A practitioner research study exploring critical literacy in a secondary English classroom

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A PRACTITIONER RESEARCH STUDY EXPLORING CRITICAL LITERACY
IN A SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

Dilnavaz F. Hushmendy

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a qualitative practitioner research study in which I explore how my students and I engage in critical literacy using sociopolitical Articles of the Week (AoWs). Critical literacy is the ability to read, write, and speak about texts in a reflective manner to better understand power, inequality, and injustice that prevails in the world. The two major questions that drove this study were: (1) How are eleventh-grade students’ perspectives evident in their discussions and reflective papers? (2) How do my students and I take up the opportunity to pursue a social action project in response to Articles of the Week? The twenty-two research participants for this study were students in one of my three eleventh-grade English classes. While I used AoWs in all three eleventh-grade sections, I conducted my research in only one of these sections. This class differed from the other two sections only in that these students planned and implemented their social action projects in groups in lieu of individual presentations of their research paper in the other two classes.

I collected six kinds of data: (1) scanned copies of students’ eight reflective papers based on AoWs; (2) transcriptions of eight video-recorded AoW discussions; (3) teacher journal; (4) students’ post AoW surveys; (5) scanned copies and/or photographs of students’ social action projects; and (6) transcription of a post social-action whole class video recorded discussion. I collected these data in four phases from October 2015 to June 2016. Every week, over eight weeks (October-December), students read an AoW. After, and as homework, they wrote a reflective paper and brought it to class at the end of the week (Friday), when we had a whole class discussion. After reading eight AoWs, students chose and researched a social action, researching daily for six weeks. This six-week research project resulted in a research paper that satisfied the research requirement of the eleventh-grade English class. Finally, two days per week for five
weeks, students implemented their group social action projects on these topics: (a) Gun control laws, (b) Syrian Refugees, and (3) School Start Later.

Using the constructivist grounded theory technique (Charmaz, 2000, 2006) and the two methodological frameworks—practitioner research and inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009)—as well as the four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint & Sluys, 2002) to analyze and interpret my data, the following findings emerged: Findings to research question 1—most students appreciated considering multiple perspectives, both in writing and discussion. Students’ discussions demonstrated strong knowledge building in the following areas: incidental knowledge building; knowledge building with immediate effects; knowledge building by geography; and knowledge building as deliberation and debate. Findings to research question 2—social action projects involved two major activities: procedural activities and negotiating power. The procedural activities involved choosing a social action project, researching, and working in groups to implement the social action projects. The power analysis in this study revealed that examining multiple perspectives and including them in social action projects can work positively for students—social networks opened for students who provided a balanced perspective on topics. For students taking a one-sided perspective, social networks shut down. The results of this study have the potential to inform future practitioner researchers and critical pedagogues to develop new ways of building a critically reflective classroom that allows for robust social transformations that could influence educational policies because teachers’ voices do matter.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my incredible husband, Fershid Hushmendy. I truly cherish his love, patience, and constant nudges to pursue my passions no matter what.

You are the wind beneath my wings!!
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My dear husband, Fershid, is my pillar. He stood by me through thick and thin. His unwavering love, positive energy, endless patience and steadfast encouragement has been instrumental in committing me to this research and making this endeavor attainable. Thank you so much, I could not have done it without your support!

*Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today,*

*and creates a vision for tomorrow.*

~ Beattie
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

*Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world.*

~Freire (1987)

Critical literacy is the ability to read, write, and speak about texts in a reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice that prevails in the world. Paulo Freire (1970) explicitly reminds educators like me, that the goal of education is not merely a “banking” system where the teacher fills the learner with “knowledge,” but a democratic one that involves critical literacy—exploring how language and power move both the learner and the educator to a new way of knowledge, building and bringing social justice in the world. “Reading the world” enables readers who are critically aware to comprehend beyond the literal level and understand the deeper meaning of the topic. As Freire (1993) explains:

> And when I speak of the world I am not speaking exclusively about the trees and the animals that I love very much, and the mountains and the rivers. I am not speaking exclusively of the nature of which I am a part, but I am speaking also of the social structures, politics, culture, history, of which I am also a part. (p.103)

Critical literacy allows us to question the texts—read against the grain and not just trust the texts at a surface-level understanding. As Shor (1999) states, “Critical literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (p. 1).

Hence, certain principles highlight critical literacy: (a) that all education is political; (b) that the aim is to eliminate oppressions such as race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality; (c) that
teaching and learning is community based; (d) that problem posing and dialogue should be encouraged; and e) that concepts of critical consciousness and action for social change, or praxis, should be developed. This study mirrored the above principles in that I provided students the opportunity to adopt an inquiry stance through controversial topics and to develop social action projects.

Informed by critical literacy (Freire 1970, 1987; Janks, 2000; Luke, 2000; McLaren, 1989; Morrell, 2004; Shor, 1980) and practitioner research study (Cochran & Lytle, 1993, 2009), my students and I explored how articles on social/controversial issues influence high school students’ reading and writing, which leads to social transformation.

As a high school teacher for the past 11 years, I have observed that students may be digitally savvy and gravitate to websites that reflect their own beliefs, but that they are often oblivious of the economic, political, and social problems that exist in today’s world. Students need critical literacy skills to be aware of how texts position them and how we can all be vulnerable in a world surrounded by powerful, calculating messages. Reading, writing, and discussing controversial issues can engage students in learning multiple perspectives, dealing with conflict, developing informed decision-making, and becoming active agents of social change.

I conducted this nine-month critical literacy study in my eleventh-grade English classroom. I applied practitioner research methods to inform my own teaching practices and to apprise other teacher researchers about the learning, teaching, research, and challenges that I experienced in order to generate new opportunities in conducting their own studies.

After attending Kelly Gallagher’s workshop in 2008 on Reading and Writing in Secondary English Classrooms, I learned about Gallagher’s (2009) “Article of the Week”
(AoW). Gallagher designed AoWs so that students would read closely, annotate, write a one-page reflection based on the article, engage in discussions, and build background knowledge of critical current issues. It was during that workshop that I determined that articles on social issues could be central texts that I could use in my research on critical literacy in my classroom.

Gallagher (2004, 2009) claims:

> When we teach students to read more deeply, we are not only helping them to understand the book in front of them, we are also sharpening their critical thinking skills. Developing the ability to read and pass a test is desirable; developing the ability to read the world is even more important. (p. 168)

In fact, Gallagher (2004) agrees with Freire that “the world is a difficult text,” and students who are unable to read it critically “are in for hardship” (p. 169).

Moreover, with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) connected to the standards, teachers are constantly under pressure to meet defined academic standards or face penalties based on test results. APPRs result in a score based on:

1. teaching
2. students’ scores on the New York State English Regents exam
3. other school-based measures.

A tenured teacher who receives an “ineffective” APPR score for two years in a row can lose his or her job.

Rather than buckle to the negative effects teachers can feel in these high-testing times of the CCSS and the APPR process and think that the chains of the traditional education system are quite impossible to break, for my research, I deliberately identified ways in which I could
incorporate practitioner research as a naturalistic approach to develop critical literacy strategies in my own classroom. I knew that I would be entering uncharted and sometimes uncomfortable situations in this process, but if we are to prepare students to be critically literate in today’s world, we must expose them to a variety of texts, including an abundance of texts and topics that they will interact with in their everyday lives. It is this kind of text that students must be able to rigorously question and make connections to if we want them to be critical consumers of information and how it can position them. Critical literacy asks, “What is literacy for me, for us, for the community, at this time, in this place, and how can it be used by all of us to teach out goals?” (Pandya & Avila, 2014, p. 143).

Anderson and Irvine (1993) note that teacher research about literacy can remain locked in a “functionalist paradigm” if it does not consider critical literacy (p. 87). Considered “a quiet form of research” by theorist Britton (1987), practitioner research stresses innovation, enables teachers to observe their own students in a multiplicity of situations, and most importantly, enables teachers who, like me, are committed to social justice to study and relate how students resist, consent to, or argue about equity in society.

Through this practitioner research study, I positioned my classroom as a site “for intentional investigation” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 48). I took an inquiry stance toward my teaching to question my theories of practice, including my expectations about my critical literacy framework, about how students engaged with the social issues provided, about the invitations I extended by working within the paradigm of “knowledge-of-practice,” and about how I constructed knowledge about my practice as well as the theories proposed by other scholars and practitioners for promoting critical literacy (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

My goal in this study was to gain access to my students’ knowledge-building processes
within a specific framework of practitioner research study gathered over time, so that I could explore critical literacy and praxis within my own learning community. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explain that the practitioner research approach brings “a worldview, a critical habit of mind, a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across professional careers and settings” (pp. 119-120).

In this practitioner research study, I establish how I engaged my students in reading, writing, and discussing different controversial articles, and creating a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), sociocultural learning (Au, 2000; Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 1996, 2003; Heath, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978, 1998), and collective knowledge building (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006). I also explain how my students’ multiple perspectives enabled them to take a stance, expand their rationales, engage in knowledge building, and take transformative action. Since our words and how we use them shape our identities, my study demonstrates how, “Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us” (Shor, 1999, p. 1).

In this context, being a teacher of critical literacy and a practitioner researcher made me look for ways of providing a safe space for my students to raise questions about language and power, voice their beliefs, explore alternate meanings offered by peers, and gain insights of knowledge building in context. As a community, my students and I systematically constructed social action projects. As Shor and Pari (1999) state:

Critical literacy challenges the status quo to discover alternative paths for social and self-development. This kind of literacy—words rethinking worlds, self-dissenting in society—connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for reinventing our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. (p. 1)
Democracy supports a diversity of voices and perspectives that have equal opportunity to voice opposition and participate in the world's social systems. My goal in conducting this research was to give students the opportunity to read, analyze, and discuss texts about the world around them so that they would have the experience of democratic participation in their English class and deepen their understanding of what it means to take a critical stance.

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study was to take several steps beyond traditional public-school curriculum and to develop students’ self-confidence in examining the relationships between texts, readers, writers, and society—recognizing and addressing inequities experienced in their own lives or the lives of others. This qualitative practitioner research study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009) addresses the importance of implementing critical literacy in a secondary English classroom, of exploring different sociopolitical issues that disrupt the commonplace, and of engaging in multiple perspectives leading to social transformation (Lewison et al., 2002).

Surprisingly, during my academic review of the literature, which I detail in chapter 2, Walters’ (2017) study was the only study that used an adaptation of Gallagher’s Article of the Week (AotW as cited in her study) to enhance middle and high school students’ critical literacy and moral leadership skills in a Catholic school. Walters (2017) developed an instructional routine with her students—reading an article, making meaningful annotations, and then sharing with the class within a small group discussion. After the discussion, students wrote a reflection about the article that either related to their opinion on the topic of the article or the discussion that they had in class. Utilizing the Article of the Week (AotW) routine over the course of the school year helped students become more adept at leading discussions and making connections to the real world. “We must challenge [students] to see their role in their local and larger
communities and to think about how they will step into those roles both now and in the future” (Walters, 2017, p. 207).

Similarly, I too adapted Gallagher’s use of AoWs and incorporated them to give voice to students’ thoughts in a disciplined manner as they interacted with others to make meaning and advanced individual and collective understanding of the issues. Additionally, I incorporated AoWs to engage students in social action projects. As educators, “If our aim is to develop conscientious citizens, then we must encourage students to think beyond their opinions that they hear on television and enable them with the tools that they need to be critical thinkers” (Walters, 2017, p. 205).

As I stated earlier, being a high school teacher for the past 11 years and teaching in a politically challenging time with the pressures of state standardized testing of Common Core Standards that call for increased rigor in the use of non-fiction texts, along with 2015-2016 being a stirring election year between Mrs. Hillary Clinton and Mr. Donald Trump, my commitment to critical literacy made me well poised to explore and document how my students and I, together, became critical consumers of content in controversial articles and participants in social actions. It is pertinent in today’s English Language Arts classrooms that along with the teaching of the required texts, educators engage students’ critical literacy practices through collaborative discussions.

Through this practitioner research study, I engaged students in a process of questioning and reflection while encouraging them to think critically about how language affects social relations and how students’ voices can influence their roles in the world. It also helped me to gain insights into my teaching practices and to “figure out how my classroom helps me understand the world and how the world helps me understand my classroom” (Cochran & Lytle,
If social justice and democracy are goals of critical literacy, then the educational system needs to mirror these objectives within classrooms, organizations, and policies.

Teachers have engaged in an array of critical literacy projects, which have affected communities from small, local scales to grander scales. I will discuss these engagements in the literature review on critical literacy in chapter 2.

My critical literacy study seeks to illuminate:

1. how high school students can incorporate AoWs to engage in critical literacy in a regular English classroom
2. how students take on and develop, over time, a critical stance
3. how I taught critical literacy with social action as my goal to develop my students’ ability to authentically engage with the “real issues” around them.

I engaged my eleventh-grade students with Articles of the Week from a critical literacy perspective, and I asked the following questions to inform these gaps in my critical literacy research:

1. How are eleventh-grade students’ perspectives evident in their discussions and reflective papers?
2. How do my students and I take up the opportunity to pursue a social action project in response to Articles of the Week?

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter serves as an introduction to this study, providing an overview of its purpose and contribution to the field and the research questions that I explored. Chapter 2, a review of the literature, addresses specific areas of research in this study by providing detailed information on critical literacy and the theoretical frameworks that informed my practitioner research study.
Since critical literacy is a social process, I also include an explanation of how situated learning/communities of practice and knowledge building complement the body of knowledge impacting this study. Chapter 3, the methodology chapter, begins with my research questions, followed by the two methodological frameworks—practitioner research and inquiry as stance, and Lewison, Flint and Sluys’ (2002) critical literacy framework that informed my study. Chapter 4 includes my research design—the setting, selection criteria, and participants, an overview of the critical literacy curriculum that is the focus in this study, and data collection and method of data analysis informed by Charmaz’s (2003, 2005, 2008, 2015) constructivist grounded theory. Chapter 5 And chapter 6 include detailed data analyses and findings relating to my research questions 1 and 2 respectively. The concluding chapter, chapter 7, presents a detailed discussion of my findings and implications for future research.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

*The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.*

~ Plutarch

This literature review begins by differentiating between critical literacy and critical thinking. It then examines the goals of critical literacy in practice. Then I explain critical literacy research in classrooms under three categories: (1) critical textual exploration; (2) critical praxis and levels of transformation; and (3) reflective writing relevant to this study. This is followed by studies of practitioner research framed by critical literacy that informed my study. Next, I explain situated learning/communities of practice, which is a key aspect of critical literacy. I also draw on how this culture of social experiences influenced students’ knowledge building, which was a major development in this study. I conclude this chapter with a summary.

**Critical Literacy and Critical Thinking**

The term “critical” comes from the Greek word *kriticos*, the ability to argue and judge (Pandya & Avila, 2014). Critical thinking starts from the premise that we often come with our beliefs and prejudices, and that language could free us if only we could use it plainly and sensibly. Critical literacy scholars complicate and extend this notion of critical thinking, explaining that we not only read the word, we read the world (Appleman, 2009; Freire, 1970) and we not only read between the lines, we read beyond them (Sumara, 1996). In other words, reading a text critically not only involves critical thinking about the words but thinking about how they might affect our lives.

John Dewey (1938/97) called critical thinking “reflective thinking” and defined it as, “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). He argued
that it is possible to help people develop their thinking by helping to develop their creative, curious, and questioning mind. According to Dewey (1916), “education is not preparation for life, it is life itself...the only ultimate value which can be set up is just the process of living itself” (p. 281). Therefore, critical thinking is a crucial element of critical literacy.

Similarly, Vygotsky (1998) stresses the importance of “thinking in concepts,” which involves not only the awareness of the “outside” world but dialectically requires a deeper self-consciousness: “Understanding reality, understanding others and understanding oneself—this is what thinking in concepts brings with itself. This is the kind of revolution that occurs in the thinking and consciousness of the adolescent” (p. 50).

“Reading the word and the world,” according to Freire (1987), requires readers to reflect upon their responses to texts and, through dialogue, to understand the deeper meaning of the text in relation to the world. Deeper meaning comes through “ideological critique,” in which groups of people question and contest beliefs, values, and knowledge of dominant social groups. The goal of critical literacy, according to Freire (1970), is praxis or conscientization. Praxis is comprised of “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126). Through critical literacy praxis, education can be “constantly remade” (p.84).

McLaren (1989) goes one step further and argues that proponents of, simply, critical thinking “neutralize the term critical by repeated and imprecise usage, removing its political and cultural dimensions and laundering its analytic potency to mean ‘thinking skills’” (p. 161). McLaren helps us understand that critical thinking is not critical literacy. Too often a neutralized definition of critical thinking has passed for “critical literacy.” Critical literacy, however, engages social and political contexts. The overarching goal of critical literacy classrooms is to create a critical democracy, where students and teachers engage in literacy practices that relate to
their daily lives so that they play a part in shaping them (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993). At the point that a classroom is engaged in reshaping classroom participants’ lives, through literacy, classrooms are engaged in praxis.

Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) too elaborate on the differences between critical thinking and critical literacy:

Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice... these practices are substantively different from what are commonly referred to as critical thinking approaches. Although critical thinking approaches have focused more on logic and comprehension, critical literacies have focused on identifying social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and unequal power relationships in place. (p. 3)

Although critical thinking and critical literacy share some commonalities of higher-order thinking and reasoning, their sociopolitical goals are very different.

**Goals of Critical Literacy in Practice**

Critical literary and critical literacy theory aim to encourage students and teachers to investigate and analyze the power relationships prevalent in language use and to challenge the belief that education is politically neutral (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). The different lenses through which students can see the world, the more flexible and efficient they can be in discussing and responding with others. A key aspect of critical literacy is the idea that readers learn that texts are bound to context—the context of both the “perspectives of the writer and the socio-cultural times
in which they were written” (Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 159). It involves making connections between controversial/sensitive topics in the world at that particular time and period.

Shor (1980) believes that the goal of critical literacy is to engage students to social issues that can reproduce themselves in the everyday life of the classroom. He suggests that bringing students to voice their perspectives represents a possibility for their “social emergence” (p. 37) within a context that presents real opportunities for individual and collective development. When students understand and experience the world as a place of ongoing change, a place that is never complete and is always in need of more social justice and more equal conditions among its members, then students have acquired a critical consciousness.

Similarly, Vasquez (2004) contends that a “critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived” (p. 1), it is not something that a teacher can simply teach traditionally. She believes that teachers need to intentionally create critical spaces for students to explore new or existing real-world issues and, if the need arises, to undertake transformative social actions.

Rogers, Mosley, Kramer, and the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group (2009) developed a framework of critical literacy that “leans on twin pillars of critique and hope” (p. 195). They recognize that becoming critically literate is a lifetime process. They emphasize that:

...more so than life-long learning, a lifespan perspective of critical literacy education considers what is and what might be in our lives, our classrooms, and the groups in which we participate. It requires that we use our social imagination to imagine new possibilities and courses of actions. (pp. 194-195)

The complex processes of literacy do not occur in a vacuum—they are negotiated within and influenced by a social and cultural context (Bloome, 1989; Cazden, 1988; Delpit, 1995;
Finders, 1997; Gee, 1990; Heath, 1996; Hynds, 1997; Luke, 2000). Luke (2000) argues that reading instruction over time has fallen short of recognizing that reading always connects to the formation of moral values, identities, political ideologies, and beliefs, and therefore, literacy instruction is not a neutral transmission of ideas, but a political and ideological platform. Luke (2009) states that he wants the average citizen to see critical literacy not as subversive, but as a basic human right:

In today’s environment if you don’t have critical literacy you are a sucker, you are going to wind up in debt, you’re going to end up on the streets, you are going to sign up with the first bank that offers you a crummy mortgage, you are going to wind up with big Visa card debt, you are going to buy everything that is pushed your way. (Luke, 2007, Video file)

Thus, Luke (2009) emphasizes that the goal of critical literacy is to make students aware of how they can be agents of texts, rather than victims of texts, and how their voices can reach out into a larger like-minded community. He also urges that we as educators need to address whose readings or whose version of the world counts and give students the opportunity to search for truth and facts in their everyday lives. Bringing AoWs every week that deal with controversial and sensitive issues aims at encouraging open dialogic conditions of exchange in the classroom and establishing democratic engagement that could lead to social action or transformation.

In a similar vein, Janks (2000, 2010) points out that critical literacy “requires that we both engage with and distance ourselves from texts;” this involves “reading with a text and reading against a text” (2010, p. 96). Like Luke, she examines “the multiple threads tying language to power” (p.12) and distinguishes four approaches to critical literacy: domination,
access, diversity, and design that are interdependent and suggests that one without the other produces a problematic imbalance. Janks (2000) explains that critical literacy is the engagement by learners with the major texts, discourses, and modes of information. Critical literacy provides students with technical resources for analyzing how texts work. The world is full of differences, and these differences shape in relation to power—unequal access to resources based on race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. “Even in a world, where socially constructed relations of power flatten, we will still have to manage the politics for our daily lives…the little p politics to distinguish them from the P politics” (Janks, 2010, p. 186). I intentionally introduced sociopolitical issues in my classroom to provide students the opportunity to discuss and deliberate the possibilities and constraints that we all negotiate sometime in our lives. This discourse is the power that we need to seize for social action and change (Foucault, 1980).

According to Jones (2006), critical literacy consists of layers (perspective, positioning, and power) and tenets (deconstruction, reconstruction, and social action). According to Jones, layers of critical literacy include (1) perspective; (2) positioning; and (3) power. The first layer, perspective, focuses on the creator of the text and the idea that people with certain ideologies, beliefs, and perspectives construct texts. The second layer, positioning, suggests that all texts place some people at the center and other at the margins, making the experiences of some people seem more valuable than the experiences of others. The third layer, power, focuses on how language practices that are deep-seated in a hierarchical society create all texts and therefore used to oppress or resist. The tenets focus on what readers and writers can do with texts to engage in critical literacy. These include the following: (1) deconstruction or analyzing a text for how different people are positioned; (2) reconstruction, where the identities of marginalized groups are restored; and (3) social action or working for social change. Like Janks (2000) in her
argument about literacy orientations, Jones (2006) believes that the tenets and layers of critical literacy never work in isolation; they are interrelated.

Critical literacy practices can vary, but the sole purpose of literacy is to understand culture, power, and domination (Kincheloe, 2008). Aronowitz and Giroux’s (1985) vision of the primary task of education resonates with Kincheloe, when they claim that the education ought to create a critical democracy—not of mere participation in elections and the like, but rather creating the space around our daily lives, within the public sphere, and enabling us to take control over our lives and over the nature of knowledge acquisition (p. 9).

Morrell, too, reiterates the significance of reading the world and emphasizes that critical literacy provides students opportunities to question preconceived beliefs, recognize other stances and “separate true knowledge from the dogmatism and moral fanaticism of the day” (Morrell, 2008, p. 38).

According to Morrell (2004), the goal of critical literacy is:

- the ability to challenge existing power relations in texts and to produce new texts that delegitimize these relations;
- a consciousness of the relationship between the dominant culture's use of language, literacy and social injustice;
- the ability not only to read words but to read the world into and onto texts and recognize the correlation between the word and the world;
- and the ability to create political texts that inspire transformative action and conscious reflection. (p. 57)

In general, scholars and practitioners use critical literacy to draw attention to marginalization and to promote social justice. For example, one literacy practice is to have marginalized groups draw on their background experiences to construct their own worlds while reading and writing texts (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Wissman, 2007). In so doing, marginalized
groups create a positive place for themselves in the world by bringing their experiences to bear on the texts they read and write. Another practice involves exploring social relations within texts. This type of textual exploration asks students to identify the marginalized within a text (Lesley, 2008) or to consider what perspectives (or life experiences) are absent in a text (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2004). Exposing texts as non-neutral is a literacy practice that highlights how texts marginalize groups through exclusion.

Additional ways of promoting social justice involve making students’ interests central or, if reading traditional texts, having students critique them. Morrell (2008); Morell & Duncan-Andrade (2002), for example, explain that teaching popular culture and media can provide youth, marginalized by traditional school literacy practices, access not only to academic literacy but also to political engagements that involve 21st century texts and technologies.

Comber and Nixon (1999), while not necessarily using media texts, also make students’ interests a vital component of critical literacy. They ask children to consider how texts work upon them to reveal power relations that influence identity construction. In engaging students with texts and analyzing texts this way, children grapple with their local conditions and consider social change.

Pennycook (1999) and Behrman (2006), like Morrell, find traditional literacy practices marginalizing for some youth. Rather than bring 21st century texts into the classroom, however, they promote social change by asking students to recognize how language in traditional texts affects social relations. Pennycook (1999) points out that critical literacy of this kind can transform at individual and/or institutional levels. Education in critical literacy should aim to foster “social justice by allowing students to recognize how language is affected by and affects social relations” (Behrman, 2006, p.490).
Critical Literacy Research in Classrooms

While reviewing critical literacy research in classrooms, six clusters emerged: (1) text exploration (Bean & Moni, 2003; Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; Schramm-Pate & Lussier 2003); (2) social justice (Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999; Powell, Cantrell, & Adams, 2001; Wissman, 2007; Wright & Mahiri, 2012); (3) situated privilege (Giroux, 1993; Tatum, 1999); (4) power in classroom positioning (Behrman 2006; Vetter, 2010); (5) the role reading models/frameworks play in critical literacy (Huang, 2011; Kaur, 2012); and (6) writing for change (Christensen, 2000; Luke, 2000; McLaren, 1989; Shor, 1980; Wertch, 1991).

I described these six clusters under three categories: (1) critical textual exploration; (2) critical praxis—levels of transformation; and (3) reflective writing relevant to this study. I included the cluster of role reading models/frameworks play in critical literacy under the category of textual exploration and the clusters of social justice studies, situated privilege, and power in classroom positioning under the category of critical praxis—levels of transformation.

Critical Textual Exploration

As noted previously, one way to engage in critical literacy is textual exploration. According to Luke (2000), critical textual exploration involves examining how texts, often overtly, work to construct our worlds, cultures, and identities. He explains that we can use texts as social tools to reconstruct our worlds. To these ends, scholars (Appleman, 2009; Christensen, 2000; Hobb & Frost, 2003; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys 2002; Luke, 2000; McLaughlin, & DeVoogd, 2004; Silvers, Shorey & Crafton, 2010) often use questions such as: Who/what represents the text? Who is marginalized? What is the author trying to accomplish with this text? For whom was this text written? Who stands to benefit or be hurt from this text?
Questions allow teachers and students to ponder issues around race (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; Schramm-Pat & Lussier, 2003; Tatum 1999, 2003); class (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010, 2013); gender (Bean & Moni, 2003; Street 2003; Wissman, 2007); and moral leadership (Walters, 2017) more closely. There are multiple examples of racial explorations within texts.

Cadiero-Kaplan (2002) observed the construction of kindergarten children’s racial identities revealed in their reading of *Nona Bonita* and *The Ugly Duckling*, in which a discussion of race ensued. Children said they did not like their own, dark, skin color; however, by the end of the conversation, students determined that skin color did not matter as much as behavior. This study powerfully demonstrated how students changed their perspectives about the color of skin and behavior.

Schramm-Pate and Lussier (2003) explained how text reconstructed youths’ worlds when they read magazines, newspapers, and websites regarding the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina capital. Students debated, role-played, and wrote about how their own values affected their reading of these texts and this issue. This study draws out the new space that existed in the classroom for innovative ways of making meaning that explored race relations.

Like Schramm-Pate and Lussier’s (2003) study, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) juxtaposed popular culture texts alongside required school texts to promote the development of academic literacies for their work teaching urban youth in Southern California. After acknowledging and understanding the impact of hip-hop culture on students’ lives, regardless of racial or ethnic backgrounds, they brought these literacy practices into the classrooms to “forge a common and critical discourse that was centered upon the lives of the students...allowed us to tap into students’ lives in ways that promoted academic literacy and critical consciousness” (p. 88).
Likewise, Hobb and Frost’s (2003) study engaged in an experiment for eleventh-grade English class and collected data on students’ pre-and post-tests on comprehension of new commentaries, magazine articles, and analytical questions on a media message and found that the intervention students who received media-literacy instruction had developed the strategies “to recognize the complex blurring of information, entertainment, and economics that are present in contemporary nonfiction media…[and] appeared to have a more nuanced understanding of interpreting textual evidence in different media formats to identify the author’s multiple purposes and intended target audiences” (p. 351).

Phelps (2010) found promise in interrogating non-fiction texts to expose the tenets of Islam in America that might disrupt common stereotypes and prejudices that many Americans may have about Islam and Muslims and bring an awareness of complex sociopolitical and ideological issues that is necessary in today’s globalized world.

Huang (2011) and Kaur (2012) conducted qualitative studies that implemented reading models/frameworks of critical literacy, which were powerful in revealing that the reading models helped readers to transform their power of reading locally and globally within and outside texts, making readers analyze critically and think critically in the process of meaning-making.

Finally, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) examined the understandings and classroom practices of two groups of teachers: a group of five newcomers who did not know what a critical literacy curriculum might look like and a group of two novices who had some prior background with critical literacy. The four dimensions of critical literacy—disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, focusing on socio-political issues, and taking a stand toward social justice— provided a framework for the researchers to examine teacher beliefs and practices and to distinguish ways in which teachers hypothesized and enacted critical
literacy. These dimensions enabled the researchers to see where teachers were most comfortable initiating critical literacy and how their practices changed over time. The researchers found that there was much-published work on how teachers with an advanced understanding of critical literacy instructed, so they focused their study on the practices of teachers who were new to critical literacy.

They found that novices saw more opportunities for children to interrogate multiple perspectives and focus on sociopolitical issues. Novices to critical literacy encouraged students to move beyond personal connections and challenged them to better understand the ways in which larger sociopolitical structures position people in the world. The support mechanisms, especially the workshops and study groups, seemed to be effective to all teachers’ growing visions of critical literacy and the possibilities of implementing it in classrooms. The subjects requested more time for conversations and reflection after each workshop session, more book discussions, and the ability to view and discuss videotapes of peers as they implemented critical pedagogy in their classrooms. My study utilizes the four dimensions of critical literacy as a methodological framework, which I will explain in detail in chapter 3.

**Critical Praxis: Levels of Transformation**

Critical literacy practices with the end goal of “praxis” comprise “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire, 1970, p. 126) and involve communities looking at their own social lives and transforming them in some way. Within the critical literacy category of social justice practice, three levels of transformation are evident in the literature: praxis beyond the school, school-level praxis, and praxis within the classroom.

**Praxis beyond the school.** Praxes which occur beyond the classroom occur from a small to a grand scale. On a small scale, for example, a first-grade classroom, learning of an elderly
woman in danger of losing her home, wrote a letter to their local newspaper editor in which they discussed social inequity (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007). On a slightly grander scale, a classroom of fifth-grade students, upon discovering the stereotypes in their classroom textbooks, shared the results of their analysis with younger classrooms and wrote an article in their school newspaper (Peterson, 1994). On an even grander scale, five students, who began as a small inquiry group called “The Hurricane Group,” began a book-coll ecting project that eventually involved their entire first-grade class and families sending books to New Orleans’ students after Hurricane Katrina (Silvers, Shorey & Crafton, 2010). Further, taking action beyond the school level, the “Sistahs” in Wissman’s (2007) research examined issues of race and gender and exhibited their findings in various representations (photography, poetry, and visual autobiographies) at conferences, exhibitions, and on a website. The sistahs’ actions created a representational space that had not existed prior to their social actions.

On yet grander scales of beyond-school actions, three studies involved major community engagements. Comber, Thomson, and Wells (2001) report on a critical literacy project that occurred over a year, in Wells’s second/third-grade classroom in Australia. Her students explored their changing neighborhood through drawings and writing, and project officers and council members considered their ideas. Wright and Mahiri (2012) created a literacy program called Positive Youth Development in which middle and high school youth conducted participatory action research that led, eventually, to the creation of a community youth center involving 60 community stakeholders.

Finally, on an institutional level, high school students in Kentucky, upon learning that Kentucky’s highest mountain peak, Black Mountain, was a target for strip mining, conducted a campaign to save it (Powell, Cantrell, & Adams, 2001). They conducted interviews with miners,
mining company officials, and environmental activists, they analyzed water samples they collected, and they held press conferences to raise public awareness. After writing a proposal with their recommendations, the State of Kentucky adopted a compromise solution.

School-level praxis. School-level critical literacy praxes involved examining problems affecting entire schools. Thornberg (2008) explored school rules and teachers’ behavior in relation to rules in several Swedish classrooms, ranging from preschool to grade five. Students looked at school rules—management and administration. They concluded that teachers were unfair and inconsistent in their interventions and that they did not follow the rules themselves. Also, students felt powerless and perceived teachers sometimes as “bad role models.” Similarly, in another study (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000), elementary students examined lunchroom treatment. They conducted observations and surveys and found that gender and age marginalization occurred. They wrote and performed a play for the student body to raise awareness about lunchroom marginalization.

A final example of school-level praxis involved a teacher researcher in an Australian high school who started an after-school social action group. The group, identifying “teacher-maltreatment” as a social issue they wanted to address, analyzed a staff memo that implied students were stealing. They also examined the school handbook, noting that while “respect” was a key word in the handbook, teachers were disrespectful toward students, in practice. Upon complaining, school administrators dismantled the group. The teacher researcher (McGregor, 2000), however, reported that the project, with its social action emphasis, engaged the youth in critical reading and writing.
Praxis within the classroom. Critical literacy praxis with the classroom usually involves transformation at the text-reading level (Alvermann, Moon & Hagood 1999; Laman 2006; Stevens & Beans 2007; Tatum 1999).

Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) explored children’s discussions as they explained why they shaped their self-created superheroes in certain ways and what visual images they used to depict traits such as gender, power, and personality. In another classroom, students shared examples of popular culture and explored questions regarding who was represented, who was not represented, what aspects of American society were reflected in the popular culture, and who stood to benefit or be hurt by the images.

Tatum (1999, 2003) documented her process of critical literacy with White students addressing racism and learning about the “White Ally,” where she reminds readers that the role of allies is not to “help” victims of oppression; rather, it is “to speak up against the system of oppression, and to challenge other whites to do the same” (p. 65). Similarly, Laman (2006) taught students to identify and classify roles of characters as “allies,” “bystanders,” “targets,” and “perpetrators.” This classifying system of reading generated discussion on racial issues. Students then re-wrote the circumstances, using this framework, whereby they could re-envision social injustices simply by considering alternatives to texts.

Stevens and Beans (2007) reported an English teacher’s reading of Fast Food Nation (Schlosser, 2001) with her students, to question the consequences of corporate farming in their own Nebraskan community. By critically examining farming’s past and present, and speculating on its future, students began co-constructing a more critical perspective on the future of corporate farming and how it may impact their lives and livelihoods. This unit of study stretched beyond traditional question and answer recitation of textual facts to include the real-life impact
and the possible consequences that corporate farming could have on their community if it were to happen.

Similarly, Peterson (1994) used critical literacy with his students and asked them to examine messages in texts and to sort out which ones they should believe, and which ones promote fairness and justice in the world. His fifth-grade students looked at their school books and classrooms for evidence of stereotypes about Native Americans, such as the letter “I” in an alphabet poster pictured with an “Indian.” As a result of their investigation, they took action for social justice by teaching younger students in their school about what they had learned, and they wrote an article in their school newspaper about stereotypes.

**Writing Relevant to this Study**

Many scholars have acknowledged the importance of “voice” in writing and how students need to learn how to identify ways in which their “inner voice” is crucial in mirroring their past, present, and future perspectives, impacting other people and leading to change (Christensen, 2000; Lee, 2000; Lesley, 2008; Shor, 1980, 1992; Wertch, 1991). Writing associates with power (Collins & Blot 2003; Friere, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Luke, 2000; McLaren, 1989; Singer, 2006) and can occur at institutional and even local levels. It is essential for students to become critical thinkers and producers of new knowledge if they are to see themselves as consumers and stakeholders in the future.

Lee (2000) provided “a reflexive, critical portfolio of one teacher’s (ongoing) process of coming to a specific version of critical pedagogy in the teaching of writing” (p. 5). Analyzing student texts, conversations from the classroom, and current scholarship on composition and critical pedagogy, Lee argues for a “pedagogy of revision” and claims that teaching writing is a
political activity with “important possibilities for effecting change both within and beyond our classrooms” (p. 21).

Singer's (2006) study offered a series of stories of justice told through collaborative writing practices. Singer studied students’ writings about stories of injustice, finding an audience and collaborators while writing themselves into activism. In Singer's study, the youth studied models of expository essays about activists while reading a text about the influence of youth throughout the history of the social justice movement in the United States. Students had to write on the question: “What does your activist story teach about the movement toward making a positive social change?” (p. 97). As students designed and executed culminating projects on issues of activism, participants became “consumed with the world outside of the school” (p.112) and becoming experts in activism as well as experts in research literacy.

Lesley (2008) examined the possibility of creating a pedagogical bridge between dominant (school sanctioned) and non-dominant (non-school) forms of literacy. In that study, high school students co-constructed a literacy group with an education professor from a local state university and the school’s Communities in Schools Youth Coordinator. Lesley (2008) examined students’ responses to texts, which were based on topics of social justice. The results for this study show that creating contexts where “at risk” adolescents can explore “marginalized positionalities” presented in a variety of genres of text, creates a bridge between dominant and non-dominant forms of discourse. This study presented the role of critical literacy and its implications to promote a more just society as a key component for creating this bridge.

Thus, writing can be a form of social action. That action may privilege the already privileged and may do that when we ask students to write a “good argument” as required of my eleventh-grade students in state tests. However, writing can also dismantle the status quo,
providing a springboard for grassroots political action (Street 2005). Students’ reflective papers on AoW topics in this study, project their stance with appropriate reasoning and justification and expand their understandings and perspectives to achieve social justice/transformative action.

In this study, students wrote reflective papers in response to AoWs. The writing was a part of my study to disrupt dominant ideologies or, more specifically, to disrupt the commonplace. Reading, writing, and discussing AoWs within a critical literacy framework, provided participant students and me the opportunity to build knowledge and to construct and implement social action projects. Harste, (2003) reminds us that, although writing begins in student’s voice, once students have expressed what is on their minds, they need help to “relocate the personal” (p. 9). When teachers create safe classroom spaces where students publicly share issues of personal and social concern, then students can explore social narrative writing that can provide a way for students to see literacy as a community resource. They can relate to the power relationships that impact their lives and can step out and take action in the world.

While reviewing the literature on critical literacy specifically utilized as practitioner research, the following six practitioner research projects, theoretically framed by critical literacy, informed how I designed my own practitioner research study.

**Practitioner Research Framed by Critical Literacy**

Harper (2005) used a practitioner research design and reflective stance as tools to help sixth-grade students critique and recognize stereotypes and become more aware of issues related to social justice in an affluent, almost all-White school community. A graffiti incident that occurred near the beginning of the school year helped change her classroom culture to one in which students shared openly and critically about graffiti. Harper used social issue books that related to adolescence or race over a seven-month period. Her students reflected on White
privilege in small literature circle groups and other literacy events. Using HyperRESEARCH™ computer software, Harper developed multiple codes pertaining to student discussion data and reduced them to major themes. Using critical literacy stories permitted students to engage in complex discussions about social issues. Students developed an openness to social issues, although a handful showed resistance to engaging in social topics—and Harper had several hurdles to overcome as a practitioner researcher. Harper reported that “engaging in teacher research about this, prompted insights that allowed for more growth as an educator” (cited in Cochran-Smith, 2009, p. 251).

Stern (2008) conducted a practitioner research study with four seventh-grade students in a New York City public school over a four-month period. She was interested in students’ transactions with Harlem Renaissance poems. Students read and annotated poems, wrote their own poetry, and even wrote letters. Stern’s study challenges teachers to remain open to the idea that their students’ dialects may transact with literary texts in ways teachers may not be familiar with. She also calls upon teachers to expand their own knowledge so that they may develop a better understanding of their students’ transactional strategies and give students the space to create their own paths in writing.

McCallum (2014) conducted a critically-oriented practitioner research study of an afterschool writing club in a suburban public middle school. She focused on using dialogic engagement and digital multimodal composing practices to interrogate issues related to the question, “What is power?” McCallum transcribed recorded conversations, made anecdotal teaching memos, and collected samples of student work. “Discourses” of disability and ability surfaced as a theme in her data. She also examined the ways in which the research started to impact her own daily teaching practice. McCallum focused data analysis on conversations that
surfaced when talking about power relationships and on how the critical and digital orientation of the club influenced these discussions. In addition to analyzing whole-class data, McCallum framed a case study of the one-on-one conversations she held with Neil, a student within the club, and the critically oriented multimodal texts that he crafted using critical digital literacy practices.

Wu’s (2008) dissertation research was a practitioner research study that analyzed what it means to teach and learn writing using a critical literacy curriculum in the highly examination-oriented context of Taiwan. This study occurred throughout an academic year in a composition class of 50 students. This class was a requirement for sophomore English majors at a national university in Northern Taiwan. “As the hierarchical structure of education in general and the banking model of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching had failed to provide language learners and teachers in Taiwan an integrated life that connected the word with the world” (Wu, 2008, p. 4). The author designed the writing curriculum to deal with students’ needs and school requirements. Wu discovered that although her students were initially unfamiliar with the critical literacy curriculum, they were gradually able to make it culturally relevant to their experiences by taking up the challenge of an alternative practice of doing writing from their cultural assumptions about learning, writing, and language. Furthermore, Wu found that what she and her students had strived to accomplish did not gain value in the other classes that her students took. Therefore, Wu reported that an important implication of her research is a need to encourage more collaborations among teachers at all levels of the system in Taiwan to explore teaching from a stance of inquiry.

Sepko (1998) conducted a case study examining the data from 21 students enrolled in her 10th grade American literature class in an Appalachian classroom in South Carolina as they read
and applied the Appalachian literature in a nine-week Modern and Postmodern American literature unit. Students in Appalachian settings often had high dropout rates and low literacy levels and characterized as culturally deprived and economically deficient. Very few Appalachian students had the opportunity to read literature reflective of their own cultural region or to engage in critical literacy. Sepko first analyzed data from structured and unstructured interviews, students’ written artifacts, and audio and videotaped classroom discussions. She then selected six students as representative case studies. Sepko’s data analysis focused on the explanation of critical literacy events, which she correlated with the Appalachian literature the class read. The students evidenced features of critical literacy within the events that provided opportunities for students to rely on their cultural backgrounds to make sense of Appalachian literature and to create life story portfolio/presentations. Both native and new students to Appalachia engaged in critical literacy through their own cultural connections with Appalachian texts. The research participants not only met the standards of critical literacy needed to enter the workforce, they did so while reading and responding to Appalachian literature.

Pincus (2005) conducted a practitioner research study with her 43 senior drama students who read, researched and reenacted Kaufman’s (2000b) play, *The Laramie Project*, which was about the merciless beating death of a gay student, Matthew Shephard, whose body was retrieved near Laramie, Wyoming. Pincus collected journal responses and had discussions in response to the issues and events on homosexuality and sexual orientations. Though some students described their reading of the play as an “emotional roller coaster,” it aroused their thinking about social action. The impact of this project rippled out of her classroom when the school decided to perform *The Laramie Project* as a school play. It also led to student government groups having workshops relating to homophobia for the middle school students following the performance.
This inquiry also helped the researcher to consider her own teaching practices—the questions and issues that she would like to pursue in her future classes.

**Summary of practitioner research framed by critical literacy.** I specifically provided the above six examples of practitioner research studies because they informed the critical literacy design of my study in the following ways:

1. Harper’s (2005) study alerted me to the challenges and constraints that I might encounter in my research.
2. Stern’s (2008) students used dialects in ways that opened new interpretations of texts. Her findings opened my eyes to ways I might consider my students’ idiosyncratic methods of learning.
3. McCallum’s (2008) research related to power relationships and how critical literacy influenced their discussions. The hierarchy of social and power networks might be relatable to my students’ implementation of social action projects.
4. Wu (2008) introduced a critical literacy curriculum in a school structure that emphasized standards and exams. Like Wu, I expected my study would inform me about the challenges of teaching with a critical literacy framework in a standardized era.
5. Sepko (1998) recognized that her Appalachian students could not relate to the literature they read because it did not represent their culture. So, she introduced them to Appalachian texts. I chose AoW texts that my students could take a stance on and voice it.
6. Pincus’ (2005) study dealt with sensitive issues of homosexuality, homophobia and hate crimes, and how her project extended beyond her classroom to a presentation of
the school play. My study too involved discussions on sociopolitical issues and this classroom dissonance could generate shared action beyond my classroom.

Practitioner research may “develop a heightened sense of fallibility” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 338), but this does not discourage teachers to deepen their own understandings and invest in education.

**Situated Learning: Communities of Practice**

There have been long-standing ideological debates known as “The Great Debate” about what constitutes literacy and/or literacies, as some disciplines might have it, and whose version of cultures, values, and accounts need to be a part of society. Therefore, the new term *literacies* disrupt from the traditional, restrictive notion of literacy as a single reading and writing or skill-driven phenomenon with predictable consequences—rather, literacies are cultural practices that vary with time and place and have multiple perspectives and complexities, which become functions of the people living within them. Learning therefore, is situational, which is to say that what people learn and how they learn it is dependent upon the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Street (1995) names literacy as “social literacies” and suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the literacy practices held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is inaccurate to suggest that literacy can be “given” neutrally and then its “social” effects only experienced afterward.

A literacy that is not dialogical, that is not emancipatory, merely goes back into the practice of depositing “false knowledge” and contributes to the “domesticating” of human
beings, making a cultural invasion possible (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). A critical approach to literacy considers sociopolitical and historical contexts of subjects and views them from multiple and opposing viewpoints. In working with multiple perspectives, critical literacy theory posits that it is essential to not only consider and respect the voices present but also to pay attention to and seek out the voices silenced or marginalized (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2000). Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education (Freire, 1970, 1973, 1993). Dialogue, implemented in critical pedagogy, provides the balance of “teacher’s authority and students’ input” (Shor, 1992, p. 85) and creates the critical discourse that “questions existing canons of knowledge and challenges power relations in the classroom and society” (p. 87). In fact, when students take responsibility for the discussion, they take the added responsibility for their learning (Walsh & Sattes, 2015). Cornel West (1998) maintains that “dialogue is the lifeblood of democracy” (p. 10).

Similarly, Shor (1992) suggests that bringing students to voice represents a possibility for their “social emergence” (p. 37) within a context that presents real opportunities for individual and collective development. When students understand and experience the world as a place of ongoing change—a place that is never complete, is always in need of more social justice, and more equal conditions among its members, then students have acquired a critical consciousness. When people understand and experience the world as a fixed and static place, then this is a sign that some variety of oppression and false consciousness exists. By students and teachers coming together through dialogue, a “critical paradigm” begins and a “zone of potential transformation” develops whereby a new culture emerges, “the third idiom” (p. 203), which is necessary for a critical literacy practice. Giroux (2007) also suggests students should learn how to deliberate, make judgments, and exercise choice. It should be a “collaborative coming together” (Jones,
2014, p. 6) of teaching and learning which creates an environment in which the critical analysis of text, pedagogy, curriculum, schools, communities, and the world can take place.

Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced three concepts: situated learning, communities of practice, and legitimate peripheral participation. According to Lave and Wenger, learning is not solely cognitive, rather, it is something grounded in social contexts and cultural practices. Communities of practice are communities to which learners become attached through their learning. As a result, “learning in doing” coincides with “learning to be.” Therefore, the role of the teacher is to facilitate purposeful discussions and social interactions and to provide environmental incentives/stimuli to engage children’s inquiry. This study engages in collaborative learning through all the AoW discussions and the planning and implementation of participants’ social action projects. Classroom discourse research has argued for instructional practices that encourage dialogue between teachers and students.

Vygotsky (1978) believed learning is a social activity and talked about language as a mechanism for thinking—a mental tool, and it is this mental tool that we use when we read, write, hear, or experience a new idea. His tenet of “zone of proximal development (ZPD) laid the basis for the socio-cultural explanations of children’s learning. “It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86, italics in original). In line with Vygotsky, Rogoff (1990) coined the phrase “guided participation” to characterize the social participation of instruction between the adult expert and the learner, and only when both participants contribute and when their roles are mutual, can we shape learning.
Bakhtin (1981) too, emphasizes the notion “that utterances and utterance meaning are inherently situated in socio-cultural context” and that meaning is “inextricably linked with historical, cultural, and institutional setting” (p. 66) and that students learn that cultural difference through participation in dialogue referred to as “Addressivity.”

Gee’s (1996) concept of ‘Discourses with a capital “D” likewise provides a fitting description of the cultural and the specific literacy practices observed in communities of practice. Discourses are “ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities” (p. 127), and people participate in multiple discourses in varying contexts such as home, school, work, playground, and church. Erickson writes that “Discourse is how things get done… in the interplay between macro/micro socio-political nature of relations in schools/society” (2004, p.128). Therefore, the meaning is always a matter of contextualizing that conveys emotion and a sense of social identity and ownership (Erickson, 2004; Gee 1996; Naylor and Wood 2012; Well 2007).

Rosenblatt (1978, 1995, 2005), in laying out her transactional theory, claims that every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular text, occurring at a particular time in a particular context; “the ‘meaning’ does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text” (2005, p. 7).

Rosenblatt (2005) suggests that stances (efferent-aesthetic) are the stream of consciousness (p. 12) and that no reading experience is purely aesthetic or purely efferent, but that readers are always making choices about their thinking, focusing on both stances and sometimes more on one than the other. Furthermore, when students have discussions, it “can be a powerful means of stimulating growth in reading ability and critical acumen” (2005, p. 28).
Rosenblatt (1995) also reminds us that:

[W]e teachers of language and literature have a crucial role to play as educators and citizens. We phrase our goals as fostering the growth of the capacity for personally meaningful, self-critical literary experience. The educational process that achieves this aim most effectively will serve a broader purpose, the nurturing of men and women capable of building a fully democratic society.

The prospect is invigorating! (p. 297)

It is definitely invigorating when teachers make a concerted effort to encourage discussions of texts, which makes students realize that the same text takes on different meanings in transactions with different people or even with the same person in different contexts or times because each individual’s “linguistic-experiential reservoir” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 26) is a buildup of past transactions with the environment. In other words, my study engages students in AoW discussions to develop their insights concerning transactions with texts and how their critical and interpretive abilities can lead them to question their views of the world and take social action that is essential in a democracy.

Heath’s (1983) work on literacy practices in three communities in the US—the Roadville, Trackton, and Maintown, explicitly brings out the importance of ecological perspectives, the importance of cultural values, and the need for policy/decision makers in developing a more culturally appropriate curriculum and encouraging an adaptation of strategies/interventions instead of just a “cookbook” approach. As Heath states:

For many families and communities, the major benefits of reading and writing may not include such traditionally assigned rewards as social mobility, job preparation, intellectual creativity, critical reasoning, and public information…
literacy has different meanings for members of different groups, with a variety of acquisition modes, functions, and uses; these differences have yet to be taken into account by policy-makers. (p. 133)

Much sociocultural research in literacy, therefore, requires an understanding of literacy—requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in diverse cultural settings (Au, 2000; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire 1970; Lien, 2003; Street, 1995, 2001). These sociocultural foundations and specifically, my belief that knowledge is situated, multifaceted, and rooted in social relations, shaped this study.

**Knowledge Building**

As stated above, situated learning and discussions or “accountable talk” (Michaels et al., 2008) about social issues can engage a community of learners to become deeper thinkers who can acquire the ability to address difficult/sticky issues and make rational and informed decisions in a democracy. This collaborative learning leads to critical thinking (Garrison et al., 2001; Michaels et al., 2008; Sawyer, 2003; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006) and creating significant artifacts (Stahl, 2008).

Dewey (1933, 1938) maintains that communication between two people does not involve the sharing of ideas or observations that have already occurred independently; instead, he argues that the joint activity of communicating it is what creates ideas. And since meaning comes into existence through communication, one creates knowledge through the same dialogic process. Through dialogue, students can develop a voice within the classroom that thus represent their interests and needs (Giroux, 1997).
Knowledge building classrooms need an environment that encourages students into a knowledge building culture where students integrate valid points from multiple perspectives and contribute as co-constructors. As Guba and Lincoln (1989) state:

It is plain that knowledge emerges as a product of an interaction between humans.... Different interactions will yield different findings. Strange as it may sound to ears socialized to the conventional paradigm, the results are literally—we stress literally—created by that interaction; they are not “discovered” as if they had always been “out there.” (p. 67)

Indulging in AoWs every week and engaging in discussions or accountable talk creates the space for students to deliberate and be better prepared to read and write both the word and the world. It is this community space where students build knowledge and find new possibilities to implement it. According to Michael, O’Connor and Resnick (2008), accountable talk could be based on three broad categories (p. 286):

a. Accountability to the Learning Community—talk aimed at gaining clarity on what others are saying or thinking.

b. Accountability to Standards of Reasoning—talk aimed at presenting original reasoning or pressing for, challenging, or adding on to existing reasoning.

c. Accountability to Knowledge—talk aimed at contributing or recollecting relevant factual knowledge.

Peers influence each other significantly and construct meaning by putting together pieces of the puzzle that can make sense to them (Charmaz, 2006). As Michaels et al. (2008) state:

In the ideal discussion-based classroom community, students have the right to speak and the obligation to explicate their reasoning, providing warranted
evidence for their claims so that others can understand and critique their arguments. The classroom culture assumes that all students have equal access to the floor and to the academic content and that all students have comparable discourse experience to make their voices heard and recognized as offering reasoned and cogent contributions. (pp. 284-285)

At the core of knowledge building is the belief that ideas are real and can evolve when shared and worked upon within a community. This feature highlights that learning does not simply occur “inside the head of the individual” (Bereiter, 2002), but is highly contextual and socially situated.

According to Lave (1985), knowledge building is a part of the activity, context, and culture within which it occurs. Social interaction is a critical component of learning; deep understanding of material comes about in an incidental or unintentional manner, not in a deliberate or forced way. This situated learning is what I encouraged in my study through active engagement in a classroom-community during their discussions and social action projects that lasted for that school year.

Fecho and Botzakis (2007) argue that there is no model dialogic classroom. However, naming and studying the frameworks which underlie these classrooms can help other teachers imagine the possibilities, affordances, and limitations of critical pedagogy, should they choose to implement it in their own contexts. This kind of knowledge building was at the heart of my practitioner research study and not simply an add-on (Scardamalia, 2000).

Similarly, Burns and Worsley (2015) stress that participation is necessary to (a) ensure that knowledge generated is appropriate and benefits the people intended and (b) promotes ownership of learning and development and motivation for sustained change. In this study,
students’ AoW discussions intended open and reflective communication about sociopolitical issues and provided them the opportunity to build knowledge together and construct their social action projects collectively (explained in chapters 5 and 6).

In a similar vein, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) write:

…when teachers at all levels of experience are encouraged to ask questions, their students are more likely to find themselves in classrooms where their own questions, not rote answers signal active and consequential engagement with ideas. (p. 85)

Therefore, it is so important that teachers take the first step to believe in critical literacy and embrace critical literacy discourse in their classrooms instead of shying away from controversy (Fecho 2001).

Therefore, it is important in this time, when so much of schooling is standards-based and assessment-driven, to look explicitly at whether the knowledge that we produce in classrooms is effective of critical pedagogy and what this rethinking of knowledge means to our students.

**Summary**

The above literature review provides a deeper understanding of the important aims and studies of critical literacy studies, practitioner research, studies and knowledge building through communities of practices that relate to my research—working toward principles of democracy and social justice. I drew on the complexities and nuances necessary to expose and disrupt the status quo or the commonplace by introducing social and cultural issues that could evolve into a local/micro and/or global/macro transformation.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

*If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?*

~Einstein

This qualitative research is a practitioner research study of a critical literacy curriculum that I implemented in one of my three eleventh-grade English classes. To assist in understanding the two methodological frameworks for this research, I have organized this chapter as follows: (1) research questions guiding this study; (2) the purpose of qualitative research; and (3) research methodologies that frame this study—(a) practitioner research and inquiry as stance (b) four dimensions of critical literacy (Lewison et.al., 2002).

**Research Questions**

This qualitative research explores the role of critical literacy in one of my English 11 classrooms. The following two major questions guided this dissertation:

1. How are eleventh-grade students’ perspectives evident in their discussions and reflective papers?

2. How do my students and I take up the opportunity to pursue a social action project in response to Articles of the Week?

**Purpose of Qualitative Research**

I utilized a qualitative research methodology for this study that lends to a form of “ideographic” or specific knowledge that is invaluable in the context of individual classrooms (Elliot, 2009). One purpose of qualitative research, therefore, is to present various perspectives of individuals in order to explain specific cultural activities from those perspectives. Denzin and Lincoln (2000), too, posit that “qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of
reality, the intimate relationships between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p. 8).

According to Creswell (2005):

[Q]ualitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of the participants, [and] asks broad general questions, collects data consisting largely of text from participants, describes and analyzes those words for themes” (p. 39).

Hence, qualitative research provides in-depth descriptions of the data, which is more than just reducing pages of narration to numbers (McMillan & Schumacher 2014).

First Methodological Framework: Practitioner Research and Inquiry as Stance

Educational research often separates theory and practice. Conventionally, research links to theory and teaching to the framework for application of theory. Usually, the processes of “thinking” theory and “doing” theory are considered mutually exclusive, and as a result, “theory-thinkers” and “theory-doers” are sometimes perceived as belonging to two distinct communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger (1998) further suggests that a school must be more than a place of instruction, it must also be a place of inquiry, a place that produces knowledge, as well as transmits knowledge. As such, successful professional learning communities require a design that would help teachers systematically understand and improve their own practice.

In practitioner research studies, practitioners themselves simultaneously take on the role of researchers in local settings where they aim to understand their practice and make changes to their practices based on their findings. In this tradition, “research is theorized as a significant
process of coming to know one’s own knowledge and understanding how knowledge is constructed” (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, p. 459).

Practitioner research can take multiple forms. The most common ones include action research, teacher research, self-study, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and using practice as a site for research (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). Therefore, practitioner research “does not fit neatly into the categories of either solely empirical or solely conceptual research; instead it is best, understood as a hybrid based on the dialectic of the two” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 95).

Practitioner research “challenges and intentionally muddies this traditional distinction” (p. 95). As a participant, I could be a practitioner researcher who sought to make meaning, to achieve what cognitive psychologist Bruner (1986, p. 63) calls “a kind of solidarity” with others, to work together toward common goals, and, yet, acknowledge and appreciate individual choices and difference or “as a way of knowing and a grounded theory of action for educational transformation” (Cochran- Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 125). I agree with Richardson (1994), who rejects the perceived dichotomy of practical and formal research and states, “Practical inquiry is conducted by practitioners to help them understand contexts, practices and, in the case of teachers, their students… [While] formal research is meant to contribute to a larger community’s knowledge base” (p.7).

Practitioner researchers who learn to link theory and practice and examine the process and building of their own research through the two different lenses—practitioner and researcher—provide an insider perspective in terms of the data they gather and analyze. Teachers have unique insights to offer research, and teachers’ contributions as research participants can address some burning questions that sometimes haunt teachers, by engaging in teaching that
“provides an opportunity for learners to explore collaboratively topics of personal and social interest…for purposes of producing a more equitable, a more just, a more thoughtful world” (Harste, 2001, p. 1). Hence, bringing critical literacy teaching in one’s own classroom is a deliberate act and I embraced it in my study.

Moreover, teachers who engage in research utilizing inquiry as stance are likely to see the relationships between teaching and research as they discover answers associated with their own curriculum and practice:

Embracing critical inquiry is to embrace a process, a process that through reflection and self-analysis, is self-propagating. Through this process, [teachers] learn that there is no best practice, only continued practice. Existentially, [teachers] can never be best, only better. Grasping that paradox and the process that supports it is the most certain to support continued inquiry by teachers to come. (Fecho, 2000, p. 199)

I situated this study within the tradition of practitioner research for several reasons: (1) as a doctoral student, public school teacher, and researcher, I am a literacy education practitioner; (2) I view my role as facilitator of my classrooms as a practice and intend to change my approach to facilitation based on what I learn through this research; and (3) I wanted to create the conditions for my classroom to become an inquiry community in which we pose questions based on AoWs, dialogue with each other, question our assumptions, raise critical questions, and after researching on a topic, work toward some method of social action.

I believe that a practitioner researcher position would give me a unique vantage point—being a public-school teacher for the past eleven years gives me the experience and knowledge that comes with teaching full-time in a specific context. The unique feature of teachers is that
they are constantly reflecting on their practices—learning what happens in classrooms, schools, and districts—and it is teachers who, in the end, will significantly influence future teaching, learning, and schooling and be able to change the world by understanding it (Rudduck, 1995).

**Key Features of Practitioner Research**

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have listed eight salient characteristics that most forms of practitioner research relate to, which I summarize below and which I incorporated into the design of my study.

**Practitioner as researcher.** In a practitioner research study, the researcher is the practitioner, and the practitioner is the researcher. Such dual roles provide an “insider perspective” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that counters traditional concepts of research in which practitioners are the topics of study or serve as informants and “outsiders” conduct the research. I played these dual roles in my study.

**Community and collaboration.** In most forms of practitioner research, participants collaborate within and across the communities of practice and inquiry. My students’ social action projects went beyond the classroom to involve peers across the high school, faculty, administrators, and parents, thus initiating learning communities for sharing of research knowledge and feedback.

**Knowledge, knowers, and knowing.** Practitioner research works on the assumptions that all involved in inquiry work together as “knowers” to generate knowledge that is directly applicable to their local contexts/classrooms and can often also “function as public knowledge by informing practice and policy beyond the immediate context” (p. 42). This practitioner inquiry was a collaborative effort by participants and me in developing social action projects that involved the local community.
Professional context as inquiry site and/or professional practice as focus of study.

When teachers conduct research on their own teaching and/or in their own instructional contexts, they create knowledge that is distinct from knowledge created by outsiders studying the same contexts. Knowing my participants and sharing in day-to-day practices helped me make immediate decisions and answer students’ questions in context. The questions that practitioner researchers explore emerge “from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersections of the two” (p. 42).

Blurred boundaries between inquiry and practice. Practitioner researchers often find the boundaries between practice and research blurred by the nature of their work. This blurring of the two roles of “practitioner” and “researcher” often creates tensions, dilemma, and problems, but steps of being reflexive, triangulating data, and sharing for critique among professional learning communities may provide a deeper understanding of the issues in context and serve a larger purpose of schools in a democratic society. Schön (1983) characterizes practice as a process of “posing and exploring problems as identified by teachers themselves” (p. 9). The dual process of inquiry and reflection produces meaningful knowledge for teachers in transforming and informing their practice.

Validity and generalizability. An interesting feature across many forms of practitioner research is that the researchers often look at validity and generalizability in ways that are different from traditional and academic research. Some replace validity with trustworthiness and generalizability with transferability.

Systematicity. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) emphasize the need for practitioner research to be systematic and use this criterion to separate practitioner research from other kinds of traditional research. In addition to multiple data sources, practitioner researchers need to
commit to “long-term and highly systematic observations and documentation of learners and their sense making” (p. 44), which may include narratives or interpretations as data.

**Publicity, public knowledge, and critique.** Practitioner research, although being local, often aims at being public and accessible to populations beyond the immediate. Many scholars, in fact, place a lot of importance on the need for practitioner researchers to make their knowledge public in ways that are reachable to the larger community of academia.

My insider’s perspective benefited me in the sense that I could consider all the above characteristics in light of what was happening in my classroom to generate knowledge and students’ voices and make a difference by bringing social action projects alive outside my classroom. Practitioner research stresses innovation, enables teachers to observe their own students in a multiplicity of situations, and most importantly, enables other teachers committed to social justice to study and relate how students resist, consent to, or argue about equity in society.

**Inquiry as Stance**

Inquiry as stance provides educators opportunities to develop a lifelong approach to learning and teaching. It offers educators multiple opportunities to reflect upon, learn about, and adjust their teaching practices and encourages responsiveness to change and social action. Practitioner researchers implementing inquiry as stance need to be open-minded and depending on context, the results of the inquiry may lead to the uncovering of additional challenges and further inquiry.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993, 2009) argue that helping teachers develop an inquiry stance will make teachers better critical thinkers, which will, in turn, make their students better critical thinkers.
They further argue that:

[T] here is a clear contrast between the meaning of inquiry, regarded as stance on teaching, learning, and schooling, and the much more common use of inquiry as a time-and place-bound classroom or school research project completed within a teacher preparation or professional development program. (2009, p. 113)

With practitioner inquiry as my stance, I integrated teaching and research as a realistic method to develop critical literacy strategies in my own classroom. I created a space for students to think critically about the world so that they can engage with the world “to transform policies and structures that limit access to equitable and democratic education” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 143). Practitioner inquiry as stance would contribute to my understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and needs of my students in my own teaching context. “The ultimate purpose of inquiry as stance—always and in every context—is enhancing students’ learning and life chances for participation in and contribution to a diverse and democratic society” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 146). Inquiry as stance thrives on uncertainty because knowledge is always evolving—changing because of new insights and new problems—and that is when learning transpires (Fecho, 2004).

I built my overarching knowledge-practice relationship based on the four central dimensions of the construct of inquiry as stance. Stance is an overarching concept including a theory of action grounded in the dialect of theory and practice, a repositioning of practitioners as intellectuals, and a repositioning of teaching as a transformative, socially active profession. Listed under stance are four dimensions of practice as Figure 1 represents, which I explain later in detail.
Figure 1. Adapted from Inquiry as Stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 126).
**Dimension 1.** The first dimension, Knowledge, is a perspective on knowledge that discards the formal knowledge-practical knowledge dualism and instead takes up social and political issues “on an ongoing basis with local, but globally influenced, problems for which solutions do not already exist and questions for which answers are not already known” (Cochran & Lytle, 2009, p. 127).

**Dimension 2.** The second dimension, Practice, is an interplay of teaching, learning, and leading that involves a combination of “students’ learning as well as students’, teachers’, and leaders’ ongoing investigations into the social, cultural, intellectual, relational, and political aspects of knowledge construction” (p. 133), which was practiced in my classroom through AoW discussions, reflection papers, and “working the dialectic” with administrators/faculty, to come up with specific social action projects.

**Dimension 3.** The third dimension, Communities, involves communities as the key medium for carrying out the theory of action that my students and I implemented through social action projects. By working collaboratively, we analyzed the social issue proposed and came up with a plan for students to get exposure to a wider audience, which may contribute to communities becoming “catalysts for change” (p. 143).

**Dimension 4.** Surrounding these “interior” dimensions is a fourth dimension, Democratic Purposes and Social Justice Ends. By encouraging and engaging in critical literacy, deliberating and appreciating others’ perspectives, students recognized democratic values and committed to taking action for social change and social justice inside the classroom during our inquiry and outside the classroom by implementing their social action projects.
The above model of inquiry as stance informed how I developed curriculum for my students, how I engaged my students in that curriculum, and how I understood my students’ engagement so that my understanding would transform my own and others’ who pursued similar teaching practices. In addition to this method of practitioner research, critical pedagogy also explicitly informed my study. Inquiry as stance is also compatible with my belief that research and teaching, need not be opposing dichotomies. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) write:

[T]he assumption behind inquiry as stance is that the dialectical relationships of research (or theory) and practice, researchers and practitioners, knowing and doing, analyzing and acting, and conceptual and empirical research make for generative and productive tensions rather than dichotomies. (p. 123)

Second Methodological Framework: Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed 30 years of professional literature on the definitions of critical literacy and synthesized them into four dimensions, introduced in Chapter 2. In what follows, I explain these dimensions, a second methodological framework that influenced how I designed my critical literacy curriculum.

Disrupting the Commonplace

This dimension involves seeing the world through new lenses, critiquing, and being able to perceive and consider how texts influence readers. Here, readers look at widely accepted notions in a new way. Disrupting the commonplace might include reading texts that present a different view of the world or challenge common practices.

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) use Ramadan, the Islamic holiday, as an example of disrupting the commonplace. Celebrating Ramadan disrupts most North American students’ understanding of religious holidays, which often limits to Judaic and Christian holidays such as
Hanukkah and Christmas (Goldsmith, 2002). Celebrating Ramadan describes Ibraheem, a New Jersey boy and how his Islamic holiday is a time of peace and harmony for Muslims. At a time when there is war in the Middle East, reading this text disrupted the notion that people in the Middle East do not believe in peace. Along the same lines, I used AoWs in the design of my critical literacy curriculum to bring multiple perspectives on social issues into the limelight, so that my class would reflect upon whose perspectives were missing or considered in the articles.

For teachers who draw on critical literacy teaching practices, disrupting the commonplace involves having students question social practices that construct and maintain inequities involving race, ethnicity, gender, and class, etc. Thus, teachers who engage in sensitive and risky texts that explore race, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion, often pursue to establish democratic classrooms that take on a dialogic structure.

I chose AoW content that dealt with sociopolitical issues. Through discussions, I wanted to disrupt the commonplace of traditional school content as well as a traditional binary distinction between students and teacher (Freire, 1973; Luke, 2012). Also, by design, at the end of eight weeks, students researched, planned, and conducted social action projects. My goal was to interrupt the commonplace of the typical school curriculum, which usually ended with simply a test or exam. Teaching literacy without questioning its basic claims runs the risk of perpetuating dominant ideologies (Freitas & McAuley, 2008; McIntyre, 1997).

**Interrogating Multiple Perspectives**

This dimension of critical literacy requires readers “to imagine standing in the shoes of others” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). Readers need to understand texts’ multiple perspectives. This means readers must consider what other characters in the text might be thinking or feeling, even when their thoughts are not like the authors.’ When readers interrogate multiple
perspectives, they examine the unspoken voices of those silenced in addition to those heard. Fundamentally, this dimension confirms that everyone’s voice matters in a specific culture. I designed my critical literacy curriculum so that students could interrogate texts in two contexts: their own original reading of AoWs and the class’s discussion of the text. I wanted students’ discussions on controversial topics not only to encourage them to take a stance and voice their perspectives, I also wanted to create a space where students ‘perspectives led to social action projects.

Other researchers have also used text interrogation as a research and teaching framework. Christensen (2000), for example, built a classroom community in which students “learn[ed] to live in someone else’s skin, understand the parallels of hurt, struggle, and joy across class and culture lines, and work for change” (p. 2). Freire (1970) too, noted that quite often we never consider the experience of the oppressed as relevant or useful; thus, when change does occur, it usually just replaces the existing oppression with more of the same without ever acknowledging the value of one’s own experiences.

Luke and Freebody (1997) argue that critical literacy involves interrogating texts by asking questions such as, “How is this text trying to position me?” For students to interrogate texts, they must understand the power relationship between the reader and the author. The author has the power to define the topic and the handling of ideas in the text, however, the reader has the power to question their perspective. Readers have the right to question the author’s perspective. Luke and Freebody argue that dialogues should be candid, open exchanges among students and teachers that focus on revealing multiple realities.

Asking questions and participating in discussions enables the possibility of change—discussion promotes imagining what alternatives might be possible. Educators need to recognize
students’ prior knowledge if they are to become critically literate because they are simply not empty vessels (Larson & Marsh, 2005). My goal, in designing a critical curriculum, was for dialogue processes to lead to the development of a language of critique that included students’ own experiences, and which would lead to social action. I believe that the more students engage in discussions and recognize multiple perspectives of their peers, the less inclined they are to rely upon the teacher’s authority of knowledge.

**Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues**

Once the disruption of commonplace transpires and the existence of multiple perspectives recognized, the third dimension, focusing on sociopolitical issues “attempts to step outside the personal to interrogate how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions” (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383). This is how students become text analysts (Freebody and Luke, 1990). A text analyst investigates the author’s purpose to write a specific text and how he or she practices the cultural systems of meaning, questioning the legitimacy of unequal power relations, investigating oppression, privilege, and status, and using literacy as a means to participate in the politics of daily life (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2008) explain, “Although critical thinking approaches have focused more on logic and comprehension, critical literacies have focused on identifying social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and unequal power relationships in place” (p.3). Focusing on sociopolitical issues is key to understanding the distinction between critical thinking and critical literacy, and in turn, enacting critical literacy pedagogy.

I designed a critical literacy curriculum that would encourage students to do close readings of AoWs and engage in critical literacy by asking questions about “language and power,
people and lifestyles, morality and ethics, and who is advantaged by the way things are, and who is disadvantaged” (Comber & Simpson, 2001, p. 271). My goal was for students to become critical consumers and develop radical curiosity (Freire, 1970).

**Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice**

The fourth and final dimension epitomizes praxis and highlights the transformative power of critical literacy to advance social progress. As Cumming-McCann (2003) argues:

The approach requires students to make decisions and to take action related to the concept, issue, or problem they have studied. This approach requires that students not only explore and understand the dynamics… but also commit to making decisions and changing the system through social action. (p. 11)

Social change leads to transformation in thinking, which in turn influences behavior patterns in society. Freire (1970) notes that true transformative social action must come from the class of the oppressed rather than instituted by the dominant social structures if it is to shape lasting change. Vasquez et al. (2013) too, believe that taking social action is a significant component to move the school curriculum to the community and to make it relevant to the lives of the students we teach (p. 15).

Similarly, Morrell (2008) encourages critical literacy theorists to find innovative ways to engage student literacies on behalf of social justice and social change. Rather than regimenting and standardizing the agenda of the privileged, he argues that educators should look for ways to open space for students to be the change they want in the world. As noted by Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002), going beyond reflecting on what one has done or might do, to fully align with taking action and promoting social justice is not easy. They warn that novice critical educators may, in certain situations, fall short of providing opportunities for students to fully align with this
fourth Critical Literacy component. Comber (2011), too, contends that when students’ varying practices can become part of a collective capacity in a classroom, they can address and take action on issues of power, privilege, and injustice to approach possibilities. Thus, she strongly believes that the existing knowledge and practice children bring with them to the classroom regarding power relations can facilitate learning about injustices.

I designed a critical literacy curriculum so that students’ final assignments for the course, a social action project, required them to take responsibility and make connections between their own life and the social community. I also wanted them to experience that their voices can bring a change in their lives, the lives of others, and in society.

In summary, my two-part methodological framework—practitioner research and inquiry as stance, and Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys’ (2002) critical literacy-framework, informed the design of my study and my analysis. This research would lead to students’ exploration of critical literacy and changes in my own teaching practices, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) state:

Working from and with an inquiry stance then, involves a continual process of making current arrangements problematic; questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change. (p. 121)
CHAPTER 4

Research Design

In this chapter, I lay out my research design by restating my research questions, followed by setting, selection criteria, and participants. Then I provide an overview of the critical literacy curriculum that I incorporated into my study. Next, I provide the data collection and the phases of data collection followed by an overview of the method of data analysis for my two research questions based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2015). I also address issues on trustworthiness and reflexivity as they pertain to my practitioner research study.

Research Questions

1. How are eleventh-grade students’ perspectives evident in their discussions and reflective papers?

2. How do my students and I take up the opportunity to pursue a social action project in response to Articles of the Week?

Setting

Rezlin High School (pseudonym) is a small semi-rural school in Upstate New York. The district serves about 2,000 students in grades Pre-K through 12. According to the New York State Department of Education enrollment data, in the 2015-2016 school year, the high school was home to 582 students from grades nine to twelve. At the time of the study, the student body comprised 86% White, 6% Hispanic or Latino, 5% Black or African American, 1% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Multiracial. Students were from different socioeconomic levels, with 42% classified as economically disadvantaged (New York State Department of Education: Enrollment Data).
Selection Criteria and Participants

I am an eleventh-grade English teacher at Rezlin High School. I teach five classes in 40-minute periods each day. This study is a practitioner research study involving one of my three eleventh grade classes from October 2015 to June 2016. All my English 11 classes had the same curriculum, but it differed in these ways:

a. The participating class planned and conducted their social action projects in groups on Fridays, from March until May, while the other two classes worked on planning their research papers individually.

b. While the participating class planned and conducted social action projects on Fridays, the other two eleventh grade classes continued reading, reflecting, and discussing additional Articles of the Week, instead of completing social action projects.

Purposive and Convenience Sampling

Data gathering is crucial in research, as the data is meant to contribute to a better understanding of a theoretical framework (Bernard, 2002). I used both purposive and convenience sampling for this research. Qualitative researchers use purposive sampling to seek participants who are likely to serve as “rich sources of information” (Patten, 2012, p. 149) and convenience sampling when researchers select a group of individuals based on being accessible to the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

After I received my class rosters from school counselors who assigned students to classes, I chose period three from the three English 11 classes as the class with which I would conduct my research because I had a preparatory period before and a study hall after that period. This gave me time to prepare my classroom for discussion and video recording and gave me time
after class to make field notes and write in my research journal (Figure 2 provides the
demographics of my participants).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ Pseudonyms</th>
<th>School-Identified Gender</th>
<th>School-Identified Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burnette</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curt</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taffy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libby</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobias</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliet</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total=22</strong></td>
<td><strong>Male= 13</strong></td>
<td><strong>White=19,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Female=9</strong></td>
<td><strong>African American=2,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Latino=1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.* Class demographics.
This class comprised 23 eleventh-grade students. One student opted out of participating in this research; hence 22 students consented to participate in my study. All places and students’ names in this research are pseudonyms.

**Overview of the Critical Literacy Curriculum in this Study**

Critical literacy is of the essence in today’s classrooms, and my qualitative practitioner research study sheds light on how my students engaged in critical literacy discourse. This study explored critical literacy using Articles of the Week (AoWs). AoW reflective papers and discussions culminated in social action projects from October 2015-June 2016.

My critical literacy curriculum was based on Gallagher’s (2004, 2009) Article of the Week (AoW). Gallagher (2004, 2009) developed the Article of the Week activity to provide students the opportunity to build their background knowledge, engage in discussions on current/authentic events, and think critically when writing their reflection papers.

From the beginning of October through the beginning of December, the eleventh-grade student participants in my study read eight articles on controversial topics that we chose to read as shown in Figure 3.

Every Monday, I handed out an article as homework. Students responded to them by writing a reflective paper of at least one-page and bringing it in on Fridays. On Fridays, I facilitated a discussion on the article, and then students handed in their reflective papers. After reading, writing, and discussing all eight articles, students took a survey and identified the three most interesting topics from the eight they would like to conduct as their social action project. Before conducting their social action projects, students wrote individual research papers on their chosen social action topics. Then, from March through the end of May, students worked in groups to plan and implement social action projects on their topics.
# Articles of the Week (AoWs)


   https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2015/10/02/the-oregon-shooting-probably-wont-change-the-politics-of-gun-control


   https://goalbookapp.com/pathways/#!/passages/33cdb5dc-e3f8-468c-465d-ced92501216d


   https://www.huffingtonpost.com/warren-j-blumenfeld/extinguishing-libertys-fl_b_8593168.html

*Figure 3. Articles of the Week (AoWs).*
As a significant component of my critical literacy classroom that I designed, I was a facilitator, guide, and even a recipient of new knowledge. Strauss and Irvin (2000) suggest that, when alternative types of texts become center stage, interconnections among language, literacy, and culture become stronger. Therefore, when I introduced AoWs alongside required texts as specified by the English department of which I am a member, I integrated everyday knowledge into traditional literacy that disrupted the commonplace of what student engagement typically looked like in an English classroom. As practitioner Christensen (2000) explained:

I came to see [critical] literacy as a tool that students could use to know themselves and to heal themselves . . . I discovered that my students were more engaged in learning when we stopped reading novels as ends in themselves and started reading and examining society—from cartoons to immigration laws to the politics of language—and taking action, as Baldwin says, to ‘change it and to fight it. (p. vii)

**Data Collection**

I collected six kinds of data: (1) scanned copies of students’ eight reflective papers based on the eight AoWs; (2) transcriptions of eight video-recorded AoW discussions; (3) teacher journal for field notes; (4) students’ post AoW surveys; (5) scanned copies and/or photographs of students’ social action projects; and (6) transcription of a post-social-action, whole class video recorded discussion. I collected these data in four phases (see Appendix A).

**Four Phases of Data Collection**

**Phase 1: Article of the Week (October-December).** Phase one was a teaching and discussion phase. It involved the implementation of AoWs, which occurred over eight weeks beginning in October. When I introduced the course and explained its goals, I explained my role as a facilitator and learner and how teaching from an inquiry stance is about shared knowledge
building with my students and colleagues. I explained that I would learn from our work together and would share what I learned with my colleagues.

Students read AoWs every week for eight weeks, usually on Mondays, and brought their reflective papers for whole-class discussion at the end of the week, usually on Fridays. Prior to data collection, I introduced students to the AoWs and walked them through the process of how to conduct discussions. I arranged the classroom desks in a circle format to foster discussions. I modeled close reading, note-taking, and using critical literacy questions written on a graphic organizer (see Appendix B). I transferred the questions on the graphic organizer into “bookmarks” that could serve as a reference for students as they wrote their AoW reflective papers throughout the AoW phase of the research.

Students’ eight reflective papers provided evidence of their thinking about the AoW topics. I video recorded the AoW whole-class discussions and used recordings to identify speakers. I also transcribed discussions. Videos also helped me gain insights into how I could facilitate and draw out the voices of those students who were not participating.

I kept a teacher journal in which I wrote during my study-hall period. I wrote detailed field notes about what I observed while teaching, issues or concerns that arose during classroom discussions, recollections of incidents that required deeper reflection, and ideas for lesson planning. (While not always a part of Phase 1, I also used the journal to note patterns that seemed to emerge throughout the study and to keep a detailed timeline of students’ meetings and social action processes during Phase 4.)

**Phase 2: Surveys (Mid-December).** After the class discussed eight AoWs, I gave them a survey (see Appendix C, Part A) to learn two things: (1) whether reading, writing, and discussion of AoWs differed from reading, writing, and discussion about other texts and (2) which three
AoW topics they found most interesting to explore further, both in a research paper (requirement for all my eleventh-grade classes, but not part of this study) and as a social action project. By January, students had chosen social action project topics. In the participating class, three teams formed based on the chosen topics: Gun Control, School Start Later, and Syrian Refugees.

**Phase 3: Independent research papers (January-February).** Across my three eleventh-grade classes, students researched their topics and wrote a research paper as an English department requirement.

**Phase 4: Social action (March-June).** After writing individual research papers on the controversial topic of interest to them, my non-participating classes continued reading and discussing other AoWs. My participating class, on the other hand, formed inquiry groups once per week. In collaborative teams, they planned and implemented social action projects informed by their independent research. Hence, my reflective journal at this juncture of the research began with my recollection of each group’s work, observations of their work, students’ meeting schedules with people connected to their research (such as the school principal), and how students in each group planned their social action projects.

After this, I assisted groups of students at the beginning phase of their collaborative work, brainstorming probable projects, considering the feasibility of their projects, and considering implications for the larger educational community. Once I sensed that students knew how to approach their projects, I stepped back and let the groups plan their actions and work with the main-office secretary, librarian, and administrators to accomplish their social actions. I took photographs of students’ projects throughout the planning and implementation process, including any display that students created. I continued writing in my teacher journal during this phase of
the research, noting how separate groups approached their projects as well as how they encountered and negotiated the social networks they had endured on their projects.

In the final post-action discussion with my students on June 6, 2016, I asked students for feedback on their social action projects, gaining a multidimensional perspective on their experiences, their learning, and the critical choices they made throughout the project. During this discussion, I also shared my preliminary analyses to learn whether I was understanding their experiences effectively.

In summary, using multiple forms of data helped me gain an in-depth and complex understanding of my research questions.

**Method of Data Analysis**


Constructivist grounded theory calls for a reflexive researcher stance that attends closely to “empirical realities,” and requires the researcher to “[locate] oneself in these realities” (p. 206). While in the traditional, positivist grounded theory, the researcher is likely to delay the review of the literature to avoid becoming too familiar with the research topic, Charmaz (2006) argues that conducting a literature review prior to engaging in the study allows the researcher to develop *theoretical sensitivity* or an awareness of the subtleties in the data and an ability to draw meaning from the data.

Since this inquiry was a practitioner research study, and the study involved discussions of AoWs and social action projects, I considered the constructivist grounded theory appropriate
because “we [researchers] are a part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10).

Moreover, this study closely utilized five steps specified by Charmaz (2005): Firstly, I established “intimate familiarity with the setting(s) and the events occurring with it—as well as with the research participants.” (p.521). Secondly, I focused on “meaning and process at both the subjective and social levels,” while being cautious of considering “the context in which the studied research problem or process exists” (p. 522). Thirdly, I engaged in a “close study of action…What do research participants see as routine? What do they see as problems?” (p. 523). Fourthly, I focused on “action and context” in order “to make nuanced explanations of behavior” (p. 524). Finally, I emphasized the importance of language because “Language shapes meaning and influences action. In turn, actions and experiences shape meanings” (p. 525).

My practitioner research study generated data in my own classroom as part of the natural proceedings in the setting. Studying my own students’ experiences helped me to get a better understanding of my participants, to interact with them, and to collaborate. This, in turn, shaped my data analysis.

**Overview of Analyzing Data**

Qualitative researchers analyze data by constructing themes evident in the data. I analyzed data differently to my two research questions. In what follows, I describe methods I used to develop themes (which I will discuss in depth in chapters 5 and 6) for each of my research questions separately.

Strauss and Corbin (2008) suggest that early phases of theme generation should concern discovery of properties, conditions, and answers to who, what, where, when, and why questions.
To that end, in order to answer my research question 1: How are eleventh-grade students’ perspectives evident in their discussions and reflective papers? I asked these initial questions as I read students’ reflection papers:

- What is the student’s stance/claim on this topic?
- How is the claim supported?

Asking these initial questions of students’ reflection papers allowed me to generate codes, such as “student made a claim,” or “student provided reasoning,” or “student used textual evidence.” Developing initial codes led me to ask more questions, such as, “What is the student’s takeaway for this article and from the discussion?” I tentatively applied initial coding, and as the analysis proceeded, I modified these codes to construct common patterns and themes across student interactions to provide “pattern matching” which strengthens internal validity in qualitative research (Yin, 2009, p. 136). As Lankshear and Knobel (2004) note, open coding begins with specific meaning units removed from the data to draw broader interpretations from these individual pieces of data.

After coding reflection papers for purpose of understanding some basic properties (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), I coded video transcripts. Again, with the same goal in mind as discussed in the above section, I systematically asked more questions of video transcript data, such as,

- How did some students change their stance from their reflective papers?
- How many students changed their stance?
- On what articles did students deliberate more? When did students personalize their responses? (This question emerged as an important question to consider while I was analyzing the other three questions).
This process of asking questions of the data helped me to triangulate my emerging codes across the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). According to Creswell (2007) triangulation is, “The examination of each information source by the inquirer to find evidence which supports a theme. This ensures that the study will be accurate because the information draws on multiple sources of information, individuals, or processes” (p. 259). My goal was to understand patterns across article responses and discussions; I was concerned with representing all students’ perspectives and means of responding to issues.

I also developed a color-coding system to assist me in keeping track of themes across the data. Color codes revealed more questions such as, “Why did students utilize this particular discussion strategy?” and “Did students use the questioning strategy more with certain topics?” Since many of my questions involved tallying and adding up ways students used specific strategies to engage in reflective papers and discussions, I also created tables that allowed me to keep track of my developing quantitative data. Asking questions caused me to go back to the tally tables, the reflective papers, the video-recording transcripts, and my research journal to triangulate developing themes across data.

Using these methods, I kept an analytic distance and let the data speak. Strauss and Corbin (2008) assert, “doing line-by-line coding through which categories, their properties, and relationships emerge, automatically takes us beyond description and puts us into a conceptual mode of analysis. Classifying indicates grouping concepts according to their salient properties, that is, for similarities and differences” (1990, p. 66). I looked at the disparities and dimensions within the categories I developed and related them “… to subcategories along the line of their properties and dimension levels… to see how categories crossect and link[ed]” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 124).
For research question 2, in which I question how my students and I take up the opportunity to pursue a social action project in response to Articles of the Week, I used the same data-reducing approaches as I did for question 1, but I used questions that suited to the research question to generate themes. I provide detailed analysis and findings for research question 1 and question 2 in chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative studies is a measure of a study’s credibility (versus a quantitative study’s statistical validity). Trustworthiness is the credibility of research findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), typically measured by clear, “thick descriptions” of how researchers analyze data and arrive at findings, providing sufficient details to enable the reader to determine relevance. I established trustworthiness and credibility through prolonged engagement (a nine-month study) and reflexivity, providing sufficiently detailed descriptions of data, in analysis methods and means of triangulation.

While investigating my own practices may raise ethical issues in dealing with “troubling blind spots” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 35), it does not mean that teachers should not take up the challenges and invest in being sources of optimism and change. In fact, teachers bring years of expertise and insight into their research and are “native habitants” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 58) of their instructional sites. As Herr and Anderson (2005) explain:

As researchers, we acknowledge that we all enter the research with a perspective drawn from our own unique experiences and so we articulate to the best of our ability these perspectives and biases and build a critical reflexivity into the research process. We also articulate these evolving perspectives in our journaling, field notes, and to some extent, in the dissertation itself…as long as they are critically examined rather than ignored. (p. 60)
In order to provide my “nature habitant” perspective, but to do so credibly, I used triangulation throughout data collection and analyses, using the constructionist grounded theory. I systematically and thoroughly looked at all the data that I collected. I went back and forth, cross-checking data, asking questions, and converging students’ statements to form saturation charts and coded themes to make my findings as rich and robust as I could. There were many levels of analyses which I explain in detail for both my research questions in chapters 5 and 6.

**Reflexivity**

One of the biggest challenges that practitioner researchers face is to establish the procedural integrity of their work. The academic community often critiques practitioner research as lacking ‘rigor,’ but constructivist grounded theory emphasizes that the researcher’s own voice and deep understandings of the context creates meaning (Charmaz, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2015). As a practitioner researcher, it was important that I consider how my own biases and values shaped and/or enhanced the study at each step of the research process: study design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting of findings. I expect that sharing my research in a comprehensible manner and opening it to the critique of other practitioners and researchers in the field will ensure the quality and rigor of my research (Shulman, 2000).

In practitioner research, the researcher is an intersectional subject, “who speaks from a [intersection of] class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspectives” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 18). As such, I reflect on how my intersectional position influenced my study in chapter 5. Writing a reflexive research journal helped me in this endeavor; it helped me to learn/unlearn about myself and to better understand how my biases shaped my study. For example, my journal entries included questions, and/or reflexive thoughts, about when/where/
how I positioned myself as a teacher, researcher, participant and facilitator. The following is an excerpt from my journal after student’s discussion on the topic of Gun Laws:

I had my stance on having stricter gun laws and the common sense of doing away with automatic and semi-automatic guns, but I was careful not to interrupt students’ discussions and impose my power on students. But when I was asked about other nations, I added my spiel and explained how Australia and Germany had curtailed mass shootings through stricter gun control laws. America truly takes pride in their right to bear arms!! (Journal, Oct. 23, 2015)

My journal entries helped me understand my boundaries as they influenced how I gathered data and analyzed it. Implementing social action projects was exploring uncharted waters, which disrupted the commonplace both for my students and me, but I seized the moment to capitalize, improvise, and facilitate this inquiry. For example, this is a post social-action excerpt captured on video:

Even though it is my study, I did not let my biases come in the way and listened to student’s challenges with the social action projects and why they advised me not to do the social action projects with my future classes. I had to remind myself that this is a learning process—an inquiry that gives us an opportunity to voice our perspectives and engage in authentic and appropriate ways of understanding and engaging beyond the classroom. (Journal, June 16, 2016)

I agree with Cochran-Smith (2003) that practitioner inquiry is “not only reflective and critical…but also reflexive, with the learning of students…functioning as a kind of reflecting pool or mirror for the learning of their teachers” (p. 19).
CHAPTER 5

Data Analysis and Findings: Question 1

Curiosity begins as an act of tearing to pieces or analysis.

~ Alexander

In this chapter, I focus on the data analysis and findings to my first research question. Being a practitioner researcher, one of the core features of my dissertation work was that I immersed in my data collection and was also an active agent in analyzing data. Moreover, I conceptualized my research as an inquiry as stance, keeping in mind the need to be reflexive and provide my study with a degree of authenticity and integrity.

Question 1: How are Eleventh Grade Students’ Perspectives Evident in their Discussions and Reflective Papers

For this question, I conducted four levels of analysis. The first analysis allowed me to examine all pertinent data and begin data reduction, which pointed toward themes in my students’ participation. In the second analysis, I constructed themes from my students’ participation patterns. In the third analysis, I explored themes more closely to learn further about students’ perspectives evident in themes. In the fourth level analysis, I analyzed students’ survey responses in detail.

Level 1 Analysis: Broad Analysis of Reflection Papers and Discussions

To answer research question one, I initially began with a broad analysis. Data included students’ reflective papers for each of the eight articles read, transcriptions of video recordings of each of the whole-class discussions, and my electronic journal entries that I wrote after each session of discussion. To preserve the anonymity of my participants, I came up with pseudonyms, which I used in all my data.
My first level of analysis was primarily descriptive—I first noted students’ stances toward each article based on author’s position on specific topics. I then described how they used evidence in two contexts: a reflection paper and a follow-up whole-class discussion of the article. To do this, I created a table for each article and used the table to note how students responded to articles in reflections and how they engaged in discussions. Upon reading students’ reflections across papers, I saw that students responded in multiple ways, and I created a table to capture their responses.

Figure 4 is a section of the table I made for Article 3 (Gun Control). I made a similar table for each article. As Figure 4 depicts, I created four columns and asked two questions pertaining to reflection papers and two questions pertaining to the discussion. Regarding reflections, I asked, “What was the student’s stance?” and “How did the student address the issue?” Regarding discussions, I asked, “How did the student contribute?” and “Did the student’s stance change during or after discussion?”

Qualitative research studies involve asking the kinds of questions that focus on the why and how of human interactions (Agee, 2009, p. 432). Thus, qualitative research questions need to reflect the particularities of a study by articulating “what a researcher wants to know about the intentions and perspectives of those involved in social interactions” (p. 432).

Similarly, Merriam (2009) identifies three areas of interest for qualitative researchers which reiterate understanding participants’ viewpoints as a fundamental goal in qualitative research: (1) how people interpret their experiences; (2) how they construct their worlds; and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences.

Keeping this in mind, I analyzed data by constantly looking for answers to the above self-reflected questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Reflection Paper</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Stance?</td>
<td>How did the student address the issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnette</td>
<td>Disagreed</td>
<td>Textual Evidence with reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>Disagreed</td>
<td>Textual Evidence with reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curt</td>
<td>Disagreed</td>
<td>Textual Evidence with reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taffy</td>
<td>Disagreed</td>
<td>Textual Evidence with reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Disagreed</td>
<td>Textual Evidence with reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>Agreed</td>
<td>Reasoning without text evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Section of gun control article: Responses to reflection paper and discussion.*

After completing a table for each article read, written about, and discussed, I compared findings across the eight articles by creating a new table. Table 1 below, is an example of just the analysis of the article on Gun Control. My analysis of the reflection papers of the table is as follows. Seventeen of twenty-two student participants submitted their reflection papers. Regarding students’ stances, three students of seventeen participants agreed (A) with the author’s main premise, and thirteen students disagreed (D). One student wrote both agreed and disagreed (B) with the author. No students had a neutral (N) stance, and five students did not submit (NS) a reflection and, therefore, received a zero as their grade. Across the eight reflection papers, students addressed issues in three ways across the eight articles, but in only two ways in the gun control article. First, fourteen of seventeen students who submitted their reflection papers used textual evidence (TE) to address the issue. Second, three students addressed the issues using their
own reasoning (Re). The code TLM (Too Little Information) did not apply to students’ responses for this reflection but did apply to some of the other articles. Finally, five students of twenty-two student participants did not submit (NS) a reflection paper. These students received no credit for that reflective paper.

Table 1. Gun Control Article: Reflection Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Stance</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreed with Article (A)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreed with Article (D)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral (N)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Disagreed and Agreed (B)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Submitted (NS)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of Students</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Response</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text Evidence with Reasoning (TE)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning without Text Evidence (Re)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Little Material (TLM)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Submitted (NS)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of Students</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My analysis of students’ discussion on the topic of gun control laws as shown below in Table 2 is as follows. When discussing, fourteen times students personalized (P) the issue. Twenty-nine times they used reasoning (Re). Four times students used textual evidence (TE) to make their point. Three students did not participate in the discussion (NP), and three of twenty-two student participants were absent (Ab) on discussion day, therefore, the total participants present that day was nineteen. One student participated in the discussion without submitting a reflection paper (PwP). All students had the opportunity to take part in discussions—to provide their stance, their reasoning, and evidence for their claims so that others could understand and critique their arguments. I usually let students take the floor and kept out of the discussion unless students asked me questions directly. I would facilitate the entire discussion and sometimes
called on students who did not participate or were shy because everyone’s voice mattered. When students refused to participate, I would give them the space they required.

Furthermore, it demonstrates that two of nineteen students changed their stance from the one that they took in their reflection paper, and thirteen of nineteen students did not change their stance. Three of nineteen students did not participate (NP), and three students were absent (Ab). Discussions promoted input and voice from multiple perspectives and sometimes resulted in tension and disagreement. I found though, that there were possibilities that sometimes arose from these tensions and passionate discourses, which is a significant tenet of critical literacy. Thus, after discussions, I gave students the option to write “discussion take-away” (DTA) comments at the end of their initial reflective papers before handing them to me. I intended for students to write take-away comments as a means for them to state what mattered or was intriguing about the discussion. Students often did not complete DTAs as shown in Table 2—students did not include DTAs on their gun control reflections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Gun Control Article: Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Response</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning without Textual Evidence (Re)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual Evidence (TE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Participation (NP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent (Ab)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Student Stance**                       |
| Changed Stance (C)                       | 2               |
| No Change (NC)                           | 13              |
| No Participation (NP)                    | 3               |
| Student Participation without Paper (PwP)| 1               |
| Absent (Ab)                              | 3               |
| Total # of Students                      | 22              |

| **Student Discussion Take Away (DTA)**   |
|                                          | 0               |
After calculating numbers for each article (as described above), I tallied totals across articles and figured averages, resulting in the following findings.

**What was student’s stance in reflection papers and did students change stance during discussions?** Across the eight articles, students always took a stance. With an average of seventeen students in each class, sixty-four percent of the students typically agreed with the authors’ positions across the eight articles and twenty-six percent of the students disagreed. Only five percent of students took a neutral stance across the eight articles and five percent took a stance both agreeing and disagreeing with the author’s position.

During discussions students sometimes changed their stance from the stance taken in their reflection papers. The range of changes in students’ stance was zero changes during discussions on cyberbullying and transgender identity issues; one change during the discussion on e-cigarettes; two changes during discussions on gun control, starting school later and racial discrimination; six changes during the discussion on illegal immigration; and eight changes during the discussion on Syrian refugees. While these numbers seem low, their occurrence is significant in two cases. In the discussion on Syrian refugees, fifty percent of students changed their initial stance from what they had taken in their reflective papers, and in the discussion on illegal immigration, thirty-three percent of the students changed their initial stance taken in their reflective papers.

While my intention in discussions was not that students change their stance, change in their stance does suggest that students were thinking critically about the AoW topics. The percentages of agreement, disagreement, neutral positions, or taking both sides are not important in and of themselves; rather, the types of stances they took and their tendency to take a pro (agree) or con (disagree) stance more so than a “neutral” one or “both sides stance” tells me that
my students’ perspectives may be black and white prior to discussion, and less prone to the ambiguity of thought that taking a “neutral” stance or “both sides” stance would suggest. Given that students had a strong “agree” or “disagree” stance on issues prior to the discussion, instances, when they changed stance during discussion, suggests that discussions can interrupt looking at issues in black and white terms.

**How did students address issues in reflections and contribute to discussions?** An average of seventeen students completed reflections across the eight articles. Seventy-nine percent of the students used textual evidence to discuss issues in the eight articles. Twenty-five percent of the students did not use textual evidence and responded to article issues using their own reasoning outside the article. Four percent of students’ reflections across the eight articles were too sparse to determine how they addressed issues. These papers might have included a stance but had too little material (TLM) beyond that. Level 2 analysis answers how students addressed issues in discussions.

**Did students have a discussion take away (DTA)?** I looked for students’ DTAs for each article in their reflection papers. Students specified their takeaway typically by adding an asterisk or a bullet to their paper before handing it to me after discussions. Eight of eighteen students present during the discussion (44%) provided DTAs after article 6 (transgender identity). Two of seventeen (13%) students present during discussion provided DTAs for article 7 (racial discrimination). There were seven of sixteen (44%) students who provided DTAs for article 8 (Syrian refugees).

**Summary of level 1 analysis.** This broad first level of analysis gave me an idea of how students contributed to individual articles, contributed to discussions, and allowed me to learn how students participated to the eight articles. The findings from this analysis demonstrate that in
reflections, textual evidence helped students respond to the topics. It played a vital role in their thinking. Also, it probably played a role in their initial stances taken toward the topics. The findings also demonstrate that students addressed issues quite differently in discussions—reasoning without textual evidence being the primary way they respond to the AoW topics. Also, very few students added DTAs, and they did so only for the last three articles discussed—article 6 (transgender identity), article 7 (racial discrimination), and article 8 (Syrian refugees).

This Level 1 analysis warranted a more thorough analysis, so I ventured to look more closely at the scripts and to discover any patterns that emerged in the second level of analysis.

**Level 2 Analysis: Seeking Nuances in Discussion**

Discussions occurred on the day reflection papers were due. On average, seventeen students were in attendance on discussion days and of these, about two students per discussion did not participate (NP).

To begin constructing patterns that would better illuminate the nuances I found in my students’ discussions of articles, I asked:

- How was the discussion framed?
- What is actually happening in this particular data?
- Why did the student respond in this way?
- What category does this comment indicate in this context?

I began analyzing these questions by reading the opening lines of each transcript. In the first discussion (e-cigarettes), I discovered that I framed the discussion by telling students to keep in mind the ground rules for discussion. Next, one of the students took the initiative to begin and did so by making a claim. Implicit in each student’s opening claim was the AoW topic. Beginning with the discussion of article 2 (cyberbullying) through article 8 (Syrian
refugees), I no longer announced expectations. Students knew the “discussion ritual,” and one student started the discussion by making a claim as soon as I said, “Begin.”

After students made an opening claim, students addressed issues quite differently across articles. I created a data saturation grid (Brod, Tesler, & Christianson, 2009) to analyze these differences. Data saturation grids help qualitative researchers, first, to account for all nuances of whatever activity they are trying to understand and second, note patterns evident in those activities. To make a saturation grid that suited my guiding questions, I simply wrote answers to my questions. Each time the script revealed a different answer to my question, I wrote down that new answer. In this way, I accounted for the varied ways in which my students participated in discussions—that is, I saturated my descriptors for all probable ways students participated.

When reading and noting descriptors, if I answered my questions in a way that already had a descriptor, I simply made an X under that specific descriptor on my saturation grid and finalized the tallies. Using this method, I found that students used six techniques to engage the topics in discussions. Table 3 depicts these six techniques as they related to Article 8 (Syrian Refugees). I summed up the tallies (Xs) for each student, and the numbers depict which students used these specific techniques and how many times they used each technique. Across the eight articles, students relied on these six techniques of discussing the topic:

1. making a claim
2. referencing the article
3. providing additional information (including suggestions)
4. questioning peers for additional information
5. personalizing information about the topic
6. using reasoning but without personalizing the topic.
Table 3. Syrian Refugee Article: The Six Discussion Techniques and the Number of Times Each Technique Used by Each Participant Student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Six Discussion Techniques</th>
<th>Making a claim/stance</th>
<th>Referencing article</th>
<th>Providing additional info/suggestions</th>
<th>Questioning peers/more data</th>
<th>Personalizing</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
After systematically coding the discussion scripts of all eight articles and going back and forth comparing charts for each discussion, I made Table 4, which depicts the numbers of times students used these six techniques of discussing topics for each of the 8 articles (Rows highlighted are topics students chose for their social action projects, which I will explain in detail under research question 2).

**Table 4. Number of Times Students Used Each Six Discussion Technique per Article**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Making a claim/stance</th>
<th>Referencing article</th>
<th>Providing additional info/suggestions</th>
<th>Questioning peers/more data</th>
<th>Personalizing Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-Cigarettes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cyberbullying</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Control</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Starts</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal Immigration</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender Identity</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Discrimination</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>65</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Summary of level 2 analysis. This second level of analysis provided a clearer picture of how students engaged in discussion. While students relied most heavily on reasoning as a technique for discussion, I did not find that the numbers of times students used one discussion technique above another to be a powerful means of understanding how students used the six techniques to have discussions. Therefore, I conducted a third level analysis to understand better students’ perspectives taken using these six techniques.

Level 3 Analysis: Examining Patterns in Nuances in Students’ Discussion Techniques

After revisiting all the transcripts and comparing codes and charts, I found that in every discussion, students, built knowledge about each claim made, but that they did not engage in some claims as powerfully as others. To understand this phenomenon, I began looking for relationships and merging concepts into thematic categories. Being a practitioner researcher and having the unique position of being part of these classroom discussions allowed me to consider students’ dialogue in context. As Charmaz (2009) notes, “By locating participants’ meanings and actions in this way, we show the connection between micro and macro levels of analysis, and thus link the subjective and the social” (p. 131). Transcripts of all eight articles reveal that students build knowledge using discussion techniques in four ways: Building Incidental Knowledge; Knowledge Building with Immediate Effects; Knowledge Building Influenced by Geography; and Knowledge Building through Deliberation or Debate. Prior to explaining these themes, I provide information about knowledge building in general.

Knowledge building. The AoWs and the social action projects that I explain later gave my students the opportunity to engage in sociopolitical issues and to be active constructors of knowledge building, and to not just be passive recipients of other’s expertise. This practitioner research also provided me the opportunity to be a co-learner and facilitate knowledge building in
my classroom. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define this kind of ‘local knowledge’ as “both a way of knowing about teaching and what teachers and communities come to know when they build knowledge collaboratively” (p. 45). Bereiter (2002) suggests knowledge-building “not as knowledge in the mind or a set of processes, but rather a “relation between the knower and an object of understanding” (p, 100). He argues that “understanding implies abilities and dispositions with respect to an object of knowledge sufficient to support intelligent behavior” (p. 101).

Students discussed, argued, and used different techniques (as shown in Table 4) to think deeply about the articles in purposeful and collaborative ways as a community. As Scardamalia (2002) claims, community knowledge assumes that all members of the learning community have equal say in their ideas and suggestions in idea advancement. According to Sawyer (2003), the social process of knowledge creation is analogous to collaborative improvisation without a script; or it is like a daily chat among a group of people without a predetermined focus, timeline, or system for conversational turns. Creativity emerges from an interactional process that “involves a social group of individuals engaged in complex, unpredictable interactions” (p. 19).

The themes that follow demonstrated nuances of the community knowledge students built as they discussed Articles of the Week. When quoting discussions, I color coded the discussion techniques as depicted above in Table 4. Some talk-turns required more than one code. The point of my coding was not to definitively define all talk; rather, I wanted codes to shed light on how students build knowledge. While talk-turns may sometimes also require another code, I made my analysis on credibility—my interpretation that represents what students attempted to do with talk.
**Building incidental knowledge.** Two discussion topics were “incidental.” These were topics that students showed interest in, but chiefly as “common school topics.” In these discussions, they stated a claim and really spent time building knowledge around that claim, using the discussion techniques, before considering another claim. For example, when discussing e-cigarettes, Bruce opened the discussion with a claim, and students considered it, using especially additional information (coded purple) before making another claim:

**Bruce:** Ok, Well, I think all tobacco sales should just be illegal because it’s an addictive drug and every other drug like cocaine and pretty much this company is getting rich off of killing people and their children

**Roman:** It’s not that tobacco is the only addictive drug in the market, there are other things that are actually illegal, and doctors prescribe them. It might have a purpose, but…

**Bruce:** Doctors have to prescribe them, you can’t buy them in the store

**Roman:** Yeah, but people still steal them, people still use it

**Nate:** You can buy Nyquil…you trip like crazy on that

**Connor:** You would have to drink the whole bottle?

**Nate:** No, No, No, no, no…you drink the whole bottle you might just die

**Roman:** Well yeah, it has its repercussions… laugh

**Joey:** Best thing for life…laugh

**Tobias:** Alright, I think vaping is better than cigarettes, I don’t think people go from vaping to cigarettes, I think most people come from cigarettes to vaping because it’s healthier and people are trying to quit…like not, not all vaping not all of them have nicotine in them…like some of them are like just flavored, water vapor it’s not nicotine

This incidental knowledge building occurred in two of the eight discussions (e-cigarettes and cyberbullying). In this example, Bruce made a claim (green) and provided reasoning for it (orange). Roman added information to his reasoning (purple), after which Bruce, Roman, and Nate added more information (purple). Connor then asked a question (blue), and Nate answered by adding information (purple). Roman provided a reason (orange) for Nate’s information, and
Joey personalized that reason (red). Up to this point in the discussion, students centered upon that claim and built upon it. Then, Tobias made a new claim (green). He extended his claim by referencing the article (brown). Two discussions occurred like this one. Students were willing to engage in the topic, and they did build knowledge, however, my research journal lent insight to these discussions. I noted that the discussions seemed like typical classroom discussions. Hence, the category, “Building incidental knowledge.”

Knowledge building with immediate effects. I coded only one article with this category. Unlike other articles, this was an article where students used “personalization” more than reasoning to build knowledge. Personalized statements were those in which students noted what personal stakes they had in the issue (in red). The school start later article resonated for students because it influences their lives immediately. Four students wanted to start school later because they were involved in athletics or work. Their evidence for early start times were as strong as evidence made for a later start time. In both cases, the strongest evidence students had for their stances was their life experience:

Roman: Depends on the job… (inaudible)…Asks Tobias…what time you get back from work? You said 11:00…

Tobias: From work or school?

Roman: From work?

Tobias: Yeah, from work at 11:00, from football around 5, 5:30

Roman: So, if you push back the time…then it gets harder…

Tobias: Also, football is from 5-7

Teacher: So, there are many more factors involved…there are lines there…it’s not a decision that can be made in a short while…a lot is involved

Helen: (Nods)

Bruce: There are schools who have looked into that… (inaudible)

Amy: Yeah, they have done it in Schenectady…
**Code: (Called on by Teacher)** Well, my perspective...I have full time work, sleeping very important, but some people just can’t get to bed early because of issues at home. With the drug thing, honestly, I have done it and honestly, I quit it after a couple years...that’s helped me sleep on time and get up early...all about what the issues the person is facing.

Personalizing experiences drove this discussion, and six students also chose this topic as a social action project. Since students used personal experience as support for their claims, this discussion technique seemed highly significant for students. Through such critical engagements, students connected the context of their own personalized experiences to their school context.

**Knowledge building influenced by geography.** In only one article, the article on gun control, students’ perceptions of place influenced prevalent stances taken on the issue. Only three of seventeen students wanted gun control; hence, most students in this discussion were against it.

Interestingly, students relied heavily on all discussion techniques, but did not rely on referencing sources: their own experiences were the more authoritative sources. This distribution of their use of techniques, minus using sources, seemed significant to me. Reasoning was relied upon most often as a knowledge building technique. I felt this was due to students’ geographic perspectives, as I noted in my research journal:

It opened my eyes to the significance of guns in this rural population and how students who normally went hunting with family/friends or had the passion for guns provided their rationale for guns. (Journal, October 23, 2015)

Students’ urban and rural perceptions played in their arguments both for and against gun control, and they used discussion techniques to relate their perceptions as evidence. At two times during the discussion, Bruce and Nate’s differences in perception of “urban” was the hub for the class discussion:

**Bruce:** In Chicago, they have very strict gun laws and has the highest rate of death due to guns...Texas, absolutely no gun laws...very few deaths
Nate: You can’t even bring up Chicago (laughter) because you have to move there to understand it, like they have very strict gun laws but you have to think from the perspective of circumstances, people that grow up there have no chance of ever getting out of the ghetto…like…(inaudible)… OK, let me put it this way, when I lived in NJ then Albany, I’ve known kids where there are 8 people living in a one bedroom house, and there are kids sleeping on the floor, none of them are looking toward college, none of them like, I will go to a mechanic school, Oh I will build cars…by the time kids are like in 7th/8th grade, they are like selling drugs…they are big by the time they are in high school, most of those kids learn from other people who have done that…violence is just a part of their world, and you know they just grow up; they have guns, they have knives, they fight, kids are kids, and when they grow up with that mindset, they grow into adults, and being adults…they don’t take any crap…if you come around the house and you’re like, trying to like start anything…you are shot like two seconds in…Chicago, Detroit, moving in any of those places, even downtown New York, that stuff doesn’t run there, so by limiting guns you are also trying to help progressive people that don’t know how to end that …(inaudible)…in Chicago (sarcasm) (Many laugh)…you cannot put that in an argument

Bruce: Ok, Ok, So, I understand your point, that’s how they grow up, so what difference does it make if the guns are legal or illegal for them to still use it?

Joey: It makes it harder for good people to get guns, it always does

Kelly: Why do good people need guns…they can hunt with a bow, you do not need a gun

Joey: I never said anything about hunting

Kelly: I know, but that’s their point, they need to hunt, you can hunt with a bow

Joey: It will not stop any one in a ghetto to get a gun, it just makes it harder for good people to get one

Nate: No, it makes it harder for authorities to track (inaudible)

Even this short excerpt of the discussion demonstrates Bruce’s assumption about urban life, which Nate countered by actual urban experience. While Bruce respectfully acknowledges Nate’s experience, Nate’s experience did not replace Bruce’s own authority on guns—he maintained his pro-gun stance throughout the discussion. As the discussion continued, Kelly
female) determined that the argument against gun control hinged on hunting. The rural experience for many of my male students did involve hunting. Rurality and urbanity constructed by Bruce and Joey meant “good” (rural) and “bad” (urban). Joey built on Bruce’s argument that gun laws affect more gun-related deaths by reasoning that “good people” which from the context meant rural people, have a tough time getting guns. He later reasoned that laws do not deter those in a “ghetto” from getting guns. “Good” and “bad” are geographic constructs in this discussion.

Gun control is one of the three topics students chose for the social action project. The most used technique in this discussion was “additional information or suggestions.” When students provided additional information, in the case of this discussion, they used additional information either as evidence to further support a claim or as rebuttal against another claim. Students’ stances were solid and unchanging during discussion, however, one student, Ezekiel who participated in the social action project around gun control, changed his stance not because of discussion, but due to the social action project, which I will discuss in a later analysis.

Knowledge building as deliberation and debate. Students deliberated and debated in four discussions. Each of these topics was “difficult topics” and were difficult for three distinct reasons. The category, “difficult topic” was derived from Amy during a discussion about illegal immigration.

Difficulty due to unsure stance. Two articles were difficult because students could not easily take a stand: articles 5 and 8. In article 5 (illegal immigration), students made claims (as they did in all discussions) as a means of generating further discussion, however, some students were undecided and could not easily take a side. Their indecision made this topic difficult. When
students could not decide their stance on illegal immigration, the class debated and deliberated both sides of the issue, using questions to nudge the class toward a stance:

Amy: (Called on by Teacher) It’s a difficult topic

(Class discussed difficult issues pertaining to safety in the voyage as well as the time it takes to apply for citizenship.)

Code: (to Teacher) You have children, right?

Teacher. Yes, I am coming to my part

Code: If your children were in danger because you are living in such a bad environment, would you want to wait multiple months even years in order to go through the whole process, or would you want to get your kids out of there and safe?

Teacher: Question asked

Kelly: But they are not safe

Aria: But they are not safe

Maggie: But they are not safe here

Kelly: What if you get arrested, what are your children going to do?

Code: But what if you could make it through…

Kelly: But you can’t…it doesn’t make sense

Code: What if your children are going to die soon?

Teacher: One at a time, please

Connor: This is a hot topic

Teacher: He [Code] has made a point…their lives are at stake…

Ezekiel: Even if they get arrested here, the orphanages are better than the ones in Mexico

Kelly: But why would they want to be in jail?

Ezekiel: I know an illegal family…drug cartels…and they cannot afford to move… I know a person who will help you become a citizen…

Tony: (Called on by Teacher) I don’t know where I stand because some people have been working hard here and the illegal immigrants come over, but yet they are helping us with the economy
As seen in the excerpt, two students used questions to ask the class to think critically and to tacitly rationalize their own stances. For example, Code’s concern was about immigrants who left their countries because they were in danger, but rather than consider his worry of the danger immigrants could be in at home, fellow students countered with another perspective on his concern. Kelly, Maggie, and Aria, each exclaimed that immigrants are not safe in America either. These students were not convinced that the situation Code introduced—danger in their countries of origin was any more dangerous than what could happen if they illegally entered the United States. In this example, students used the discussion to deliberate and struggled to come to terms with a difficult topic.

Article 8 (Syrian refugees) was also a difficult topic because most students could not easily take a side. Most students seemed torn and expressed their fears and empathy toward the Syrian refugees with uncertainty:

**Connor:** I have to agree with Toppler…it’s a big gamble… not an easy decision…but if I had to choose a side, I would let the refugees come in…giving them a chance to live…fear of ISIS…

Teacher: So, you are more on the fence right now…more inclined to not let them in, and yet you are considering...

**Connor:** Nods

**Helen:** Actually I agree with Bullseye’s point of view, everyone comes from a different place…in the past other groups have come, but there was still that fear that they would do something to ruin the country (looks at the article and reads) “…many conservative and nationalist activists use narratives representing refugees as invading hoards, as barbarians at the gates who, if allowed to enter, will destroy the glorious civilization we have established…” so, yeah it’s terrible to think that other people will just ruin this country just by coming in to save themselves… (looking at Tobias)

(Class discussion continued)

**Juliet:** (Called upon by Teacher) I don’t really know… I’m kind of like on both sides, like those coming here…they have to go through a certain amount of things in order to be in
Amy: (Called on by the Teacher) I’m not sure… (inaudible)

Jeremy: (Called on by Teacher) Kind of in the middle… (inaudible) … they want to make lives for themselves, and some kind of terrorize

Teacher: So, how can that be resolved, they are there…some have left and there is no way of going back…they will die, many fled to Germany, Hungary, they are moving into those countries

Tobias: This is kind of like the Salem Witch Trials, like for every 100-innocent people, like there could be one ISIS member…and I am not willing to take that risk

Code: (Called on by Teacher) Well, to make it short, sweet and simple, honestly, I do favor Trump’s idea, just lock all the borders down and ramp up the second amendment (Just the opposite of what he expressed for illegal immigrants)

Tobias: These people…these people will kill as many people as they can, they go on sprees…killing everyone

This above excerpt once again shows that most students were unsure of their decision-making process and found it “difficult” to take a side. They used reasoning (orange coding) and additional information or suggestions (purple coding) techniques the most and personalizing (red coding) the least. Plainly, students were torn—they could not decide whether Syrians should be given refuge in America, and they were explicit in their indecision when they stated, “I’m not sure,” “kind of in the middle,” and “I don’t really know.” With uncertainty driving knowledge building, they considered two sides, sometimes even in one sentence. Beginning with Connor, first he agrees with Tobias who does not want Syrians admitted to America, but then decides in the same breath that they should be allowed. He is deliberating in his own mind, and the group takes up his personal deliberation, which helps Helen take a stand—she decides she agrees with Bruce who has taken the stance to let Syrians take refuge in America. Yet, Helen’s disposition raises doubt for Juliet, Amy, and Jeremy who express uncertainty.
Deliberation of this kind emerged with sensitive topics which caused students to consider multiple perspectives. In some cases, students could not settle on a perspective, yet, in other cases, students were probably uncritical in their stances. As I noted in my journal:

I noticed the unwavering perspective of one student, Tobias, who tried repeatedly to convince his peers that allowing refugees would be a big gamble and an immense risk which he was not willing to take. He called it a disease!

(Journal, December 5, 2015)

Tobias had a strong stance regarding Syrians. Whereas he did not deliberate about the topic, his strong stance did provide one perspective on the issue that caused other students to deliberate.

Another intriguing facet concerning students’ deliberating and debate in this discussion was how a student, Code, who is Latino, said, “Just lock all the borders down and ramp up the second amendment.” His stance was just the opposite of his stance on illegal immigration where he expressed concern about the safety and life of illegal immigrants.

Students’ knowledge building on the topic of Syrian refugees required deliberation. In fact, half the students (eight of sixteen) who participated in the discussion changed their stance from their reflection papers. I determined that students see value in the uncertainty that deliberation requires because they chose Syrian Refugees as one of the topics for social action projects.

**Difficulty due to a student needing more information.** One topic was not difficult for people to talk about but was simply “difficult” for one student to understand because he needed more information. All students were empathetic toward transgender identity issues introduced in Article 6. They discussed this topic with great enthusiasm and compassion. However, Joey did
not understand what was involved in transitioning gender, and he found the class to be a safe enough space for him to use questions to learn:

**Joey:** Can I ask a question?

**Teacher:** Yes

**Joey:** If you get a sex change operation, who are you on the inside?

**Amy:** Who you want to be

**Joey:** On the inside?

**Roman:** Who you think you are…

**Kelly:** If you are a guy and if you feel you have grown from the inside with the sex change to be a girl, then you are a girl

**Joey:** If you are born a guy, then on the inside don’t you still feel you are a guy?

**Taffy:** …it’s like a guy becoming a girl, like he feels that his whole life…

**Kelly:** They never actually feel like a guy, so on the inside, they are not a guy

[Joey continued, later in the discussion, with more questions. He was still questioning to gain knowledge:]

**Joey:** Can I say something? Correct me if I am wrong but it requires hormonal therapy?

**Teacher:** Yes, it requires a lot of money…that’s why we have Bruce Jenner…Caitlyn…why? It was easily done…it involves a lot of pain, no matter what amount of money, but it gets done faster, that’s why they are questioning, how can we help them. He (the boy) was asked to wait for how long according to the article?

**Amy:** Till he was 18…

**Teacher.** Till he was 18…Think about it…this is one case, there are many other cases

**Helen:** (Called on by Teacher) There are so many other parents out there who are like that, they cannot put aside their beliefs, but a real parent would put aside anything even their beliefs to make their child happy, but the fact that parents like this can’t do this because of their beliefs is just unbelievable…

**Tobias:** You (Helen) remind me of Hillary Clinton
Students: Laugh

Joey: That’s what I was saying about hormonal therapy, how does he know that he wants to be a girl…not just the wiring in the brain…how do you fix it…give more estrogen or something?

Roman: Even before you go through surgery, it is mandated that you have to go to a Psychiatrist for about 5 sessions in most states, then for a year with all the hormones…

Teacher. Juliet just looked up something on her phone. Will you share it with the class?

Juliet: From male to female it is 7,000 to 24,000 dollars, but from female to male it’s 50,000…

Kelly: So, you really want it…

While students discussed Article 6 with ease, Joey needed the discussion space to learn more about the topic. Whereas most students did not need to deliberate on the topic, Joey did. He used questions (blue coding) to help him understand the issues that so many of his classmates understood. Questioning was a deliberation technique that, in a safe discussion space helped Joey build knowledge on a topic his classmates knew so much more about.

**Difficulty due to colorblindness.** The topic in Article 7 (racial discrimination) proved to be a difficult topic because a majority of the white student population was “blinded” as though wearing a veil because of their inability to see and understand the racial perspective of one of their classmates, Nate, an African American. Article 7 dealt with racist comments and activities that occurred at many college campuses in the United States. My students deliberated, especially over two cases from the article. At Ithaca College, two white alumni on a university panel called an African American alumnus a “savage” after she had said she had a “savage hunger” to succeed. University students called for the resignation of the college president. In another case, students at two universities dressed up in sombreros and other ethnic costumes for Halloween, and most of my students expressed several times that a furor over people dressing in ethnic
costumes was “over-exaggerated.” As students discussed these issues, Nate (African American) tried to lend his perspective on the issue. Students simply could not see his perspective:

Bruce: Ummm, (reading from article) something that I found silly the whole like kids dressed up for Halloween, wearing sombreros, ponchos and stuff… it was Halloween, it wasn’t like they were wanting to make fun of them, they were dressed up for Halloween, it’s the same way being dressed up as…

Joey: Spiderman

Bruce: Yes…Spiderman…yes

Nate: So, what you just came out dressed up like Ku Klux Klan, so I’m supposed to like, it’s Halloween …

Students: It’s not the same…

Nate: It’s the same concept…so, you can say somebody can come out dressed up like an Indian, like…

Tobias: KKK is like a terrorist group, dressing up in a sombrero is just like celebrating culture…

Nate: Technically, they are not a terrorist group because they are allowed to voice their opinion in America without being run down by the government, so I…

Tobias: They killed black people.

Roman: They killed till the 1900s

Nate: No, dude like they can legally have meetings and everything without like…

Ezekiel: Yeah, but they like have slander, defamation of people

Nate: But they can say, they can like straight up call people, like whoever they want to, like…it’s freedom of speech

Ezekiel: But there are bars on freedom of speech…it’s not that simple…

Students deliberated on racial discrimination using the technique, adding additional information (purple coding). On the one hand, one can see these white students build knowledge about the Ku Klux Klan when Tobias noted that “they kill black people” and Roman extends his comment stating that this was true “up to the 1900s.” Nate, however, is aware that the KKK is
still as hateful as they were up to 1900s. He countered, “No, dude like they can legally have
meetings and everything…” The students though tried to diminish Nate’s concerns, which he
voiced a bit later, “…they are allowed to voice their opinion in America without being run down
by the government” and can “straight up, call people like whoever they want to…freedom of
speech.” In these cases, Nate and the other students used additional information to provide
evidence for their stances. Nate attempted to engage students in deliberating another perspective,
however, students did not take him up on his perspective.

In the following section of the discussion, the white students used a variety of discussion
techniques to shut down deliberation (“leave the past in the past”) and to veil a problem that only
Nate (African American) could see:

Maggie: I think that some things are turned bad… no matter what you say,
someone can always make it sound worse, like not everyone’s intention is to
make a racial comment, but someone can turn it around and it causes all
this like backlash…it’s like too much if you want racism to go away, stop
blaming everything as racist

Bruce, Roman: (nod their heads)

Ezekiel: Don’t bring it up

Joey: Leave the past in the past

Nate: What? Wait…no, explain that please?

Joey: Just move on

Maggie: No one wants racism anymore, and if you just keep calling what
someone says as racist, then it will just cause more and more… people will
divide, and it’s just too much like…

Nate: So, what happens if real cases of actual racism occur, we should just
ignore like we are supposed to just look past it?

Tobias: Like “microaggressions” like, don’t be soft

Maggie: And it gets kind of…people think that racism is just against
African Americans, well, it can technically be against Whites too, Asians
and Islamic people, like everyone thinks it’s like against African
Americans, it’s really not.
Most white students’ discussion techniques depicted colorblind racism. “…[C]olorblind racial ideology is a dominant race-based framework that individuals, groups, and systems consciously or unconsciously use to justify the racial status quo or to explain away racial inequalities in the United States” (Neville et al., 2006, p. 276). Given that most students’ who spoke in this discussion had a colorblind perspective, it is possible that students did not choose this topic as a social action project because so many who spoke did not see the topic as one needing social action.

**Summary of level 3 analysis.** Level 3 analysis allowed me to contextualize students’ perspectives in the context of specific content in articles, articulated through discussion techniques. These findings, which I will discuss further in chapter 6, will be useful to teachers. First, it demonstrates that students actively engaged in knowledge building; however, knowledge building moves forward in nuanced ways and in some cases, the perspective of a minority in the classroom can produce responses in colorblind ways, and students can construct good and bad; rural as “good” and urban as “bad.” In these cases, personal experience of race did not sway or even slightly change my mostly white students’ perspectives. This precise finding creates a challenge for me that I can take into my future teaching, specifically, how can I move the discussion from colorblindness into the interrogation of one’s race and geographic perspectives in my future teaching?

Other forms of knowledge building were either commonplace (incidental knowledge), akin to usual classroom content, or unusual in that topics were unusual (Syrian refugees, illegal immigration, and transgender identity). In cases of unusual content, students’ uncertainties had a positive impact on knowledge building.
Unlike common school content, which also often involved content they did not understand, current controversial topics engaged students. Their use of multiple (six) techniques to understand suggests they contributed to knowledge building and even felt safe when they were uncertain about their stances.

**Level 4 Analysis: Students’ Survey Responses**

After discussing all eight Articles of the Week, I gave all students a survey (see Appendix C, Part A) on which they expressed their opinions on the three statements provided, which I later tallied to gain insights on their expectations with discussing AoWs. Table 5 depicts the statements and results followed by an analysis.

**Table 5. Survey Statements and Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Articles of the week (AoWs) made me look at social issues in ways I did not typically do before we started reading AoWs.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Discussing AoWs with my peers made me look at issues in ways I did not typically do in class discussions not related to AoWs.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reflective AoW papers caused me to take perspectives on issues that I might not have taken in writing not related to AoWs.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Combining results in the agree and strongly agree columns, most students (13 of 21 students—one student did not turn in her survey on the statements) felt AoWs made them look at issues in ways they had not, prior to reading the articles. Six students were neutral, and two students expressed that articles did not cause them to look at social issues in new ways. Most students (12 of 21) reported that discussing AoWs with peers, as we did in this class, differed from their typical article discussions. Seven students reported a neutral opinion and two students reported that discussing with peers did not seem different from other discussions. Finally, most students (13 of 21) reported that discussing the AoW papers caused them to take perspectives that they might not have taken in writing not related to AoWs. Five students reported a neutral position on this statement and three students reported that the AoW reflective writing did not cause them to take perspectives more so than in writing not related to AoWs. Overall, student surveys show that students gain perspective by reflective writing and discussing AoWs.

In the second half of the survey, students explained their responses to the three statements. I created saturation charts for each statement in order to represent the full range of students’ explanations for each statement response.

**First statement: AoWs different from what they had read before.** I learned the following about the first statement:

a. One student learned how *serious issues* were.

   **Brunette:** AoWs made me look at social issues in ways I would not have typically because in each new topic we read each week I learned more information about it or I learned how more serious some of them were.

b. One student felt AoW discussions were *fun*.

   **Joey:** I feel like the AoWs were a fun and interesting way to discuss today’s issues in society. AoWs made me look at social issues in ways I did not typically do before we started.
c. One student was grateful because she felt optimistic about changing things for the better.

**Aria:** Articles of the Week made me look at social issues in ways I did not typically do before we started reading AoWs because I didn’t watch or read the news, but it being a homework assignment, I was sort of forced to. I’m greatful [sic] for AoWs because now I’m alot [sic] more interested of what is going on in the world and what we can do to change things for the better.

d. One student felt the topics were important because they affect people.

**Ezekiel:** It affects millions of people everywhere, and everyone can make a difference.

e. One student did not provide an explanation.

**Bianca**

f. Two students felt that the regular media did not report issues in as much depth as AoWs.

**Bruce:** AoWs have opened my eyes and mind to these topics in ways regular media haven’t.

**Tony:** I feel that the AoWs went in-depth into issues we briefly hear about.

g. Three students appreciated examining multiple perspectives.

**Taffy:** Discussing AoWs with classmate made me begin to look at social issues with many point of views. I strongly agree that it helped me expand my way of looking at problems.

**Kelly:** …AoWs made me look at social issues in ways I typically wouldn’t before I started reading them because I didn’t know I felt that way before I read them.

**Juliet:** I agree because some of the topics I never really thought about before I wrote/read the AoWs.

h. Three students felt they already took critical perspectives in other subject area, prior to participating in AoWs.

**Connor:** I believe I already knew how to discuss current events in a classroom situation (social studies).
Nate: I have very strong opinions on topics ranging from race, immigration, gender, schools and based off research or a conclusion I have reached myself. It takes a very hard time for me to look at something differently unless it’s fact.

Roman: I always reconsider all sides to be sure as possible-stances on any topic.

i. Four students did not appreciate AoW discussions.

Curt: When I read about it in the AoW I don’t like to get more into it after it’s done. I mainly just do the AoW because it’s a grade, otherwise I don’t further it after it’s handed in.

Libby: AoWs have not really opened my perspective or taught me anything.

Amy: I don’t think I look at social issues ay different now than I did before starting AoWs. They are assignments, so I had to do them.

Code: Overall most of the AoWs have done nothing for me.

j. Five students appreciated learning more about issues in the world.

Helen: …because before I didn’t really involve myself in any social issues. But now I know more about what is going on in the world today.

Lenny: …reading the articles that the AoWs provided made me think about the world from a brand-new perspective.

Maggie: AoWs were on topics that were really interesting and are going on in society now. I never really thought about these issues before this.

Tobias: …it’s true, we were given an article to read about the subject to get some more knowledge about it before we started to write our essay and eventually debate about it.

Juliet: … because some of the topics I never really thought about before I wrote/read the AoWs.

Second statement: Learning from peers. This is what I learned about my students’ discussions with peers about AoWs:

a. One student reported not being able to express much but listened to others talk.
**Curt:** When in class discussing with my peers something I want to say but I know I can’t, so I don’t really think it makes me think more about it. I just usually say one thing then let others just discuss.

b. One student reported appreciating that discussion was *different from typical classes*.

**Tony:** I think the argument brought up a few points that wouldn’t come up in a regular class.

c. One student reported that discussions with peers made him *feel more comfortable as a discussant*.

**Connor:** …I think discussing the AoWs with my peers made me feel more comfortable.

d. One student reported that she *does not always agree with others’ perspectives*.

**Juliet:** I was in the middle because all of them had really good points, but I didn’t agree with some of the stuff they said.

e. One student reported that discussion on *immigration was important*.

**Ezekiel:** Immigration policies need to be held tight and is a big issue right now.

f. Three students did *not give an explanation*.

**Libby, Code, and Bianca**

g. Three students reported that discussions *did not cause them to change their perspectives*.

**Kelly:** I am neutral about discussing it with peers because it made me look at it differently, but I would still feel the same way.

**Maggie:** In some classes things such as these are discussed. Peers didn’t help me look at things in other ways.

h. Eleven students reported *appreciating multiple perspectives*.

**Burnette:** …discussing the AoWs with my classmates made me look at it in ways I wouldn’t have because I could see the topics in their point of views also.
Joey: I usually look at most social issues in a black and white lens while the AoWs have made me look in a more grey [sic], or blue perspective.

Aria: …discussing AoWs with my peers made me look at issues in ways I did not typically do in class discussions not related to AoWs because everyone went back and forth with their opinions and it became controversial it made me think differently.

Taffy: …you can’t just look at one side of an argument. And tend to just jump to one side. With the discussions, it helped with discussions not related to the AoWs.

Helen: …while I write my AoW, I have my own opinion. But when I hear other opinions, my mind becomes more open to interpretation.

Lenny: Listening to what other people have to say about the topic gives me new insight about it. It is good to discuss topics and world problems with your peers to help each other learn more about something.

Bruce: I agree because having other sides or points in a discussion is crucial in understanding the topic.

Amy: While discussing I got to see and hear viewpoints that weren’t mine, so I could try to understand what other people were thinking.

Nate: The AoW discussions of the week me open to other people’s ideas or viewpoints.

Jeremy: I looked at social issues differently during the discussion because my peers hand many good points about things I never would have thought of.

Tobias: I strongly agree with this because you get to know everyone’s opinion and get many viewpoints, that might change your opinion making you a more open person, instead of closed minded.

Third statement: Value of writing reflective papers. This is how writing reflective papers impacted my students:

a. One student grew as a writer and stated that she was considering going to college for writing.

Aria: …reflective Aow papers caused me to take perspectives on issues that I might not have taken in writing not relative to AoWs because I was told I write AoWs very well. Now, I am thinking about going to college for writing. I believe that AoWs are very important and great for education.
b. One student reported that *some articles were more meaningful to write* about than others.

**Curt:** Some of the papers we’ve wrote about I feel meant alot [sic] more to me compared to others. Some I care about others I don’t.

c. One student wrote that reflective writing *did not cause her to change* her opinion.

**Amy:** I stick to my opinions on things, so I wasn’t going to change them just because of these articles.

d. One student stated that the *topics were unusual* and thus worth writing about.

**Tony:** The reflective papers brought up a lot of topics that I probably wouldn’t write in a regular class.

e. Two students wrote that the *social topics were important to write* about.

**Connor:** …because I didn’t realize that some of the topics were so important.

**Ezekiel:** Without guns in America we’d get walked all over.

f. One student reported that reflective writing was *not as in-depth as essay writing*.

**Roman:** I’ve written a few minor essays on topics in similar fashion, but usually with more sources than one article.

g. Three students wrote that writing about the articles caused them to *look deeper and learn more information*.

**Maggie:** My perspectives would have been the same with or without AoWs, but they gave me more information and reasons for my opinions.

**Nate:** I still kept my own opinion about issues in the AoWs but they me look deeper into the problems presenting in the reading.

**Jeremy:** The AoW gave me more information on the topic and my viewpoint changed but for some of the AoWs I wrote about my viewpoint which I had before reading the article.

h. Five students *did not provide an explanation*. 

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**Joe, Libby, Lenny, Code, and Bianca**

i. Seven students *appreciated writing about multiple perspectives.*

**Burnette:** …AoWs caused me to take perspective because now I see how serious something can be such as cyberbullying. I look at things differently now also.

**Taffy:** …because normally I would just stick to one side where now I look into the other view.

**Helen:** …because AoW articles show greater issues going on in the world. Then, I get to see other perspectives other than my own.

**Bruce:** I agree because these articles have changed my perspective various times.

**Kelly:** I agree that it made me have perspectives on social issues that I might not have taken in writing not related to AoWs because they had good facts to make your opinion yours.

**Tobias:** I strongly agree with this statement because like I said above, it makes you an open-minded person.

**Juliet:** Most of the topics I had never really thought about the things that were said in the articles so writing about them made me see things a little different.

**Summary of Findings: Question 1**

Most students appreciated multiple perspectives provided by articles and appreciated considering multiple perspectives, both in writing and discussion. The discussion analysis in which I examined nuances (Level 3 analysis) demonstrated that students have a strong interest in knowledge building and that students determine the shape of knowledge building using six discussion techniques. Techniques are used in different ways depending on the topic of the article and tensions can both promote and block knowledge building, as discussed in the summary of Level 2 analysis. Regarding writing reflective papers, most students acknowledged that it was meaningful and that some topics were important to write about.
CHAPTER 6

Data Analysis and Findings: Question 2

Doing a social action project involved two major activities: procedural activities and negotiating power. I begin this analysis with a description of four procedural activities. I follow this description with a preview of students’ social action projects. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of how students and I negotiated power because I determined that taking up social action projects is really a question of how projects engage in networks of power.

Procedural Activities

Calendar of Social Action Activities

Figure 5 (Calendar of activities for social action projects) depicts five main activities: (1) surveying students to learn what action they wanted to take; (2) topic research and report writing; (3) social action planning; (4) project implementation; and (5) post-social action discussion.

I distributed the survey (in Appendix C, Part B) in December, and students chose three topics (results are in Figure 6). Through January and February, students spent Mondays in the computer lab, finding articles and writing a research report, which was due March 2.

Research papers were important to the social action projects—the content learned while researching fueled students’ group discussions every Friday, from January through the end of March, when students met with their social action teams and deliberated over what projects to do and how to implement them.

Students designed projects by April, and between April and May, students presented their social actions projects in various venues throughout the school. On June 6, 2016, after the presentation of all the groups’ social action projects, students discussed with me the process of doing social actions and were provided an opportunity to express their reactions.
**Figure 5.** Calendar of activities for social action projects.

**Choosing Social Action Projects**

I had initially intended to ask all students to do one social action project around the topic that received the most votes on the survey. However, I determined that more choices would be more motivating, hence, I determined that students would do social action projects on the three most popular topics (those with the greatest number of votes on the survey). I felt, as a teacher teaching four classes in addition to this one, that I could manage three diverse topics (and social actions) and no more. The three chosen topics were Gun Control (nine students chose this topic and of these, only eight were research participants), Syrian Refugees (eight students chose this topic), and School Starts Later (six students chose this topic).
How Students Began Small Group Collaborations

Upon learning that Gun Control was a topic of the greatest interest to students and would thus be one of the social action projects, the nine students who chose this topic immediately split into two groups: Group A, consisting of seven students (six research participants, since one student did not give consent) were against gun control laws and Group B, consisting of two students were for gun control laws. These groups chose to work as “pro” and “con” groups and created two entirely different social actions.

On Day 1 of the social action time in the classroom, Group A attempted to persuade a student (Tobias) who was for gun control laws to change his stance and join their group (their attempt was to no avail). However, a student (Ezekiel) who was against gun control at the start of the social action projects changed his stance during one of the planning sessions in class. At that point, he switched groups after seeking my permission, and participated in Group B’s social action project, leaving five research participants in Group A.

The eight students in Group C who chose Syrian refugees as a topic did not voice whether they were for or against allowing Syrian Refugees into the United States. Instead, they immediately worked as one group and began planning a project. They never voiced an interest in splitting into smaller groups. Therefore, Group C treated the project as an open inquiry, and wanted to learn from this project what the student body’s perspectives were on allowing Syrian refugees into the United States to “live the American dream.”

The six students in Group D who chose School Starts Later as a topic, all had the same stance at the start of the social action project and worked as one group throughout the project. One girl, Kelly, had another stance, which was evident both in her discussion and her reflective paper when the class read an Article of the Week on this topic. Yet, she changed her stance on
the first day of the social action project. I asked her why she changed her stance and her response was that a later school start time would not really affect her since she would be a senior the next year, while a later start date might truly benefit others. Figure 6 provides the groups, their topics, the participants, and their social action projects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A Against Gun Control</th>
<th>Group B For Gun Control</th>
<th>Group C Pro/Con Syrian Refugees</th>
<th>Group D For School Start Later</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Tobias</td>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>Juliet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>Amy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td>Taffy</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td></td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Libby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td></td>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>Joey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayna (non-participant)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Curt</td>
<td>Tony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Action</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Social Action</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social Action</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PowerPoint to Faculty for Vote</td>
<td>Poster and Video to Faculty for Vote</td>
<td>Information Flyers and High School Student Body Vote</td>
<td>Letter to parents/guardians sent through students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6. Group, topics, participants, and social actions.*

**How Did Students’ Projects Develop During Eight Weekly Meetings?**

To answer this question, I used my research journal as the primary source of data. I accounted for weekly progress for each group in my journal, noting what groups did at each meeting. To analyze the progression of projects, I made a four-column chart (one column per
group) and noted what students did each week. There were eight weekly meetings, beginning
February 22 and ending April 12. After these weekly meetings, students also met at sporadic
times outside of class to accomplish project-specific goals.

All groups, except Group B (Pro Gun Control), immediately began brainstorming their
social actions. Group B had difficulty throughout the social action project because two of its
three group members were usually absent. Group B’s project progression was an outlier of sorts
because other groups worked collaboratively from the beginning. Group C (Syrian Refugees)
decided on a project on the first weekly meeting date. Unlike the other three groups, Group C
was able to conduct their project as they had originally envisioned it. They decided to ask the
high school student body to vote on one question: “Should Syrian refugees be able to live the
American dream?” and to educate the student body with informational flyers posted throughout
the school.

Group A (Against Gun Control) decided on a social action project by the second weekly
meeting. They decided to create a PowerPoint presentation against gun control, which they
would present to the faculty at a faculty meeting, after which the faculty would vote for or
against gun control laws. Group B (Pro Gun Control) did not decide on a social action project
until the fourth weekly meeting (March 18), when they decided to make a poster in favor of gun
control. Two weeks later, Group B also decided to make a video to accompany their poster and,
likewise, decided to present their poster and video along with Group A, at a faculty meeting,
after which the faculty would vote. Both groups presented their social action projects to the
faculty on May 2, 2015. After the presentations, the faculty voted for or against gun control laws.

Group D (School Start Later) brainstormed on Day 1 and decided on their project Day 2,
however, this specific group’s project became entangled with power structures, which I will
explore later by detailing the theme, “Negotiating Power.” On Day 2, Group D intended to invite the Board of Education members to the classroom, where they had hoped to present an argument for schools to start later, but that was not feasible because members of the Board of Education have full-time jobs and are available only later in the evening, which was not feasible. After several meetings with the principal, Group D finally decided on their social action project on March 18, when they concurred with the principal to send a letter to parents in the community arguing for a later school start time.

**Preview of Final Social Action Projects**

**Group A: Against gun control.** Four students in this group stayed back after school on May 2 and presented their PowerPoint slides at the faculty meeting. Figures 7 and 8 depict two out of the 21 slides presented.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 7. Example of Group A—PowerPoint slide number 3.*
Figure 8. Example of Group A—PowerPoint slide number 4.

**Group B: Pro gun control.** One student of the three members of this group stayed back for the faculty meeting on May 2 and presented the poster and the video-recording that all three members had recorded earlier during their lunch period. Figure 9 depicts their poster.

**Figure 9.** Group B—poster.
After Group A’s and Group B’s presentations, the faculty members who were present for that meeting voted on the ballot (shown in Figure 10 followed by the results).

![Ballot Image]

**Figure 10.** Group A and B ballot.

**Results: (Faculty members voted)**

Yes: 21

No: 15

Abstain: 1

**Group C: Syrian refugees.** Prior to the actual presentation, during all four lunch periods in the high school cafeteria on April 15, 2016, students had canvassed about this social action project through flyers. Figure 11 depicts the flyer stuck on students’ lockers, walls, and hallways, and group members answered any questions raised by students and/or faculty members regarding this project.
Mrs. Hushmendy’s 3rd period class is doing a social action project and we need your opinion on the debatable topic of if Syrian Refugees should be allowed in the United States.

Thank you for your cooperation!

VOTE ON THE TOPIC OF SYRIAN REFUGEES
APRIL 15TH

Syrian Refugees

Everyone’s opinion matters!

Vote during your lunch period!

Should these refugees be allowed here?

VOTE ON APRIL 15TH

Figure 11. Group C—flyer.
On April 15, 2016, students in Group C facilitated student body voting in the cafeteria over four lunch periods—one student explained the project aloud, and a couple of students who had lunch during that same period brought the ballot box and the ballot papers and asked students to vote on this issue after lunch. They encouraged students grades 9-12 to vote and they made it clear that it was voluntary. I was present during all lunch periods. I monitored, clarified queries, and observed students casting their votes. Figure 12 depicts the ballot, and Figure 13 the ballot box followed by the results of the votes.

Figure 12. Group C—ballot.
Results (high school students-Grades 9-12 voted)

148 votes casted

87: Yes

61: No

Group D: School start later. As stated earlier, students in this group finally got permission from the principal to send the letter that they had drafted to the parents/guardians of high school students. They gave the homeroom teachers the letter to hand out to students, who in turn had to take it to their parents/guardians. Figure 14 is the letter.
Parents/guardians of children in Rezlin High School:

Please note that this letter is written by students, a project for Mrs. Hushmendy’s English 11 class. This is one of the topics discussed in our class but does not need to be decided by the district.

School start times can be a big issue for high school students, as you may know. They are too tired in the morning, which causes them to be late to school, sleep in class, and cause their grades to slip. In addition to the above, they also have focusing problems including while driving and encounter depression. Many high schools in our area, and all over the United States have pushed their start times back to 8 a.m. or later, while Rezlin high school still starts at 7:30 a.m. sharp. Sleep is very important for high school students, and we are not getting enough here.

It’s proven that teenagers need 8 to 10 hours of sleep every night, but we found that 40% of high school students are getting 6 hours or less. Along with this, students are trying to make up their lack of sleep in class, with about 33% of them sleeping through their lesson. Rapid Eye Movement (R.E.M.) happens several times during night, which causes teenagers’ brains to be wildly active during their sleep, instead of getting a deep sleep. Teenagers getting enough sleep can impact their life in more ways than one, along with those who don’t get enough sleep.

Less of the negative and more of the positive, getting enough sleep can improve teens’ lives in many ways. High school students who get enough sleep at night have improved student attendance, better grades higher test scores are in a better mood and are at lower risks of being in car accidents. When they get enough sleep every night and aren’t getting up too early, it’s proven that there is a 16.5% decrease in car crashes. In one school district, start times were moved from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., and the school noticed less tardiness, more kids eating breakfast, and more kids taking advantage of before school tutoring.

Point blank, starting school later in the morning has more pros than cons, so it would be worth it for the health of your children. Please email us your feedback or if you would like more information at students12143@gmail.com by May 15, 2016. Please, we would really like to know whether you are for or against this issue.

Sincerely,

Figure 14. Group D—letter to parents/guardians.
Negotiating Power

According to Freire (1970), knowledge building occurs through interaction; it is not transcendent or absolute. What counts as knowledge always connects to power and to culture, thus, schools are never neutral sites. Instead, schools are highly politicized battlegrounds where cultural domination/subordination occurs. Power circulates through people and their positions in the contexts they inhabit. Wenger (1998) too, acknowledges that broader social discourses of power influence communities of practice, such as schools, but maintains “that they still possess the agency to create their own meanings in local settings” (p. 131).

In this study, students and I negotiated three major circulations of power or power circuits. (1) “A real social action project”: Critical literacy and teaching constraints were one created by my curriculum and my teaching constraints. This circuit flowed between my students and me. (2) “Falling on the shoulders”: Power and labor disputes involved students’ relationships with one another and how they accomplished work. (3) “Not happening”: Routing and re-routing of power involved social contexts outside the classroom, where power circulated between students, the community, the principal, and me. In what follows, I explain how students and I negotiated these power circuits.

“A Real Social Action Project”: Critical Literacy and Teaching Constraints

As part of the recruitment process, I explained my entire study to students, so they would understand what close readings and discussions entailed. I first modeled close reading and discussions about four articles: (1) The Economic Guide to Picking a College Major, (2) The Next Civil Rights Frontier is Digital, (3) 87 of 91 Tested Ex-NFL Player Had Brain Disease Linked to Head Trauma, and (4) Should You Let Your Kids Play Football? After students engaged in close readings and discussions, we discussed and chose prospective topics for our
social action curriculum. With five classes to teach (about 110 students across five classes),
topics for close reading, discussion, and eventual social action projects needed some constraints.
What my critical literacy class chose to study and act upon, my other two eleventh-grade English
classes also needed to study (though they did not need to do social action projects). Hence, I
could not give the critical literacy class full reign on topic choice. I decided to begin with eight
topics students would be interested in and have students, later, choose the topics they wanted to
act upon. The eight topics had to be of interest, not only to my critical literacy classroom but to
my other two eleventh-grade classes. Still, I had the critical literacy class choose their topics. A
few students suggested two topics to me outside class discussion (gun control and
cyberbullying), then, in class discussions, we chose e-cigarettes, racism, and school starts later.
Finally, I chose three topics and mentioned the topics prior to bringing them to the class: Syrian
refugees, illegal immigration, and transgender identity.

After students wrote and discussed the eight AoWs, my teaching constraints required that
I reduce the social action projects to three topics. Thus, I asked students to choose the three most
interesting topics, tallied them, and asked students to choose one of the three most interesting
topics as their social actions. I attempted to provide student choice, and all students did act on
one of their top three choices. Even so, two students expressed that second and third choices
were not necessarily motivating. These students felt the power of my teaching constraints
through topic reduction as lack of motivation. Roman, of Group A (against gun control),
expressed how my teaching constraints affected his learning:

We have to be actually motivated about what we’re doing. Because, as for me, I
couldn’t care less about topics. I was doing this [against gun control] because this
is the one that didn’t bother me that much. These other two options…I didn’t care at all. (Post-Social-Action Transcript)

He went on to express that, “if you’re going to do a real social action, you have to be motivated to do it… Refugees, I couldn’t care less. Guns, I couldn’t care less…. The three [final tallied topics] that came up, I couldn’t care about.”

Roman did not see the social action project that he participated in as “real.” His concern about authenticity butted up against another “real”—the reality of my teaching constraints. It is important to “open up spaces for authentic dialogue, new forms of participation, and curricular projects that are immediately relevant to the lives of urban youth” (Morrell, 2004, p.12), but I could not have students do more than three or four social actions. There was a factor of accountability that needed consideration—I was accountable to my principal for all students’ projects. Roman did not care about the three topics and, as he said, he chose the one topic that “didn’t bother him that much.” While two students, Roman and Jeremy, were the only two students who expressed this problem of “what is real” in social action, it is possible that others felt this way too, but did not express their feelings. In fact, when I asked students if they would do similar social action projects or whether I should do them with my future classes, many students vehemently replied, “NO!” Roman understood the importance of authenticity to social action and revealed how, for some students, the social actions were not authentic.

My curriculum involves the study of topics, and in this critical literacy project, while I attempted to be egalitarian, there was the topic constraint. Students negotiated this constraint with me by doing projects, whether they wanted to or not. In fact, Roman, who is transgender (which I did not know at the time), wanted to do a social action project on Transgender Identity, but his interest was in the minority. I could not facilitate every students’ first choice. Roman
demonstrates that students are familiar with their positions in typical curriculum and go along with the teacher’s decision. The social action project, in fact, was not an emancipatory project for Roman because it was not real.

Reflecting on this situation as a practitioner researcher has generated exclusive and vital knowledge from an emic perspective and helped me learn from my students to revise and reconstruct more meaningful ways of negotiating and engaging with local realities. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) state, “There are critical relationships between teacher learning and student learning; that when teachers learn differently, students learn differently” (p. 689). I learned that when a few students did not get their first choice for social action, that affected their intrinsic motivation. Therefore, in the future, I will need to consider this issue when making topics available. However, I am not sure that my real world of teaching can accommodate all students’ choices.

“Falling on the Shoulders”: Power and Labor Disputes

The post-social action transcript demonstrated that members from all four groups expressed difficulty doing teamwork. For Group A (Against Gun Control), power had to do with the distribution of labor specifically, they wrestled with the issue, “Who is doing the most work?” This group was concerned with grades, and they correlated grades with the amount of work. A good grade would mean that the group member did a substantial amount of work. Hence, Group A members were concerned with fairness. They set up expectations—everyone was supposed to do a certain number of PowerPoint slides. However, two students (Code and Aria) were often absent and did not complete their slides.

Group A members expected an equal distribution of labor and they determined the worth of labor through grades. Bruce expressed Group A’s issue of grades in the post-social action
discussion, and again with me in June, when he approached me individually and stated, “Having seven people in groups… the biggest difficulty was having everyone do work. It falls on the shoulders of one, two, three people and six others sit around.” Bruce further summarized his feelings about the project:

   We’ve never done this in other classes, prior, nothing of this large of a scale.

   Honestly, we’d be much better off in smaller groups alone during the project.

   The topics themselves, I had fun researching them. I would have liked researching others like them because they’re modern and it’s not like some old guy there in a history class research paper…Something modern is happening, so that was nice, but the social action part of it, there was just too many people to try to organize…

   (Post-Social-Action Transcript)

   Two students in Group D (School Start Later), Joey and Juliet, also articulated Bruce’s (Group A) frustration. Joey noted that “Our group had a really hard time trying to get any kind idea off the ground,” and Juliet added to the complaint saying, “And we all have different ideas, and it’s hard organizing everyone.” Taffy and Maggie who were in Group C (Syrian Refugees), supported Bruce’s perspective. Taffy said, “Yeah, it was very unorganized,” and Maggie said, “I agree with him, and I just think that with the big groups, there wasn’t enough to do and to agree on...” Nate, in Group B (Pro Gun Control), expressed how group work was difficult for his group that functioned as a separate group for most of the project and then joined with Group A for the final presentation of their project to the faculty. He said, “So many people had many different ideas…a lot of conflicts.”

   Across groups, students had difficulty both determining what group labor would be and determine how that labor distributed fairly. Students felt very strongly regarding this issue and
agreed that they would not want to do a social action project in school in the future. I will discuss this theme and its implications for critical literacy in the discussion chapter.

“Not Happening”: Routing and Re-routing of Power

Overview. This theme emerged from two data sources: students’ social action projects and my research journal, in which I recorded my involvement in negotiating student projects with the school administration.

All groups’ final social action projects involved different communities within and outside the school. Groups A and B (Gun Control) would meet with the faculty to present pro and con arguments about gun control. Group C (Syrian refugees) would post flyers around the school and then ask students to vote during their lunch periods on whether they were for or against Syrian refugees living the American Dream. Finally, Group D (School Start Later) would send a letter home to parents and guardians in report cards wanting their response, through email, on their stance on the school day starting later. Of groups’ initial plans, groups A, B, and C’s actions did occur as planned, however, Group D’s initial plan did not occur as they had hoped.

All groups, whether their projects occurred as planned or not, met with the principal several times before implementing their final social actions. Meetings with the principal revealed the pivotal role he played as a power broker for the students who wanted to reach out to communities. The principal was an almost omniscient overseer of students’ actions. His concern with all groups was “balance” and additionally, his concern with Group D was “control.” The principal requested that Groups A, B, C, and D present both sides of the issue. Groups A, B, and C were agreeable to this, but Group D was not, and disagreement required negotiation. In addition to the principal’s interest in balance, he exerted control over who
received Group D’s information and how they would receive it. Routing and re-routing of power that occurred for each group are as follows.

**Balance: Direct route to an audience.** Group A (Against Gun Control) and Group B (For Gun Control) presented their arguments for and against gun control at a faculty meeting on May 2, 2016. When these groups met with the principal, they showed their presentations to him. He found that the content balanced, and thus facilitated the routing of these groups’ information to their intended audience, the faculty, without tension. Negotiating a balance incurred less tension and struggle for students in these two groups. Balance in perspectives provided a direct route to students’ intended audiences.

“All the drama and backlash”: Re-routing. Group C (Syrian Refugees) distributed flyers about Syrian refugee issues at the end of March and intended to have a student body vote (students grade 9-12) on April 6, 2016, on whether Syrian refugees should be allowed to live the American Dream. When they met with the principal in early March, his only concern was that they provide the student body a balanced perspective on Syrian refugee issues. Yet, as the date of the planned vote approached, national politics heated up (this being the year for presidential elections). Students at the school were voicing their support for presidential candidates, especially for the candidates Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and Hillary Clinton. Student discussions created tension, and some faculty members reported to the principal that they were concerned about these *intense* opinions. The principal, not wanting to add to this fervor, postponed Group C’s voting day. He asked me to come to his office and told me to postpone Group C’s voting day by one week. When I told Group C, they understood the principal’s concern. Maggie expressed that “Syrian refugees” was a sensitive topic, and Connor agreed. Connor understood that the changed schedule was due to “all the drama and backlash” voiced
by students about the presidential candidates. In the end, Group C held the voting day a week later—the principal’s postponement did not reroute information, it merely stalled it until he felt the Syrian information would not exacerbate the heated discussions about the presidential candidates. To assure that no student unrest would occur during the Syrian refugee voting day, he hired a substitute teacher to fill in for me during the four lunch periods when I supervised the voting.

“Point blank”: Re-routing and re-routing. Group D’s initial interest was to present an argument for a later start time to the district’s Board of Education (B.O.E.). The group wanted the B.O.E. members to come to school, which was not feasible. Their next plan was to write a letter that they hoped would get mailed home to parents in their third-quarter report cards in April. They brought the letter to their second meeting with the principal in March. Because this group was single-minded about starting school later than 7:30 AM, their letter to parents expressed one interest: “Point blank, starting school later in the morning has more pros than cons, so it would be worth it for the health of your children.” At their second meeting with the principal, the principal okayed the students’ project.

Students again met with the principal on April 8 to finalize the letter before the secretary mailed it on April 13. At that time, the principal told the students he would need to meet with me. On April 11, he met with me and expressed concern about the students’ letter. He said he communicated with the superintendent and learned that the students could not send the letter with the report cards. He then recommended several different routes that students in this group could take. First, that students could email the letter to faculty and ask them to vote, instead of seeking community response. Second, he asked whether students could reconsider their plan to
address the B.O.E. by simply going to the next Board meeting because it was not feasible to have any B.O.E. members come to their classroom.

I reported in my research journal that, when I conveyed these possible new routes to the students on April 12, “Students were outraged.” Students requested that I ask the principal to come to the class and talk to them. I did as they requested, and the principal came to our class. My journal describes this meeting thus:

Students had a heated discussion…. By the end of class, the principal was convinced that letters would be sent, but students in that group would send it through the high school students for their parents, instructing their parents to respond to the email address provided. This group really argued well and were happy to address their questions to the principal directly. I was amazed that they finally got the principal to agree that the letter had to be sent.

(Journal, April 12, 2016)

The routing and rerouting of information was a stressful circuitry of power for students in Group D to experience. In our after-project discussion, Amy said, “We knew our social action [was] not happening…They [administration] didn’t want parents to think that it was.” Amy expressed exactly why their letter was re-routed to the same audience, but in a compromising manner. Group D gave homeroom teachers copies of the letters, which teachers distributed to students. It is doubtful most parents got the letter. Three Group D members told me, “These letters will not go to the parents. We know that. high school students just toss it out.” Students in this group felt that they had bargained, and that the outcome was not a just one.
Social actions involve social networks. The students’ social actions were either acceptable or problematic for the principal, a major channel in the schools’ power circuitry. The principal determined when exactly the students could provide the information, and what routes the information would take. It is likely that the principal knew, just as the students did, that almost no parents would ever see those letters. In fact, only eight parents responded by email to the students. Of these eight, four were against a later start time and four were for it.

**Summary of Findings: Question 2**

The procedural analysis demonstrates the straightforward operations of conducting a critical literacy project. However, the power analysis demonstrates both the affordances and constraints of such projects in my school. The principal is the head of my school; his role is to oversee. The power analysis enabled me to see his position in the students’ projects—evidently, he envisioned a bigger social network than the students did. Also, he was steeped in power relationships with his superiors. His network influenced students’ projects. Students’ projects balanced in perspectives afforded the audience they wanted to reach. Moreover, they experienced less tension with the principal. However, they did experience tension due to my teaching constraints, which caused them to work on projects that did not motivate them.

Students valued equal distribution of labor and expected grades tied to the amount of work done. Literacy is “tied to power relations in society” (Morrell, 2008, p.4), but as educators we need to analyze the hierarchy of power and use power as a more productive force; “it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1977, p. 194).

The power analysis in this study revealed that examining multiple perspectives and including them in social action projects can work positively for students—social networks were opened for students who provided a balanced perspective on topics. When topics balanced, the
principal may have delayed the routing of students’ information, but he eventually opened the route, and students could address their audiences. For students taking one side, for example, social networks shut down. Students arguing for a later school start time never really reached their audience. The principal re-routed and re-routed their information, making it more and more challenging for that group of students to reach their audience as planned. I will provide a discussion of this study and its implications in chapter 7.
CHAPTER 7
Discussion and Implications

The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

~ Baldwin (1963)

Since I framed my practitioner research study with two methodological frameworks—Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’ (2002) critical literacy framework and Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) practitioner research framework—I will focus the discussion of my research within these frameworks.

Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys’ (2002) critical literacy framework includes four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, multiple perspectives, sociopolitical issues, and taking action. My practitioner research study reveals that, in my teaching, disrupting the commonplace, seeking multiple perspectives, and engaging in sociopolitical issues were integrated practices. When students read, wrote and discussed sociopolitical AoWs, they provided their own perspectives, first in writing and then in the discussion. Taking social action, however, occurred as a separate activity after initial textual explorations of AoWs and their interests in topics for social action. In what follows, I discuss the four dimensions of critical literacy framework revealed in my research. I integrate disrupting the commonplace, engaging in sociopolitical issues, and taking multiple perspectives as one topic: “Disrupting the Commonplace.” I then discuss taking social action separately.

Disrupting the Commonplace

My approach to a critical literacy curriculum included Lewison et al.’s (2002) four-part framework, which resulted in disrupting the commonplace of my English classroom by
deliberately discussing and writing reflection papers based on AoWs of controversial topics every week. Texts that address social issues “enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized. They make visible the social systems that attempt to maintain economic inequities” (Heffernan & Lewison, p. 16).

**Disrupting Common Teaching**

Exploring critical literacy in my classroom through AoWs and social action projects disrupted my usual eleventh-grade curriculum, which traditionally included teaching *Othello*, *Black Boy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crucible* and research writing. Incorporating critical literacy in my curriculum was not easy; it required a concerted effort on my part to provide my students the space to explore controversial topics, which not only involved choosing relevant topics, grading reflection papers, and facilitating deliberations, but also involved taking risks linked to New York State’s accountability system involving my Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR).

Eleventh-grade students take the English Regents exam in grade eleven; therefore, my teaching requires that I prepare my students for this exam. The test is based on general reading passages, an argumentative essay based on articles about any topic, and a second essay based on literary elements they discuss regarding certain literature. Students who do not pass the Regents exam have to retake the exam to graduate after grade twelve. In the end, APPR is the mechanism used by my school district to determine whether I am teaching English as New York State intends.

Since my district implemented APPR in 2012, I have earned “highly effective” (the highest APPR rating) according to my district’s evaluation method called New York State Evaluation. A major risk I took in implementing a critical literacy project, was my own
accountability review and my students’ exam scores. When planning the critical literacy curriculum for this study, I had to consider how the project would prepare my students for the Regents exam. I took the risk of teaching a critical literacy curriculum and disrupting my commonplace curriculum because I felt that reading and writing done for the critical literacy project would, in fact, help students to bring a worldview on their Regents exam.

**Disrupting Common Content**

A second way that this study disrupted the commonplace was the content I chose for students to read in AoWs and the discussions the articles provoked. Article content consisted of controversial topics. Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) give attention to how sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language are a part of teaching, and teachers who focus on sociopolitical issues understand that teaching is never neutral. Keeping this in mind, I deliberately engaged students in discussions and reflective papers about the sociopolitical issues that prevail in society and intentionally asked students to take a stance to broaden their outlook on social, political and ethical issues.

As stated earlier, in surveys conducted right after completing the eight articles of the week, most students reported that reading, writing, and discussing controversial topics on a regular basis in an English classroom (as curriculum), was something new and different from what they usually did. I built my inquiry upon findings from other critical literacy research where disruption of curricular content occurred. For example, Comber, Thomson, and Wells (2001) reported that a second/third-grade Australian classroom explored their neighborhood as school content. As a result, the students changed their relationships with key people in their neighborhoods: project officers and neighborhood council members.
My research extends Comber et al.’s (2001) findings by illuminating how social networks occurred within four different social action projects. All four critical literacy projects involved communicating project results to school community members. Like the children in Comber et al.’s study (2001), the eleventh-graders changed relationships to teachers, the student body, and parents in the school community. However, access to these key community members was easier for students whose projects included multiple perspectives or a balanced view of the topic than it was for students who chose to argue from only one perspective.

This finding has important implications not only for critical literacy classrooms but for civic education. Today’s political climate is one in which people are in camps. Nationally, one-sided perspectives are making it difficult to bring about change. Camps are not speaking to one another. Communication is very important. In this project, the principal easily routed the students whose projects included multiple perspectives to the audience they wanted to address. Civic educators can learn from this finding—perhaps, the way to change the world is to look at a more balanced view of things or at least invite multiple perspectives on a topic so that a balanced resolution may come about.

In my study, disrupting content opened avenues for social action projects and provided the space for engaging multiple perspectives. Students in Groups A (Against Gun Control) and B (For Gun Control) learned that 21 faculty members were for gun control, 15 were against, and 1 abstained from voting out of the 37 faculty members who attended their presentations. Students in Group C (Syrian Refugees) learned that 87 high school students (grades 9-12) were for allowing Syrian refugees into the country and 61 were against out of the 148 votes cast. Students in Group D (School Start Later) on the other hand, heard back from only a handful of parents via emails, thus, they really did not learn what the parent community felt about school starting later.
Disrupting “Smooth” Knowledge Building

In research question one, I asked, “How are eleventh-grade students’ perspectives evident in their discussions and reflective papers?” Descriptive analyses (levels one and two) of students’ reflective papers to articles did not reveal disruption of the commonplace; their writing was similar to the regular assignments that they usually did in class. However, through my third level of analysis, in which I tried to understand the themes evident in descriptive nuances of discussions, I found that there was an interruption of common, “smooth” knowledge building.

Knowledge building is a common way of thinking about learning (Bereiter, 2002; Sawyer, 2003; Scardamalia, 2002; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006), yet it is seldom, described in the literature as a tense classroom conversation. I found students build knowledge on controversial topics in common ways (e.g., knowledge building as incidental knowledge when students discussed e-cigarettes and cyberbullying), yet I also found, that when topics were sensitive, students used tension to build knowledge and that tension both afforded and constrained knowledge building.

Students specifically used deliberation and debate when they did not have a stand on a topic. Whereas students usually take a stand and knowledge building occurs around a stance, sometimes students had difficulty taking a stand on controversial articles. In some of these cases, they used deliberation and debate, not to provide evidence for a stand, but to figure out their stand. To understand their stance on the topic, they kept asking questions and often disagreed with one another. Students felt comfortable with uncertainty and debated to learn from others’ perspectives. Deliberation and debate were necessary, and an agreement was not their expected outcome. Rather, deliberating simply to understand, was some powerful discussion technique students used to build knowledge.
The summary of my Level 3 analysis of discussions, in Chapter 5, explains the diverse ways that students used six talk techniques to build knowledge. Whereas in some cases, students easily built knowledge together, in some cases they did not. Tensions had both productive and troubling outcomes. Productive outcomes were those in which students used questioning in order to get more information. Joey, for example, really wanted to know more about transgender identity and his peers responded respectfully.

Another productive outcome was the outcome of no definite stance: discussions did not always result in strong stances. When discussing Syrian refugees and illegal immigration, students used deliberation and debate to understand, but they did not necessarily reach any firm understandings. Kelly questioned and truly wanted to learn more about immigration and the decision-making process of Syrian refugees. It is possible that wanting to gain a better understanding of this topic on refugees may have caused Group C to choose Syrian refugees as their social action project. They used the project to seek knowledge and educate the student body. They did not have a definitive stance on the issue at any point during discussion or during their social actions. Typically, in education, we want students to arrive at definitive stances. Group C did not arrive at a stance throughout the project. I determined this was a productive outcome because it aroused students’ curiosity to obtain a better understanding of the topic.

Knowledge building did not go smoothly when students’ perspectives on the topics of race, oppression, and ethnicity were not open to intersectionality. Identity scholars (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005) use the construct “intersectionality” to explain individuals’ raced, classed, gendered, sexual, dis/abled, and aged constructions. Single constructs, such as race or class, for example, do not very adequately demonstrate the complexity of individuals’ positions in the world. Race, class, gender, age, etc. play out differently in different contexts.
The student discussions on gun control revealed an interesting set of intersections, including how urbanity and rurality strongly influenced my students’ thinking about “good” and “bad” people. As they deliberated about gun control, two students very clearly constructed people from Chicago as “bad” and people from rural areas as “good.” In fact, Bruce argued against gun control because he said people from Chicago could get guns with or without gun control; therefore, gun control would not change urban people’s gun access, they would always have access. Two African American students, Nate and Lenny, were for gun control. Nate responded to Bruce’s argument discussion on urbanity and rurality concerning gun violence in Chicago from his past-experiences, having lived in a city. Additionally, Lenny posed the question of whether his classmates had witnessed firsthand the shooting of a loved one. No one took up Nate’s and Lenny’s perspectives even though they were the only students in my classroom with firsthand knowledge of life in cities.

The way in which the gun control discussion veiled students’ intersectional experiences of the two African American students, challenged me as a teacher. On the one hand, students need a safe space to talk—I believe I created that space through the critical literacy project. On the other hand, as this discussion was occurring, I was aware of the tension, but I could not pinpoint its origin. It was later, when analyzing data, that I realized what made addressing the tension difficult. The tension was intersectional. It seemed probable that it made up of multiple constructs including rurality, urbanity, race, and class.

Yet, when students later discussed the AoW on racial discrimination and conversed, I sensed the tension and immediately addressed the issue of “White privilege” comparing it to the Brahmins and the “Untouchable” issue that still exists in India. I initially responded to the tension with one construct, race, but it was a more complex tension involving intersections of
what seemed to be race, class, and geography. Often it is later, that the teacher has time to analyze more closely what word specific intersections may be operating within tensions in class discussions. The teaching profession has yet to address how teachers might address intersectionality tensions that are noticeable only after they initially arise.

Knowledge building was not a smooth process when students experienced tensions. Some tensions led to further inquiry and solutions, however, when I could not unravel the tensions enmeshed in intersectionality on the spot, underlying tensions persisted. Intersectionality, therefore, is a key issue for any classroom teacher on which to build awareness and knowledge. Critical literacy involves the “micro politics of everyday life” (Janks, 2010, p. 188). Intersectionality can make the underlying tensions around those politics less easy to identify at the moment of utterance.

**Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice**

Discussions prepared students for democratic citizenship or praxis through social action projects. According to Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013), when educators help students make “inferences and connections between things that are not immediately obvious” (p. 13), they provide opportunities for students to consider the relationship between what is local and what is societal. Students’ discussions were the springboards for social action projects they chose.

This fourth dimension of critical literacy, taking social action, is usually a challenging task. My students actually took their social action projects beyond the classroom and let their voices be heard through their presentations to faculty members, as Groups A and B (Pro and Con Gun Control) did, and to the entire high school student body, as Group C (Syrian Refugee) did, or through a letter that went beyond the school to the community members, as Group D (School Start Later) did.
Students’ social action projects on gun control, school start later, and Syrian refugees brought out critical consciousness and an awareness of power structures, which students negotiated (O’Brien, 2001). Projects provided students the opportunity to acknowledge their potential to “speak with a voice that is rooted in their sense of history and place” (Giroux, 1987, p. 176).

Students also experienced that power is unequally distributed. Students persisted even though the principal constantly routed and re-routed their projects in the power circuitry. Because they persisted, they experienced transforming, in their small ways, some of the ills that exist in society to create a more just world (Shor, 1996). Students took responsibility during the entire social action process, and even though they voiced the hurdles they had to overcome, they positioned themselves anew in each re-routing of power and found ways to act as agents of change. They also learned that taking social actions on complex social issues does not always provide happily-ever-after outcomes.

The analysis of research question two, “How do my students and I take up the opportunity to pursue a social action project in response to Articles of the Week?” revealed the specific circulations of power that will be instructive for other teachers interested in implementing critical literacy projects. Firstly, I was unable to facilitate more than three projects. Other high school teachers who teach 120 students or so will most probably also have this constraint. Secondly, some students reported that social action projects were not authentic to them—this issue revealed the first power network students navigated in this study—power between students and me. Teaching will always experience this power differential.

Horan (2004) asserts that teachers often need to be authoritative in the classroom, to work through crises and to facilitate dialogue, for example, and argues that being authoritative without
becoming authoritarian represents a delicate balance. I found a balance with my students, and I assume this is the reason they completed their social action projects, even though some reported they were not authentic.

As teachers we need to test the influential power of our own critical pedagogic perspective first, before asking our students to search for their concealed beliefs/ideologies—the education process must somehow become mutually transforming for both students and teachers for it to be truly liberating (Shor, 1996).

The second power circuit students navigated was one that existed among the group members, as to who did the most work. This power structure was like any other group work; however, it was so uncomfortable for some students that they recommended that I do not engage my future classes with social action projects. I understand how strongly this power circuit operated for students, and I am contemplating how to address the problem of providing grades and work in the future. It is common that collaborative work, whether in critical literacy projects or otherwise, poses a problem for students around the distribution of labor. In the future, I may not do social action projects unless there is a collective recognition of issues of injustice, racial discrimination, curricula privilege, or stereotypical inequities that my students and I want to address.

Most interesting to me in the power analysis around social action projects was learning how power operated as routing and re-routing of students’ information to intended audiences. It would be easy to make the principal a “bad guy” in the power circuitry, but his/her job is to oversee. The principal of our school became more aware of his stakeholders when the topic of social action was close to home. Basically, he permitted students’ voices and negotiated with them, which eventually allowed students to address their intended audiences. Interestingly,
balanced perspectives opened these avenues. However, when students displayed closed perspectives, he was concerned about stakeholders and the tumult that could have erupted in the community if letters voicing only one side of a sensitive issue (School Start Later) were mailed with report cards.

Perhaps, the most powerful finding of this study was how doors opened up when students showed a balanced perspective on issues. As noted in the summary of the power analysis, this finding has implications for civic education. If we want to educate civic-minded students, we need to teach them to argue for their stance, but to keep an open mind to knowledge of multiple perspectives. Balanced perspectives in students’ social actions in my study opened direct routes to audiences. Sometimes delays occurred in the routes, but they were open, nonetheless.

Thus, it is significant to see power not only at a macro-level as enforced by institutions and bureaucracies but as something that affects every one of us even at the micro-level—in our own classrooms/schools. Students who wanted to inform parents/guardians about a later school start date promoted only a single perspective, and that closed communication for them. The principal, aware of stakeholders’ multiple perspectives, made communication for this group of students difficult. This group experienced power at a micro level at the school; they may have had a different outcome had they considered that multiple perspectives would open doors for them and allow them to relate to a larger power structure—their letters may have then routed to parents with less resistance from the principal.

**Practitioner Research Study in My Classroom**

As teachers, we are constantly making deliberate decisions about our students. We are concerned with connecting curriculum with students’ knowledge, and as teacher researchers we can make this happen by being “natural agent[s] of change” (Bissett & Bullock, p. 27).
I believe...

that teachers are among the more important factors, if not the single most
important factor, in educational change…that any educational reform that does
not account for the role of teachers and school leaders cannot be successful in
either the short or the long run. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 152)

Comber and Simpson (2001) state that finding better ways to thoroughly study the effects
of critical literacy on the accepted practices of teachers and students in classrooms must be a
priority. This practitioner research study was a major step that I took, and I believe that teachers’
interpretations and analyses of their own classroom data can definitely change the teaching and
learning process and “lend credence to the substantial value of the emic perspectives they are
uniquely positioned to provide” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 187).

Most of my students had not engaged in this kind of inquiry in another English
classroom. In fact, all students found the social action projects a new concept, and this change
made them anxious and concerned. I tried to be flexible and spontaneous as much as I could
during the planning of students’ social action projects, but at times I had to assert the aspects of
accountability and constraints that I encountered and the reasons for the completion of certain
activities at specific times. Even though engaging in the processes of change is difficult and it
challenges people to think differently and act differently, it is precisely these unforeseen hurdles
that occur in ongoing collaborative processes that make it possible for people to become agents
of change and make it necessary for practitioners and participants to find various ways to
evaluate success (McIntyre, 2008).

Even though social action projects required tremendous amounts of time and planning,
and this was a challenge in my study, it was most rewarding too. While engaging in social action
projects, my students came up with a structure for their presentation and even rehearsed their individual roles. This gave me the opportunity to learn the complexities of my students’ perspectives and the individual and collective ways that they expressed their beliefs, took a stance and created a meaningful classroom space to project their social actions. Learning to balance these conflicting issues is a crucial facet that educators experience, and it is imperative for future teacher education researchers to take on the challenge. Teachers need to recognize that intersectionality will play a role in students’ interactions, and we need to be more aware of tensions so that we can share with one another ways in which we can (1) come to understand intersectionality tensions and (2) respond to them.

This practitioner research study shaped my understanding to see things differently. This shift in vision comes from the assumption that teachers theorize their teaching practices by forming and reforming conceptual frameworks, posing new questions through which to view practice, and questioning their assumptions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It made me aware that as a critical pedagogue I need to reflect further on my own positionality and make a concerted effort to address intersectionality to interrogate oppression on multiple levels. I acknowledge that it is difficult for teachers to sometimes engage in controversial/sensitive issues, but as educators, we need to seize the moment and dig deeper. If we do not bring it up, then who will? I learned that when students showed colorblindness in one of their discussions and walked on top of words, I needed to challenge them further and wrestle with these difficult issues of racism in their lives as well as in the world.

This inquiry also informed me of my teaching practices and opened my eyes to how I could use students’ everyday experiences as the starting point for any examination of critical classroom practices (Freire 1987, 1993; hooks, 2003; Shor, 1996). It made me aware of the
challenges that critical pedagogues face because there is bound to be a struggle for balance between pedagogy and institutional constraints. In fact, this practitioner research study helped me “work the dialectic” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), which blurred the boundaries of being a practitioner and a researcher and provided “at once disruptive and productive tensions” (p. 97) to understand more fully, how hierarchical power and time constraints influenced the planning and implementation of the social action projects.

Furthermore, students’ post-social action discussion raised important questions about my students’ perspectives and multiple interpretations. I take comfort in knowing that AoW discussions on a regular basis disrupted the commonplace and encouraged multiple perspectives while discussing sociopolitical issues, which is essential in a civilized world. Hopefully, it will make a difference later in their lives, if not presently. It also made me realize the importance of “learning about real, material, concrete, and particular practices of particular people in particular places” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 564), and it challenged me to rethink distinctive ways in which I could learn from my students and tweak the options for social action projects as they suggested—doing as many social action projects as they wanted, which would not be feasible during school hours, but could be possible if we engaged in a social action club after school or in collaboration with the social worker.

Critical literacy education is about access and discrimination, about inclusion and exclusion. “It is about setting the conditions for students to engage in textual relationships of power” (Luke, 2000, p. 449). My students learned that power circuitry exists, and even in the real world there are contending forces which make up society, and that transformation can occur in society since it is unfinished (Shor, 1992, 1996). This study had larger societal issues that were relevant, new, and relatable and made connections to students’ everyday experiences.
Significance of the Study for Future Research

This study helped me in many ways: as a teacher, researcher, participant, mediator, interpreter, and an agent of change. I took the risk to explore critical literacy with my students, which energized students to voice their perspectives and produce social action projects that they had not experienced before in their English classrooms. I believe that my study will serve many other teachers to orchestrate controversial issues on a regular basis in their English classrooms and encourage students to read against the grain. As Freire (1998) once said, “If we escape conflict, we preserve the status quo” (p. 45); thus, teachers need to pursue an inquiry stance as “part of the life-stream of the classroom” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 339) and aim to teach better and keep the human element of teaching alive in schools that are increasingly characterized by standardization, scripts, and competition (Campano, 2009).

I will extend my dissertation to my English department and to the larger community to encourage practitioner research district-wide. I look forward to sharing my dissertation at conferences and forums to shed light on the challenges and affordances of a practitioner research study and, hopefully, to inspire other educators to “alter the material conditions of teaching and learning and liberate the fuller potential of both students and teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 327).

This study was comprised of a small sample of twenty-two students; nonetheless, doing more longitudinal studies may further extend findings to include the affordances and constraints associated with developing students’ critical literacy practices at distinct stages of critical perspective-taking. I also recognize that as an interpretivist, reality is relative, local, and specifically constructed and that every construct carries equal importance (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).
Critical literacy is “an attempt to move the school curriculum to the community; to make it relevant to the lives of the students we teach” (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 15). My students’ social action projects undeniably moved out of the classroom, and their voices reached out to the entire student body, faculty, and community members. They may not have considered that important at the present time; nevertheless, it provided them the opportunity to exercise their power to communicate effectively and increase their possibility of becoming agents of change in their own lives. Foucault (1980) argues that power needs evaluation at its most basic levels as a means of recognizing and understanding forms of global domination. He emphasizes the importance of not understanding power in negative terms (as something that excludes or represses), but instead as a productive force: “it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1977, p. 194).

Practitioner research and inquiry as stance “involves experimenting with a variety of forms in the constant flux and flow of classroom life and culture in order to generate new possibilities” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 332-333). Unlike traditional research, where the researcher is the outsider making his/her entrance to collect data, practitioner researchers learn from their practice, share their knowledge with their students, administrators, and colleagues, and “make themselves vulnerable to scrutiny…partake in this ‘risky business’ because of their greater commitment to illuminating the true complexity and value of teaching” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 380).

Engaging in sensitive/controversial discussions with students, colleagues, and administrators may be difficult, yet it is important to raise awareness, create spaces, explore new communities, and provide “proof of possibility” (Cochran-Smith et. al., 1999) to other educators who might implement a different version of practitioner research study in their own field that
could yield important findings. Making local knowledge public is an essential element of the practitioner inquiry movement that can happen in other contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009). Practitioner research serves to “concretize local knowledge” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 47).

Grappling with methodological challenges suggests that learning through struggles can be powerful—that students have a voice outside the classroom, which they can make meaning of their multiple lenses through social action projects, and that local knowledge can extend globally. “It affords groups of people the freedom to explore and value how they experience their individual and collective realities” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 68) to address the local issues that may develop globally. Blackburn and Clark (2007) argue that future literacy research must engage methodologies that foreground the immediate needs of participants, particularly focused on tackling the connections between the local and the global in literacy research for political action. They contended that such research creates kinetic connections beyond the local through a focus on the social practice of collaborative, collective engagement with the texts and context of activism.

In this age of increasing pressures on classroom teachers—of standardized testing and completing required texts—I think we must be increasingly sensitive to what our research reveals about our classrooms and what they ask of teachers. I do not claim that, as critical educators, our understandings of knowledge and learning are different from and better, instead I argue that we need more research that identifies how critical pedagogy engages learning—whether that engagement offers something new to our understanding about learning outside a critical framework.

Developing practitioner research and encouraging research partnerships with universities should therefore, be a part of our doctoral level programs. As Apple (2009) notes, education is
not something separate from society, “it is not something alien, something that stands outside. Indeed, it is a key set of institutions and a key set of social and personal relations. It is just as central to a society as…so many other places in which people and power interact” (p. 40).

Hopefully, this study in one local context might be relevant to other educators working in similar local contexts. In fact, the burden of showing how one set of findings is applicable to another context rests with the investigator (Wesley, 2004a). Naturalists do not believe in “truth statements that have general applicability;” instead they believe “all social/behavior phenomenon are context bound” (Guba, 1981, p. 86).

We cannot address critical literacy through any ready-made curriculum mapping. It requires a rethinking of our pedagogies in order to develop students’ critical ways of thinking, reading, writing, and taking social actions about their world through their sociopolitical cultures. Fecho (1993) made a plea for recognizing teachers as constituting a distinct interpretive community and that, as teachers, we have a unique and necessary perspective in relation to theory and research and that our perspectives “will create for us a niche that will give our collective voices both authenticity and resonance” (p. 266).

I hope the findings from this study can serve to guide future practitioner researchers and critical pedagogues to develop new ways in building a critically reflective classroom that allows for robust social transformations that could influence educational policies because teachers’ voices do matter.
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# Appendix A

## Research Timeline

### 2015-2016

I have constructed my research timeline based on Yin’s (2009) suggested considerations:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Processes</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>July-Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submit Proposal to IRB (wait time included)</td>
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<td>Send Consent Forms</td>
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<td>Collect Consent Forms</td>
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<td>Prepare Data Collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implement AoWs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surveys after AoWs</td>
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<td>Choose &amp; Research topic for social action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plan &amp; take social action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gathering Data &amp; Analysis</td>
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<td>X</td>
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### Appendix B
#### Graphic Organizer

Some questions to consider for AoWs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the purpose of this article?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Whose voices are being heard?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Whose viewpoints are missing, silenced or left out?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What is your viewpoint of this article? Do you agree/disagree?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How is gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, etc. portrayed in this text?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Were there any surprises/confusions?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What would the title of the article be, if you were the writer?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What action might you take on the basis of what you have learned?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Survey after Articles of the Week (AoWs)

Name: _______________________________ Period: _________ Date: __________

This survey consists of two parts: A and B. Part A concerns your experiences with reading, discussion, and writing related to AoWs. Part B asks that you rate your three favorite AoW topics so that your teacher can determine what topics the class would like to research further and plan social action projects around.

Part A

Directions: The following chart asks that you reflect upon Articles of the Week (AoWs). Please rate your agreement on the following statements by placing an X in the column that most suits your response.

Please fill out the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Articles of the week (AoWs) made me look at social issues in ways I did not typically do before we started reading AoWs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Discussing AoWs with my peers made me look at issues in ways I did not typically do in class discussions not related to AoWs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Reflective AoW papers caused me to take perspectives on issues that I might not have taken in writing not related to AoWs.</td>
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Appendix C

Part B

Of the eight topics we explored in Articles of the Week, choose three that you would be most interested in doing further research on, and also planning and conducting a social action around. Put an X next to the three topics you would like to continue researching. Choose only 3 topics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article of the Week/Social Issue</th>
<th>Most Interesting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. E-cigarettes</td>
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<td>2. Cyberbullying</td>
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<td>3. Gun Control</td>
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<td>4. School Start Later</td>
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<td>5. Illegal Immigration</td>
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<td>6. Transgender Identity</td>
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<td>7. Racial Discrimination</td>
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<td>8. Syrian Refugees</td>
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</table>