully develop.

This study shed some light on the impact of disconnections and problem posing on African American boys' development towards critical literacy as well as the influence of the teacher on the boys' development. Further research is needed to see what is required for African American boys to achieve critical literacy. Such a study would shed more light on how African American boys become critically literate and the actions taken by teachers. Similar studies can be conducted to examine whether different strategies, genres of text, extended time, and teachers with experience working with literature discussion groups could support the boys' development towards critical literacy.

This study selected participants based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Future research involving a broader cross section of students is needed to learn if and how other populations of the student body respond to disconnections and problem posing strategies in a literature discussion group setting. As future leaders and current citizens of a democratic society, it is important for all students to learn to read text from a critical perspective. It is also important

to note any variations in response to similar studies between different groups of students.

Lastly, this study sheds light on the use of mainstream texts to encourage African American boys to critique the social and cultural practices of the dominant culture. The boys never reached the point where they offered any critique of mainstream practices. For the most part, this study found that they supported the author's prerogative to present such depictions. Further research is needed to see if African American boys can and will critique social and cultural practices portrayed by the dominant class as normal. Also, future research is needed to explore whether African American boys could and would have critical discussions about narratives with controversial and provocative issues built into the text.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to investigate the promise of critical literacy for African American boys, a student population that historically underperforms in the area of reading as compared to other student populations. The study investigated the impact of critical literacy strategies on African American boys' development towards becoming critically literate, and how the instructor might support their development. The study revealed that critical literacy may hold promise for African American boys as evidenced by the progress made by the boys across the seven instructional sessions. However, the study also reveals that critical literacy is not easily achieved. Despite learning to use two complementary critical literacy strategies and support from the instructor, the boys were not able to achieve critical literacy in this study. Further research, involving an extended timeframe and a more experienced instructor, is needed to see what is required to lead African American boys towards critical literacy, and the promise that critical literacy holds for this particular population.

## APPENDIX A: READER INTERVIEW

Carolyn L. Burke

(adapted by Stiles Simmons)

4/9/12

1. When you are reading and you come to something you don't know, what do you do?*(It is important that you use the word "something" as you want to see what the reader identifies as giving him/her difficulty, a word, sentence, paragraph, etc.)*

Do you ever do anything else? *(Ask this question until the reader indicates "That is all.")*

2. Do you think you are a good reader? Why or why not? *(If no, ask the following question and proceed to question #3.)*

Who do you know that is a good reader? *(Have the reader identify someone they know personally who they think is a good reader.)*

3. What do you see \_\_\_\_\_ do that tells you he/she is a good reader?

*(What shows you that \_\_\_\_\_ is a good reader?)(Sometimes this question needs to be asked in different ways. The idea is for the reader to indicate what the qualities of this good reader are, for example, reads fast, reads accurately, understands everything. Do not provide direct prompts about these things.)*

4. If you knew that someone was having difficulty reading how would you help them?
5. What would a/your teacher do to help the person?
6. Do you have a favorite book/story? Can you tell me about this book/story.
7. Do you have a favorite character in this book/story? *(If the answer is yes, then proceed with following question.)* Can you tell me why this character is your favorite?
8. Do you have a least favorite character in this book/story? *(If the answer is yes, then proceed with following question.)* Can you tell me why this character is your least favorite?
9. In your favorite story, where does the story take place?
10. What is the most important part of the book/story? Why?
11. Have you ever thought to change any part of your favorite book/story? What part? Why? *(If no, then ask the following question.)*

If you could change the ending of your favorite book/story, what would you do? Why?

## APPENDIX B: STUDENT (POST) INTERVIEW

1. Thinking back over our reading group, what are all of the new things that you learned about reading?
  - Are there more? (continue until all are listed)
  - Tell me about X (the first one listed, repeat until all are described)
  - Which of these do you think are the most important? What makes these more important?
  - Which is the least important? What makes it the least important?
  
2. Suppose a parent asked you what changes our reading group made on your own ability to make sense of an author's message? How do you think you've changed as a reader?
  - What's different about how you discuss books in our reading group and how you discuss books in other places where you read?
  - What's changed about how you see yourself as fitting into a story or not?
  - What can you do to make a story better fit with the way things are for you when an author writes about some other person's way of life? How does that make you feel?
  
3. Thinking back over all of our reading groups, what event [did something happen that] stands out in your mind? Tell me about what happened from beginning to end. What makes that event stand out for you?
  
4. Do you remember that day in reading group when [briefly describe an event that I want to know more about]?
  - Tell me about what happened then. How did that make you feel?
  - I'm not sure I understand why [something that happened] went that way. Could tell me what you think happened then?
  
5. Describe what I did in the reading group.
  - What do you think is the most important part of my role in the reading group?
  - Is there anything that I didn't need to do?
  
6. What is your favorite story and why?
7. Have you ever thought to change any part of your favorite book/story? What part? Why? How would you change it? *(if no, then ask the following question)*  
 If you could change the ending of your favorite book/story, what would you do? Why?

## APPENDIX C: SESSION 2 FIELD NOTES

### Session #2–Field Notes (Audio transcription)

5/8/14

Instructor: Good afternoon. Today we are going to read and discuss a new book and do something very familiar. Who remembers the activity that we did with the first book, *Do Like Kyla*? What was the name of the activity? Student One.

Student One: We did likes and dislikes.

Instructor: Likes and dislikes... Kind of, but what do we call it?

Student Three: Disconnections and connections

Instructor: Right. Disconnections and connections. But this time you guys will read the book silently and note your connections and disconnections as you read through the text. We will then talk about your connections and disconnections once everyone has finished reading the text. One of the reasons why we're doing this is because I have to begin stepping back not controlling the conversation, but allowing you guys to talk about the text, to ask questions, and maybe even comment on comments offered by one another. However, we need to keep in mind two things. First, we need to respect each other. Second, we need to take turns, remember, we talked about turn taking and how we can't talk while someone else is talking. Okay. Let's begin reading the text when *Lightning Comes in a Jar*. Before you begin reading, what comprehension strategy do you normally use before you begin reading a text?

Student Three: You predict what the story is going to be about.

Instructor: Right. You predict what the story is going to be about. Okay. So, let's begin reading through the book stopping where you have connections and/or disconnections and writing down those connections and disconnections and placing the Post-it notes on the appropriate



pages.

The boys and I began to read the text silently. We note our disconnections and connections where applicable.

Instructor: Okay. Nice job, guys. Would you like to share some of your connections and disconnections?

Student Five: I would not say lightning in a jar.

Instructor: You wouldn't say lightning in a jar?

Student Five: No. And, I wouldn't tell secrets a year later. Like in the story they were telling secrets a year later.

Instructor: Okay.

Student Four: I never had a family reunion.

Instructor: You never had a family reunion?

Student Four: Not that I know of.

Student Three: I have had a family reunion before. It was at the church downtown.

Instructor: Are you talking about St. Anne's?

Student Three: Yeah.

Instructor: (speaking to Student Four) So you never had a family reunion before?

Student Four: Not that I know of.

Instructor: So what did you think of the family reunion in this story?

Student Four: I thought it was kind of cool.

Instructor: You thought it was kind of cool. Maybe something you would like to do.

Student Four: Yeah

Instructor: (speaking to Student Three) so talk to us about your family reunion. Was it like this one in the story?

Student Three: We didn't do as much stuff as they did. Like we didn't play baseball, but we played football and all the grown-ups were inside cooking.

Instructor: Okay. Did you have relatives coming from out of town?

Student Three: Yeah. We had people coming from Grand Rapids, Atlanta, and Detroit.

Instructor: What kind of activities did you guys do outside of playing football and getting the food ready? I know in this story some of the adults told stories about when they were young trying to get the kids to laugh. Did anything like that happen at your family reunion?

Student Three: Shakes head, no

Instructor: You didn't have that uncle that said "hey boy how you doing, I haven't seen you in a long time"? (Laughing)

Boys began laughing.

Student One: yeah. I've had three family reunions in Indiana. We didn't have it at the church we had it at a park and we went to a movie and a football game.

Instructor: You went to a football game?

Student One: Yeah, we did.

Instructor: Who did you see play?

Student One: The Colts and the Packers.

Student Five: I have a question about the family reunion. In this story, they had tons of Jell-

O.(Turning to the page) See here on this page see all the Jell-O. They had five or six plates.

Instructor: Yeah, I did see that. Do you eat Jell-O?

Student Five: Yep. I eat lots of Jell-O.

Instructor: (speaking to Student Three) Do you eat Jell-O at your reunion?

Student Three: Yeah, we eat like Jell-O salad.

Instructor: Oh really! Do you like Jell-O salad?

Student Three: nods head, yes

Instructor: What about you, Student One? Did you guys eat Jell-O at your family reunion?

Student One: Nods head, yes

Instructor: Talk a little bit more about the other kind of food that you guys ate at your family reunions.

Student One: We had some french fries and burgers

Student Three: We had chicken, burgers, and someone cooked crab legs.

Student Four: It wasn't like a reunion, but most of our family came cause my Grandma throws Christmas parties and have her boyfriend's family come and she served some Jell-O and since her boyfriend likes crab she served some crab.

Instructor: Okay. So, it's like a family reunion where the family comes together. So, basically in this story they ate just like you do at your reunions or your Christmas get-togethers, but you guys didn't have anyone telling stories. So, how long did your reunion last? Was it for a day or was it over a weekend?

Student One: It was like two days, because my cousins spent the night and we stayed up and

played video games.

Student Three: At mine, we started in the morning and everybody had got there and we had a few cousins spend the night so it was on a Saturday and then they left early in the morning.

Student Four: Our Christmas party and all her parties we usually start preparing it in the morning and lots of people come over to help out and we usually close it after dessert.

Student Three: We went to the park at like the middle of the day and went to the basketball courts.

Instructor: So your family played basketball instead of baseball? Any other connections or disconnections that you guys want to talk about?

Student Five: I have a connection. Usually, we throw parties at our house like in the story. Sometimes we catch fireflies at night.

Instructor: So you catch fireflies, too?

Student Four: And frogs. We collect a lot of frogs. We keep them for a day and then we let them go.

Student One: Like my big brother he tried to trick me. He got a jar and put lights in it and said "I really did catch lightning in a jar."

Instructor: So what did he put in the jar?

Student One: He put some lights in there.

Instructor: Lights! Instead of fireflies. (Laughing)

Boys began laughing

Instructor: Let's wrap up our discussion. So, at this time, I like to ask you guys what you think

about what we did today.

Student five: I thought it was good and it will help us become better readers.

Instructor: How so?

Student Five: Because, we had a chance to read the book to ourselves, which helped us to better understand the book instead of reading it out loud where we might've missed some words.

Student Three: Yeah, the more we do the connections and disconnections the better will get at doing them.

Student One: I think it was good, cause like Student Three said we get better at connections and disconnections and we get to compare...

Instructor: What do you get to compare?

Student One: We get to compare stories to real-life or our life.

Student Four: I thought it was pretty good, because we read in our minds and we were better able to think about it.

Instructor: Now, how did this story compare to your real-life?

Student Five: Because people have family reunions and they eat.

Instructor: Good. It sounds like there was some real connections and disconnections. Now let's take about 5 minutes to write in our journals. I need you to write about two disconnections that you had.

## APPENDIX D: CODES

### Teacher Actions

#### Teacher-to-student interactions

##### Teacher as Leader

teacher evaluates student response  
 teacher giving directions  
 teacher teaching/reinforcing positive group processes  
 teacher teaching/reinforcing use of strategy  
 teacher accepts student response  
 teacher calls on student  
 teacher asking question request prediction  
 teacher evaluates student reading

##### Teacher as Facilitator

teacher asking question asks for evaluation  
 teacher asking question for additional information  
 teacher asking question for clarification  
 teacher asking question invites response  
 teacher asking question invites response to transform story  
 teacher asks question to encourage students to challenge authorial power  
 teacher challenge student opinion/belief  
 teacher restates student response for clarification

##### Teacher as Participant

teacher answers student question models how to challenge authorial power  
 teacher explains answer with personal information  
 teacher makes connection  
 teacher makes connection tells what is done  
 teacher makes disconnection  
 teacher makes disconnection gives explanation for what is done  
 teacher makes disconnection tells what he would do

### Students Actions

#### Student-to-teacher interactions

##### Boys development towards critical literacy

Application of reading comprehension and critical literacy strategies  
 student makes disconnection tells what is done

student makes disconnection tells what is not done  
 student reviewing connections and disconnections  
 student makes connection  
 student makes connection tells what is done  
 student makes connection provides example  
 student answers teacher question provides prediction  
 student answers teacher question provides summary from text  
 student answers teacher question refers to text

#### Boys' Talk

student answers teacher question  
 student answers teacher question about changing the story  
 student answers teacher question provide example that disconnects  
 student answers teacher question provide explanation  
 student answers teacher question states opinion/belief  
 student answers teacher question provide description that disconnects  
 student answers teacher question evaluating authorial power  
 student answers teacher question refers to text  
 student responds to teacher comment  
 student asks teacher question  
 student asks question to encourage teacher to challenge authorial power  
 student asks teacher question request personal information  
 student asks teacher question request clarification  
 student asks teacher question request additional information  
 student explains opinion refers to text

#### Student-to-student interactions

##### Boys' development towards critical literacy

Application of reading comprehension and critical literacy strategies  
 student answers student question provide summary  
 student shared disconnection provide explanation  
 student shares disconnection  
 student shares disconnection tells what he would do  
 student asking question asks for summary

#### Boys' Talk

student answers student question  
 student answers student question provide description that disconnects  
 student answers student question states opinion/belief  
 student responds to student comment affirms  
 student responds to student comment provides example  
 student responds to student comment states opinion/belief  
 student answers student question provide explanation  
 student answers student question provide evaluation  
 student challenges student opinion/belief  
 student challenges student opinion/belief refers to text  
 student supports student opinion/belief/comment  
 student accepts student response  
 student asking question invite response  
 student asking question solicit thoughts regarding the author  
 student asking student question request evaluation  
 student calls on student  
 student evaluates student response



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**ABSTRACT****LEADING AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS TOWARDS CRITICAL LITERACY**

by

**STILES SIMMONS****August 2016****Advisor:** Dr. Karen Feathers**Major:** Reading, Language, and Literature**Degree:** Doctor of Education

Historically, African American boys have underperformed their Caucasian, Hispanic, and female counterparts in the area of reading. Key indicators reveal that the reading achievement gap between African American boys and their counterparts persists despite efforts to ameliorate the problem. Some researchers and school reformers point to the instructional practices and testing mandates as part of the reason as to why boys, and African American boys in particular, are underperforming in reading. Critical literacy and literature discussion groups are presented as two processes that might improve African American boys' reading achievement. This study investigated the impact of critical literacy practices within a social learning context (literature discussion group) on African American boys' development towards critical literacy. Additionally, this study explored the impact of the instructor's roles and actions on African American boys' development towards critical literacy. The study involved an instructor who engaged five African American boys in two critical literacy strategies across seven instructional sessions that spanned a 9-week timeframe. The two critical literacy strategies were taught and applied within a literature discussion group setting. Data consisted of student interviews, transcriptions and video tapes of instructional sessions, field notes, and thick descriptions.

Analysis of the data revealed that these African American boys made progress towards, but did not achieve, critical literacy. Analysis also revealed that the instructor's actions contributed to the boys' progress, but may have contributed to the boys not fully achieving critical literacy. This study reveals that critical literacy strategies and literature discussion groups hold promise for moving African American boys beyond a literal understanding of printed text to a critical understanding of text. However, it should be understood that progress is not without challenges as both the boys and the instructor require time and practice to hold critical discussions about and around texts. Moreover, to fully understand critical literacy development, future research projects should engage students over an extended period of time. Also, the roles and actions taken by the instructor should be studied to better understand the kind of support needed to help students achieve critical literacy.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

I was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1971, the eldest of four children. I attended Head Start and later Detroit Public Schools from Kindergarten to ninth grade, where I attended Thomas M. Cooley High School (now closed). After my freshman year at Cooley High School, we moved to Oak Park, Michigan, where I attended Oak Park High School and later graduated in 1989.

After high school, I enrolled at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) where I majored in Education. At the end of my third year, I decided to transfer to Wayne State University (WSU). I entered Wayne State University determined to successfully complete the College of Education program. Eventually, I successfully completed the program and earned my undergraduate degree. A few years later, I earned a Master's degree in Educational Leadership at WSU.

As I have worked in various school leadership positions, I have also pursued my doctorate degree at Wayne State University. I was admitted into the program a few years ago at the urging of one of my professors. Although it has been a long, challenging road to travel, I have enjoyed the experience. I believe that the experience has better positioned me to serve students and families seeking opportunities to lift themselves out of their current set of circumstances. I thank God every day for blessing me with this work. After I earn my doctorate degree, I plan to continue the work that I have been called to do as well as look for opportunities to pursue a career in higher education. I believe that I can help prepare those seeking a position in the field of K-12 education.