THE PROCESS OF CO-CONSTRUCTING AND IMPLEMENTING A CRITICAL
LITERACY UNIT FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

by

Marriam Ewaida
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
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of
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in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
Of
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

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Date: Fall Semester 2017
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Fairfax, VA
The Process of Co-Constructing and Implementing a Critical Literacy Unit for English Learners

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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Master of Education
George Mason University, 2009

Co-Directors: Kristien Zenkov, Professor, and William Brozo, Professor
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Fall Semester 2017
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my two precious angels,

_Leila Grace and Ethan Mattias Ewaida_

You remind me that every moment is a gift and to always dream bigger.

I wish you…

The _COURAGE_ to change the things you want to change in the world,

The _FAITH_ to help you overcome all your obstacles,

and

The _HUMILITY_ to always look for the good in circumstances and others.

I’ll love you always and forever.
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THE PROCESS OF CO-CONSTRUCTING AND IMPLEMENTING A CRITICAL LITERACY UNIT FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Marriam Ewaida, Ph.D.
George Mason University, 2017

Dissertation Co-Directors: Dr. Kristien Zenkov and Dr. William Brozo

English learners (ELs) represent one of the fastest growing groups among the school-aged population in the United States, yet the level of literacy achievement for ELs has lagged significantly behind that of their native English-speaking peers. Existing practices in schools tend to favor an asocial and decontextualized language learning approach that ignores critical literacy and inquiry. Grounded in sociocultural theory, critical multiculturalism, engagement theory, and language learning frameworks, this mixed-methods ethnographic case study explored the process of co-constructing and implementing a critical literacy unit in which I worked alongside two middle school English teachers of ELs. The study describes the challenges and successes the teachers and I experienced during the planning and implementation process, as well as the impact of the critical literacy unit on ELs’ literacy engagement and development. Analysis suggests the teachers encountered several barriers during the process, including difficulty locating quality resources, struggling to balance state and district requirements with core
beliefs, and effectively managing projects. On the other hand, the process was perceived to be an effective mode of teacher professional development and fostered collaboration and trust between students and teachers. Quantitative analysis also suggests that the unit positively impacted students’ literacy engagement and development. This study highlights important alternative notions of English language learning and literacy pedagogies, as well as teacher professional learning and growth.

*Keywords:* Critical literacy, English learners, curriculum, adolescents
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

One of the most important aspects of education is its ability to transform and shape society and its citizens. Education has traditionally been seen as a vehicle for preparing students to become active members of society, trained not only to fill workforce roles, but also to become committed and engaged citizens in a public democracy. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2009) once quoted,

Education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if we care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.

Ultimately, it is not just the school itself that will help achieve this goal—it is the experiences and practices offered to students that will achieve the aims of social justice in society.

Compelled by this ideal and the demographic shifts in ethnic diversity that we are facing in the United States, I, as an educator, have had a sustained commitment to social justice education in all its forms. Scholars highlight there is great variability in how the term “social justice” is used in education (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009). Central ideas behind this term include: a distributed notion of justice, enhancing students’ learning and life chances by challenging the inequities of
school and society; and, teachers who are committed to the “democratic ideal and to diminishing existing inequities in school and society by helping to redistribute educational opportunities” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 350). Thus, teaching for social justice is an intentional and deliberate approach to K-12 education.

I primarily took a particular interest in social justice pedagogy because as a former English teacher I firmly believed that English education can contribute to disrupting these inequitable hierarchies of power and privilege in society. Social justice pedagogy provides marginalized students with the tools to aid in effecting change because its ultimate goal is to combat oppression by enabling all groups to have equitable opportunities and to be able to participate fully in a democratic society. According to Gutstein (2003), social justice pedagogy has three specific goals, including helping students develop 1) a sociopolitical consciousness 2) a sense of agency, and 3) positive social and cultural identities. Primarily, teaching for social justice involves helping students “understand, formulate, and address questions and develop analyses of their society” (Gutstein, 2003, p. 40). Just doing this, however, is insufficient. Ultimately, the goal is for students to become “actively involved in rectifying social inequalities” (p. 40) by believing that they have the capability to make a difference in the world.

It is therefore important for educators to validate students’ cultural and social identities and help them understand their history. Thus, social justice pedagogy is ultimately a pedagogy of caring since it relies on teachers who care about their students and their experiences (Esposito & Swain, 2009). This orientation guided my experiences as an English and English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and eventually
led to a passion for and adoption of critical literacy as an instructional approach. This approach encourages readers to actively analyze texts in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships (Luke, 2012).

My journey as a learner and educator interested in critical literacy is firmly entrenched in my experiences as an immigrant and former English language learner. My personal journey as an immigrant began in 1989 when my family immigrated to Vancouver, British Columbia from Cairo, Egypt in hopes of a better life. Born and raised in Egypt, I attended private Catholic school in which English was the privileged language. In that environment, I learned very quickly that no one could afford not to master English simply because it held such an elitist status. I vividly recall how rote memorization and mechanically focused drills were the sole focus of instruction in Kindergarten. This almost military style of teaching English highlighted the authoritative role of the English teacher and how learning English was not meant to be “fun,” but rather formal and systematic.

Upon immigrating to Canada, however, my experiences were primarily shaped by my inability to fit in due to language and cultural barriers. For one, I had to attend English as a Second Language (ESL) classes during my first year in the country. Again, my exposure to the English language was one of drill and mastery. Language learning was a chore, something I needed to master if I wanted to strip myself of my immigrant cloak. At that point, I was not able to appreciate literature beyond finding the “correct” answer the teacher had in mind.
It was not until my undergraduate studies in English Literature and Linguistics at the University of British Columbia that I formed a different relationship with the English language. I began to see how language is affected by and affects social relations and how power relations are inherent in language use. As the dimension of language in the social justice equation became apparent, I started to form a different relationship with language. I no longer viewed language as simply a tool used to contribute to the domination of some by others, but rather also a tool I could use in my aim for social justice in education, a tool that could help empower linguistically and culturally diverse students like myself. No longer able to ignore my experiences with language and my commitment to education for social justice, I continued my studies to obtain an additional Bachelor’s degree in secondary English and ESL education.

As a teacher, my experiences were so rich and meaningful because I could relate to my diverse students’ struggles. I knew what it meant to be an immigrant and not know the language. I also knew what it meant to straddle two cultures, to feel pressure to form a hybrid identity and to constantly cross boundaries, both physically and figuratively. I became committed to the notion of social justice and multicultural education; the goal for me was to equip students with the tools to take on more social justice oriented approaches to learning, so they could challenge the inequities they face at school and society and question issues of power and privilege they encounter daily.

For years, I struggled with these issues and ideas, however. In 2006, I immigrated one last time to the United States and was hired as an English and ESOL teacher in a school division known for its large numbers of Hispanic immigrants. Once again, I felt
conflicted. I often saw students feeling shamed and defeated because of their role as immigrants in this country and unfortunately saw teachers contributing to this shame and ridicule. On many occasions, I would witness teachers purposefully lowering expectations for ESOL students because they believed these students could not complete the work, while consistently assuming these students’ parents did not value education. And, on many occasions, I would ask myself if I were perpetuating the status quo and not maximizing these students’ learning and success. Was I privileging my students’ voices and experiences or not?

As a result of my reflections, I renewed my commitment to the values of social justice pedagogy—equality, opportunity, voice and agency (Esposito & Swain, 2009). I was opposed to teaching English Language Arts from an authoritarian perspective where only official voices and received knowledge are valued. Equipped with a renewed sense of passion for working with ELs in various capacities, I began to teach with a different language oriented approach. No longer was I willing to approach language from a functionalist perspective, but I aimed to equip my students to see the power of language to influence their roles in society and to help them take ownership over their own learning and experiences. Morrell (2005) calls for an increased emphasis on a critical English education and claims that such an approach to teaching English is “explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations” (p. 313). As an English educator, I wholeheartedly embraced social justice as a personal and professional disposition, and as a way to support my
students, and in turn have them support me, in understanding and transforming our own positions in society.

Throughout my teaching career, I have studied how I might work with K-12 students, pre-service teachers, and currently practicing teachers to enhance their understanding of how English education plays a vital role in producing democratic and active members of society. For years, I studied this project informally as a practicing teacher, literacy coach, ESOL program specialist, and graduate student. Social justice was a central part of the rhetoric I used to conceptualize and carry out my work with others and I committed myself to completing teacher action research projects rooted in how social justice pedagogy could engage our newly arrived immigrant students. I also participated in action research where I used photovoice to access students’ ideas about the purpose of school and how we, as educators, can help them find success in their newly found countries.

While in graduate school at George Mason University, I began to recognize the potential for specifically employing a critical literacy approach with adolescent learners. For most of these years, I had an undeveloped awareness that utilizing a critical literacy approach with students generally increased their level of engagement with their own education and appeared to have implications for engaging people in democratic ways. Informally, and over years, I began to tackle critical literacy activities in the classroom with my English learners and became aware that this approach to instruction was a key to empowering my students and eliciting discussions rich in students’ voices and perspectives.
It was also during this time that the broader social, political and cultural context around me helped confirm the notion that social justice issues are still very much prevalent today and ignited a renewed sense of passion within me to provide students with opportunities to confront these issues in the classroom. It became difficult for me to ignore the flood of social justice issues portrayed in the media. For instance, this past year saw the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, an activist movement that originated in the African American community as a result of police brutality against African Americans and the broader issue of racial inequality in the criminal justice system. In addition, issues of gender and identity rights resurfaced via publicly discussed transitions, the LGBT community gained victory as the Supreme Court of the United States ruled to guarantee the right to same sex marriage under the constitution, and gender wage discrimination was brought to the forefront of Hollywood discussions. The political domain also experienced widely publicized debates around income inequality and immigration, seeing some politicians pushing to raise the minimum wage and others concerned with several tactics to ban immigrants from entering the United States.

Undoubtedly, the political, social and cultural context surrounding me prompted me to explore contemporary struggles for social justice in a more intense and formal research capacity.

Ultimately, the roots of my dissertation project weave across a range of domains—critical literacy education, English language learning, and social activism. More specifically, I aimed to explore ways that critical literacy can be used in the English classroom with adolescent ELs. English learners are defined as students with a primary
language other than English who have a limited range of speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills in English (VDOE, 2015). Critical literacy is defined as an instructional approach that encourages readers to actively analyze texts in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships (Luke, 2012). As a curricular approach used in English classes, critical literacy has been found to impact reading comprehension and support the empowerment of immigrants, many of whom are English learners (Rush, 2004). Morrell (2005) argues that there is no higher social calling than to teach critical approaches to the consumption and production of language.

With regards to the English curriculum, a critical literacy approach calls for a social, political, and cultural debate and discussion, along with a discussion and analysis of how texts and discourses work, where and with what consequences and in whose interests (Morrell, 2005). One of my primary goals, therefore, is to contribute to how classroom teachers, teacher educators, curriculum theorists and policymakers might rethink and enhance schools’ ability to teach students to be critically and socially justice minded. This explains my fervent desire and commitment to approaching English education for ELs through a critical literacy lens.

**Statement of the Problem**

**Literacy Achievement**

Our schools today are under increasing pressure from numerous forces to meet high goals for student performance, specifically in the area of literacy (Wise, 2009). According to the United States National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S Department of Education, 2015), 66% of American eighth graders are at risk of failure
because they read and comprehend at or below, and often significantly below, the basic levels needed for success in high school and the workforce.

While these statistics are alarming, the reading crisis for ELs is even more critical. Echevarria, Short and Powers (2006) highlight how the level of academic achievement for ELs has lagged significantly below that of their language-majority peers. A thorough review of NAEP (2015) results reveal that only 4% of ELs scored at the proficient level in reading, while 96% scored at the basic or below basic level in reading (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Eighth grade 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment results.

In addition, the results of the NAEP (2011) writing assessment reveal that among eighth graders who scored below the 25\textsuperscript{th} percentile, 31% were Hispanic (see Figure 2).
In fact, only one percent of ELs performed at or above the proficient level on the writing assessment, while 65% were below the basic level. Studies also reveal that ELs typically perform 20-40 percentage points below other students on statewide assessments (Menken, 2008).

![Figure 2. Eighth grade 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment results.](image)

Currently, ELs represent one of the fastest growing groups among the school-aged population, expected to account for 40% of students in U.S. schools by 2030 (Thomas & Collier, 2001). Although most ELs in the United States speak Spanish as their home language (Thomas & Collier, 2001), this group is very heterogeneous in form. According to Olsen and Jaramillo (1999) and Freeman and Freeman (2002), there are three main
groups of ELs at the secondary level: newly arrived students with adequate schooling; newly arrived with limited/interrupted schooling; and, long-term ELs. Newly arrived students are typically defined as students who have been in the country for five or less years (Flores, Kleyn, & Menken, 2015). Contrary to what people believe or expect, although many ELs are newcomers, others have always called the U.S. home (Goldenberg, 2008). Approximately 80% of all ELs are native-born American citizens, while only the remaining 20% are recent immigrants (Education Commission of the States, 2004). A staggering 85% of ELs actually begin kindergarten in America (Ortiz, 2009) and are referred to as long-term ELs (LTELs) because they are still classified as ELs after seven or more years (Flores et al., 2015). Many of these students have only ever attended American schools and they are still nowhere near the achievement level of their peers.

Studies highlight there is an urgent need for greater attention to long-term ELs in secondary settings, as these students are “disproportionally represented in national rates of dropout and grade retention” (Menken, Kleyn & Chae, 2012, p.121). An identifying characteristic of LTELs is that they are orally bilingual for social purposes, yet have limited academic literacy skills in English and their native language. According to Menken et al. (2012), the large majority of LTELs have experienced inconsistent schooling in the United States, often changing ESOL programs, moving in between schools with different language policies, attending multiple schools across school districts in different states, or lacking any access to ESOL programming at all.
Menken and Kleyn (2010) documented how the experiences of LTELs in schools have been subtractive, largely contributing to their limited academic literacy skills, which ultimately impacts their overall academic performance. They argue that schools have failed to build on the native language resources these students bring with them to school, working instead to solely develop English. According to the National Education Association, “few districts have designated programs or formal approaches designed for [LTELs] in secondary schools, leaving LTELs to sink or swim with inadequate support” (Olsen, 2014, p. 17). In fact, in their survey of over 40 school districts in California, they found that only four districts had designated programs or formal approaches for addressing the needs of LTELs. Instead, the most common current approach to helping these students is simply placement in mainstream classrooms that are designed for English-proficient students and, according to Olsen (2014), “there is nothing about these classes (instruction, pacing, curriculum, grouping) that addresses the language development or access needs of Long Term English Learners” (p.14).

A central cause of this regular misplacement in mainstream classrooms with no EL supports is the fact that most LTELs have reached a basic level of oral fluency and thus teachers do not recognize their need for continued support. When their needs are recognized, moreover, many LTELs receive interventions designed for other student groups such as newcomer ELs or academically struggling native English speakers (Menken & Kleyn, 2010). As a result, schools neglect the opportunity to help students transfer their native language literacy skills to acquire English.
Further complicating the situation, the typical secondary ESOL program is not designed to address the needs of many of these students, especially LTELs. English language acquisition programs in middle and secondary schools are typically designed for students who have native language abilities and who are assumed to simply need academic content language to navigate across the curriculum. In addition, despite their diversity, ELs in middle and secondary schools are often lumped into the same classes, with one teacher attempting to address the needs of students with drastically varied English proficiency and cultural backgrounds (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). These compounding factors impact the consistent development of ELs and contribute to their academic performance.

Another factor contributing to the urgency of this literacy predicament in the United States is that ELs are at risk of dropping out of school at higher rates. As McGinnis (2007) highlights, dropping out of school is typically the final stage in a cumulative process of disengagement. In fact, the high school dropout—or “pushout”—rate has hovered near 50% amongst non-White students in almost every major US city for four decades (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001; Balfantz & Legters, 2004). ELs in the US disappear from high school at this same astonishing, nearly 50% rate (NCES, 2009; Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2009).

Research suggests various factors are associated with students dropping out of school, particularly English language proficiency and academic achievement, family socioeconomic status, and cultural differences (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011). More specifically, ELs who speak English with some degree of fluency are three times as likely
to dropout as compared with their English-dominant peers, whereas ELs who have difficulty with English are five times as likely to drop out (August & Shanahan, 2006). The 2015 National Center for Education Statistics’ dropout data also compare the dropout rate between Hispanic students who were born outside the United States (foreign-born) and those who were born in the United States (U.S.-born) and find that foreign-born Hispanics had nearly three times the dropout rate of U.S.-born Hispanics (NCES, 2017).

These issues are important to address because students who drop out of high school and cannot read proficiently may not be able to participate actively in society or be as gainfully employed in the future (Amos, 2009). This could potentially contribute to problems such as increased crime rates and detrimental effects to the United States economy (August & Shanahan, 2006). Given the changing demographics and the rise in presence of ELs in our nation’s schools, there is an urgency to focus our attention on ways to help maximize their literacy learning and success.

**Language Learning Instruction is Insufficient**

The low reading achievement of ELs may also be a result of practices in the classroom, as language learning opportunities in schools do not include critical approaches that value analysis (Lau, 2012). Research highlights that ELs are continuously being placed in classes that teach basic English or content through direct and teacher-controlled instruction (Haberman, 1991; Lau, 2012). Language learning instruction has been criticized as being largely whole-class and teacher-centered, relying on the use of rote memorization techniques and often failing to motivate student learning
(Haberman, 1991; Lau, 2012). Yet, what students require are higher level literacy skills, as NAEP (2015) results indicate that ELs already possess basic literacy skills.

After conducting an extensive ethnographic study with immigrant youth situated in an urban middle school, McGinnis (2007) highlights that many urban middle schools are leaving immigrant students behind because of the autonomous-based-curriculum that dominates many classrooms. Observations in classrooms revealed that immigrant youth were typically asked to sit in controlled classrooms, required to listen quietly, work on decontextualized vocabulary activities, and complete assignments individually (McGinnis, 2007). McGinnis (2007) argues these immigrant students are being placed in classrooms that ask them to “do” rather than to “create” and the “narrowly focused skill-based activities did not tap into the youth’s creativity or talents, nor did they develop critical analysis of texts or higher levels of writing abilities” (p. 36). Harper and de Jong (2004) also argue that “failure to take advantage of the linguistic and cognitive strengths of older learners can restrict these students’ L2 development” (p. 158). Ultimately, teachers need to understand that older students possess a more sophisticated linguistic and conceptual base than younger students and that they have more advanced cognitive and reasoning skills (Harper & de Jong, 2004).

Too often the methods teachers are employing may not be effective in helping students achieve academic success. For the most part, English language teaching in schools has largely been influenced by the field of second language acquisition. There are diverse methods and techniques aimed at promoting language learning and acquisition, all of which have their advantages and disadvantages. Primarily, language
learning instruction has been grounded in the input-output model. Comprehended language input is processed and perceived, depending on the combined influence of one’s affect, prior knowledge, attention and the frequency of exposure. The output stage is when the learner produces the acquired language that, in turn, feeds back into the intake stage (Krashen, 1982). A strictly behavioristic interpretation of language acquisition has led to language teaching methods such as the audiolingual method, which emphasizes such practices as rote memorization and language drills. On the other hand, cognitivist perspectives, such as the language acquisition theories of Chomsky (1959) and Krashen (1982), have led to methodologies of language teaching that emphasize the learner’s inherent ability to acquire language(s). However, many of these approaches to language learning fail to focus on the social context and communicative approach to language learning (Block, 2003). Language acquisition is simply regarded as an autonomous and decontextualized cognitive process. According to Anderson and Irvine (1993), this asocial and functionalist approach to teaching the English language reflects a belief in meritocratic principles and assumes a cultural assimilationist posture.

Ideally, full language development has to embrace both linguistic and cognitive developments (Cummins, 2001). Mere exposure to the target language is insufficient if students are to develop grade-level language proficiency, “especially for older students who must negotiate the abstract concepts and complex language of secondary school classrooms and textbooks” (Harper & de Jong, 2004, p. 153). Thus, the optimal learning environment is when students’ prior knowledge is activated for learning the new. However, when educators simply rely on an asocial and decontextualized language
learning approach, they often ignore ELs’ language, culture and experiences. Ultimately, when students’ identity developments are not considered, students will not be engaged academically and cognitively (Cummins, 2001).

With regards to English Language Arts instruction more specifically, middle and secondary teachers rarely integrate reading into every aspect of instruction and literacy is almost a secondary priority to content material (Wise, 2009). According to Lee and Spratley (2010), there is a major difference between reading at the elementary level compared to reading at the secondary level. At the elementary level, students are often taught to learn to read, while secondary students are often transitioning to reading to learn. Adolescents, defined by the World Health Organization (2017) as ranging between 10-19 years of age, often need more specific kinds of literacy support, such as disciplinary literacy, that will help them access content-area texts. Lack of proficiency in academic language and vocabulary affects ELs’ abilities to comprehend and analyze texts as well as write and express themselves effectively (Francis, Rivera, Leseaux, Keiffer & Rivera, 2006). For those who have below-grade level literacy skills in their native language, the problem is exacerbated. In addition to having to grapple with limited English proficiency and accessing content area text at a faster pace, ELs are often placed in classes with secondary teachers who have little training in teaching basic literacy skills to adolescents (Francis et al., 2006).

Poor language learning instruction could potentially be due to teacher misconceptions. Many teachers have inherent misconceptions about second language learning in general, such as learning a language simply requires exposure to and
interaction in the second language and that all ELs will learn English in the same way (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Research demonstrates that pre-service teachers sometimes base their beliefs and assumptions about teaching ELs on experiences they had as students (Busch, 2010). A qualitative study conducted in Australia by Alford (2014) found that ELs are often positioned by their teachers through a deficit discourse that assumes they lack the necessary skills and knowledge base to engage in rigorous, critical literacy work. Alford (2014) found, however, that deficit discourse was also challenged by discourse related to students’ capacity for critical literacy. In this sense, teachers viewed students as both having a capacity for critical literacy but also encountering difficulty with critical literacy tasks, particularly in relation to linguistic, cultural, and conceptual barriers.

Yet, these beliefs do not match the reality in the classrooms, and at the same time, the student population is diversifying while the majority of teachers remain predominantly white and middle class (hooks, 2008). In addition, research conducted on teacher preparation suggests that teacher education programs often treat ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity “as one largely undifferentiated set of factors (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008, p. 606). Therefore, teacher beliefs and assumptions may be factors contributing to poor language learning instruction in many schools.

Inadequate language learning instruction could also be the result of ill-prepared teachers. Due to shortages in the area of ESOL, many school districts have opted to license as qualified individuals those with minimal record of subject area knowledge or competence and limited teaching experience. Although most individuals seeking an
ESOL endorsement in Virginia, for example, originally had to complete a state-approved ESOL licensure program, accruing at least 24 hours of coursework, more recently alternate routes to licensure are becoming the norm. For instance, legislation passed in June 2016 permits an individual who holds an active teaching license to add an ESOL endorsement simply by passing an academic subject test prescribed by the Board of Education (Virginia Department of Education, 2017).

Given that today’s new teachers often feel ill-prepared to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students, teacher educators and researchers have found that pre-service teachers need additional training in this field (hooks, 2008; Jones, 2002; Short & Echevvaria, 2004). Currently, many teacher education programs expose pre-service teachers to content related to developing knowledge of language learning and linguistics and understanding the socio-political aspects of language use (Fitts & Gross, 2012). In addition, many teacher preparation programs that focus on training individuals to become licensed teachers of ELs provide field experiences that require candidates to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Fitts & Gross, 2012).

Nevertheless, scholars continue to argue adamantly for an English Language Arts curriculum that focuses on the development of critical practices as an aspect of language study (Freebody & Luke, 2003). Effective readers should be able to decode texts, understand and compose meaningful texts, use texts functionally, and analyze texts critically (Freebody & Luke, 2003). Overall, learning involves collaborative inquiry and second language research highlights that engaging ELs in critical dialogue with English texts improves both their critical skills and language ability (Greenleaf, Schoenbach,
Cummins (2009), for instance, suggests that language learning will be optimized when teachers consider more teacher-student interactions that draw on students’ identities and explore more critical, social issues. Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) cautioned readers about how ELs may be stranded in ways to interpret texts or become overly dependent on the teacher’s guidance and assistance, yet also suggest that critical literacy can be beneficial for ELs if their voices and experiences are effectively incorporated into the curriculum. They argued, therefore, that the relationship of critical literacy to mainstream literacy is one of dependency rather than an add-on. In addition, Pennycook (1999) claimed that the “view of language learning cannot be an autonomous one that backs away from connecting language to broader political concerns” (p. 334).

As educators, we need to reconsider alternate views of language development and curricular choices, especially given the higher language demands and critical analysis required by standardized testing in all content areas. In addition, we need to engage in culturally relevant teaching approaches that may help empower these students and maximize their learning and success. Overall, I do not believe, nor argue, that we must neglect the technical aspects of language learning. However, what needs to be adopted is a more critical approach that values reflection on issues of power, language, and culture if we value social justice as the ultimate goal of education.

**Marginalized Youth**

Much of the intrigue guiding my inquiry lies in the fact that a critical literacy approach to teaching English is needed for social transformation and for empowering
these often-marginalized youths. Adolescent ELs face compounding challenges as they enter American schools for the first time. Although the causes of the discrepancy in achievement between ELs and their non-EL peers are debatable, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) suggest,

Hispanic immigrants may be at risk for academic failure due to the stresses of minority status, discrimination, alienating schools, economic hardships, difficulty understanding the English language, or having parents who are unfamiliar with the education system in the United States. (p. 301)

Many families tend to settle in high poverty, high crime neighborhoods. In fact, approximately 21% of Hispanics live in poverty compared to 9% of Whites (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2015). These neighborhoods typically lack the necessary social and physical resources that help adolescents prosper in their academic career, therefore, placing these immigrant ELs in considerable risk for behavior disorders and substance abuse (Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002). In fact, high levels of neighborhood poverty have long been associated with crime. Sociologists and criminologists suggest that the “concentration of poverty creates an environment within which criminal behavior becomes normative, leading impressionable youth to adopt criminal lifestyles” (Jargowsky & Park, 2009, p.28).

Not only are these adolescents surrounded by crime and poverty, but their families usually lack the social capital necessary to help them adjust and navigate the U.S. educational system, placing them at greater risk in relation to academic success. Immigrant families’ lack of knowledge and skills may place them at a greater
disadvantage for finding support structures to help them parent effectively in the United States. According to Coatsworth et al. (2002),

Parents and families may be alone in creating ways to facilitate their adolescents’ developmental needs for a coherent sense of self, a view of oneself as competent person, effective behavioral and emotional regulation, and strong bonds to society’s conventional social structures. (p. 113)

Often, immigrant youth face the stress of acculturation and having to integrate two cultural backgrounds. According to Mena, Padilla and Maldonado (1987), the acculturation process is particularly difficult for students who immigrate after the age of 12 years old as immigration prior to age 12 seems to be most influential in predicting language fluency and adaptation.

In addition, many of these students are facing discrimination in multiple settings, including their school. Sirota and Bailey (2009) studied teachers’ expectations and perceptions of Hispanic ELs. Results indicated that teachers held more negative perceptions of EL students and held them to lower expectations simply based on race and class. Research has continuously shown that children’s self-perceptions are generally shaped by teacher’s perspectives of them (Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2000). Ultimately, discrimination in educational settings is “often associated with lower self-esteem, decreased academic motivation, increased racial mistrust, problem behaviors, and greater levels of anger and depressive symptoms” (Sirota & Bailey, 2009, p. 256).

On the other hand, however, Morrell (2005) argues that it is vital “to move beyond deficit explanations for the failure of many marginalized populations to develop
essential academic literacies” (p. 313). Gutierrez, Morales, & Martinez (2009) argue that schools often provide these deficit explanations because they assume that students’ cultural backgrounds or home languages are misaligned with school norms. Examining the lack of achievement of ELs in education as a result of an opportunity gap instead can help to shift the focus from output to input. From this lens, the current achievement gap between ELs and their peers could be the symptom of a public school system that consistently provides different and unequal educational opportunities to minorities. Whereas language associated with the achievement gap negatively focuses on minority students and their families for being responsible for the students’ low achievement, an opportunity lens puts the responsibility back on the public school system to provide an equitable education for all students (Minor, Desimone, & Phillips, 2015). Minor et al. (2015) argue that “systematic differences in teacher characteristics and instruction constitute an opportunity-to-learn gap,” which may also contribute to variances in achievement (p.241). Recognizing that ELs’ achievement could be bolstered through adequate instruction and equal opportunities in schools is a critical first step to closing the gap.

As educators, we need to acknowledge that youth’s personal and social identities are critical in the learning process. Critical literacy, rooted in social justice pedagogy, aims to combat these risks by helping students take pride in their culture and develop a critical consciousness (Esposito & Swain, 2009). Critical literacy, thus, is needed because it ultimately grants marginalized groups a voice as they are so often misunderstood and their voices misinterpreted (Enciso, 2011). As Alford (2014) argues,
critical literacy “can help dispel dominant deficit views about [Els] capacity for learning” (p.73).

Pennycook (1999) highlights how critical approaches to EL instruction need a transformative dimension in addition to a critically analytic one, and they need to include a “political understanding of the location of pedagogy and the development of a way of teaching aimed at transformation” (p. 341). He not only argues that it is important to focus on the inequitable contexts in which language learning takes place, but also for students to not feel trapped in unequal relations of power. Pennycook (1999) suggests that a more useful approach to critical work in education “needs some vision both of what a preferable state of affairs might be and of how one might start to work towards it” (p.335). A critical approach to English language instruction, thus, needs to do more than simply “describe pessimistically what is wrong and instead suggest possibilities for change” (p.335). Awareness is simply not enough – action is needed, as well.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

Though the growing number of immigrants has enriched the racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity within schools, it has also posed several challenges. This unparalleled level of migration has introduced into schools across the country ever-growing numbers of students with limited English skills. Consequently, one of the biggest challenges facing schools is finding effective ways to teach an increasingly diverse student population. While remediation and classes aimed specifically at addressing the standards have been prevalent, they have not impacted the progress of these students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Research since the beginning of
the century has demonstrated that a critical literacy approach to English instruction may help to maximize student learning and success (Morrell, 2002) and can impact reading comprehension (Chun, 2009; Rush, 2004). All too often, critical literacy education is reserved for “advanced” students (Lalik & Oliver, 2007). However, I believe that critical literacy should be an integral part of literacy education for all learners, regardless of language proficiency, ability and age. Given the increasing popularity of critical literacy and its significant benefits for marginalized students, there is a vital need to investigate the use of this approach in the English classroom with ELs, particularly at the middle and high school levels.

This study is particularly important for several reasons. The uniqueness of this research lies in the fact that it documents the process used in creating and implementing a critical literacy unit with ELs, with a particular focus on what instructional and curricular choices teachers use to create a unit, how they negotiate teacher and student identities, and what conditions constitute the effectiveness of a critical literacy approach. This research also helps identify context-bound barriers in the implementation of critical literacy in English language learning classrooms. Literacy practices need to be situated and as Vasquez (2004) argues, a critical literacy curriculum needs to be “lived,” arising from the social and political conditions of the community. Thus, it is important to examine the context-bound complexities in implementing a critical literacy curriculum in order to enrich our understanding of the processes and effectiveness of critical literacy work with ELs in various contexts.
The purpose of this study was to explore the process of constructing a critical literacy unit alongside middle school English teachers of ELs and to examine what happened when English teachers engaged in critical literacy practices with their adolescent ELs. Research questions guiding my research were the following:

1. What are the challenges and successes the teachers and researcher experience in the process of co-constructing a unit grounded in critical literacy and in implementing the unit with English learners?

2. How does a unit grounded in critical literacy impact English learners’ literacy engagement in the English class?

3. How does a unit grounded in critical literacy impact English learners’ literacy development?

Operational Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms have been defined as such:

Critical Literacy. Critical literacy, which relies on critical theory, is an instructional approach that encourages readers to adopt critical perspectives towards texts. There are multiple definitions of critical literacy. Shor (1999) defines critical literacy as “language use that questions the social construction of the self” (p. 2). In addition, Lenski (2008) offers the following definition: “Critical literacy is developing a set of beliefs about reading that focus on examining a text’s social and cultural implications” (p. 229). More recently, Luke (2012) defines critical literacy as “use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday
life” (p. 5). It is important to note that these various definitions informed the
development of curriculum in this study. Each definition was influential in guiding the
curriculum development work of the unit grounded in critical literacy.

*English learner (EL).* English learners are the fastest growing group of students in
the United States (Thomas & Collier, 2001). More than half of secondary ELs are native
born, and the majority of them speak Spanish. The term EL in this study refers to
students whose first language is other than English and who are receiving ESOL services
(see definition of ESOL below). In this study, all participants learned Spanish as their
first language, with the exception of one student whose first language is Arabic.

*English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).* A structured language learning
program or curriculum designed to teach English to students in the K-12 system whose
native language is not English and who do not possess sufficient English language skills
necessary for academic success (VDOE, 2015).

*Limited English Proficient (LEP).* This term is often used interchangeably with
EL. According to the Virginia Department of Education (2015), an LEP student is
defined as a one with a “primary language other than English who may come from a
background or home environment where a language other than English is routinely
spoken”. The English language proficiency level would need to be measured in all skill
areas (formally and informally). An LEP student in the Commonwealth of Virginia is
classified according to the federal government definition as described in Public Law 107-
110, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (VDOE, 2015).

A) who is aged 3 to 21;
B) who is enrolling or preparing to enroll in an elementary or secondary school;

C) i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; OR

ii) who is a Native American or Alaska Indian, or a native resident of outlying areas; and who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual’s level of English language proficiency; OR

iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; AND

D) whose difficulties speaking, reading, writing, and understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual –

i) the ability to meet the state’s proficient level of achievement on state assessments described in Section 1111(b)(3);

ii) the ability to achieve successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or

iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

Social Justice. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines social justice as “a state or doctrine of egalitarianism.” The term emphasizes the notion that there is justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. According to Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007), social justice is both a goal and a process.
The goal of social justice is equal participation of all groups in a society. Distribution of resources should be equitable and individuals should feel safe and secure. The process is comprised of actions that are both democratic and participatory. These actions should also be affirming of human agency and capacities and individuals should work collaboratively to create change.

*Social Justice Education.* An educational approach that aims to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression in society. The goal is to develop a sense of agency in order to impact the oppressive systems around them (Adams et al., 2007). Multiple theories, including critical, critical race, postmodern, post-structural, feminist, and multicultural education theories espouse the social justice education goal.

**Organization of the Report**

This report is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 has presented the introduction to the study, defined the statement of the problem, and highlighted the purpose of the study, the research questions, and operational terms. Chapter 2 presents an overview of related literature and research related to the topics being explored in the study. The methodology and procedures used to collect and analyze data for the study are presented in Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 presents the results of data analyses. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a discussion of findings, implications derived from the findings, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Conceptual Framework

I adopt sociocultural and engagement theories as lenses to approach curriculum and instruction. My study relies on how a curriculum situated in critical multicultural literacy and informed by best practices for second language acquisition may impact ELs’ engagement and literacy development in the English classroom. The following conceptual model (Figure 3) helps to situate this study:

Figure 3. Conceptual model for critical literacy unit planning and implementation with English learners.
Sociocultural Theory

The process of second language teaching is mainly grounded in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, “which emphasizes meaningful interaction among individuals as the greatest motivating force in human development and learning” (Eun & Lim, 2009, p.13). According to Vygotsky, learning takes place on the social level before it moves on to the individual level. Learning, thus, occurs using two key elements: tools and signs as mediation, and the social interaction of individuals with a more capable individual in the zone of proximal development. In that sense, learning is not about transmission and assimilation, but rather about negotiations of meanings through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978).

Likewise, Wenger's (2006) social theory of learning has extended the study of learning beyond the context of the classroom instructional setting. Learning includes the structure of the social world in analysis and considers conflict and the relational nature of social practice (Lau, 2012). Wenger (2006) emphasizes a community of practice as a “group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). Communities of practice, therefore, include a domain (identity defined by a shared domain of interest), the community (members interact and learn together) and the practice (shared practice). Essentially, through the process of sharing information and experiences, it is believed learning takes place. Therefore, learning is regarded as social participation in which the individual is an active participant in the practices of social communities and in the construction of his or her identity. Central to this discussion is the idea that less experienced members of the
community can learn from the contributions of the more mature and experienced members, ultimately all gathering to work towards a common goal.

This social aspect of learning is key to critical literacy development in the classroom. Students need multiple opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other. The classroom, in this sense, acts as a “community of practice” where students are encouraged to develop their identities, share cultural experiences, and gain a sense of voice and agency.

**Critical Multicultural Literacy**

Critical multicultural literacy pedagogy, which combines an emphasis on critical literacy with the notion of culturally-relevant pedagogy, is also key to this study. Stevens and Brown (2011) claim that when blended, these two conceptualizations overlap with the concept of critical multicultural education (May, 1999 as cited in Stevens and Brown, 2011).

Given the increase in student diversity, it is imperative to teach in culturally relevant ways that take into consideration how all students experience the curriculum. According to Villegas (1991), culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on “how people expected to go about learning may differ across cultures, and in order to maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice” (p.13).

Ladson-Billings (1995) positions culturally relevant pedagogy as a pedagogy of oppression that is committed to the empowerment of marginalized groups. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally-relevant pedagogy is committed to three principles.
First, students need to engage in activities that ask them to pose and solve higher-order problems in order to maximize their learning and success. In addition, students should view their cultures as strengths and develop cultural competence as a mechanism for learning. Finally, students “must develop sociopolitical and critical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Lopez, 2011, p. 78). Culturally relevant pedagogy, therefore, is constructed upon an effective set of principles on which teachers can base their instruction (Lopez, 2011). As Lopez (2011) highlights, culturally relevant pedagogy “has emerged as an effective way of centering the cultures, languages and experiences that diverse students bring to classrooms so as to increase their engagement and achievement” (p. 77).

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) also developed a conceptual framework of culturally relevant pedagogy teaching behaviors, infusing aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze social inequity that is manifested through racist practices in educational institutions. They identified five themes inherent in culturally relevant pedagogy: identity and achievement; equity and excellence; developmental appropriateness; teaching the whole child; and, student-teacher relationships. The first theme of identity and achievement focuses on how identity is a cultural construct and that both teacher and student identities need to be considered in the classroom. Culture includes ethnicity, race, gender, class, language, region, and religion and thus, “participating as a member of these microcultures makes each individual a multicultural being” (p.72). These cultures shape one’s identity and culturally responsive teachers should not be colorblind or race
neutral, but rather aware of power and privilege in the educational system. Teachers need to embrace diversity and affirm it as an asset by using home-community cultures as learning tools in the classroom. In essence, the knowledge students bring with them to school must be acknowledged, explored and utilized in the classroom.

Second, with regards to equity and excellence, teachers should give students what they need, and incorporate multicultural content in the curriculum. Equal access to the curriculum and instructional practices also means maintaining high expectations for all students. In addition, teachers should address developmental appropriateness with a focus on teaching styles, learning styles and cultural variation in psychological needs. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) claim that teachers should be cognizant of how diversity of culture impacts developmental appropriateness. The key, therefore, is to generate “teaching styles that incorporate the vast differences in culturally-based learning styles and learning preferences of students” (p.76).

The next component of the model is a focus on teaching the whole child. This implies sensitivity on the part of the teacher to how culture, race and ethnicity influence the academic, social, emotional and psychological development of students. Culturally responsive teachers need to observe and interact with students as individuals and be sensitive to the funds of knowledge and cultural capital that each student possesses.

Finally, student-teacher relationships built on caring interactions and a warm and inclusive classroom atmosphere are necessary components of a culturally-relevant pedagogy. Caring is demonstrated through patience and persistence with all learners. Overall, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper’s (2011) model of culturally-relevant pedagogy
integrates a focus on critical race theory and explicitly synthesizes teacher behaviors inherent in the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy.

In addition to a focus on culturally-relevant practices, critical multicultural literacy is also comprised of critical literacy practices. Lewison, Seely Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed definitions of critical literacy that appeared in the research literature over the last 30 years in an effort to identify its underlying characteristics. They identified four related components: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues and taking action and promoting social justice. Primarily, students are called on to interrogate texts and analyze how they are positioned in relation to the text. Students may “examine competing narratives and write counter-narratives to dominant discourses” (p. 383). In addition, students need to “step outside of the personal to interrogate how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions” (p. 383). Finally, critical literacy involves taking action and promoting social justice by engaging in reflection and challenging the status quo.

Lenski (2008) offers the following definition: “Critical literacy is developing a set of beliefs about reading that focus on examining a text’s social and cultural implications” (p. 229). Luke (2012) defines critical literacy as “use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (p. 5). Overall, definitions of critical literacy underscore the fact that reading is not simply comprehension of an authors’ message, but rather that a text “represents a view of reality
that is based on the author’s social, cultural, and political beliefs from his or her context” (Shanklin, 2009, p. 44). Such a critical approach to literacy and language also implies that texts are constructed by authors who have a particular representation of the world and are therefore, occupied with issues of power.

The purpose of critical literacy approaches is to empower students to become effective readers and thinkers while engaging them in analyzing and synthesizing texts and experiences (Pescatore, 2008). In this sense, critical literacy needs to have a transformative and social action component in order to be effective and therefore should not be regarded as a strategy or an add-on in the English classroom, but rather a “stance toward language learning and use” (Shanklin, 2009, p.45). As Luke (2012) highlights, “critical literacy is an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological, and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum” (p. 7). Critical literacy, therefore, leads educators to advocacy and activism on behalf of those who are marginalized and vulnerable in society and schools (Luke, 2012).

Through this lens, there is an explicit connection between critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy, as developing critical consciousness is also an implicit goal of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Lopez (2011) argues critical literacy is “a way of understanding and engaging with culturally relevant pedagogy in English classrooms” (p.77). According to Stevens and Brown (2011), multicultural literacy education, thus, includes “making instruction more equitable in the classroom by serving the needs of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, by incorporating multicultural literature, and by bridging home and school literacy
practices” (p. 32). Since these tenets are rooted in culturally relevant pedagogy, critical multicultural literacy goes one step further by taking into account issues of power, privilege and oppression that are reflected in and shaped by literacy practices. Stevens and Brown (2011) assert critical multicultural literacy instruction that challenges discrimination is necessary if educators aim to promote educational equity and social justice for all students.

**Academic Expertise Framework and Pedagogy**

Cummins’ language learning framework also informs this study. Cummins proposed The Academic Expertise Framework (2001) which emphasizes critical literacy, active learning, deep understanding and the importance of building on students’ prior knowledge (see Figure 4).
According to Cummins’ Academic Expertise Framework (2001), optimal instruction includes a focus on meaning, language and use. Primarily, a focus on *meaning* involves the development of critical literacy rather than surface level processing of text. A focus on *language* incorporates critical awareness of how language operates within society. Finally, a focus on *use* enables students to generate knowledge by...
creating art and literature, and acting on social realities. As a result, the crux of his framework involves a focus on power relations and identity formation. Cummins (2009) argues for the “importance of identity negotiation and identity investment in the promotion of academic expertise among marginalized groups of students” (p.264). Through teacher-student interactions, knowledge is generated and identities are negotiated. Learning, thus, is optimized when interactions maximize both cognitive engagement and identity investment. Cummins (2009) also discusses the ways in which the larger power relations in society manifest themselves within classrooms and how collaborative negotiation of identities between students and teachers can begin to subvert these dynamics.

The framework also highlights the importance of academic language learning, while also emphasizing the role of literacy engagement, identity formation and investment, and collaboration in terms of guiding critical literacy practices. According to Cummins, Mirza, and Stille (2012), there are several conditions necessary for promoting literacy engagement among ELs. Scaffolded instruction should not only affirm students’ identities, but also activate and build on prior knowledge while also extending language development. Figure 5 highlights the necessary components for promoting literacy achievement and engagement:
These frameworks inform Cummins’ orientations to pedagogy as well. In his nested model of pedagogy (2009), Cummins focuses on three orientations: transmission, social constructivist, and transformative. The goal of transmission is to transmit information and skills from the curriculum directly to students. This should be the narrowest focus of instruction. In addition, social constructivism involves students and teachers co-constructing knowledge and understanding to include higher order thinking. Finally, the broadest focus should be on the transformative dimension, which enables students to gain insight into how knowledge intersects with power. Thus, the focus is on developing critical literacy with English language learners (Cummins, 2009).

Cummins’ framework and pedagogical model highlight the role of language in impacting power structures and transforming society. It is this focus on language and
identity that serves as a foundation for creating and implementing a critical literacy unit with ELs in the English classroom.

**Engagement Theory**

Finally, another body of literature that informs this study is Guthrie’s theory of literacy engagement. Researchers suggest that engagement is critical for sustaining literacy development and that certain instructional practices can help achieve this goal (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Guthrie (2004) argues that there is a higher correlation between the indicators of engaged reading and reading comprehension achievement than any other demographic factors such as gender, income or ethnicity.

Engaged readers are those who apply reading strategies for comprehension and conceptual knowledge, are motivated to learn and achieve, and who are part of a supportive literate community (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). According to Guthrie (1996), there are seven context-based dimensions that will help foster literacy engagement in the classroom. First, the *observational* dimension involves instruction with real-world interaction. Emphasizing students’ real-world experiences can help generate curiosity and motivation for learning and questioning that follows. Next, the *conceptual* dimension of the classroom context refers to “support for deep understanding of explanatory ideas” (p. 436). Students need to connect what they are learning with prior knowledge and synthesize information from multiple texts to build conceptual understanding. According to Guthrie (1996), “conceptually oriented instruction is organized around culturally significant, generative concepts” (p. 437) and reflects higher order thinking. Another dimension is *self-directed learning*, where literacy activities are
personalized to promote deeper engagement. These conditions help students develop a sense of agency in their literacy learning. Students also require *explicit support* for strategy instruction. This fourth dimension involves teacher scaffolding, student modeling and guided practice. However, these strategies need to be integrated in the context. Furthermore, students require *collaborative opportunities* where they feel they are part of the classroom community. The sixth dimension, *self-expressive*, refers to the “extent to which students are encouraged to represent their knowledge or imagination in ways that they select” (p. 439). This may involve producing artifacts, such as presentations and essays, based on their own interests. Finally, the educational context needs to be *coherent*, in which learning activities are all connected to each other.

Guthrie (2007) argues that the closer that literacy activities and tasks match students’ values, needs, and goals, the greater the likelihood that students will exert effort and sustain interest in reading. By acknowledging students’ reading interests and building on them, teachers can help students become motivated to read and engaged in the texts inside the classroom. Guthrie’s (2007) research suggests that classroom practices in which the content of instruction is linked to students’ direct or recalled experience and integrated with their background knowledge is relevant to students and can increase motivation. When teachers connect classroom lessons to “real life” outside the classroom, students reported that the lessons seem purposeful and interesting. In addition, when teachers structured their units of instruction thematically, in organized and connected forms, student motivation to read increases.
Overall, based on these dimensions, a critical literacy approach to language learning may promote better literacy development as opposed to the asocial and decontextualized style of teaching. Using a critical literacy approach in the classroom involves more student-centered activities, choice, collaborative opportunities and real-world connections, and thus may ultimately impact students’ literacy engagement.

**Review of the Literature**

**Historical Foundations of Critical Literacy**

Although critical literacy is not a new term amongst literacy scholars, it has gained popularity and momentum in recent years due to renewed interest in developing students’ critical thinking skills and the need to prepare our young learners for 21st century careers and beyond (Lee, 2011). A discussion of the roots of critical literacy is crucial given the impact of history in shaping paradigms in education. Although it is extremely difficult to attempt to seek out the “founding fathers” of critical literacy, an extensive review of the research points to its roots in critical theory and pedagogy.

Primarily, critical pedagogy has its root in The Frankfurt School, which was established in 1923 and whose theoretical tradition was influenced by the work of Karl Marx (Luke, 2012). Marx believed that the cause of society’s problems was socioeconomic inequality and therefore, argued that everyone should work towards establishing a socialized economy. According to this worldview, social justice is dependent upon economic conditions. Influenced by the work of Marx, these theorists believed that the process of schooling “withholds opportunities for students to formulate their own aims and goals and actually de-skills students” (Breuing, 2011, p. 4). Schools,
it was argued, distort history and “undermine the kind of social consciousness needed to bring about change and social transformation” (Breuing, 2011, p.4).

Many have highlighted how critical literacy practices grew out of the critical pedagogy of Brazilian educator and theorist, Paulo Freire. Working with impoverished peasants, Freire developed educational ideals that were aimed at improving the lives of marginalized groups and stopping oppression (Freire, 1970). Freire’s (1970) approach, which was grounded in Marxist philosophies, was one of the first to discuss the “pedagogy of the oppressed”. He argued that school was based on a “banking model” in which learners’ lives and cultures were regarded as irrelevant. In this view, schools were regarded as impediments to liberation. Instead, Freire (1970) advocated for a more dialogical approach to teaching and learning in which literacy was based on principles of reciprocal exchange. He devised a literacy program based on his model that focused on liberatory action and praxis, in which theory, action and reflection would lead to social change and justice. According to Freire and Macedo (1987), “reading the word” entails “reading the world” and building new ways of knowing and acting on the world.

This Freirean ideology has informed several theorists in America, including Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and Jean Anyon, whose writings began to appear in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Breuing, 2011). Giroux (1981), for instance, examined the role of school in transmitting certain messages, such as those that serve to privilege some groups and not others, and urged educators to build classrooms that embraced and fostered critical pedagogy. Since then, critical literacy approaches have been developed through feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, and critical race theories and have been
prevalent in Canadian and Australian education (Luke, 2012). Critical literacy has also
been characterized under different names, such as critical work and transformative
pedagogy, participatory approach, emancipatory literacy, critical education, liberatory
teaching, and radical pedagogy (Breuing, 2011).

Overall, critical literacy began out of a need to reform education so that the focus
was on acknowledging how the social and political elements influenced the educational
context. This historical overview of the roots of critical literacy is important to
understanding how the approach began to take shape in English classrooms.

**Critical Literacy in Practice**

Alexander and Fox (2004) have referred to the early 1990s as an “Era of
Sociocultural Learning” (p. 46). The goal of learning, according to these authors, was
“the creation of a mutual understanding arising in the social interaction of particular
individuals in a particular context at a particular time” (p. 46). It was during this time
that researchers began to view the knowledge gained in school as an “oppressive tool of
political and cultural authorities seeking to maintain their dominance over the
disempowered” (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p. 46). According to Alexander and Fox
(2004), learning was seen as a sociocultural, collaborative experience and in the context
of school, critical literacy was regarded as “the ability to read resistantly and write
critically” (Hammond & Mackin-Horarik, 1999, p. 529). The purpose of critical literacy
approaches, therefore, was to empower students to become effective readers and thinkers
while engaging them in analyzing and synthesizing texts and experiences (Pescatore,
2008).
Freebody and Luke (1990) argued that analyzing texts from a critical perspective is one of four essential reading practices. They developed a four-tiered approach to early reading instruction which include four necessary sets of social practices necessary for critical literacy in the classroom. The first set, coding practices, focus on developing resources as a code breaker. Students ultimately bring with them diverse cultural and linguistic resources. More specifically, “given the diversity of writing systems, and their specific print knowledges, and the culture specificity of text genres and conventions,…many students will require explicit introduction to the code” (Luke, 2000, p.455). Code breaking is necessary, but not sufficient for critical literacy.

The second set, text-meaning practices, focus on developing resources as a text participant. Students bring with them certain schema and background knowledge that helps them make meaning while reading a text. In addition, pragmatic practices are concerned with developing resources as a text user. According to Luke (2000), teaching pragmatic practices involves “enabling students to read contexts of everyday use, assess how the technical features of a text might be realized in these contexts, and size up the variables, power relations, and their options in that context” (p. 455). This pragmatic stance also involves teaching students how to do things with texts.

Finally, critical practices focus on developing resources as text analyst and critic. Students should question text production and reception and discuss the intention, force and effects of texts upon particular audiences (Luke, 2000). Luke (2000) encourages teachers to create lessons that address these different dimensions simultaneously, rather than attempt to move students up the hierarchy.
Since the beginning of the 21st century, critical literacy has expanded and has evolved to reflect the changing trends of American education. Fisher (2005) suggests that critical literacy provides an avenue for teachers who are seeking to develop culturally-relevant and socially just pedagogies (as cited in Lopez, 2011). However, although critical literacy has gained popularity and momentum in recent years in the world of academia, it has not been widely implemented in elementary and secondary classrooms and it is still rare to find pedagogical models and practical suggestions for teaching critical literacy (Lee, 2011), particularly with ELs. Goodman (1992) argued that “most of the literature that calls for critical approaches to pedagogy remains on an obtuse level of abstraction, with few images from which to gain a true understanding of the authors’ meaning and intent” (p. 29).

There are several reasons why critical literacy has not taken root in more classrooms. Luke (2000) asked more than a decade ago the following question: Can critical literacy move into mainstream state-mandated curriculum (p. 449)? His question resonates even more so today given the challenges and demands of the Common Core standards. Avila and Moore (2012) acknowledge that engaging in critical literacy is a challenge today, simply because “critical literacies often operate from a sociocultural definition of literacy while standards define literacy proficiency in individual students” (p. 32). They argue that educators need to utilize these approaches to literacy instruction as a way to offset some of the stifling aspects of standardization. Standards should not intimidate teachers into avoiding reciprocal approaches that encourage them to involve their students in critical literacy work, but rather teachers should involve students
critiquing the very nature of the state standards themselves. As Luke (2012) argues, “wherever textual access, critique, and interpretation are closed down…human agency, self-determination, and freedom are put at risk” (p. 5).

In addition, teacher beliefs have contributed to the lack of critical literacy practices in the classroom. One reason is that new teachers may find this type of teaching difficult and consequently avoid discussing controversial issues with their students (Smith & Lennon, 2011). Vasquez (2000), for instance, shares some of her frustrations and the barriers involved in attempting to construct a critical literacy curriculum in her kindergarten class. She suggests that the first step is to identify critical incidents, which she defines as ones “that create opportunities for conversations that might lead to some form of social action” (p. 9). She attempts to increase her students’ roles as text users and text analysts. However, she notices that the curriculum she was attempting to base on her students’ interests was based on her own agenda, and this made her listen to her students’ stories in different ways. In retrospect, Vasquez (2000) reflects on how she could have used her students’ interest in certain topics to discuss issues of gender, power, control, racism and cultural stereotyping.

Another reason is that some teachers fail to understand the meaning and depth of critical literacy, simplifying it to critical thinking and believing that it is only meant for high ability students (Lee, 2011). According to Lee (2011), educators need to be made aware of their misconceptions and realize that critical literacy is broader and meant for larger audiences than they have been led to believe.
Several studies have been conducted to synthesize aspects of critical literacy instruction. In a review of the literature on critical literacy over 30 years, Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) identified four dimensions that reflect a critical literacy curriculum: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple perspectives, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action to promote social justice. Behrman (2006) also reviewed articles published between 1999 and 2003 in *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* that focused on lessons and units emphasizing critical literacy pedagogy in middle and high school grades. Behrman’s search revealed that the most commonly used practices that support critical literacy included: reading supplementary texts; reading multiple texts; reading from a resistant perspective; producing counter-texts; having students conduct research about topics of personal interest; and challenging students to take social action. By providing the stories of people whose voices typically are not heard, teachers offer students the opportunity to participate in dialogue about why certain perspectives are normally privileged while others are silenced.

Furthermore, Comber and Simpson (2001) note that teachers listened carefully to students and used their concerns to co-create classroom tasks; involved students in focused discussions; offered strategies to help students reach their goals; and, helped students take action on a topic of study. Finally, Stevens and Bean (2007) suggest that critical literacy practices include approaching all texts as representational, situating a text within a particular context, juxtaposing different texts for differing representations, engaging in contested and rigorous discussions about a text’s representations and finding,
creating, and promoting alternative textual representations. While static definitions are not desirable, these common characteristics mark most critical literacy practices.

However, given that critical literacy is meant to look different in every classroom, based on the subject matter and the population of students, there is no formula for how teachers engage students in mastery of critical literacy. I conducted a thorough review of the literature over the last decade to identify studies in which teachers specifically employed critical literacy practices with adolescents in North America. Despite considerable variability in curricular approaches that support critical literacy practices, several patterns emerge related to the types of practices that are prevalent in classrooms that support critical literacy.

The notion of voice and dialogue is central to many critical literacy studies. For instance, Cridland-Hughes (2012) explores urban students’ literacy practices in City Debate, an after-school program that allows youth to discuss national issues. Her case study examines how “members describe and cultivate literacy skills in out-of-school contexts” (p. 194). Situated as a literacy community, the debate program empowers students politically and helps them formulate critical perspectives. Participant observations and in-depth interviews revealed how students’ knowledge led to social action. Critical literacy, therefore, centers on acknowledging student voice and creating opportunities for gaining knowledge and critical engagement. One participant credits the debate program for helping her see change as a process and working towards taking social action in every setting. Results indicated that these students developed critical literacy skills through specific debate activities and critical participation in the real world.
Schieble (2012) also acknowledges the importance of engaging students in critical conversations. She argues that a lens on whiteness is absent from literacy teaching and learning in secondary schools and highlights how whiteness as an “analytic lens makes visible a constellation of institutional privilege benefiting white Americans that exist largely unnoticed” (p. 212). Schieble (2012) argues for secondary teachers to make more explicit a lens on whiteness by facilitating critical conversations with young adult literature. Through an analysis of Sherman Alexie’s *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, Schieble (2012) shares instructional practices and ideas for critical conversations to help teachers facilitate critical literacy practices in their classrooms. According to Schieble (2012), critical conversations “involve tensions in perspective and aims to critique how power has an impact on people’s social, material, and psychological lives” (p. 214). These conversations can occur not only in small or whole-group discussions, but also in students’ internal discussions via journal writing. Utilizing critical discourse analysis, Schieble (2012) analyzed the identities and power relationships of the characters in these two texts revealing how “although white characters stand up for the injustices put forth by a white teacher, intersecting Discourses of patriarchy and social class maintain the voice of and against intolerance” (p. 218). Schiele (2012) advocates for literacy teachers to include a plethora of multicultural and contemporary works that engage adolescents and that represent multiple voices.

Laman, Jewett, Jennings, Wilson, and Souto-Manning (2012) draw upon five empirical studies centered on practices promoting critical dialogue across various
educational settings and with diverse populations. They define critical dialogue as “identifying, challenging, and reframing status quo discourses that can then be acted upon in new ways that challenge oppression and open opportunities for transformation” (p. 197). These conversations engage participants of varying and shared social identities in exploring issues of power and oppression toward the ultimate goal of social change. Results from each of the five studies revealed that critical dialogue is supported by time, the role of the facilitator, and ultimately, the use of tools. Primarily, participants need time for talk across multiple sessions in order to critically reflect on their social conditions. In addition, facilitators need to “cultivate a deliberate, intentional stance toward supporting critical dialogue without overtaking it” (p. 208). Finally, critical dialogue needs to be centered on one or more textual tools. In these studies, tools included picture books and young adult literature, photo-essays, printed bills and paychecks and verbal texts.

In another study, Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) advocate for the expansion of critical literacy practices to include critical performances, or “moments when students use their bodies to communicate their critical perspectives” that recognizes embodied texts and performances (p. 35). Their study highlights how two tenth graders use their bodies to illustrate critical literacy by responding to and conveying their critical engagements with a variety of texts. From this lens, Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) argue the body is a text “produced by socially circulating norms for gender, race, sexuality, class, age, and ability” (p. 35). For instance, one student “positioned clothing as a text, critical to performing and positioning identities, geographic and ethnic locations, and
socioeconomic status” (p. 36). Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) argue for teachers to attend to the ways in which critical literacy is evident in unexpected postures and practices in the classroom, such as off-task behavior and taboo classroom acts.

Lopez (2011) also highlights how it is imperative that English teachers engage in critical literacy practices in an effort to engage diverse students in today’s classrooms. Her research centers on a twelfth-grade English teacher in Ontario, Canada who engaged in culturally-relevant pedagogy and critical literacy in her writing class to build cross-cultural understandings and increase student engagement. Through the use of performance poetry, students were able to deconstruct and reconstruct “how they view different forms of poetry, knowledge that is privileged and not privileged, and their own understanding of people who do not look like them” (p. 76). Using a qualitative, collaborative action research approach, this study questioned how culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy nurture and open spaces for student learning, engagement, and achievement in diverse English classrooms. Data sources included journals, classroom observations, and dialogue. After being exposed to several examples, students constructed their own performance poetry based on their own personal experiences. Primarily, in the deconstructing stage, students examined the position of the author, their own biases and assumptions, and the relationship to their own lived experiences. Next, through critique, students discussed the sociopolitical context and examined multiple perspectives. Students were encouraged to discuss tensions and their perspectives in collaborative groups. Through this process, students were able to think of ideas for their poems and were encouraged to reflect on the process as a whole. Findings suggest that
the critical dialogue that took shape in the classroom helped students make connections to their world and “see multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination without naming it” (p. 86). Moreover, all students passed the unit, with achievement results well above previous years. Finally, their engagement and participation was greater than had been anticipated by the teacher. Results indicated that “using performance poetry as a form of critical literacy to engage in culturally-relevant teaching in a diverse classroom is valuable in building cross-cultural understanding, raising critical consciousness and helping students understand how oppression works in multiple ways” (p. 88).

Another set of studies revolve around the expansion of critical literacy practices to focus on multimodal texts and practices of adolescent learners. Gainer (2010), for instance, examines the multimodal literacy practices of a group of middle school students in an after-school critical media literacy club. Sessions focused specifically on representations of urban youth and schooling in media. Students began to read media as situated and social practice, however, they did not embrace the process of producing counter-narratives based on their own personal experiences. Overall, the participants drew on their own experiences as they “deconstructed, debated, resisted, and reimagined dominant narratives of urban students” (p. 372). Gainer (2010) urges teachers to create spaces in the curriculum for students to debate culture through collective analysis of media and creation of alternative representations.

Many studies also include a focus on interrogating texts through reading and writing strategies. Sawch (2011), for example, argues, “when approaches to critical inquiry and critical literacy are used by students to interrogate the dynamic between both
fiction and nonfiction texts simultaneously, they shape a classroom of questioning that empowers students to take an informed and more activist stance” about social issues in the world (p. 80). The author explores how nonfiction reading and writing, combined with theories of inquiry and argumentation, can help students make sense of literature they are reading in class, in this case *The Great Gatsby*. Students were encouraged to read a novel, interrogate its messages and themes related to the social, political and cultural issues of the world, and explore nonfiction texts to support arguments that arise from this interrogation. Sawch (2011) used the following curricular approach with her 11th grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition students: the class discussed levels of inquiry and development of self-generated questions about language, content, and themes; participated in Socratic seminars that troubled the text and its relevance; produced essential questions about the text; conducted nonfiction research around essay writing prompts derived from students’ essential questions; and, collaborated in writing groups to produce their final products. This inquiry-based approach to writing instruction fostered critical conversations and allowed the students to construct their own knowledge and use multiple texts to challenge the forces that shape the world.

Some scholars, however, argue that although reading strategies instruction is beneficial, it is often not enough. Park (2012) claims that teachers need “instruction that defines reading strategies as a set of resources for exploring both written texts and the texts of students’ lived realities” (p. 630). Park (2012) focuses on how visualizing, as a reading strategy, can become a tool for critical literacy. By using a voluntary after school club for middle school girls as her research site, Park (2012) highlights how
visualizations can lead to rich dialogue among the girls and how visualizations were informed by and reveal the readers’ identities and worldviews. Results indicated that the “girls’ visualizations revealed the different lenses that they used to read the race of literary characters” (p. 636). Ultimately, Park (2012) suggests that visualizing can lead to the process of grappling with complex social issues, making connections between texts, and “cultivating a heightened awareness of the way we see the word and the world” (p. 637).

Young (2007) also explored the use of critical multicultural pedagogy and critical literacy strategies to interrupt institutionalized silence, deepen high school students’ awareness of the power of language and support their development as allies as they challenged heterosexism through reading and writing tasks. Her primary goals were to learn more about critical multicultural pedagogy with students with situated privilege, add to her students’ and her understanding of the way heterosexism functions in the school, and begin to facilitate action towards social justice. Qualitative data included student writing, participant observations, field notes, audio recorded classes, and taped interviews with students and faculty. Analysis revealed institutionalized silence and invisibility regarding homophobia at the school, and the unit helped students become allies against oppressive language and homophobia in their school. Ultimately, Young (2007) argues that through critical multicultural pedagogy, she was able to “help students with situated privilege interrupt their own behavior and reinvent themselves as agents of change” (p. 18).
Overall, studies conducted over the past few decades suggest that critical literacy pedagogy looks different across settings. Teachers and scholars have continued to challenge a standardized curriculum by experimenting with different approaches to critical literacy in the classrooms. A review of the research suggests that critical literacy practices can rely on the use of multimodal texts, explicitly interrogating texts through reading and writing strategies, and a focus on developing dialogue and voice in the classroom. Ultimately, these studies underscore the importance of continuing to explore different avenues for employing critical practices with different groups of students across various contexts.

**Critical Literacy with ELs**

It has been argued, however, that it is not simply enough to just take a critical stance in English education, but to also try to connect English as a Second Language (ESL) as a field to the world in which it occurs. Pennycook (1999) suggests that the “view of language learning cannot be an autonomous one that backs away from connecting language to broader political concerns” (p. 334). He highlights how critical approaches to ESL need a transformative dimension in addition to a critically analytic one, and they need to include a “political understanding of the location of pedagogy and the development of a way of teaching aimed at transformation” (p. 341).

It is important to note, however, that the literature around the use of critical literacy with ELs is scarce, highlighting how critical pedagogy is quite a recent approach to education with regards to ELs. One reason may be because critical literacy as an approach to be used with ELs has always been regarded as difficult. Given the pressure
for ELs to meet state standards and ELs’ evolving language skills, there has been a debate around whether critical thinking and cooperative instructional approaches have a place in the EL classroom.

Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999), for instance, suggested there are several implications with regards to employing critical literacy approaches with ELs. For example, “to what extent does development of an effective critical literacy in English presuppose control of mainstream literacy practices?” (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999, p. 528). Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) cautioned readers about how ELs may be stranded in ways to interpret texts or become overly dependent on the teacher’s guidance and assistance. Yet, although Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) suggested that critical literacy may require more effort, they viewed critical literacy as being beneficial for ELs if their voices and experiences are effectively incorporated into the curriculum. They argued, therefore, that the relationship of critical literacy to mainstream literacy is one of dependency rather than an add-on.

Although there are very few iterations of how critical literacy is used with ELs in classrooms, a thorough review of the literature over the last 15 years highlights several patterns and trends and to what extent critical literacy practices support ELs. Primarily, several studies have documented how critical literacy use with ELs can help empower and give them voice. Research has continually demonstrated that critical literacy is characterized by an emphasis on students’ voices and on how critical literacy can help minority students become “change agents” (Avila & Moore, 2012; Lawrence, McNeal, & Yildiz, 2009; Lesley, 2008). Specifically, research conducted in the late 1990s and early
part of the century was concerned with developing students’ identities and how a critical
stance in the English classroom could help empower students as they actively critique the
choices made in texts (Avila & Moore, 2012).

Auckerman (2012) argues for what she terms “critical literacy as dialogic
engagement” (p. 43). She highlights the shortcomings with positioning critical literacy as
an outcome, or as a procedure in which the teacher is the authority, or as simply personal
response. Instead, Auckerman (2012) calls for an approach that allows students’ own
voice to emerge in conversation and where teachers and students critically encounter each
other’s perspectives. According to Auckerman (2012), critical readers need to
acknowledge the following: her or his own reading of a text is one of many possible
understandings; the readings we produce depend on our histories and social locations;
and the writing/reading of text is never a neutral act. This premise that literacy is a social
action where students’ voices are valued is central to the evolution of critical literacy use
with ELs.

Nussbaum’s (2002) case study in two sixth grade inner city social studies
classrooms explored how language-minority students with varying English proficiency
levels engaged in critical discourse about academic and social content in an effort to
increase content knowledge as well as critical thinking skills. These students engaged in
small group discussions around city dilemmas. Using systematic observations and
discourse analysis for development of argumentation, Nussbaum (2002) revealed that talk
by language-minority students increased during these discussions. Results indicated that
these students became more active participants in classroom discourse and used more
argumentation moves to make their points. The teachers fostered environments in which questioning and criticism were valued and modeled for students how to conduct critical discourse and be respectful of alternative opinions.

In addition, Chun (2009) acknowledged how adolescent ELs need exposure to critical literacy approaches in the classroom, one that he believed could be fostered by using graphic novels. In his study, Chun (2009) uses *Maus*, a graphic novel which foregrounds racism and immigrant otherness and ultimately resonates with ELs. Not only were his students more engaged with the text, but the content reflected their diverse identities and helped them develop critical literacies. Chun (2009), therefore, argues for the use of graphic novels with ELs in an effort to aid language pedagogy and learning and ultimately, deepen their reading engagement, which will likely help them be successful in other content area classes. Using *Maus* with this group of students resulted in a more engaged classroom environment, where students were granted a sense of ownership over the text. Anecdotal notes and classroom observations revealed how these students developed a sense of voice and were ultimately empowered as they could critique how “language works both for and against people” (p. 152).

One study by Enciso (2011) examined how immigrant and nonimmigrant middle schoolers engaged in storytelling of bigotry and advocacy with their teacher and peers. These stories often reflected the everyday realities, interests and perspectives of these students, many of whom were ELs. Three case studies of students’ stories highlight how “through storytelling, dramatic improvisation, the use of digital tools and through informal student-led spaces where stories are anticipated and encouraged, it is possible to
hear voices and lift them over walls” (p. 39). Through storytelling, both oral and written, these students were able to reflect on each other’s cultural experiences and create a safe place where differences in cultural norms were welcomed.

In addition, Flint and Laman (2012) worked with elementary school teachers to develop a more critical writing workshop approach to writing instruction that centered on issues of social justice. Many of the students in these classrooms were identified as English language learners with varying levels of English proficiency. The teachers created a poetry unit which included text sets related to social justice issues. They began by immersing students in the genre of poetry by reading and noticing key features of poetry. They also taught mini-lessons on facets of the writing process. Throughout this process, the Flint and Laman (2012) reveal how students wrote about their personal lives, even in their native language, and used poetry to speak out against injustices. Results indicated that students were more engaged in the process and took more risks with their language resources and in their writing.

A participatory action research study conducted by Lau (2012) aimed to explore the use of a critical literacy curriculum with middle school students in Toronto, Canada. Participants included 15 self-contained ELs. The researcher used a theme-based approach to critical literacy in which she chose topics that were relevant to her students’ concerns and interests. Using various writing, reading and discussion strategies, the researcher and teacher engaged students in topics such as bullying and identity. Using elements of popular culture and history, students problematized taken-for-granted knowledge by analyzing various fairytale versions from around the world, addressing
how stories are embedded with ideological cultural assumptions. Results of this study indicated that ELs “gained not only linguistic skills, but also a sense of their own voice” (p. 329). Lau (2012) argues that “it is not about when ELs are capable enough to engage with critical literacy, but rather about how we mobilize their existing linguistic, cultural, and cognitive resources to support them” (p. 329).

A more recent study by Peterson and Chamberlain (2015) explored the use of critical literacy during read-alouds with bilingual fourth-grade students in a rural school district. Relying on field notes, audio and video recordings of the read aloud sessions, semi-structured interviews, and classroom artifacts, the researchers found that teachers can develop students’ critical literacy skills through interactive read-alouds with texts that reflect and problematize relevant social issues for students. They note that “under the careful guidance of the teacher, these types of discussions present opportunities for children to deconstruct their own ways of thinking so that they might be better able to view situations from multiple perspectives” (p.234). In this study, bilingual students often aligned or misaligned themselves with characters in the stories based on their personal identities.

The element of dialogue as a component of a critical literacy classroom is also crucial given the idea that many of these ELs are placed in schools where the language of the teachers and school reflect the dominant ideologies, rather than their own cultural experiences and interpretations (Luke, 2012). Since critical literacy embodies a democratic stance, providing minority ELs with opportunities to engage in dialogue and reflect on one another’s experiences is vital and reflects a non-authoritarian view of
learning. Responding to a rise of undocumented Mexican youth in his California based high school classroom, Sepulveda (2011) conducted an ethnographic study to explore these male students’ stories. Through poetic and biographic writings embedded in a critical literacy framework, Sepulveda (2011) created a pedagogy of “acompañamiento” through which the students could speak back to the society around them in a safe and trustworthy environment. Students explored multiple realities, identities, and meanings of being border-crossers and outsiders in the United States. Qualitative data revealed that these sessions provided an outlet for relationship building through critical dialogue and helped students write about their experiences.

Griffin, Brown and Warren (2012), for instance, explored the use of intergroup dialogue as a promising model for engaging adolescents. Intergroup dialogue is a process in which two or more groups of individuals engage in face-to-face conversation to explore, challenge, and overcome the biases they hold about members of their own and other groups. They conducted intergroup dialogue clubs in four high schools with diverse student populations, many of whom were ELs. Surveys and semi-structured interviews revealed that the program had demonstrated positive outcomes for students, such as increased social awareness, decreased prejudice and improved conflict resolution skills. Overall, quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the program suggest that students formed more positive relationships with peers from various backgrounds and were more committed to social change. Ultimately, these researchers argue that the use of intergroup dialogue for social justice has the potential to lead students to transformative action and help narrow the gap between critical theory and practice.
Finally, the recent and rapid transformation of digital technology has also impacted critical literacy instruction over the past few years, as they have expanded the notions of text to not just include print but also digital or live texts (Healy & Honan, 2004). Critical media literacy has evolved with the rise of media technology. It refers to a “pedagogy that positions students to analyze relations among media, audiences, information, and power and to produce alternative media texts that challenge messages in dominant discourse” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 8). Morrell (2002) examined the use of incorporating popular culture into traditional curricula. According to Morrell (2002), popular culture is seen as a site of struggle between the dominant and marginalized groups in society. Using data collected over eight years with urban youth, some of whom were ELs. Morrell (2002) discussed how he used hip-hop, popular film, and television and media to engage students in critical reading and writing. Not only were students more engaged and motivated to participate in these literacy practices, but they were also able “to hone their critical and analytical skills and use them in interpretations” (p. 75).

Similarly, Black (2009) explored adolescent ELs’ engagement with popular media through composing and publicly posting stories in an online fan fiction writing space, which allows students to design their own narratives. Three case studies of ELs reveal how these students employ creative agency as they fashion fan fiction stories that are relevant to their own lives. Findings suggest that media, such as fan fiction writing, can be a beneficial resource for adolescent ELs as it may help their writing engagement. Black (2009) urges educators to guide ELs in the areas of critical consumption and production of media and digital texts.
Furthermore, using the classroom to include critical media literacy pedagogy, Choudhury and Share (2012) developed a framework to teach his sixth grade urban ELs to address the relationship between power and information. To address the lack of engagement in the classroom and the fact that students were questioning the very nature of schooling, Choudhury and Share (2012) began conducting regular classroom council meetings, which led to the discussion of how students feel others perceive them. As a result, Choudhury and Share (2012) engaged their students in media analysis activities and creating their own media in the community, followed by classroom discussions and reflection. Results of this study included not only a heightened sense of engagement, but Choudhury and Share (2012) observed an increased self-esteem and sense of pride in their community, deeper levels of critical thinking, and considerable growth on state standardized tests, as “three-fourths of the students improved their performance” on the state English Language Arts exam (p. 43).

Overall, the limited amount of studies specifically addressing ELs’ use of critical literacy practices is the most compelling reason I conducted this study. Clearly there is a wealth of critical literacy work on adult and college level ESL education (Benesch, 2001; Gallo, 2002; Lesley, 2001; Smoke, 1998), and although this orientation to English education is widely accepted and more prominently used in Australia and Canada (Vasquez, 2004; Cooper & White, 2008), there are fewer examples in the K-12 setting in the United States. There is also a lack of quantitative and mixed-methods studies focusing on the impact of critical literacy practices on ELs’ achievement and engagement. Thus, there is a need for more practitioners’ accounts of what critical
literacy looks like in the classroom and how teachers negotiate these practices in their particular contexts. This study aimed to partially fill this gap by researching the process of creating a unit grounded in critical literacy practices and implementing it with adolescent ELs in the English classroom.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a conceptual model of the theories that inform this study, including critical multicultural literacy, sociocultural theory, engagement theory, and the Academic Expertise Framework. I also reviewed the main themes that emerged from a thorough review of the literature around practical iterations of critical literacy with adolescents, and more specifically, with ELs. Ultimately, the studies reviewed in this chapter underscore the importance of continuing to explore different avenues for employing critical practices with different groups of students across various contexts. Despite considerable variability in curricular approaches that support critical literacy practices, several patterns emerge related to the types of practices that are prevalent in classrooms that support critical literacy, including a reliance on the use of multimodal texts, explicit interrogation of texts through reading and writing strategies, a focus on developing dialogue and voice in the classroom, and an emphasis on taking action on social reality. These practices are primarily grounded in sociocultural and second language acquisition theories, and as studies demonstrate, can have a positive impact on students’ literacy engagement and development.

This study explores the process of co-constructing and implementing a unit with teachers and their adolescent ELs, which is unique given previous research on critical
literacy in classrooms. Ultimately, the issues reflected in the literature find expression in the unit co-construction and implementation described in Chapters 3 and 4 that follow. Critical literacy unit construction and implementation will ultimately rely on embedding many of these practices, and will be informed by best practices in second language acquisition, including scaffolding learning and drawing on ELs’ prior knowledge to connect to new topics. Students will be provided with opportunities to examine how language functions in society and how it impacts social structures. In the next chapter, I review the methodology of the study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The level of academic achievement for ELs has significantly lagged behind that of native English speakers due to contributing factors such as literacy skills and development. In Chapter 2, I highlighted compelling evidence in the literature that demonstrates how, in many cases, ELs are consistently experiencing language teaching methods that favor rote memorization and mastery of basic skills in the absence of instruction that provides these students with opportunities to engage in higher-order thinking tasks, including critical analysis of texts or inquiry-based projects. The literature further supports findings that these youths also face compounding risk factors such as poverty and discrimination, all of which contribute to high dropout rates among ELs and disengagement from schools. Given that literacy development is a factor in producing engaged, critical and productive citizens of society who are prepared to tackle the challenges of 21st century society, there is an urgent need to focus our attention on ways to help foster adolescent ELs’ literacy learning and success in schools.

This study sought to explore the process of constructing a unit grounded in critical literacy alongside two middle school English teachers of ELs and to examine what happens when these teachers engage in critical literacy practices with their adolescent ELs. One of the greater purposes was the potential of this study to socially empower and transform an often underrepresented and marginalized group of ELs by giving them
access to literacy practices that allow them to question and analyze issues of power, race, language and culture. In addition to positively impacting students’ reading and writing achievement, this study ultimately aimed to provide adolescent ELs with the skills to not only deconstruct texts in schools, but to become empowered to challenge authority and norms in their school, workplace and communities, ultimately becoming activists against injustice. I approached this study with the belief that curricula can impact and transform a student’s beliefs and can be used to empower and give voice to those who are typically marginalized in our education system.

In what follows, I describe the setting for this research study, including both the school and classroom settings, as well as the teacher and student participants. It is important to note that all place and person names that follow are pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of my participants. In addition, I describe the methodological design and the data sources and analysis on which I relied for this study.

**Setting**

This study took place in Maxville City Public Schools, a school division in which I was employed as a Secondary (7-12) ESOL Program Specialist. My primary responsibilities in this role was to provide support and guidance to building level administrators, ESOL teachers, and general education teachers as it relates to programming for the instructional needs of students identified as ELs at the secondary level. Specifically, I worked collaboratively with all involved stakeholders to ensure program quality and to deliver the service delivery model that best meets the needs of students being served in the program. One of my primary responsibilities was to assist in
the design, writing, implementation, and delivery of curriculum to address the learning
goals of all EL students at the secondary level. Essentially, I researched, taught, and
modeled best practices used to address the needs of struggling ELs in both general
education classes, as well as sheltered and inclusion classes.

I am well aware, however, that my role as a Secondary (7-12) ESOL Specialist
could be regarded as problematic, especially as I am conducting backyard research in my
own school setting. Glesne (2011) notes that “when you add on the researcher role, both
you and those around you may experience confusion at times over which role you are and
should be playing” (p. 41). Primarily, I am perceived by my participants as an
instructional leader and ESOL expert. They believe that I am in a role of power and may
fear that I will evaluate or judge their responses. However, it is important to note that I
was not in a direct supervisory role nor was I responsible for evaluating classroom
teachers (both regular education and ESOL teachers) in any capacity. My role was
ultimately one of coaching and support.

I have, however, endeavored to be reflexive throughout the study. I believe my
own background as a former eighth grade English teacher and literacy coach in the same
school positioned me as a researcher not only to engage with the data, but helped to
facilitate a positive rapport with my participants. In addition, as a former colleague, I
was able to probe more deeply into these educators’ experiences as I was familiar with
the context and system in which they worked.

I chose this setting for my research study for several reasons. First, being an
employee of the school division provided me ease of access to teachers and students.
Moreover, this school division is known for its increasing numbers of ELs, which at the
time of this study was approximately 35% of its total student population (Maxville City
Public Schools, State Quality Profile, 2015). Finally, ELs in this school division had
been lagging far behind their peers and thus, teachers and administrators were desperate
to find alternate approaches to maximize the learning and success of these students,
specifically at the middle and high school levels.

Maxville City Public Schools is situated within a larger county (Clearwater
County) which operates a separate school system. According to recent data, Clearwater
County houses approximately 451,721 residents, approximately 45% of whom are White
and 22% are Hispanic. Approximately 39% of residents hold a Bachelor’s Degree or
higher, and the median household income is $99,766. Of the total city population,
approximately 7% are living below the poverty line (Data USA, 2017).

Neighboring counties are also among the wealthiest in the nation. Fall County,
for instance, a larger county situated less than 15 miles from this city is among the
wealthiest in the nation with 41% of the family income at $150,000 or more and
approximately 60% or more holding a Bachelor’s degree. Moreover, approximately 66%
of the residents living in this neighboring county are Caucasian, while only 16% are
Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

The demographics of Maxville City, the city in which this school division
operates, are in stark contrast to these neighboring counties and have changed drastically
over the past 15 years. According to the most recent census data, there are approximately
42,000 residents currently living in the city, an increase of 7000 residents from the 2000
census. Of these residents, almost 33% are of Hispanic descent. In addition, only 28.7% of those over the age of 25 hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher. The median household income is approximately $71,000 and approximately 12% of the population lives below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

I collected data for this study in Center Middle School, the sole middle school in the division, which houses approximately 1,000 students in both seventh and eighth grades. Over half of the student population is of Hispanic descent, with approximately 75% of the total school population receiving free and reduced lunch. In addition, nearly 30% of the school’s total population is classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). In the 2013-2014 school year, both Hispanic and LEP subgroups did not meet federal Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) in both Reading and Math. Consequently, this school was “Accredited with Warning” in both Reading and Math at the time of this study (Maxville City Public Schools, School Quality Profile, 2015).

**The Classrooms**

This specific study was conducted in two English/EL eighth-grade inclusion classrooms where ELs received instruction for 90 minutes per day. Both classes served a high percentage of students identified as ESOL and were therefore designated as “inclusion” classes. One class was co-taught by a certified English teacher, Ms. Fink, and a dual-certified English and ESOL teacher, Ms. Dunmead. The second class was taught solely by the same dual-certified English and ESOL teacher, Ms. Dunmead.

In an effort to gain a thorough understanding of the context in which I would be working over the next few months, I began by negotiating research relationships, not only
with both teacher participants but also with the students with whom I would be interacting in the classrooms, as I believed this would be an important method to gain trust. I visited each classroom informally twice a week for three weeks (approximately 30 minutes per visit) during the month of November 2015, prior to formally beginning this research study. Following these visits, I informally recorded my thoughts anecdotally in a reflection journal.

The purpose of visiting the classrooms informally was to avoid causing an intrusion into the lives of the participants in my study and because I wanted to have a rich understanding of the contexts while planning the unit. Informally visiting the classrooms was also intended to help me observe student-teacher relationships, literacy tasks, and students’ level of literacy engagement. As the division’s Secondary (7-12) ESOL Specialist, I also had access to extant standardized assessment data that helped me understand the students’ current language proficiency, and reading and writing achievement levels.

As noted in my informal reflection journal (November 17, 2015), the physical setting in each classroom was very similar albeit seating arrangements varied. In Ms. Fink’s classroom, students had self-selected seats in groups of four, facing all directions of the classroom. There was a Smart Board mounted to the front board, and one teacher desk at the back of the room. In Ms. Dunmead’s classroom, on the other hand, 31 students sat in rows facing the front. There was a Smart Board situated to the side of the room behind the teacher’s desk.
It was evident that the teachers had made a conscious effort to create an organized and literacy-rich environment. For instance, in Ms. Fink’s classroom there was a bookshelf which housed a multitude of classic and popular literature, as well as an assortment of nonfiction texts. By the board, Ms. Fink had also showcased several nonfiction texts related to the Holocaust, apparently previewing the next unit for students. In addition, on the back wall, student writing samples were posted in both classrooms, as well as a few posters with inspirational education quotes. To the side of each room was a blackboard, which often contained the unit essential question, as well as the relevant objectives that were meant to be mastered during the unit. At the front of both classrooms was a bulletin board that contained school announcements, as well as required daily elements of the school division’s instructional framework: a lesson essential question, as well as content and language objectives.

Perhaps as result of the teachers’ teaching styles as well as the mixture of student personalities among other factors, classroom cultures were vastly different. For instance, in Ms. Fink’s class, as noted in my informal reflection journal on November 19, 2015, students were very reticent and reserved. When prompted to discuss questions, silence echoed through the room, and during my subsequent informal observations students often appeared disengaged (November 20, 2015; December 2, 2015). Except for one female student who aggressively raised her hand to respond to questions, the remainder of students often did not want to actively participate. On several occasions, I witnessed both Ms. Dunmead and Ms. Fink nearly begging students to respond to their questions during whole group discussions. This was surprising given the inviting classroom environment.
In stark contrast, Ms. Dunmead’s classroom was loud, and from my initial visit I learned that classroom management was an issue with which Ms. Dunmead struggled particularly with this group (Reflection journal, November 17, 2015). Ms. Dunmead confided that she could barely contain the noise level enough to deliver instructions. There were five students in particular who constantly talked when the teacher was talking, yelled across the room, and visibly disrupted the learning process. In an informal conversation after one of my visits on December 2, 2015, I asked Ms. Dunmead if this was typical and why she thought this was the case. Without hesitation, she voiced her concern about having 31 students in a very confined space with no additional teaching support. She also stated that these five students had a history of receiving referrals and getting suspended due to their in-school behavior.

During my first formal interview with both Ms. Fink and Ms. Dunmead, I asked the teachers how they incorporated critical practices in their teaching. Ms. Dunmead asserted that she tries to “offer choice on projects” and to make assignments “meaningful and with a personal connection” (Personal interview, December 15, 2015). Ms. Fink also discussed how she “provide[s] choices on projects and essays” in hopes that would increase student interest and engagement in her English class (Personal interview, December 11, 2015). After providing each teacher with a broad overview of critical literacy along with examples of how it was used in classrooms, both teachers embraced the theory behind critical literacy and the social justice component that they felt would be very beneficial for their students. These teachers felt that critical literacy would be advantageous for their English learners. Ms. Dunmead, for example, highlighted how
critical literacy has the potential to help her students take ownership over their own reading because “ESOL students sometimes think of reading as something that other people do. It encourages them to be a part of literacy. Um…It gives them that ownership over their own ideas” (Personal interview, December 15, 2015). Similarly, Ms. Fink expressed how using critical literacy with her students is likely to be more engaging (Personal interview, December 11, 2015).

However, although my initial conversations with these teachers gave me the impression they valued the ideas associated with critical literacy practices, informal classroom visits suggested a disconnect between their expressed values and beliefs and their classroom practices. The daily routine in both classrooms was very similar and typically consisted of 20-30 minutes of sustained silent reading. When I asked the teachers how the books were selected, they told me that they visited the library as a class, usually every two weeks for students to self-select books. Each student was solely responsible for reading quietly during the required duration. When I asked about the purpose of the activity, both teachers told me that this was a school-mandated activity, and that they hoped self-selected “pleasure” reading would instill a love of reading in all students (Reflection journal, December 2, 2015).

Following this activity, the teachers typically presented a mini-lesson on a standardized reading or writing skill. This was generally done via teacher lecture in the front of the room, using the Smart Board to highlight key points. Students were expected to copy down the notes in their Cornell Notes journal. During the note-taking process,
both teachers prompted students to participate in sharing examples, and also modeled examples of what they were explicitly teaching (Reflection journal, November 17, 2015).

Following the note-taking activity, students were usually expected to complete an activity in their SpringBoard workbook, the required instructional resource used across all middle school English classes. The teachers encouraged the students to work in pairs or as a group to complete the required tasks. Often, students needed to complete a follow-up writing task that was meant to have them summarize their learning of the lesson.

Overall, although the teachers incorporated various learning activities and practices that lend themselves to a critical literacy approach, such as whole group discussions and critical analysis of texts, these practices were inconsistent and scarce. During my informal classroom visits, I witnessed two teachers who were seemingly very traditional in their teaching practices and who were attempting to adhere to the school division’s required curriculum resources as much as possible. These two English teachers feared steering too far away from the standards and from school and division requirements. During our informal conversations, these two teachers certainly expressed frustration with a standards-based approach to teaching because they thought it often inhibited great conversations in the classroom and they were excited about leveraging new ideas and skills to help their students engage in critical literacy practices. In what follows, I provide a more thorough description of both my teacher and student participants in order to help provide context and situate my research study.
Participants

Teacher participants. Participants for this study were classroom teachers and their students. Purposeful sampling (Glesne, 2011) was used in order to focus on English teachers who also teach ELs. Of approximately eight teachers across both grade levels, I selected two teachers who had a propensity to engage in practices consistent with a critical literacy orientation in their English classes with ELs. In order to select these two teachers, I sought the input of building level administrators, instructional coaches, the English and ESOL Department Chairs, as well as the district’s Literacy Specialist to help me narrow my pool. They were able to help me identify teachers who reflect the philosophy of social justice by reflecting on observations they had conducted in these teachers’ classrooms as well as conversations with these two teachers.

It was my goal that teacher participants exhibit a social justice orientation and be willing to take up critical literacy practices in their classrooms, such as be open to critical dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and analysis of literary texts by questioning issues of power, language, and race. This was important to me because these teachers would be co-constructing the unit with me and should have some willingness and desire to take on critical literacy practices in their classrooms. Given that the critical literacy curriculum will be shaped by these teacher participants, it was important to examine and gauge their beliefs related to social justice in education.

Based on feedback of teachers’ practices and dispositions, I narrowed my focus to only two teacher participants. Not only was scheduling more manageable with only two teacher participants, but narrowing my efforts on two teachers helped me devote more
time and energy in the curriculum planning and implementation process. It also granted me an opportunity to compare more explicitly teachers’ practices and processes. The two teachers identified as potential participants were provided with an explanation of the nature of the study and my expectations for their participation, and they ultimately gave their written consent to participate.

Both Ms. Dunmead and Ms. Fink were Caucasian teachers under the age of 35. Ms. Dunmead had been an English teacher for five years, and had taught in India for the past year in an International Baccalaureate school setting. On the other hand, this was Ms. Fink’s second year of teaching, having just completed her Masters of Education degree in English. Table 1 below outlines characteristics of both teachers.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned/Certification</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fink</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M.Ed/ Middle School English</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunmead</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M.Ed/Secondary English/ K-12 ESOL</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both teacher participants told me during our first interview that they yearned to engage their students, both ELs and non-ELs, in critical literacy practices. They viewed critical
literacy as a mechanism to impact their often disengaged and disenfranchised students and help them become critically minded, yet they did not know how to negotiate the boundaries of teaching within a standardized environment, especially under the pressure of administration to yield positive literacy results. For instance, Ms. Fink stated the following when asked how and when she discusses critical issues with her students (Personal interview, December 11, 2015):

I think it is so important to have my kids explore critical issues and question texts. Sometimes I think English class is hard because you just can’t put a box between what we should discuss and the texts. But time and the pressure of [state assessments] definitely act as constraints.

Overall, these teachers often voiced a sense of conflict and frustration with their particular instructional context.

With regards to their teaching styles, Ms. Fink and Ms. Dunmead appeared friendly, warm and often less authoritative in nature when co-teaching. In the co-taught classroom, Ms. Fink typically took the dominant teaching role, while Ms. Dunmead scaffolded the tasks for students, continuously monitoring and assisting students throughout the process. For instance, I would often see her sitting in a chair next to a student’s desk, helping the student complete an assignment. During another informal visit, she asked students to complete a vocabulary map on the word “Utopia.” Instead of simply asking students to complete the task independently, Ms. Dunmead modeled the task using an alternate word and discussed her strategy aloud with the class (Reflection journal, December 2, 2015). Nevertheless, it was evident that both teachers collaborated
during the planning process because they both had a thorough knowledge of the lesson plan and often finished each other’s sentences when giving instruction.

Yet, Ms. Dunmead exhibited a more controlled and authoritative demeanor in her own classroom. She clearly liked routine and engaged students in a more structured manner when it came to discussions and group work. For instance, she would ask students to put up their hands to reply, and often had guided discussions to avoid students calling out answers. She openly discussed with me in an informal conversation that this was a result of her desire to control her often noisy and off-task students (November 19, 2015).

**Student participants.** English learners in these teachers’ classrooms also served as participants. Participants included 21 ELs out of the total 25 students in Ms. Fink’s class. Participants in Ms. Dunmead’s class included 15 ELs out of the total 31 students. Tables 2 and 3 below present these students’ demographic characteristics as outlined in their school cumulative file.

Table 2

*Student Participant Demographic Information – Ms. Fink’s Class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>County of Birth</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Primary Language Spoken at Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aiden</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerry</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Parental Background</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julio</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Nelly</td>
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<td>Jenna</td>
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<td>USA; parents from El Salvador</td>
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<td>Katerina</td>
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<td>Walter</td>
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<td>USA; parents from Honduras</td>
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<td>Yolanda</td>
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<td>Oliver</td>
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<td>Joella</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
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<td>Kerry</td>
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<td>Damien</td>
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<td>Cassandra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Maribella</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>USA; parents from Mexico</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

**Student Participant Demographic Information – Ms. Dunmead’s Class**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>County of Birth</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Primary Language Spoken at Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>USA; parents from El Salvador</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
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<td>USA; parents from Mexico</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>USA; parents from El Salvador</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>USA; parents from Mexico</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaclyn</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>USA; parents from Mexico</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Ronald</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>USA; parents from Guatemala</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karissa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josie</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastien</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>USA; parents from El Salvador</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>USA; parents from El Salvador</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldina</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In conversing with both teachers, I learned that they were very concerned about their students’ literacy achievement during the eighth-grade year because most of these ELs had poor standardized assessment results during seventh grade. More specifically, many of their students had failed the previous year’s state-required high-stakes reading standards assessment, as well as had been identified as needing Tier 2 or 3 interventions because of their poor literacy achievement on reading benchmark assessments and the division’s curriculum-based progress monitoring tool. In fact, all students in both classes were identified as “below average” or “way below average” on the Aimsweb MAZE assessment, a progress monitoring tool meant to measure reading comprehension. As a result of these informal conversations with the two teachers, I gathered more formal assessment data with regards to students’ language proficiency levels and previous state-based, high-stakes reading assessment.

Students were identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) as evidenced by their scores on the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) ACCESS test. This test for ELs is an English language proficiency assessment administered to kindergarten through twelfth grade students who have been identified as ELs. According to WIDA (2015), the assessment serves many purposes, including:

- Helping students and families understand students’ current level of English language proficiency along the developmental continuum, generating information that assists in determining whether ELs have attained the language proficiency needed to participate meaningfully in content area classrooms without
program support, and provid[ing] teachers with information they can subsequently use to enhance instruction and learning in programs for their ELs.

Each assessment item and task assesses ELs on one of the five WIDA English Language Development (ELD) standards: Social and Instructional Language, language of Language Arts, language of Mathematics, language of Science, and language of Social Studies. In addition, students are given tiered forms of different difficulty levels. Scaling accounts for the differences in difficulty of each tiered form (A, B, or C) within a grade level cluster. Tier A, for example, contains easier items than Tier C. A student’s results on ACCESS for ELs are reported as scale scores and as English language proficiency level scores for each of the following language domains: Listening, speaking, reading and writing. In addition, scale scores and proficiency levels are also reported for the following four different combinations of language domains, known as composite scores:

- Oral Language (Listening and Speaking)
- Literacy (Reading and Writing)
- Comprehension (Listening and Reading)
- Overall Composite Score (a combination of all four language domains)

Scale scores can be used to monitor a student’s growth over time within a language domain. Composite scores are compensatory in nature, meaning that a high score in one language domain could inflate the composite score. To arrive at the composite scale scores, the relevant language domains are weighted and then added together. Literacy (Reading and Writing) scale scores carry greater weight than scale scores for oral language (Listening and Speaking) due to their relative emphasis and importance to
success in school. However, to exit the language learning program students need to achieve a score of 5.0 or higher on both the overall literacy score and overall composite score on a Tier C assessment.

All student participants in this study were identified as LEP as evidenced by their ACCESS assessment results during Spring 2015. Specifically, participants were identified as ranging between Levels 3, 4 or 5. As defined by WIDA, the language proficiency level for Level 3 students is classified as “developing.” Students in this level are expected to possess general and some specific language of the content areas and read and comprehend expository texts with graphic or interactive support (WIDA, 2015). Level 4 students are classified as “expanding” and may understand and speak conversational English without difficulty, yet exhibit hesitancy with understanding and speaking academic English (WIDA, 2015). ELs at Level 4 still require assistance with academic reading and writing tasks. Level 5 students, classified as “bridging,” are near proficiency in academic content standards and require only occasional support (WIDA, 2015).

In Ms. Fink’s class, for instance, two students were identified as Level 3, 11 as Level 4s and eight as Level 5s. In terms of Oral Proficiency, the majority of students (15 overall) were proficient at Level 6. However, students’ Overall Literacy Proficiency was much lower, with eight students scoring Level 3, and 12 scoring at Level 4. Table 4 below provides further descriptions of students’ WIDA ACCESS results.
### Table 4

Spring 2015 WIDA ACCESS Results for Students in Ms. Fink’s Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Comprehension Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Oral Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Literacy Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Composite (Overall) Proficiency Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aiden</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerry</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julio</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nelly</td>
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<td>Katie</td>
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<td>5.5</td>
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<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenna</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julianna</td>
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<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katerina</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolanda</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joella</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damien</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassandra</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
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<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maribella</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Students with missing scores are transfer students. Their files did not include complete WIDA ACCESS reports.

This same trend was apparent with students in Ms. Dunmead’s class as well. In this case, all 15 ELs in the class were identified as Level 4 or 5 in terms of Overall Composite score. However, all students were Level 6 in terms of Speaking proficiency and eight out of the students received a Level 6 in terms of Listening proficiency. Similar to students in Ms. Fink’s class, these students’ overall Oral Proficiency levels were mainly Level 6, with the exception of two students. The greatest need for all ELs in both classrooms was literacy. Five of the total students scored between a 3.0-3.7 on their Literacy Proficiency level, while six scored between a 4.0-4.6. For the majority of these ELs, oral proficiency and comprehension, as defined by WIDA, were areas of strength. On the other hand, students struggled with their literacy development in terms of the five English language development standards. Table 5 highlights the WIDA ACCESS scores for Ms. Dunmead’s students.
Table 5

*Spring 2015 WIDA ACCESS Results for Students in Ms. Dunmead’s Class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Comprehension Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Oral Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Literacy Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Composite (Overall) Proficiency Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaclyn</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karissa</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastien</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldina</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Students with missing scores are transfer students. Their files did not include complete WIDA ACCESS reports.

The majority of ELs in both classes had also failed their state-based, high-stakes reading assessment the previous year. For instance, in Ms. Fink’s class, 14 out of the
total of 21 ELs had received a score below 400, which is the score necessary for passing this standardized assessment. Out of the 14 who failed, five were receiving Tier 3 intervention during their eighth-grade year, which required them to attend a 90 minute Read 180 class every other day.

Results on the seventh-grade state-based, high-stakes reading assessment were not much different in Ms. Dunmead’s class. Out of the 15 ELs in her current classroom, nine had failed their previous year’s reading assessment, while two had passed with a scaled score of 401. Similar to students in Ms. Fink’s class, four of these nine students had received a Tier 3 intervention during their eighth-grade year in the form of an additional Read 180 class. This baseline data analysis helped establish the urgent need to find instructional support within the classroom that would benefit these students’ literacy engagement and development.

After obtaining approval from the school’s principal, the district school board, and George Mason University’s IRB (see Appendix A), consent forms were given to teachers participating in the study (see Appendix B). In addition, consent forms for students participating in the research were sent to their parents or family members (see Appendix C). Students whose parents or family members gave consent were first provided an oral explanation of the purposes and goals of the study in order to ensure they understood their roles as participants. This explanation was conducted in English by me, the researcher, as there were no students who required a Spanish translation. The students were then given assent forms to sign indicating their willingness to participate (see Appendix D).
Research Design

This study relied on a mixed-methods ethnographic case study design to address the research questions. Mixed methods research involves collecting, analyzing, and mixing both qualitative and quantitative data during the research study in an effort to better understand the problem (Creswell, 2002). Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) define mixed-methods research as “research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods” (p. 4). Employing mixed methods design has several advantages, including: understanding contradictions between qualitative and quantitative findings; reflecting participants’ point of view; providing methodological flexibility; and, collecting rich and comprehensive data.

Neither qualitative nor quantitative methods alone were sufficient by themselves to capture the details of the process needed to construct a critical literacy curriculum and determine the effects of implementation with the students. Furthermore, given that I was studying a pedagogical orientation grounded in social justice and equity, a design that relied on both methods seemed appropriate. Examining the process of constructing a critical literacy unit with teachers was best answered through qualitative measures since the focus is on the how and why. On the other hand, exploring the relationship between critical literacy and ELs’ literacy engagement and development was best answered by employing both numerical and text data collected concurrently.

Maxwell (2011) suggests that the goal of mixed-methods research is to “create a dialogue between diverse perspectives on the phenomena being studied, so as to deepen,
rather than simply broaden or triangulate, the understandings gained” (p. 28). When examining students’ literacy engagement and development of ideas, it was necessary to not only gather quantitative measures, such as rubrics and survey data, but also to highlight their own perspectives on the unit and their level of engagement and literacy development. It was also necessary to explore if students’ perspectives differed from their teacher’s and if both quantitative and qualitative measures spoke to one another. For instance, if there was a significant difference in a student’s literacy engagement based on survey data, it was necessary to delve deeper and gain a better understanding of how and why this was the case through interview and observational data. Thus, uncovering the process and implementation of a critical literacy unit was best determined from a mixed-methods approach.

An ethnographic research design was chosen because, as the researcher, I wished to gain knowledge and understanding of a particular culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2002). In addition, a case study research design provided an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within the research setting with clear boundaries (Creswell, 2002). This study was ethnographic because it sought to uncover and describe the process and implementation of a critical literacy curriculum and pedagogy with two English teachers and their ELs. In order to examine the process of building a unit and implementing it with students, I needed to be situated for a length of time in the context. Given that I intended to examine the lived experiences of these ELs in two classrooms, ethnographic case studies afforded me the opportunity to become fully acquainted with these students.
and teachers, and become socially situated in their daily learning environment, which maximized richness and accuracy of data.

Gathering quantitative data such as surveys and achievement scores was also necessary to measure the difference in students’ levels of engagement and to see if they developed their literacy skills throughout the unit. These data, in this case in the form of surveys and literacy achievement assessments, were used to compare qualitative findings to the same questions. One research question, for example, explored how a unit grounded in critical literacy impacts ELs’ literacy engagement. This question was best answered by collecting engagement surveys prior to the beginning of the unit and also following the implementation of the unit. Significance testing was used to see if there was any difference in students’ engagement; meanwhile qualitative data were collected to also explore students’ literacy engagement. In this case, students’ and teachers’ perspectives were explored and used to support or refute findings from the quantitative results.

**Data Sources**

Over a 22-week period I gathered both qualitative and qualitative data to answer the three research questions. The curriculum planning phase was conducted over nine weeks between December 2015 and February 2016. The unit implementation phase was conducted over 13 weeks between February 2016 and May 2016. It is important to note, however, that there was a two-week Winter Break during the planning phase. In addition, two weeks of instruction were lost during the implementation phase: one week for the state standardized writing assessment (March 2016) and one week for Spring
Break (April 2016). Utilizing multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and classroom artifacts reduced the likelihood of “chance associations and systematic biases due to a specific method, and allow[ed] a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). Table 6 below presents the sources of data collected to address each research question.

Table 6

*Sources of Data Collected During Research Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Sources of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the challenges and successes the teachers and researcher experience in the process of co-constructing a unit grounded in critical literacy and in implementing it with English learners?</td>
<td>Teacher Interviews, Audio Recorded Curriculum Planning Sessions, Teacher Reflection Journals, Classroom Observations, Work Samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does a unit grounded in critical literacy impact ELs’ engagement in the English class?</td>
<td>Teacher Survey, Student Surveys, Classroom Observations, Student and Teacher Interviews, Teacher Reflection Journals, Work Samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does a unit grounded in critical literacy impact ELs’ literacy development?</td>
<td>Pre/Post Critical Literacy Assessment, Classroom Observations, Student and Teacher Interviews, Teacher Reflection Journals, Work Samples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative Sources

Qualitative sources included semi-structured teacher and student interviews, classroom observations, curriculum planning sessions, reflection journals and student work samples.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and selected students (4-6 per class). Students were purposefully selected to participate in interviews based on their English proficiency levels (WIDA ACCESS overall composite scores) and English achievement data (classroom grades, previous reading and writing state standardized assessment scores, and benchmark scores). In this way, student participants varied along a continuum of low, average, and high in levels of proficiency and achievement. I conducted two rounds of interviews throughout the duration of the entire study: pre-implementation and post-implementation. Each round of interviews contained questions pertaining to a combination of the research questions (see Appendix E for sample teacher questions and Appendix F for sample student questions). Follow-up interviews were only conducted to clarify meanings.

Curriculum planning sessions. Curriculum planning sessions took place over a nine-week period, with both teachers present at the same time. Each planning session lasted approximately 45 minutes, as this was the given planning session during the school day for middle school teachers. I planned with both teachers as a group twice every week, for a total of 18 curriculum planning sessions. Each planning session was
audiotaped and involved the teachers and me working to co-construct the next unit through a critical literacy approach.

**Observations.** Classroom observational data were collected during the 13-week implementation phase. I originally anticipated spending nine weeks in the classroom, since this was the duration of an entire marking period and both teachers hoped this time period would be sufficient to comprise the length of the unit. However, the unit, which included a final project (a description of the project will follow in Chapter 4) took longer than anticipated and was not completed until May.

I conducted classroom observations in both teachers’ classrooms two to three times per week for approximately 90 minutes per session over the 13-week period. My field notes focused on student engagement (as defined earlier), literacy development, and the implementation process overall. I also focused on the successes and barriers of implementing the unit with students—for instance, what instructional choices worked and what did not? How did the teachers negotiate their roles and identities? See Appendix G for an observation protocol used in the classroom.

**Reflection Journals.** The teachers and I also kept individual memos/journals that documented our interactions and the entire process, during both the planning and implementation phases. Teachers chose to either keep this in their own format or consult a few prompts to guide their reflections (see Appendix H). The focus of these tools was on the challenges and successes we encountered, as well as reflections related to students’ engagement and literacy development. These written artifacts were kept twice a week during the planning and implementation phases of the study.
**Work Samples.** Student work samples included both formative and summative assessments, with a particular focus on written artifacts. Each student kept a unit portfolio in which they placed their classroom work samples and both summative and formative assessments. Work samples included students’ written responses to questions, completed graphic organizers, annotated notes, and/or PowerPoint presentations. These work samples were used primarily in the analysis of research question three, which pertains to students’ literacy development; however, data related to the final social action project was also used to support research questions one and two.

**Quantitative Sources**

Quantitative sources included a teacher survey, a student survey, and a teacher-created pre- and post-unit assessment. In order to create the teacher and student surveys, I consulted a report titled, “Measuring Student Engagement in Upper Elementary Through High School: A Description of 21 Instruments” produced by the Regional Educational Laboratory (Fredricks et al., 2011). The teacher survey relied on questions from the *Reading Engagement Index (REI)* (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and the *Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning* scale (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furner, 2009). The student survey relied on questions from the *Academic Engagement Scale* of the Consortium on Chicago School Research Biennial Survey (CCSR/AES, 2007), the *School Engagement Scale* (Dornbusch & Steinberg, 1990; Perry, 2008), and the *Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning scale (EvsD)* (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furner, 2009).
Finally, both classroom teachers and I co-constructed a critical literacy unit pre- and post- assessment. In addition, I explored extant data presented by the teachers, such as students’ WIDA ACCESS scores and state standardized reading and writing assessment scores.

**Teacher Survey.** I created a survey meant to capture teachers’ perceptions of each student’s level of engagement in English class (see Appendix I). Given that there was no existing instrument that captured just that, I constructed my own instrument by relying on research-based teacher surveys meant to gather aspects of student engagement. The survey comprised three sections. In section one, I relied on the *REI* to capture reading engagement. The *REI* is a teacher rating of the extent to which each student is an engaged reader in their classroom. “Engagement” includes behavioral, emotional/motivational, and cognitive aspects. Thus, the engaged reader is assumed to be behaviorally active (reads frequently), internally motivated (likes to read), and cognitively active (uses strategies in reading). The *REI* contains eight items that reflect the behavioral, motivational, and cognitive characteristics of engaged reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). I adapted the survey to also include additional questions regarding writing engagement, modeled after the eight questions from the *REI* related to reading engagement. In section two, I adapted questions from the *Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning (EvsD)* teacher report. The goal was to make sure I captured similar information from both teachers and students. Overall, teachers were asked to complete one survey for each of their students.
This teacher survey was administered to both teachers prior to implementation of the unit and then following implementation of the unit. Quantitative analysis was used to determine if there was any significance between ratings pre- and post-implementation. Results from this quantitative tool was used to validate the qualitative data, more specifically teacher responses in interviews and classroom observations of student engagement.

**Student Survey.** I created a student survey to capture students’ perceptions of their own engagement in English class. The student survey was comprised of three sections (see Appendix J). In section one, I used questions from *The Academic Engagement Scale* (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2007). The *Academic Engagement Scale (AES)* is a paper and pencil student self-report questionnaire that was developed by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. This scale has been used since 1999 with over 100,000 demographically diverse elementary and high school students attending Chicago Public Schools (Fredricks et al., 2011). The AES examines students’ reports about their interest and engagement in learning in their reading or language arts classes. Questions ask about students’ interests in topics they are studying and their engagement in the class in general. The scale contains six items intended to measure behavioral engagement and consists of four-point response scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate that students report higher levels of engagement. Based on their response pattern across the six items, students are grouped into four engagement categories: none, limited, moderate or high.
Validity of this tool has been demonstrated in previous research and continues to be examined in current research (Fredricks et al., 2011).

In section II, students answered four questions taken from the School Engagement Scale (SEQ). This scale was originally designed to measure high school students’ “self-reported effort or investment in particular classes, as reflected in their time spent on homework assignments and their attendance, concentration, and attention in class” (Fredricks et al., 2011, p. 42). Questions focused specifically on their English class. In this case, higher ratings indicate a stronger level of self-reported engagement in English class.

Finally, in section three, I adapted questions from the Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning student report as well as the Motivations for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). The instrument, which is comprised of 53 questions, assesses the extent to which students are motivated to read. Although motivation and engagement are different, they are also related in that a student who is motivated to read is likely to be more engaged in English class. I adapted the questions to include a focus on writing and classroom discussions, as these were aspects that would be included in our critical literacy unit.

Overall, the student survey was used to validate the qualitative data, such as classroom observations and interviews, and was compared to the quantitative results from the teacher surveys. The purpose was to gather as much information related to students’ own perceptions of their engagement in English class.
Critical Literacy Assessment. Prior to the actual implementation of the unit, students took a teacher-created critical literacy assessment (see Appendix K). As part of the unit planning process, we created a critical literacy summative assessment to be used as a pre- and post-assessment. The assessment was comprised of three sections: Multiple Choice, Short Answer, and Written Composition. Students were asked to read a short excerpt from the novel, *The Best Bad Luck I Ever Had* by Kristin Sims Levine. They were then asked to respond to five multiple choice comprehension questions that were based on state standards, yet framed to provide critical analysis of the passage. The short answer section included seven questions that asked students to reflect on the passage using a critical literacy lens. Finally, students were presented with a prompt that asked them to reflect on a social issue in their community and write a persuasive letter to a community member arguing for a position on this social issue.

Following implementation of the unit, we administered the same literacy achievement assessment to compare results and run quantitative analysis. We created a critical literacy rubric (see Appendix L) to assess the short answer portion of the assessment as well as the ideas in the extended composition, and we relied on components of the 6 + 1 Traits writing rubric to assess students on all six writing traits: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Sentence Fluency, Word Choice, and Conventions (Education Northwest, 2015). The 6 + 1 Writing Traits rubric was chosen because it was the framework both teachers used to teach writing throughout the year.

These quantitative data were used in various ways. First, they were used descriptively to situate the student participants in the context of the entire study and to
present their levels of engagement and literacy achievement prior to implementation.

Second, quantitative data were used to validate or refute the qualitative data. Overall, these data helped me answer research questions two and three to determine the impact of the unit on ELs’ overall literacy engagement and development.

**Procedures for Data Collection**

The data collection process lasted approximately 22 weeks and contained three phases: Phase 1: Pre-implementation, Phase 2: Implementation, and Phase 3: Post-implementation. Both qualitative and quantitative data were simultaneously gathered at these three junctures. Table 7 highlights the procedures I used for data collection.

**Table 7**

*Phases of Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phase</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Pre-implementation of critical literacy unit</td>
<td>November 2015</td>
<td>Sought out participants (met with building level administrators and instructional coaches, department chairs, and district literacy specialist) Gathered literacy achievement and English proficiency data on students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 2015/January 2016</td>
<td>Interviewed both teachers Co-constructed unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Planning and Preparation</td>
<td>Kept reflection journals/memos twice a week</td>
<td>Audio-taped each planning session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td>Finished co-construction of unit</td>
<td>Interviewed 4-6 students from each class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students completed engagement surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers completed engagement surveys on each student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students completed critical literacy assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2: Implementation of critical literacy unit</th>
<th>February 2016- May 2016</th>
<th>Unit is implemented in the classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kept reflection journals 2-3/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collected student work samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kept observational notes 2-3/week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 3: Post-implementation of critical literacy unit</th>
<th>May 2016</th>
<th>Interviewed both teachers and students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Re-administered teacher and student engagement scales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students completed critical literacy assessment

Note. Data were not collected during Winter Break (12/21/15-1/1/16), the week of the 8th grade state-based, high-stakes writing assessment (2/29/16-3/4/16), and during Spring Break (3/21/16-3/28/16).

Phase 1
During this phase, I administered the engagement scales to the teachers and students, and conducted the first round of interviews with both teachers and students. This provided me some baseline data with which to work and use as a point of comparison upon completion of the unit.

The teachers and I met at least twice a week to co-construct the unit. While working to co-construct the unit, I also continued to visit the classroom at least once weekly in an effort to understand the context, which helped the teachers and me make more informed curricular decisions based on students’ interests and needs. The teachers and I also kept a journal/memo focusing on the process (barriers and successes) of building this unit, which included reflections written in narrative or note-form related to three prompts. All curriculum planning sessions were also audiotaped.

Phase 2
I became an active full participant in the classroom working with the teacher and students to implement instruction two to three times a week over the thirteen-week implementation period. I kept observational notes at least twice a week to document the implementation process, highlight teacher-student interactions and student engagement levels, and note successes and barriers during implementation. All three of us also kept reflection journals throughout the implementation to document the successes and barriers
to implementation, and reflect on student engagement and achievement more broadly. Finally, we collected formative and summative assessments throughout the entire process, such as written work samples and formative assessments (i.e., exit slips, 3-2-1 reflection forms, etc.).

**Phase 3**

Upon completion of the unit, I measured students’ literacy engagement via the teacher and student surveys. We also administered the same critical literacy unit assessment given pre-implementation. Finally, I conducted one last round of interviews with both teachers and the same 4-6 students from each class that were interviewed prior to unit implementation.

**Data Analysis**

In this embedded, mixed-methods design study, the data analysis process was ongoing and followed a more cyclical approach rather than a fixed linear approach. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were implemented concurrently and the analysis involved the comparison of results (Greene, 2007). At some points in my study, “results from the different methods serve[d] to elaborate, enhance, deepen, and broaden the overall interpretations and inferences” (Greene, 2007, p. 101), which lent itself to a more complementary stance.

My first step was to gather baseline data from the students and teachers in these two classrooms. Along with information from classroom visits and conversations with the two teachers, I collected extant student achievement data. Achievement results on language learning assessments as well as statewide literacy assessments were
documented in a spreadsheet and descriptive statistics were analyzed. This helped me better understand the context in which I became situated.

**Data Analysis for Research Question 1**

To address this first research question, I examined two sets of data. The first set of data related to the co-construction of the unit included audio-recorded curriculum planning sessions, teacher and researcher journals/ memos, and semi-structured interviews at the end of the entire research study. The audio-recorded curriculum planning sessions and the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded to reveal more detailed themes related to the successes and challenges of the process. In addition, I read through the teachers’ and my own reflection journal entries multiple times, coding to reveal themes related to research question one. Based on the themes that arose in the reflection journals and from the curriculum planning sessions, the final semi-structured interview with the teachers probed for more details related to how they viewed the process.

Overall, analysis was conducted in three waves (LaRossa, 2005). In particular, during open coding all the transcripts were read, focusing on codes developed a priori related to the successes and challenges involved in co-constructing the unit. During axial coding, data were drawn such that each code was read separately across all data to understand the dimensions of each theme or category. Finally, during the third wave of coding, “the main story underlying the analyses,” (LaRossa, 2005, p. 850) emerged. In particular, the factors related to how the unit was constructed and the successes and barriers involved emerged. Throughout the entire process, I employed a constant-
comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed me to make decisions about
how to proceed based on previously collected data.

The second set of analysis included data related to the implementation of the unit,
such as classroom observations, teacher and researcher journals/memos, and semi-
structured interviews with teachers and students. The same method of analysis was
repeated documenting the process of implementation with a particular focus on the
success and challenges involved when the critical literacy activities were employed with
students in the classrooms.

**Data Analysis for Research Question 2**

To address this second research question, I examined results from the student
engagement surveys, teacher surveys on student engagement, observational and interview
data. I also reviewed the teachers’ and my own reflection journal entries. Student
engagement surveys (both teacher and student) were scored pre-and post-implementation
and analyzed quantitatively. At this point, I wanted to see if there was a statistical
significant difference in their pre-and post-scores (two variables). Since the students took
the engagement survey pre-implementation and post-implementation, I compared the
average scores on the two tests using a dependent samples t-test. A dependent samples t-
test helped me determine if there was statistical significance between the means of the
scores on the pre- and post- engagement surveys, both students’ perspectives and
teachers’ perspectives. I also compared the results of the teachers’ perspectives with their
students’ perspectives on their levels of literacy engagement. Student’s perspectives on
their own level of engagement were determined not only by quantitative measures, but
also through analysis of interview data. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded as a comparison to the survey results.

Finally, I reviewed my observational field notes as well as our reflection journal entries multiple times, attempting to jot down some similarities and discrepancies between my participants’ responses and their actual classroom behavior. Data analyses of my observational field notes and our reflection journals included looking for patterns that emerged from multiple readings and drawing conclusions related to student engagement (as defined in the literature as behavioral, cognitive, and emotional/motivational). I constantly revisited my field notes to see how the observations related to the themes identified in the analysis of the interviews and survey results. I also employed constant case comparison (Glaser, 1965) to note similarities and differences across the interviews, reflection journal entries, and classroom observations with the quantitative data. This part of the process helped me refine my themes and also helped me see discrepancies between the qualitative and quantitative data.

**Data Analysis for Research Question 3**

Students’ critical literacy unit assessments were scored using a combination of our own teacher-created critical literacy rubric and the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubric. Assessment results were recorded pre- and post-implementation of the unit. As with the engagement data, I wanted to see if there was statistical significance between their pre- and post- implementation scores. Since the students took the unit assessment pre- implementation and post-implementation, I compared the average scores on the two tests using a dependent samples t-test. A dependent samples t-test helped me determine if
there was statistical significance between the means of the scores on the pre- and post-assessments.

The results from the quantitative data were then compared to the themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Primarily, I used the student and teacher interview data as well as reviewed our reflection journal entries to see if any themes emerged related to students’ literacy development. These data were compared to the quantitative results and used to either confirm or refute the findings. Moreover, I examined student work samples throughout the unit and analyzed them using anecdotal notes to see if there were any improvements to literacy development. These data were also compared to the quantitative data findings.

**Data Quality**

It is critical to pay attention to the credibility of the findings while conducting research. Therefore, it was essential for me to attempt to address the validity of my conclusions, particularly paying attention to possible threats or ways I may have misinterpreted the data (Maxwell, 2013). According to Maxwell (2013), methods and procedures do not guarantee validity, yet they are still important for ruling out threats and increasing the credibility of the researcher.

As a result, strategies were employed in this study to increase data quality. Specifically, lengthy field experience and rich, thick descriptions of these experiences, triangulation, peer examination, and reflexivity were used to increase truth values, applicability, consistency, and neutrality of the findings (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).
Approximately six months were spent in the field, in interaction with both teacher participants and EL students in the two classroom sites. This extended engagement in the field enabled me to become familiar to and trusted among the teachers and students, as well as observe their experiences over this period of time. Detailed field notes were kept while observing interactions between teachers and their students in the classroom. Also, teacher and student interviews as well as curriculum planning sessions were digitally recorded.

A second strategy used that increased data quality was triangulation of data. To answer each of the research questions, I relied on at least three different types of data, all of which were used to support or refute findings throughout the process. This method of triangulation increased the trustworthiness of this study, and in turn, helped to tell a more complete story about the experiences of these teachers and their students engaging in critical literacy practices.

A third strategy utilized was member checking in which I engaged in peer examination with the teachers periodically during the course of data collection and analyses. This interaction with the teachers was occurring constantly through informal conversations, but systematic member checking occurred more formally during the interview phase. What was learned during the interviews with the teachers, as well as my interpretation of the data I was gathering, were discussed. The teachers provided feedback regarding my interpretations of data particularly during the selective phase of coding. This also contributes to the trustworthiness of the study.
A fourth and final strategy used to ensure data quality and trustworthiness was being reflexive. Reflexivity is the consideration of the researcher’s background to understand how her experiences may influence qualitative data collection, analyses, and in turn, the study findings (Krefting, 1991). According to Maxwell (2013), understanding how my values and expectations influence my conduct and conclusions is important to avoiding invalid conclusions. It was critical to examine the ways in which and the extent to which my stance matter to the quality of my study’s findings and how neutrality would be difficult to achieve based on my previous work experience. Having former experience in the middle school as an eighth-grade English teacher and literacy coach, and more recently at the division-level as a Secondary (7-12) ESOL Specialist influenced not only the development of research questions, but also the collection, analyses, and interpretation of data. I acknowledged that my participants, especially my teacher participants, may not answer interview questions truthfully, and may provide an answer that they believe I may expect simply because they know me or because of my role in the school division. As a result, I consistently acknowledged my researcher bias and my role, and I spoke with the teachers regularly regarding assumptions I held based on preconceived ideas and experiences. Overall, remaining reflexive throughout this research study added to the trustworthiness of the findings.

In order to address potential threats to my study, I created a validity matrix that highlights strategies and rationales for addressing those threats (see Appendix M). Maxwell (2013) argues that a matrix can be especially helpful in focusing on validity concerns and identifying possible strategies to deal with threats. In my validity matrix, I
present my research questions, provide a rationale for why they are important, highlight my data collection methods, identify validity threats, and ultimately provide a few strategies for addressing these threats in my study.

Summary

Between the months of December 2015 and May 2016, I sought to understand the process used to co-construct a unit grounded in critical literacy with two middle school English teachers of ELs. I also aimed to understand the successes and challenges associated with implementing this unit with adolescent ELs in both classrooms. In addition, I wanted to understand the impact of the unit on students’ literacy engagement and development. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected pre-, during, and post-implementation of the unit to help answer my research questions. Results from my research study are presented in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of constructing a unit grounded in critical literacy alongside middle school English teachers of ELs and to examine what happens when English teachers engage in critical literacy practices with their adolescent ELs. In Chapter 1, I reflected on my own experiences as an English learner, educator, and graduate student and how the political and social issues today in the United States make it even more necessary for teachers to confront and explore social justice issues in schools. I highlighted the necessity of reconsidering alternate views of language development and curricular choices, especially given the higher language demands and critical analysis required by standardized testing in all content areas. In Chapter 2, I began by presenting a conceptual model grounded in critical multicultural literacy and second language acquisition to help situate my study. I also reviewed the literature pertinent to sociocultural theory as well as literacy engagement and development in the classroom, with a particular focus on ELs. Chapter 3 described the research design, data collection, and data analysis methods used in this study.

In this chapter, I present the results of the study relative to my three guiding research questions. This analysis includes a full description of the unit planning and implementation processes at work as well as the impact of the critical literacy unit on ELs’ literacy engagement and development. I begin this chapter by presenting the
critical literacy unit’s overall design, detailing the major components of the unit and specifically describing the lessons and summative assessments we created. This description provides a context within which the teachers and I worked, and serves as a basis for the tensions and successes we experienced in the unit planning phase. The remainder of the chapter is organized according to the order of the research questions presented in Chapter 1. After I present the overall design of the unit, I detail the process the teachers and I used to co-construct the unit and highlight the barriers and successes we encountered during the process. I chose to present the barriers first because we inevitably had to confront some of these barriers in order to experience many of our successes. Following, I describe the impact of the unit first on students’ literacy engagement, then on their overall literacy development.

The Critical Literacy Unit Design

We relied on Cummins’ (2001) Academic Expertise Framework as a foundation for our unit’s design. More specifically, the Academic Expertise Framework (2001) reminded us about the necessity to promote students’ academic expertise through student-teacher interactions that rely less on traditional power relationships. As Cummins (2001) proposes, critical literacy can exist in a space rich in collaborative relations of power rather than coercive relations of power.

We relied on two of the model’s underlying premises as we designed this unit. First, the model emphasizes “critical literacy, active learning, deep understanding, and the importance of building on students’ prior knowledge” (Cummins, 2009, p. 264) as highlighted in approaches to critical pedagogy and effective instruction. Second, the
model emphasizes the need for collaborative interactions to foster cognitive engagement and identity investment. We aimed to plan interactions that focused on critical literacy development rather than surface-level reading of text, as well as ways for students to be critically aware of how language operates within society and how it can be used to achieve social goals. Finally, as is highlighted in the model’s focus on use, we wanted our students to “create” or “produce” knowledge in order to act on their social reality.

Although our primary focus was to engage our students in critical literacy practices that would help them feel empowered, we also aimed to increase their literacy engagement and development. We understood the importance of scaffolding instruction for ELs by providing opportunities for comprehensible input and output. We also wanted to provide ample opportunities to activate and build on students’ prior experiences and background knowledge. Since we were working with students who had experienced academic failure in the past and who came from a social group whose identities have been devalued in the broader society, we aimed to affirm students’ identities (i.e., culture, race, language, religion, etc.) in the classroom. By doing so, we hoped to provide opportunities to help extend students’ language and literacy development.

For the design of the critical literacy unit, we integrated multiple elements, some of which were required by the school division and more specifically, the school. For instance, one important feature of this unit was that it strictly adhered to the state’s academic standards for eighth grade English, as well as the WIDA Language Development Standards and Performance Definitions for ELs. As a result, each lesson plan included content objectives, which focused on what is being taught, as well as
language objectives, which focused on how the content was being taught to ensure language development. We also followed the same standards and skills required by the division’s pacing guide to make sure that our students were performing well on the required benchmark assessments.

In addition, we relied on the division’s required lesson planning and instructional framework to complete our lesson plans. The Learning Focused Schools (LFS) instructional framework is a model for thinking about planning and delivering instruction using exemplary practices with a focus on learning. Exemplary practices are defined as “practices and activities that exist on a consistent and pervasive basis in exemplary schools” (LFS, 2015). An exemplary school is defined as one with 90% or more of its students on or above grade level. Using Marzano’s meta-analysis as the basis for identifying the most impactful strategies on student achievement, the LFS framework emphasizes the use of extended thinking, summarizing, vocabulary in context, advance organizers, and non-verbal representations. As a result, each Learning Focused lesson plan consisted of learning goals (content and language objectives), lesson essential questions, an activating strategy, a vocabulary strategy, various learning activities and assessment prompts, graphic organizers, a summarizing strategy, and a summative assignment (see Appendix N for an example of the Learning Focused lesson plan template).

Finally, we relied on SpringBoard as a primary source since it was the school’s main ELA curriculum resource. The eighth-grade textbook, created by College Board (2015), included a wide range of texts across various genres that help students develop
their critical thinking skills, close reading, and writing and research skills. The theme for the eighth-grade curriculum was “Challenges.” A sample English Language Arts lesson plan from *SpringBoard* can be found in Appendix O.

It is important to note, however, that both *SpringBoard* and LFS were instructional and curricular initiatives that were implemented two years prior to this study. Within those two years, students’ English scores had either remained stagnant or decreased. Although students’ lack of academic progress could be a result of numerous factors, it could also be the result of teachers not having enough experience and familiarity with the resources, and perhaps requiring additional professional development and training to effectively use the textbook and lesson planning resources. What is also important to note is that both these teachers, as well as the majority of the English and ESOL department, had expressed frustration about district and school-based administrators’ approach to “mandating” these resources as the sole way to approach curriculum and instruction.

We knew that we needed to adhere to the structure of an LFS lesson plan. In other words, we needed to incorporate the required lesson elements, including a lesson essential question, a vocabulary strategy, a summarizing strategy, learning activities, and a few formative assessments. However, these were simply tools that relied on research-based best practices and we ultimately needed to rely on the LFS lesson plan template to guide our planning process. We also needed to assess if our students had mastered the lesson’s standards through a summative assessment. *SpringBoard*, therefore, only served
as an instructional resource, and we relied on Unit Three (see Appendix P) of the textbook to help us find texts to read in class with our students.

As a result, we used the lesson plan format to create lessons that supported our students’ critical literacy skills. In our lessons, we relied on various instructional elements that were not originally a component in the *SpringBoard* text. Primarily, we analyzed texts as a whole group using a focus on identity (i.e., ethnicity, gender, class), and provided opportunities for students to engage in literature circle discussions where they analyzed alternate texts using the same identity lens as the focus lesson (see Appendix Q for an example of a role sheet used in literature circles). It is important to note that literature circles were a suggested instructional activity noted in *SpringBoard*; however, we broadened the scope to include a focus on critical literacy and critical discussions. More specifically, we relied on a set of critical literacy discussion questions we adapted from online sources to guide our students’ reading (see Appendix R for a complete list of sample critical literacy guided reading questions we employed in the unit), including:

- How does the text depict age, language, gender, race and/or cultural groups?
- Whose voices are represented and whose voices are missing?
- What biases, beliefs, and values do you, as a reader, bring to the text?

Our unit incorporated a multi-genre thematic focus, with a variety of texts focusing on the same theme or topic. Although the multi-genre focus was an element of *SpringBoard*, the English department had been constructing genre-based units, anchoring their units around a specific genre such as poetry or novels. This was originally
suggested because administrators wanted students to experience continuity in their instruction as this was the same curricular design approach used in the high school. Yet, although this approach makes for tidy unit planning and an easy way for teachers to check the curricular boxes, we all agreed that anchoring learning around a theme and incorporating multiple genres throughout the unit encouraged students to make critical text-to-text and text-to-world connections. We also believed that if we integrate nonfiction texts throughout the unit, we would be supporting students’ success in other content areas as well. Ultimately, we believed that a unit grounded in critical literacy should rely on multiple voices through multiple genres discussing the same topic. In a sense, the theme anchored our curriculum planning process.

Overall, the unit consisted of nine lessons, with each lesson lasting approximately 4-5 days. Topics included understanding social and historical context and exploring issues of race, ethnicity, gender, language, power, and class. Figure 6 highlights a few lesson components as outlined in our Student Learning Map, a unit planning template we were required to submit to administrators. The content within the template was created by us during the unit planning phase. It is important to note that per this framework, unit and lesson essential questions need to rely on the state standards, rather than the theme of the unit.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Unit Topic</strong></th>
<th>The Challenge to Make A Difference: Finding Light in the Darkness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard</strong></td>
<td>8th Grade English Language Arts Standards (i.e., 8.4-8.9).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Unit Essential Question** | How can I critically analyze texts related to social justice issues?  
How can I use critical reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills to create a product that helps me act on my social reality? |
Lesson 1 Focus
Unpacking
Assessments/Introduction to the Unit

Standards
8.4 e,f
8.6 b,c, g, h
8.9 a

Students will know ...(key vocabulary)
The importance of taking social action for a cause; the structure and purpose of literature circle groups; how they will be assessed in this unit; how to make connections between the unit’s theme and their summative assessments; The connotation of “activist” and “social justice”; Identity/ social constructs.

Lesson Essential Question 1
How can I analyze the theme of this unit by unpacking the assessments so I can be successful during the unit?

Lesson 3 Focus
Analyzing Texts- Race/Ethnicity

Standards
8.3b;8.5 a-c; h,i; 8.6 c,d,g,h.

Students will know ...(key vocabulary)
How an allegory uses symbolism to represent larger issues; the difference between topic and theme statements; how to critically explore texts by exploring issues of race and ethnicity.

Lesson Essential Question 3
How do symbolism and structure of a text impact theme? How do authors use these elements to reflect social issues related to race/ethnicity?

Students will be able to...
Make inferences and draw conclusions based on explicit and implied messages in texts; Extend vocabulary through four language domains; Discriminate between connotative and denotative meanings.

Students will be able to...
Explain the use of symbolism in an allegory; Analyze a text for theme; Examine how media can influence beliefs, behaviors and interpretations; Apply knowledge of media bias to various texts, consider the author’s word choice.

Figure 6. Learning Focused Student Learning Map for Critical Literacy Unit
The Process of Co-Constructing and Implementing the Critical Literacy Unit

The following section presents findings related to the first research question:

*What are the challenges and successes the teachers and researcher experience in the process of co-constructing a unit grounded in critical literacy and in implementing the unit with English learners?* To answer this first research question, I describe and document the process the teachers and I engaged in to craft the critical literacy unit, and then describe the themes that emerged from qualitative data analysis related to the challenges and successes we encountered during the process. It is important to note that our students were not involved in the overall design of the unit during the planning phase. This was due to logistics and the exploratory nature of the process, where we inevitably wanted to explore the process of teachers creating the unit and implementing it with students. However, although our students were not formally active in co-constructing the unit at the forefront, our students’ interests and academic needs (both language acquisition and literacy) helped shape our lesson plans during the implementation phase. For instance, we responded to our students’ needs and interests by adapting our pre-constructed lesson plans throughout the entire study, including incorporating additional literacy strategies, finding alternate texts to capture their interests, or shifting the scope of our summative assessments.

**Process of Unit Design**

When the teachers and I placed critical literacy and English language instruction at the forefront of our design process, we noticed that the notion of unit planning and the process we so often used as English teachers to construct lesson plans had shifted. Rather
than immediately beginning to design our assessments and carefully writing each lesson plan, we noticed that we needed multiple planning sessions to discuss our philosophical orientations and our overall goals of the unit.

Our first step in the design process was to struggle with philosophical consensus around underlying notions of critical literacy and English language instruction. In this manner, rather than beginning by identifying our desired results and establish our goals in terms of learning standards, our first planning session centered on setting our vision for the unit. Establishing the foundation for critical literacy in practice helped us “remain on the same page” as we began planning (Ms. Dunmead, Personal interview, May 26, 2016). Our main goal was to help our students “reflect on themselves and their society, be empowered, and take action towards social change” (Planning session, December 15, 2016). For Ms. Dunmead, in particular, having a vision was critical to successfully planning the unit, as she notes in her reflection journal:

I think we have a vision. And a plan. Those things are most important to me; well, other than a general understanding of what we’re undertaking, but I feel like we already got that in previous sessions. (December 18, 2015)

This ability to connect on a personal and philosophical level during the initial planning sessions set the stage for our unit design process.

It was also during these first few planning sessions that we decided to have students engage in a comprehensive social action project as their summative assessment. One of the embedded assessment suggestions in Unit Three of SpringBoard was to have students present a multimedia campaign around a social issue of interest. Using that as a
resource, we discussed wanting to extend that project so that students engage in a social action project. The following dialogue during our planning session on December 15, 2015 represents the conversation that ensued surrounding the final project:

Ms. Fink: So, I am a bit concerned about the final project. I don’t think we will have time to do a huge project.

Marriam: That’s okay. We don’t have to. The point of this is to create what we think will be the most useful and valuable for the students.

Ms. Dunmead: I really think we should have students do something because that’s what the entire unit is about. They should create something unique.

Marriam: I agree. I think they should do something different that they can choose but that also addresses some social issue or societal problem.

Ms. Dunmead: Instead of just having them create a campaign around an issue like it mentions in SpringBoard, maybe we can have them come up with their own idea based on what they’re interested in and actually do it.

As evidenced through this dialogue, at the onset of lesson planning, Ms. Fink was mainly concerned with the extent of time we needed to devote to a final project. On the other hand, Ms. Dunmead was focused on having students engage in creating or showcasing a product related to a social justice issue. At the crux of our conversation, however, was
that we wanted students to remain engaged and connect with a topic of personal interest and relevance.

During these initial planning sessions, we also spent time considering alternate project ideas and creating the pre- and post-assessment. At one point, we discussed the necessity for us to integrate a persuasive essay because as Ms. Fink noted, “I think we need to have them practice another persuasive essay during the unit so they could argue for their cause” (Planning session, January 5, 2016). We agreed that we wanted our students to synthesize research to write a persuasive essay and create a multimedia presentation that challenged audiences to make a difference on a personally relevant social issue. We also wanted our students to work collaboratively with their peers and community members to design, implement, and evaluate a social action project based on a social issue of their choice. As a result, we adapted materials from online and created a unique, three-part project that served as our students’ final unit assessment (see Appendix S for the complete assignment description).

Our students completed a variety of unique social action projects. For instance, some of our students organized social events in the school or community to raise money for an organization working to address their cause; others developed educational workshops for younger students in elementary schools or posted their campaign on social media. In order to help them throughout the process, we scaffolded the project in several stages and provided a template for their final unit presentation (see Appendix T for an example of the PowerPoint slide frames).
The emphasis in the planning sessions that followed, however, shifted to a focus on investigating critical literacy resources and general literacy strategies. After iterating our unit’s goals and objectives, keeping in mind both division-wide and building-level requirements, as well as our personal objectives related to a critical literacy orientation, we sought to find resources and iterations of critical literacy that could help support our vision and goals. We structured the unit into three components: an introduction to the theme and assessments, a few lessons grounded in textual analysis and discussions, followed by a few lessons devoted to completing the final project. We, therefore, decided to follow the theme outlined in Unit Three of *SpringBoard: The Challenge to Make a Difference: Finding Light in the Darkness* (College Board, 2015). During one of our planning sessions, for instance, the teachers and I agree that this theme is “a broad enough theme that would help encompass any text we wanted to use in the unit” (January 12, 2016). With an overarching unit essential question and identified objectives, we began tackling each lesson plan.

We began constructing, or essentially putting pen to paper, in the planning sessions that followed. We agreed that it would be necessary to begin the first lesson with a venue for students to explore the unit’s theme, as well as review their unit assessments. While constructing each lesson plan, we followed the steps we learned during our Learning Focused training. We began each lesson planning session by identifying our desired results—what we wanted our students to know, understand and be able to do at the end of this unit at the end of each lesson, what “big ideas” were worthy
of understanding and implied in our objectives, and what provocative questions we wanted our students to pursue to guide their inquiry into these big ideas.

After the outcomes were identified, we discussed acceptable assessments or evidence of student learning. We asked ourselves how we will know if students have learned and mastered the goals of the unit. In this way, we were concerned about what collected assessment evidence could be utilized to measure our students’ learning towards our desired objectives. Finally, we began planning learning experiences we believed were valuable and meaningful for our adolescent ELs.

**Complexity of the Planning and Implementation Process**

In what follows, I document some of the themes derived from data analysis that reflect the challenges we encountered during the process of co-constructing and implementing the unit. One of the primary difficulties was locating texts that could lend themselves to critical literacy analysis. We also felt constrained by the need to balance division and school-based requirements with our belief around a fluid and dynamic critical literacy classroom. In addition, time constraints made it difficult during the planning and implementation process, and more specifically during the phase when students began implementing their own social action projects. Finally, all three of us experienced personal tensions throughout the process that impacted how we navigated the overall co-construction and implementation phases.

**Theme 1: Locating quality resources.**

There is difficulty in building this unit from the ground up. As teachers we are so used to teaching the same topics, year after year, but when we want to branch out
to something new, the first stop is usually the Internet. Unfortunately, since there aren’t many online resources that we can model our unit after, we have to take this slow process of planning everything. Some days we make more progress than others because every detail has to be planned for. It’s a lot of two steps forward, one step back. (Ms. Dunmead, Journal entry, January 12, 2016)

One prominent challenge during the co-construction phase of the critical literacy unit, as Ms. Dunmead highlighted, was the lack of pre-existing critical literacy units or lesson plans that were accessible to us. We understood, of course, that because critical literacy ought to look different in different settings and according to students’ interests and needs, there would be no ‘magic’ formula for how we structure our lessons or engage our students. However, too often in planning a unit, teachers resort to online resources or extant unit plans to help jumpstart the process.

Indeed, what we discovered in this process was that there were minimal examples of online materials that could help facilitate the process for us, or help us in providing a template to think about or even begin structuring our lessons. Ultimately, the challenge was primarily a result of all three of us expecting to find materials (as is common while planning any unit), but understanding that we may not be able to with critical literacy planning. It was this dilemma that we needed to grapple with throughout the process.

Additionally, both teachers noted that one of the most significant barriers during our planning and implementation process was text selection. For instance, when asked about the most challenging part of the co-construction process in her post-interview, Ms. Fink claimed:
Coming up with texts that are meaningful, relatable, at their reading level…pulling all of those together. I mean, we found a lot of stuff when we were in the unit. We found stuff all around. It would definitely be easier to do this the second time around with lots of resources. (May 27, 2016)

Ms. Dunmead also found it “difficult to find alternate texts that lend themselves to critical literacy and fit our framework of what we want to accomplish” (Ms. Dunmead, journal entry, January 15, 2016). We wanted to encourage our students to interrogate relevant societal issues by learning to view these issues through a critical lens in a variety of genres. It was also critical for us to expose our students to various voices and cultures in hopes that they would engage in richer discussions when presented with diversity in selections. In our attempt to locate authentic, supplementary texts, we often questioned if these texts were “age-appropriate and relevant for our diverse population while also being accessible to their reading level” (Ms. Fink, Journal entry, January 5, 2016).

Given our desire to locate such texts, we spent two weeks simply looking for materials that would lend themselves to critical literacy discussions and activities, attempting to build “a critical literacy library” (Ms. Fink, Journal entry, January 15, 2016). We began by searching SpringBoard (College Board, 2015). Although it contained several passages that dealt with issues of race, ethnicity and power, the textbook contained “little evidence of passages that could lend themselves to discussions of language, class and gender” (Marriam, Journal entry, January 15, 2016). As Ms. Fink emphasized in one planning session (December 18, 2015), “we gotta go digging” for additional texts.
Digging is exactly what we embarked on next. With no luck with the assigned *SpringBoard* text, we spent an entire planning session attempting to locate resources in the middle school’s English bookroom and brainstorming ideas from our own personal and professional literary experiences, including *Seedfolks* (1997) by Paul Fleischman, *La Linea* (1985) by Ann Jaramillo, *Night* (1956) by Elie Wiesel, *Sarny* (1997) by Gary Paulsen, “Broken Chain” (1993) by Gary Soto, and “Fish Cheeks” (1987) by Amy Tan. (Planning session, January 8, 2016). We acknowledged that relevancy was key to critical literacy and that we needed to find current and relevant texts in order to impact our students’ engagement and success. For instance, we individually went home after that planning session and began searching online for more current short stories, news articles, and documentaries that spoke to recent political and social issues.

We embarked on locating specific websites or anthologies that could potentially help us structure our lesson plans. Fortunately, after exploring various online resources such as “Teaching Tolerance” and “EdChange,” websites anchored in issues of social justice and advocacy, we came across *Voices for Diversity and Social Justice: A Literary Education Anthology* (2015) by Julie Landsman, Rosanna M. Salcedo and Paul C. Gorski. The anthology explores issues of bias, discrimination and oppression through youth, educators, activists and others’ voices through a plethora of poems, prose, and art. The clarity and depth of the entries helped confirm that this text would be one of our main resources employed during the unit. In addition, Ms. Fink located a valuable website, *CommonLit.com*, which contained a free, digital collection of fiction and nonfiction texts related to social justice issues. What impressed us the most about this
collection was that each theme contained adapted and leveled texts, as well as included a variety of teaching materials to supplement each lesson.

Throughout the entire process of planning and also during implementation, we consulted these resources and continued to explore additional venues, such as newspapers and music platforms, in order to locate and select appropriate and engaging texts for our students. Selecting appropriate texts for adolescent ELs, especially given our critical literacy orientation, proved to be a complicated and complex process.

**Theme 2: Balancing requirements with core beliefs.** The inability to strike an effective balance between division requirements and our core elements (critical literacy orientation), as well as a balance between structured and dynamic instruction, was a challenge we experienced throughout the planning and implementation process. We were required by the division to use the Learning Focused Schools lesson planning template to craft our lessons and rely on *SpringBoard* as one of our primary resources. Moreover, we needed to rely on content and language standards to guide our instruction.

On the other hand, we knew we wanted to include practices common in classrooms where critical literacy flourished, such as reading supplementary texts, reading from a resistance perspective, conducting student-choice research projects, and taking social action. As a result, it was challenging to create a framework because we wanted to adhere to our orientation and the foundational elements of critical literacy.

Prior to crafting detailed lesson plans, it became apparent that we needed, even craved, to have *some* framework or structure for the entire unit based on our desired
goals. For instance, the following dialogue during one of our planning sessions (January 12, 2016) highlights the necessity of crafting a certain sequence to our lessons:

Marriam: How would you construct the lesson? How would it look like? Like, the structure? We definitely need some sort of hook to introduce them to the unit’s theme and to critical literacy as a whole.

Ms. Dunmead: Well, I think it’s going to be really hard to drive this by the standards. Like, we can’t just look at the standards and create each lesson in a certain order.

Ms. Fink: I agree. English is so hard with the standards. It is not chronological. I actually think that this is going to be so different for them, that I think it’s probably best to introduce them to different aspects of critical lenses, like, for example, we can talk about gender, or race, or culture.

Marriam: That’s what I was thinking. Maybe we structure each lesson based on a lens. Maybe we could analyze a text as a whole group and really model the process, then they can do something independently and practice. I guess that gradual release of responsibility in this scenario may work best.

Ms. Fink: So we’re thinking start with a critical literacy frame, then literature circle work where they can practice. Maybe they pick one and
pick a text to write about, then they take time to work on their project.

Ms. Dunmead: Okay, so you frontload a little information, then you can connect it to yourself, then you do a little assessment prompt. I mean, that makes perfect sense. Cause I am afraid if we just ask them what do you think, they’ll be like, ‘uh, I don’t know, I don’t care…’

Both teachers and I believed our students responded better to this type of consistent daily routine, primarily because they thrived and were more successful when they knew what to anticipate in the lesson.

Finally, the logical progression of tasks was difficult to negotiate, since we were not relying on a direct sequence of standards or following an exact pacing map. At one point while planning, for example, we discussed the need to begin with the easiest, most obvious identity focus (Planning session, January 15, 2016):

Ms. Fink: I think we start with what’s easiest, the most obvious ones. As race and ethnicity, I mean, they talk about that all the time.

Ms. Dunmead: And they have prior knowledge to bring to the table, which is always helpful. I think ethnicity is more visible. To be honest, in the past I have found, and this is sad, that these kids know nothing about religion.

Marriam: Wait, but do we talk about power as a whole, or is it really ethnicity and race? What’s easier for them to begin with? Maybe we just begin with identity as a whole, like as an introduction,
since all these elements, race, ethnicity, religion, gender are all part of your identity.

Ms. Fink: We’ve talked about identity.

Marriam: Identity could be the umbrella term, like the overall structure.

Ms. Dunmead: Wait, should that come first then?

As a result of this discussion, we agreed that identity as a whole could be part of our introductory lesson, and then we would progress through the critical frames in a sequence that took into consideration students’ prior experiences and interests.

Striking a balance, sequencing lessons, and negotiating that space throughout the process for critical explorations posed an even greater challenge as we embarked on creating our summative assessment during the planning phase. We began by asking ourselves where critical literacy learning can be authentically exercised. However, it was difficult for us to know where to begin planning the summative assessment, as Ms. Dunmead highlights in her post-interview:

It was really difficult to know where to begin and where to end. You know, with a set of standards, it is so much easier. Our standards were a lot hazier. It wasn’t clear where the students’ starting point was and what they needed to master. But, I think it’s still really important to keep everything tied to the standards. (May 26, 2016)

Both Ms. Dunmead and Ms. Fink aimed to ensure that their students were meeting the standards required of the department during this grading period; as a result, we all agreed that we would include a few multiple-choice questions that specifically addressed the
required Reading state standards on the pre- and post-assessment. However, I was especially conflicted about the necessity to add multiple-choice questions on the assessment, as highlighted in the following journal entry (January 8, 2016):

We wanted the questions to get students to think, but also to be open ended so as to ascertain multiple answers. We definitely struggled to build multiple choice questions. Our strategy was simply to take the standards that we wanted to address and use stems to build questions related to the passage we selected. I am struggling with the closed-ended nature of these questions. There shouldn’t be a right and wrong answer… I am so worried of making this unit an “add-on” critical literacy approach—I really want to use the SpringBoard text as a “springboard” for ideas, and rely on the standards to guide our lesson planning, while making sure to choose texts appropriate for critical discussions and analyses.

Yet, even though we were ultimately able to create a framework for our unit and had come to agreement about our final assessment, data suggest that at various points during the planning and implementation process, we all individually struggled with negotiating the right amount of balance. For instance, at one point, I noted the following in my reflection journal:

This is definitely more difficult than I anticipated. I know in my gut that we can balance state and division requirements by just simply being effective teachers. However, it is so difficult to know where to start and what to include. We are at a point where we are conflicted and wrestling with so much. How do we balance a standards approach with engagement and “fun” activities, while at the same time
remaining true to *SpringBoard*? How can we structure these lesson plans so that there is just enough scaffolding and direct instruction (because we know our ESOL students need that to be successful), but not too much that we are stifling our students’ voices? It’s been hard narrowing our focus on just 1-2 [standards] for the lesson format. ALL of the [standards] are essentially targeted in every lesson. Can you really package a “critical literacy” lesson? (January 19, 2016)

Although all three of us were focused on maximizing our students’ learning and success on standardized assessments and division-wide benchmarks, we were also focused on helping our students become critical consumers of texts and productive, socially-minded citizens. For instance, in one of her journal entries during the planning process (January 5, 2016), Ms. Fink notes:

> We made great headway in finding texts; I think the biggest challenge will be in creating questions and assessments for the students based off of what we have found and relating that to the [standards]. It’s so difficult to relate everything back to the standards while still trying to keep a critical literacy perspective. It shouldn’t be so formulaic and forced, but it kinda has to at this point.

Her reflection highlights the tension she felt regarding relating content and activities to the standards as being seemingly too “formulaic” and “forced.” For her, this tension seemed to continue throughout the planning process as she notes in another journal entry that “the most difficult part of lesson planning is anticipating timing and the flow of the lessons—trying to weave in *SpringBoard* as a resource in a way that makes sense, but is
often so difficult to do when we want, and should, have our students’ needs dictate what comes next” (February 2, 2016).

Ms. Fink was particularly concerned about ensuring that we balance division requirements and a critical literacy approach. More specifically, she worried that our lessons would not sufficiently address the state standards and that her students would not succeed on the English departments’ quarterly benchmark assessments. For instance, in one of her reflection journal entries, Ms. Fink noted the following:

It has been difficult taking care of logistics and creating a plan that makes sense for my students. I feel better knowing that we will still cover the standards and that Marriam and [Ms. Dunmead] will help make sure that material is scaffolded. I really think that my students need more direct instruction…It has just been hard trying to incorporate Springboard smoothly into our lessons….I want [my students] to discuss and engage in rich topics. (February 5, 2016)

Ms. Dunmead also echoes this tension in one of her journal entries during the implementation phase, claiming:

I wove [state standards] review into the lessons, since the assessment imminent, and had students working on their essays after finishing review. I need to ensure they are meeting the standards before the writing [assessment], but this isn’t happening as naturally as I would have liked in this unit. (March 4, 2016)

For Ms. Dunmead, there is an obvious struggle between her desire to ensure that her students are well-prepared for the standardized assessment as well as her desire that critical literacy tasks should naturally lend themselves to meeting the standards.
Not only was it necessary for us to sequence the lessons in a meaningful way, but it also became evident during the process of planning and during implementation that we needed to highlight specific reading strategies for our students. During the planning phase, for instance, we all anticipated that our students would confront additional barriers, especially since they likely had rarely experienced reading and writing in such a critical manner; therefore, we expressed a keen desire to provide the students with additional reading support during the textual analysis process. The following dialogue during one of our planning sessions (January 15, 2016) highlights this desire:

Marriam: We want to analyze the passage from a critical literacy lens. So we need to think of those questions that we want to ask and model the process by rereading the passage again. So it’s almost like you want to read it with them aloud first, let them do it, and then step back and reread it again from a critical perspective.

Ms. Dunmead: Yup, totally different reading.

Marriam: Maybe we can model and make annotations on the text?

Ms. Dunmead: I love annotations.

Marriam: Okay, then maybe we focus on a few explicit reading strategies during the process, like think alouds and annotations. We really need to model and scaffold the instruction.

We all agreed to introduce a few reading strategies and cycle their use throughout the unit. These reading strategies helped us structure our lessons. Initially, we would begin by conducting a think aloud. This would include a focus on a reading strategy and
we would model how we would approach our list of critical literacy discussion questions when looking through a particular identity lens, such as race, gender inequity, or language bias.

We also wanted to have students engage in meaningful dialogue and formulate their own ways of thinking about the issues presented in the texts. Relying on SpringBoard as the basis, we decided to have students engage in literature circle discussions a few times a week. As a result, each lesson began with a modeled think aloud strategy in which we discussed as a class the critical literacy discussion questions and applied a reading strategy as we approached the text.

However, there were multiple occasions throughout the process when we were cognizant that we needed to provide more direct instruction. During implementation, for instance, Ms. Dunmead became particularly aware of this need; however, as reflected in her journal entry below, she apparently struggled with the amount of “hand-holding” we needed to provide students:

The low-point was probably the fishbowl discussion, which wasn’t strategic enough. Students didn’t have enough time to prepare and they didn’t have enough to say about the texts or have the ability to conduct a discussion. I really think we didn’t plan appropriately because we all wanted or expected students to just discuss freely and voice their opinions…I am not sure we really addressed our [standards] effectively in this lesson. Perhaps we need to provide more hand-holding to these students. (April 15, 2016)
Throughout the unit, we continued to notice that our students needed more explicit scaffolds to be able to successfully navigate the literacy demands of the unit. For instance, we needed to review basic vocabulary such as “stereotype” and “bias” as well as provide sentence frames to guide literature circle discussions (Field notes, February 22, 2016). When we noticed that our students needed more explicit guidance related to the writing process, I noted the following in my reflection journal:

We noticed that we needed to review a bit more and guide their process more explicitly. This worked out really well—we chunked each task and made them follow up with a teacher through conferencing. For instance, we talked about POWER and every day gave them a small task they needed to accomplish in relation to the writing process. We used a multitude of graphic organizers so they weren’t feeling overwhelmed with the writing. (March 11, 2016)

Throughout the co-construction and implementation phases, it became apparent we needed to navigate and negotiate the constraints of critical literacy inside the school, such that we could resolve the tension between school-based literacy acquisition and critical language awareness. On one hand, we did not want to neglect academic literacy skills that we knew were necessary for our students’ school success. However, we were determined to merge our two desires and create a space where our ELs could be successful.

**Theme 3: Finding sufficient time.** Both teachers and I felt the pressure of building-level time constraints while planning and implementing the unit. It was difficult
to find adequate time to plan twice a week as a team. In her reflection journal, for instance, Ms. Dunmead noted:

…time to create new activities from scratch and to plan constructively was difficult because of all the constraints. I am definitely feeling the time pressure due to lost days for snow and testing, so maybe we need more ‘padding’ time for planning. (February 2, 2016)

Likewise, Ms. Fink echoed the same sentiment in her reflection journal claiming, “there simply isn’t enough time to plan out the entire unit in detail because of all the snow days and the PLCs we need to attend on other days. I feel like these missed planning sessions are creating a halt to our flow” (February 2, 2016).

Although both teachers were allotted 90 minutes of planning on a daily basis, their scheduled planning time had been minimized due to administrative tasks and school-based responsibilities. For instance, both teachers were required to attend an English Language Arts Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting twice a week. During this time, the teachers were required to plan the unit’s lessons as well as produce common assessments and analyze student data. Ms. Dunmead also had additional obligations to attend to with her ESOL team, often requiring her to devote a portion of her planning periods to completing paperwork for ELs on her caseload. In order to also adhere to their regular job responsibilities, both teachers were required to grade and write lesson plans for their two additional courses and were often requested to proctor testing sessions.
These competing responsibilities enabled us to plan only twice a week, for approximately an hour each session. As a result, we aimed to remain focused on setting and attaining measurable goals each session. Unfortunately, however, some sessions involved more discussion and we needed to find additional time outside of our scheduled planning sessions to continue planning individually. For instance, I reflected in one of my journal entries on the feeling of being pressed for time:

I can sense the two teachers are feeling overwhelmed and crunched for time in planning. At this point, I feel my role has shifted a bit and I ended up dividing up tasks for us to complete outside of work hours. I honestly feel that if this is truly a team effort, we all need to work to our strengths and areas of growth and support each other during the process of completing this unit. (February 1, 2016)

Although both teachers and I originally intended to plan for the unit in a collaborative environment, with no additional time required outside of our sessions, this proved not to be the case. Ms. Dunmead expressed concern over our inability to complete some of the tasks during our allotted planning sessions, claiming “we need a rhythm. I am feeling like we don’t have momentum since tasks are taking too long to plan” (Journal entry, January 5, 2016). Throughout the planning process, Ms. Dunmead continued to feel pressured by time in locating sources and noted that she sensed stress among us as a result, as noted in another journal entry almost one month later: “I am feeling like everyone needs a break. One person should locate resources and then we can rotate turns...I am sensing stress in the collaborators” (February 2, 2016). At this point,
Ms. Dunmead seemed frustrated by our inability to locate quality resources in time to begin teaching the unit.

At the end of several planning sessions, each of us had designated tasks to complete individually on our personal time. At the end of our fourth planning session, for instance, we each agreed to find alternate texts suitable for literature circle discussions, as well as think about alternate assessments and rubrics for assessing literature circle discussions. Although we intended to allot a certain amount of time to unit planning, competing demands and time constraints added pressure on us to meet our deadline and begin the unit on schedule.

Time demands also influenced the types of texts we read and the amount of time we spent on activities. In one of my journal entries, for instance, I highlight how Ms. Fink wanted to devote an entire month to Writing SOL preparation and did not think we would have enough time to complete a novel during the unit:

I was a bit shocked today because of [Ms. Fink]. She told us that she usually spent a month reviewing for the [state] reading assessment and she seemed especially stressed when we mentioned the possibility of perhaps reading a novel during the unit. I tried my best to discuss how [test] prep does not need to take a month and that if we are teaching well, our students will ultimately be prepared for the test. (December 18, 2015)

As a result of her sense of stress, Ms. Dunmead and I agreed that we would find potential alternate texts instead of having students read an entire novel.
I also sensed anxiety from both teachers as we began wrestling with project ideas. In a way, the teachers were concerned with completing the unit, and at times, were so focused on what the students were going to produce in terms of a project, rather than focusing on the process of critical literacy instruction. In one of our planning sessions (January 5, 2016), Ms. Dunmead stated, “I don’t feel like, and maybe I am wrong in saying this, but we don’t need to pick the perfect passage. Just as long as it hits every critical lens. We just need to get this done so we can start the project.” She consistently reminded us that we needed to “go with it. Let’s not overcomplicate it. I sometimes feel like we are reinventing the wheel” (Planning session, January 12, 2016). Noticing Ms. Dunmead’s sense of urgency to complete plans during our collaborative sessions, Ms. Fink commented, “But honestly, once we get the first few lessons framed, they’re all gonna follow the same pattern” (Planning session, January 15, 2016).

This sense of urgency was evident throughout the process, especially as we tried to design the final project. Ms. Dunmead appeared overly concerned about completing the unit planning, reiterating in a planning session, “I looked and I have some notes, but this is a huge undertaking. Like this is a big project” (January 12, 2016). Referring to the final project we agreed to have students complete, Ms. Dunmead appeared anxious about our ability to complete the assignment.

This pressure of meeting time constraints and adhering to a specified schedule was also apparent during the implementation phase. For instance, I noticed that Ms. Fink was stressed because she wanted her students to be able to complete a project, but felt
anxious that they may not be able to due to competing demands. In one of her journal entries, she states the following:

> It has been stressful to be working on this during the writing [state assessment] period. For this reason we have adapted the paper to a “plan” rather than a full essay. Students are writing their thesis, coming up with topic sentences, and researching supporting details to put into their graphic organizer. They will not put this information into a formal essay at this point, but rather turn in their plan for a grade. I just don’t think we have time for all that at this pace. (March 3, 2016)

As a result of feeling this pressure, we consistently adjusted our plans during implementation to adhere to time demands and ensure that the students are still accomplishing what is required to become successful in the unit, but also on state and division-based assessments.

**Theme 4: Managing projects.** Managing the social action projects until they had been fully executed was difficult for many students, and in hindsight, a challenge for both teachers. For many of our students, the project proved to be overwhelming at times. Many students in both classes desired to tackle large social action projects, often requiring multiple steps and various ways of interacting with different adults in the process.

Ms. Dunmead observed that many of her students needed to be told, “you’ve finished task one, what can you do next? …They need a lot of hand-holding” (Personal interview, May 26, 2016). For instance, a group of four students in Ms. Dunmead’s
class, two of whom were classified as ELs, wanted to create a fundraiser to raise money for animal rights. They planned to call dog shelters in the area and coordinate efforts with a local dog park. However, the group needed a lot of guidance narrowing down their vision and setting a manageable and realistic plan to complete each small task in order to complete the final project. During one class period, I spoke with Ronald, a long-term EL who had the language proficiency to navigate successfully in oral and listening tasks, but who often struggled with reading and writing tasks. As Ronald made clear, the idea of reaching out to “strangers” and “calling people on the phone is hard for me, I guess, because I am kinda shy. We’ll get it done” (Classroom observation, April 4, 2016). Ronald appeared hesitant to communicate with various gatekeepers along the way, but felt confident that the group would manage to successfully complete the project in time.

As teachers, we noticed that we neglected to help students break down their projects into manageable tasks, an aspect that in hindsight should have been carefully designed and included in our lesson planning process. For instance, we failed to explicitly engage students in conversations related to the social skills or soft skills necessary to conduct primary research. For many of Ms. Fink’s students, breaking down tasks and accomplishing goals related to the project was very difficult. Ms. Fink, for instance, noted that her students would have benefited from explicit lessons on social skills and etiquette:

In hindsight, if time had allowed, it would have been good to frontload students with some of the social skills they need to complete the projects. For example,
phone and email etiquette. Chunking tasks and meeting deadlines is a struggle for many students. Again, in hindsight, it may have been more helpful to give them a mini-calendar to record tasks and deadlines. I found it difficult to track all their progress. (Personal interview, May 27, 2016)

Data suggest that Ms. Fink, in particular, experienced mixed emotions related to the project. In a journal entry, she notes, “On one hand, I love their ideas and enthusiasm, on the other hand, I am nervous about their ability to chunk the tasks and complete such a large undertaking on their own” (April 12, 2016). At some points along the way, she felt students were “reaching a point where they are over their heads, but with no way to turn back” (Journal entry, April 15, 2016). In a sense, she feared that her lack of control and careful planning as a teacher was actually impeding on students’ ability to succeed.

According to Ms. Dunmead, however, students simply “did not have the efficacy to know what step comes next” (Personal interview, May 26, 2016). This required teachers to devote more time to facilitating the projects for, instead of with, many of our students and to take more of a “project management” role than they both had originally anticipated or wanted. Ms. Dunmead claimed:

The freedom was definitely crippling for some of them, where we were thinking the opposite, like it was going to be amazing for them…You know, I didn’t want to stifle them. I wanted them to think, to grow, to go as big as they wanted. (Personal interview, May 26, 2016).

Data indicate that we struggled to navigate our roles in the classroom during the social
action project phase, often questioning our assumptions and expectations. In our desire to provide students with freedom to navigate their own projects, we may have neglected to explicitly teach them the skills necessary to manage such large undertakings on their own.

**Theme 5: Negotiating the researcher role.** Data analysis revealed that another theme grounded in the data was one of negotiation of my role as a researcher. One of the main obstacles during the co-construction phase was negotiating my role, not only as a researcher but also as an educator and Literacy/ESOL Specialist. After the first two planning sessions, I noted the following in my reflection journal:

I noticed the teachers were almost *waiting* for me to lead the process. One teacher, Ms. Dunmead, even asked, “well, surely you have example tests and projects, right?” Unfortunately, I didn’t. I felt I needed to defend myself and explain that this was truly meant to be a collaborative process and that we need to work together in these sessions to formulate ideas. (January 3, 2016)

I often struggled with balancing this sense of collaboration with coaching. At one point, I noted in my reflection journal:

I am struggling with the lack of direction in this process. I am craving taking more of a leadership role and driving the sessions, yet I know I can’t do that. Sometimes it is too difficult for me to remain silent—ahh, that idea of “wait time” that I dread at times, yet more and more, I know I need to practice it during these planning sessions. (January 19, 2016)
This tension evolved during moments of stress, often when we felt crunched for time to accomplish our daily planning goals. For example, on another occasion, I reflected on the rising sense of internal tension I was experiencing with regards to my role and my desire to validate the teachers:

I noticed myself probing them to think deeper and reach their own conclusions—which is very much my coaching philosophy. Wait—should I be coaching at this point? Does that go against the co-construction of this process? I often asked, “well, what do you think? What do you think will help your students?” As an outsider, I feel the need, almost the obligation, to always put their needs and their students’ needs first and to also value and assure them that they are the experts with regards to their classes and students’ needs because they know them best. (Journal entry, February 3, 2016)

Negotiating our professional roles was complex and I often found myself anticipating our students’ needs and trying to control the process based on my assumptions about teacher knowledge as it relates to critical literacy, ESOL, and effective literacy instruction. During implementation, for instance, I often struggled with how the teachers spent so much time talking at students rather than with students. During one lesson in Ms. Fink’s class, Ms. Fink began reading aloud “Terrible Things,” an allegory of the holocaust. I noticed that Ms. Fink was just reading through the text and not modeling a think aloud as we planned. At that point, I began to model how I was making meaning of the text and asked students various comprehension questions along the way (Classroom observation, February 23, 2016).
However, data suggest that Ms. Fink struggled with having three teachers in the room, all of us with varying perspectives at times. For instance, during implementation Ms. Fink noted the following in her reflection journal:

The difficulty for me as a teacher has been trying to plan for “three minds.” We have our sessions and make our lesson plan, but how that lesson actually looks in the classroom can vary hugely from individual to individual. It has caused some hectic mornings where we are all running around printing, talking to students, adding slides, etc. My class is ahead, and I am first thing in the morning, so I sometimes play “guinea pig” with materials and preparation. (February 23, 2016)

Ms. Fink was not used to negotiating our roles and spaces within the classroom, as we often adapted our pre-planned lessons on the spot. She clearly articulated in her post-interview with me that “it was difficult sometimes because I wanted you and Katie to help me scaffold the material and teach reading strategies, but it sometimes got too much, like there was too much going on at one time that was different from what we originally planned” (May 27, 2016).

Yet, data also suggest that these teachers saw me as an expert and relied on me to help facilitate the entire process. On one occasion, Ms. Dunmead noted in her reflection journal that “it’s nice to have three brains in the room, especially since Marriam has a lot of background knowledge we can use” (December 18, 2015). In her post-interview, Ms. Fink reflected that one of the most positive aspects of this entire process was “being able to gain your knowledge and expertise. As a second year teacher, I was happy to relinquish control and learn from [Marriam]” (May 27, 2016). The process of co-
construction and implementation required us to reflect and negotiate our roles and spaces in unique ways.

Overall, the process of co-constructing and implementing a unit grounded in critical literacy proved to be complex and complicated in nature. As evidenced through the aforementioned themes drawn from qualitative data analysis, we all experienced tensions and barriers along the way. Primarily, we needed to actively search for quality sources that were not only current and relevant, but also lent themselves to critical analysis and discussions. We also needed to balance state and division-based requirements with our core beliefs, ultimately designing a curricular framework that allowed us to address requirements without salvaging best practices as related to critical literacy. Yet, planning and implementing the unit required adequate time, something that was often difficult to find due to building-level and logistical constraints. One aspect of unit implementation that posed the greatest challenge was project management, as we found helping students navigate large social action projects required additional supports that we neglected to consider during the planning phase. Finally, throughout the process, I was primarily challenged by how to navigate space with the teachers while planning and in the classroom, often needing to negotiate my role, especially because they often still regarded me as an “expert” based on my academic and professional experiences. In what follows, I describe how we addressed some of these challenges in order to experience successes throughout the planning and implementation phases.
Successes Experienced

Data analysis highlights that the unit planning process, although it was complex and posed several challenges, was also rewarding in many different aspects. Primarily, planning and implementing a unit situated in critical literacy had a positive impact on our professional identities. The teachers and I saw the process as impacting our sense of self-efficacy and agency by affecting us on an emotional level as we navigated the process and successfully merged two seemingly conflicting pedagogical elements and values. Also, the process in which we engaged helped to foster collaborative partnerships between us and our students. As a result, our students began to take risks and act as leaders in their classroom, school, and to a smaller extent, their community. Below, I present themes that emerged from the data around these successes.

Theme 1: Impacting professional learning and growth. Data highlight that we relied on a partnership orientation to tackling the planning and implementation of the unit and that this was key to impacting our professional learning and growth. According to Ms. Dunmead, effective collaboration was a result of sharing “a similar vision and [being] committed to the same goal” (Personal interview, May 26, 2016). We ultimately relied on each other and our own expertise and experience to help negotiate texts and make instructional decisions. One key to the success of this partnership was how we were involved in power sharing and negotiations. As teachers, we negotiated what texts to include, how to define aspects of critical literacy, and what activities serve students best. As a result, co-constructing and implementing the critical literacy unit as a team
was valuable because the opportunity allowed us to build knowledge about varied instructional methods and strategies. It also allowed us to consciously and purposefully respond to our students’ needs throughout the entire process.

**Knowledge and skills.** One benefit of the planning process was that each of us had a combined wealth of teaching experience and content knowledge. The process was simplified because we shared common knowledge surrounding English literature and teaching English Language Arts. In my journal I note, “There’s a multitude of resources and experiences we bring to the table each planning session. All of us have a rich literature background so it’s easy for us to spit out texts that would lend themselves to critical literacy practices” (January 3, 2016). There were also various instances in planning sessions in which we reflected on our past teaching experiences. For instance, Ms. Dunmead shared from her experience teaching English at an International Baccalaureate school overseas in India:

> This idea of taking social action and what you are saying about critical literacy is just exactly what I taught last year in India. It reminds me of problem-based learning. Except when I was teaching last year my main goal was to teach the language through social action projects and research. (Planning session, December 18, 2015)

Ms. Dunmead was able to reflect on her previous teaching experience about problem-based learning as a way to frame our social action project for our unit. Ultimately, we bounced ideas for an overall theme for the unit by reflecting on themes we had previously
used in our teaching experience, such as “monstrosity” and “human nature” (Planning Session, December 18, 2015).

Ms. Fink, who had less classroom experience, highlighted how she began to view literacy instruction in a different light: “I learned a lot about teaching styles just by planning. I didn’t know many of the strategies you and [Ms. Dunmead] would discuss, so it was helpful to talk through them before we even implemented the unit.” (Personal interview, May 27, 2016). For instance, during one planning session, I suggested we introduce the students to a think aloud procedure while also annotating text, because it would be helpful for them as they engage with more difficult selections through a critical lens. Although both teachers were familiar with these strategies, they did not employ them with their students on a regular basis and were excited to have me show them how I envisioned the process to work with ELs (January 15, 2016).

Not only did our collaborative opportunity help us share and learn new strategies, but it also helped solidify our understanding of critical literacy and social justice pedagogy, providing us with an opportunity to reflect on some of our most common practices, something that was not possible through textbook iterations of critical literacy pedagogy. For instance, as educators, we are often told to act as “facilitators” and “guide students’ thinking,” yet oftentimes this is a struggle and the skills needed to act effectively as a facilitator cannot be gleaned from textbooks or lectures, but rather through active participation in project-based learning. Data highlight that the implementation of the critical literacy unit served as an opportunity for teachers to practice acting as facilitators. Ms. Dunmead, for instance, noted that “my role in the
classroom really shifted and this surprised me. I was definitely more of a facilitator than I tend to be, especially during the project phase” (Personal interview, May 26, 2016).

Ms. Fink also felt that the nature of the critical literacy unit allowed her to take risks, often some that she had debated but was often uncomfortable taking as a newer teacher. She confided how she “used to be nervous about getting into these issues, sensitive ones, but the unit has really helped me see how cool it is to see how kids respond to these topics” (Journal entry, May 7, 2016). She appreciated that this experience allowed her to be more explicit in her approach to critical teaching. Ms. Dunmead also affirmed the necessity of using a critical literacy lens with all students, seeing it as “an asset because many students made amazing strides simply because of the approach we used” (Personal interview, May 26, 2016). As a result of this experience, Ms. Fink reported that she is actively seeking additional opportunities to learn how to engage students in community-based project learning.

Personal and critical reflections. Data from planning sessions and journal entries highlight that we engaged in critical discussions ourselves, and that these personal, and often emotional, discussions propelled us to focus more so on meeting our students’ needs throughout this unit. On multiple occasions throughout the planning process, we found ourselves entrenched in passionate discussions about issues of discrimination and equity that confront our students, but also making several connections to our personal experiences. At one point during a planning session (January 12, 2016) for instance, Ms. Fink discussed the many stereotypes her students encounter being a part of the Latino community:
Marriam: What do you guys think are the most pressing social issues that your students will be engaged with?

Ms. Fink: I think, I mean, I think in this area there is a lot of stereotypes surrounding the Latino community. And, I think that is something that is difficult for the students, and actually the teachers… I think this is a something that is a huge part of the school.

Marriam: Yeah, could you give me an example? I mean, something specific that you have encountered.

Ms. Fink: Um, yeah, I think the kids, you know, will always make comments to each other. Like, I had some that would say to one of my students, ‘hey, like your dad is in construction.’ You know, and issues surrounding parents who don’t want to come in because they don’t have papers, you know.

Ms. Dunmead: I’ve definitely had the same situation happen. Kids just poking fun at each other because of stereotypes.

Ms. Fink: You know, my GT class is all white and my non-GT classes are mainly minority students. Teachers just think the kids’ parents don’t want to come in because they don’t care, but that’s not necessarily true. A lot of assumptions about the Latino community. And the kids will talk a lot about, like, where you live in the community. Like, ‘do you live in [ABC Lake] or do you live in [X] area?’ which is filled with crime. You know, there was
one kid who stayed behind class one day to tell me that he lived in
the trailer park. But, they all assume, for example, that I live in
[ABC Lake] because it is the rich, better part of town. Just things
like that.

Ms. Fink witnessed her students commenting on racial boundaries apparent in their own
community, even assuming that she, as a white female, must live in the “rich, better part
of town.”

Yet, this discussion fueled some reflection on our part, as both teachers, who were
White, were aware of their privileged role in society, especially while teaching our ELs.
For instance, in discussing our personal biases and assumption, Ms. Dunmead claimed
she “[had] become complacent. I don’t regularly revisit my beliefs, but I should. I am at
a different point in life than my kids are. My ideas have already developed. But I could
benefit from rethinking about these issues myself” (Planning session, January 12, 2016).
She admitted she caught herself a few days prior to this meeting blaming her students’
misbehavior on their cultural background. Surprised by how she stereotyped her
students, Ms. Dunmead wondered, “Is it right for me to say that they should follow my
set of rules” (Planning session, January 12, 2016)? Ms. Dunmead’s honesty was also
echoed by Ms. Fink who felt compelled to assess her own biases and beliefs “so as to not
insert them while teaching,” (Personal interview, December 11, 2015) but found it
difficult to always be aware of these issues.

In another planning session, for example, I reflected on my experience as an
immigrant and how I struggled to straddle two cultures, often feeling like I failed to
belong in either (January 18, 2016). In talking about the immigrant experience, Ms. Fink shared that her husband, a child of Hispanic immigrants, also struggled with trying to navigate the American culture and was the first one to go to college in his family (Planning session, January 18, 2016). In some ways, these candid discussions allowed us to reflect on our own positions and, it was as a result of these personal experiences and encounters with issues of equity that propelled us to center our focus on what our students needed to feel empowered in the classroom, school, and beyond.

These often personal and emotional discussions fueled us to more consciously attend to our students’ needs and interests. An analysis of participant roles, control of the movement of thinking in the group, and discourse patterns also revealed that at some junctures of planning each of us contributed to the discussion and moved the group toward a common focus. The following excerpt from a planning session (January 12, 2016), for instance, highlights our ability to move the discussion towards a common goal and presents evidence of how we were able to compromise:

Marriam: How would you guys start the unit? Any ideas?

Ms. Dunmead: I usually like to start a unit by watching a video and really building their background knowledge about the topic.

Ms. Fink: I think last year when we did this, we used these quotes from SpringBoard in lesson 3.2. It’s for when they set up their literature circles. They can share out.

Marriam: Did you look at [lesson] 3.16? I thought that one was a good idea as well.
Ms. Fink: That’s a cool one to come up with ideas, actually. You know, maybe we, like, take them through the Do Something website. We give them a taste of social action.

Ms. Dunmead: And, you know what, it brings it to their level. It’s a student doing something, I mean we haven’t, we would start it off with the student, not Martin Luther King…

Ms. Fink: Yeah, these are things that are doable. Maybe we show them and then we discuss the theme and project. Unpack the assessments.

Marriam: I agree with you. I think those quotes would be better to do in literature circles the first day. The Do Something website might be more engaging, which is what we want, especially to hook them into the unit and expose them to the social action project.

Ms. Dunmead: Maybe we can do that and find some videos of these kids taking action on YouTube or something just to hook them.

Ms. Fink: I like that. I think that sounds great.

At this point in the planning process, each of us was concerned with how we were going to begin the first introductory lesson. Our goal was not only to preview the unit and preview the unit assessments with the students, but also to “hook” them and get them motivated about the unit. Although each of us had different ideas based on our previous experiences, we were able to compromise and come to a consensus about beginning the unit by exposing students to the Do Something website, a site devoted to social action
projects enacted by students. We all felt that this was most appropriate because it made
their final project meaningful and would bring the project “to their level.”

One of our primary goals during the sessions, thus, was to plan a unit that met all
our students’ needs, not just the Hispanic majority. We felt compelled to expose our
students to a variety of cultural texts, written from different perspectives, yet in
examining SpringBoard, we noticed that it presented a narrow focus, simply providing
excerpts from Holocaust-based literature and narrative nonfiction. Ideally, we wanted to
“create space for a variety of voices” focused on a variety of critical issues in the
classroom. (Marriam, Journal entry, December 18, 2015). In one of my journal entries, I
reflected on one of our discussions in a planning session:

She [Ms. Dunmead] brought a short text from Broken Chain, and I had a passage
from La Linea. We debated what would be the best choice and really highlighted
how we didn’t want this unit to simply be about “Hispanics.” Our goal was to
highlight different critical lenses through the use of multiple genres and
multicultural literature. As a result, we concluded that [Ms.Fink’s] passage [ The
Best Luck I Ever Had] might be best because it reversed gender roles and dealt
with racial tension (black/white) in a historical context. We discussed how we
didn’t want to just highlight one voice, but rather multiple voices and that it would
be best to use the alternate texts in our instructional phase, rather than on the
assessments (January 6, 2016).

We consistently negotiated appropriate texts for our students based on the
teachers’ experiences with their students and prior discussions in their classes around

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students’ interests. In one negotiation, for instance, Ms. Dunmead voiced her concern over Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”: “I think that’s a great text, I do. But I don’t think it appeals to all of them” (Planning Session, January 5, 2016). As a result of Ms. Dunmead’s concern, we decided to use a passage from *La Linea*, a novel by Ann Jaramillo about a 15-year-old boy you decided to leave his poor Mexican village and cross the American border illegally. The passage we chose reflected gender roles and stereotypes, as his sister went to make the trek across the border with him. Our decision-making process, thus, centered on our students’ needs, particularly because we knew gender roles and illegal immigration were issues with which our students had expressed interest.

It was these candid discussions and reflections that helped fuel our planning to provide our students with opportunities that would allow them to feel empowered in the classroom. We valued creating an authentic space for critical literacy to flourish and were also determined to provide our students with opportunities for making choices based on their own learning needs and interests. In terms of choosing texts that students would discuss in their literature circles, for instance, we thought it would be best to provide them with a few options, “then they can rank the ones that interest them the most and we can assign them those texts based on their preferences. I kinda like, even if it’s an allusion because it is somewhat controlled by us, of choice” (Ms. Dunmead, Planning session, January 12, 2016).

In particular, we were evidently trying to find the “perfect” text to appeal to all of our students, being sensitive that we would not ostracize any student in the class, as
evidenced by the following dialogue during one of our planning sessions (January 5, 2016):

Marriam: Okay, I think we need to choose something that shows a different perspective. We don’t want them to come out feeling like everything is Hispanic and White people suck and are to blame.

Both Teachers: Right, absolutely.

Ms. Fink: I loved that book [The Best Luck I Ever Had]. I thought it was so good. I don’t think they teach it in 7th grade. You know what I love about this book? It’s a poor boy, like, and a rich girl. They like reverse roles. And he’s not very educated. And she’s like very wealthy… there’s like a really racist guy in town who ends up getting shot. I think there’s a lot of really interesting themes in here that would appeal to our students.

Ms. Dunmead: Okay, I know we had discussed that we shouldn’t make this, like, a Hispanic unit. Now I think for our assessments, this might be a better passage to choose.

Marriam: We definitely don’t want to ostracize cultures.

Ms. Dunmead: Especially because we have only one Arab Muslim boy.

Ms. Fink: And one Black girl. We don’t want to leave anyone out. We want to make sure everyone is represented.

Ms. Dunmead: Especially because [Aiden] is so shy. Let’s just make sure we have some Muslims represented in the texts.
Ms. Fink: So, I think this text is better than because it’s good for breaking stereotypes. She’s like wealthy and educated.

Ms. Dunmead: I kinda like that one, too.

Marriam: I agree. That’s a good one.

Our dialogue suggests that we continued to negotiate texts and think through the process in order to present our students with texts and opportunities that we believed would be valuable. Of course, during the process of implementation, we continued to adapt our choices and lesson plans in order to address student needs as they arose in the classrooms. However, it was through our partnership approach to planning and implementation that we were able to find success.

**Theme 2: Fostering collaborative and trusting partnerships with students.**

Not only did we continue to develop our partnership as teachers, but data also suggest that we built collaborative and trusting relationships with our students as well. The reality that many of these ELs were able to succeed in the unit was due, in large part, to the nature of the relationships they built in class with their teachers. Below, I present data to highlight the partnerships we established with our students through one-to-one conferences and small group discussions.

Since our students had never conducted a social action project before, we needed to provide more explicit and guided support. Not only did we showcase examples through online resources, such as DoSomething.org, we also discussed with students the various ways they could take social action by engaging them in one-on-one conferences, opportunities that we believed helped us see the necessity and importance of making time
to listen, *really* listen, to students’ stories. These writing conferences emerged because we noticed that many of our students wanted to participate in our literacy activities on many occasions, but asking them to write independently was an impediment to their engagement in our critical literacy efforts.

However, when we took the time to listen to students’ personal experiences during writing conferences, in which we asked probing questions about their social issues and injustices, we witnessed more insightful writing full of voice and a clear and compelling passion for the issue at hand. In one of my reflection journals, I noted the following:

I noticed that the ESOL students struggled the most in terms of formulating their ideas in writing. When I talked with them, they were very open and insightful, but they didn’t know how to write it down on paper in a way that was coherent and clear. They also struggled to understand the bridge or how to write their topic sentences. Brainstorming with the student individually really aided the process.

(March 30, 2016)

These opportunities helped us expand on students’ ideas and allowed us to discuss broader world issues. It was through these conversations that our students could begin brainstorming various ideas and passionately sharing ideas, many of which could have been perceived as controversial school topics (i.e., human trafficking, suicide, abuse, etc.). For instance, in her reflection journal (March 4, 2016), Ms. Dunmead noted:

Most students, from what I can tell, are really invested in their topics. Students have both informal and more formal opportunities to speak with Marriam or me
about their paper, and I think this really helps shape and guide their thinking. I think brainstorming really helped […] today because she didn’t even understand the prompt. But, when I talked through the question with her she was able to tell me about how substance abuse was a ‘social’ issue to her because it impacts children and the larger community.

Ms. Fink also echoed the importance of engaging in these one-to-one conferences with her students in one of her journal entries (March 4, 2016):

The biggest success has been the connection between the topics and their own lives. Students who have had personal experiences with domestic violence, alcohol abuse (family members), gangs, divorce, and teen pregnancy, have chosen those topics to research and write about. They have had a fairly successful time coming up with reasons, which has been supported by the individual conferencing. Going through the writing process has also allowed us to review the steps leading up to a final paper.

It was also during these often brief conversations that many students revealed very intimate and personal information. For instance, Yolanda, a student in Ms. Fink’s class, was interested in pursuing research on domestic violence and the injustice experienced by women and children. I noted the following in my field notes (February 29, 2017):

- [Yolanda] raises her hand and me and [Ms. Dunmead] both respond
- She tells us she wants to research domestic violence but doesn’t know if this is allowed.
• [Ms. Dunmead] responds—“Of course, yes, but tell me a bit more about how you see this being a social issue.”

• [Yolanda] responds that she thinks that people need to get help for this ‘sickness’ because it impacts families and their social, emotional, and academic progress.

• Also, tells us that abusers might lose their families and jobs – impacts society because they can’t work.

• I ask her to tell me what kind of action she could take- refer to handout to help guide her thinking.

• [Yolanda] shares that her mother and her and her sisters were victims of abuse and she know of a community center that provides services and counseling groups to help. She wants to raise money to help the center and raise awareness on the topic.

When Ms. Dunmead and I probed her to think about what kinds of social action projects she could pursue, she revealed that she, along with her siblings and mother, were victims of domestic violence and she knew of several organizations around the community devoted to this cause. This type of revelation may not have occurred had we not taken the time to probe and listen to Yolanda’s question and story.

In another instance, Cassandra, a student in the same class and one whom teachers described as very shy and whose data revealed she struggled significantly in reading and writing tasks, revealed to me that her father attends AA meetings regularly and asked if she could visit and interview someone there for her project. After class, the student
remained behind while other students left to give me a hug and offer her gratitude to me for listening to her and helping her formulate her ideas (Field notes, March 9, 2016).

Shocked by the revelations, we faced a dilemma—one the one hand, we valued the relationship and the trust that ensued from the one-to-one conferences, yet at the same time, we were conflicted because of our need as teachers to protect and continue to report such issues to higher authority. Nevertheless, we continued to use these personal opportunities to dig deeper into students’ lives and to facilitate projects that were most meaningful to them.

**Theme 3: Taking risks and acting as leaders.** The notion that middle school ELs can serve as leaders and coordinate an entire social action project is significant. Ms. Fink noted in a journal entry (April 5, 2016) that many of her students were taking risks and engaging in skills that we, as researchers and teachers, failed to consider during the process of co-construction.

Students have been working quietly on their projects. They are on task and focused. Many students have really stretched themselves to come up with ideas that are creative and fun. Students are also engaging in a lot of great social skills that we did not even think as being part of the project. They are advocating to adults, getting permission, working cooperatively, making phone calls, sending emails. Our students partnered with teachers and community members as they navigated their social action projects. Oliver, Damien, and Jason, a group of boys in Ms. Fink’s class, were fascinated by issues in the media related to racial profiling and police brutality and decided to interview local police officers at the nearby station to gather data related to
crime rates in the community. These students did not resort to searching online for relevant data, but instead they felt compelled to take a risk and embark on their own action research project in the community (Field notes, February 29, 2016).

In another case, two girls in Ms. Fink’s class, Katie and Katerina, worked on a social action project advocating against bullying and discrimination of newcomer ELs in the school. These students regularly conducted primary research in the newcomer English class, involving the classroom teacher in the process. They administered a survey and conducted follow-up interviews with several of newcomers in the class to gather perceptions about their experiences in the United States, but also in the middle school and surrounding community more specifically. They ultimately shared their data with another pair of students, Huey (non-LEP) and Jocelyn, who were also interested the topic of bullying. Together, the group developed a PowerPoint presentation that they shared with the newcomer students in Spanish. They also created a website meant to raise awareness on the topic, which contained links to resources youth can access if they are victims of bullying. Finally, the group created and passed out pamphlets to students in the school to advertise the website and also offer key facts related to bullying. The following excerpt comes from the group’s PowerPoint presentation slide under “Explanation of Motivation” (Work sample, May 11, 2016):

- We decided to pick Bullying because we want to stop it.
- We have seen bullying happen to loved ones.
- We want to prevent suicide.
- We don’t want your child to drop out of school.
• We want them to know that they are important

Most impressive was Nelly, however, who organized and orchestrated a Hispanic Heritage celebration for the entire school community. With our assistance, Nelly contacted various adults in and out of the school to help donate food, purchase supplies, send out invitations, and secure a DJ for the event. What resulted was a two hour after-school celebration that included parents, community members, school board members, and staff. Nelly gave a ten-minute presentation around the importance of immigration to the United States and how discrimination based on race and ethnicity needs to end. In her presentation, Nelly shared the following excerpt as her motivation to organize the Hispanic Heritage event:

We wanted to have a dance where we show our culture and our race. Many of us face discrimination because of our immigration status. About 2,481,766 people have been deported since 2008. People get deported because they are not from here which isn't fair at all. Everyone wants and deserves a good life and the only way to get it is in the U.S. We need to help those people because they need to have a chance at having a good life. We have had family members who have been deported and it breaks our family apart. (Work sample, April 20, 2016).

Several students’ abilities to take risks and act as leaders in their school and community was facilitated by positive school and community support. Ms. Fink, for instance, attributes the success of the student projects to school and administrator support, claiming “there was really strong school support. I got lots of emails, lots of positive emails from other teachers, and counseling staff saying we think this is a great idea…the
school community really rallied around it” (Personal interview, May 27, 2016). This support helped our students feel empowered to take risks and embark on leadership activities in and outside of school.

Although the process of co-constructing and implanting a unit grounded in critical literacy was complex, we relied on each other and our relationship with our students to navigate the process. In doing so, we experienced several successes as evidenced through the aforementioned themes drawn from qualitative data analysis. Primarily, we discovered that we learned from one another’s experiences as teachers and that we often relied on our collaborative discussions guide our instructional decisions and navigate new territory with students. In planning the unit, we found ourselves involved in personal and often critical reflections of our experiences and identities; these reflections helped us put our students’ needs and interests at the forefront of our planning and implementation efforts. Our relationships with our students was key to the success some of them had in the unit. Through one-to-one conferences and check-ins throughout the implementation process, many of our students successfully orchestrated social action projects that required them to take risks and act as leaders in their school and beyond. In the section that follows, I present data to highlight the impact of the unit on our students’ engagement.

Impact of Unit on Student Engagement

The following section presents findings related to the second research question:

*How does a unit grounded in critical literacy impact ELs’ literacy engagement in the English class?* To answer this second research question, I present results from a
dependent $t$-test that was conducted to determine if there was statistical significance between the means of the scores on the pre- and post- engagement surveys of both students’ and teachers’ perspectives. In this section, I also compare quantitative results between both classrooms and describe the themes that emerged from qualitative analysis, which included student and teacher interviews, observational field notes, and teacher and researcher reflection journals. In doing so, I document similarities and differences between teachers’ and students’ perceptions of student engagement. Finally, I highlight similarities and differences between my participants’ responses and their actual classroom behavior, based on classroom observational field notes.

Ms. Fink’s Class

**Student perceptions of engagement.** I administered a student survey to capture students’ self-perceptions of engagement in their English class. Table 8 presents descriptive statistics related to the pre- and post- student surveys. It is important to note that only 17 out of the 21 EL students completed a pre- and post-unit survey and therefore, their results are included in this analysis.

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<td>Post</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>10.88307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between pre- and post-unit student engagement scores. The results from the t-test indicated there was a statistically significant difference between student engagement pre- and post-unit implementation as $t(16) = -2.86, p = .011$. These results suggest that the unit did have an impact on students’ perception of their engagement in English class.

Student perceptions of their engagement as evidenced by their surveys indicate that prior to the unit 79% of students (n= 17 out of 21 students completed the survey) in Ms. Fink’s class reported that they “are usually bored with what [they] study in class” and 89% claimed they “often count the minutes until class ends.” What was interesting was that 68% of these students desired to be good writers and 79% desired to be good readers. In addition, 68% of students reported that they enjoyed “learning new things in English class,” but highlighted that they often do not get involved in class or learning (53%), and often pretend they are working in class (68%).

Following the unit, however, students reported an increase in engagement in their responses. For instance, 79% of students reported that the topics they were studying in class were interesting, and only 26% reported they “are usually bored with what [they] study in class.” In addition, 63% of students reported they are actually involved in learning and participate in classroom discussions.

Qualitative data analysis also reveals a similar pattern, highlighting how students perceived their engagement throughout the unit and on specific literacy tasks. Primarily, data reveal that the social action project was the most impactful and engaging aspect of the unit, which is supported by teacher perceptions as well. For instance, Katie, a student
who participated in a social action project that aimed to decrease the amount of bullying existent in the school against newcomer immigrant students in the ESOL program, emphasized that she was engaged with the social action project because it impacted her view of the world. The following interview transcript highlights how discussing and researching relevant topics in class related to social action work impacted Katie’s engagement (May 23, 2016):

Marriam: How has the unit impacted you as a whole?

Katie: Like, I see some things in a different way. Like, for example, it was engaging to hear about some of the other topics the girls did in class. Like drug abuse and stuff. Like, I used to know they were issues but I didn’t get into it a lot. But I have heard them and the points they made in their presentation and all the facts that I didn’t know. I found it very interesting learning from each other.

Marriam: That’s wonderful. I am glad to know that you enjoyed learning from your peers. Can you talk to me a little bit about how the unit impacted your view of the world?

Katie: Yeah. Like last week when we had a game (softball) I was the only Hispanic one there. No offense to white people, but there were a lot of white and black people there and they were like looking at me. My friend was like, ‘look they are looking at you. Probably because you are the only Hispanic one on the team.’ And in the tryouts, everyone’s like are you going to try out for soccer
and I was like why would I try out for soccer. Because aren’t you Hispanic? And I was like yeah, but that doesn’t mean that I am good at soccer or that I like soccer.

For Katie, the project and learning from her peers through their social action presentations raised her awareness about the world around her.

This same sentiment was also echoed by Julio, a student who often skipped class and failed to engage with any writing tasks. He claimed that “after we got done with the unit, I am not going to say I saw the entire world differently, but I definitely saw, like I was thinking of like back then how I used to think of it and how now it has changed a bit.” When I probed further during our post-interview, Julio provided the following scenario to support how he was now more in tune with people’s behavior and power in society:

Well, I was out with my dad. I help him out with his company once in a while. I noticed some people treat other people differently because they, uh, the way that people were talking to him because he’s Hispanic. He won’t understand what people are trying to tell him. They assumed he didn’t understand and they kept talking differently and repeating the same thing over and over. But my dad understands English just fine. (May 23, 2016)

Emphasizing that the social action project was his favorite component of the unit, Julio claimed he “told all [his] friends about it and it is something I would definitely want to pursue my topic” (Personal interview, May 23, 2016). For Julio, the social action project was an avenue to research a personally relevant topic, stereotypes against online gamers,
and to convince his peers that gamers experience unwarranted bullying. During his in-class presentation, Julio presented statistics and facts about the positive effects of online gaming on youths’ social skills and academic achievement (Work sample, May 23, 2016).

To a lesser extent, students reported being engaged during whole class discussions, confirming our observations as teachers. For instance, Katie commented in our interview on the reason she was so engaged in a discussion surrounding perceptions of gender and identity:

When you guys talk about how ladies are supposed to be, how guys are supposed to be. I got related with that because like I don’t act like most of the girls, you know, that be like “ah.” You know, I like football. Like when people ask me what do you like, I say football and they are like, ‘oohh, tomboy’ or something. I am just like ok. But that’s not true. (May 23, 2016)

Yet, when we asked students about their engagement levels in class and why they did not participate as often as we expected at some points during the unit, such as during literature circles or when independently tasked with textual analysis, we were surprised by their honest answers. For many, the answer was not because they were bored, or because they failed to connect with the texts or topics, but rather because they struggled and did not want to fail in front of their teacher and peers. These ELs identified language as an impediment to their classroom engagement, but not often in the way that we expected or assumed. As Julio noted in his interview,
I don’t want to come to class and participate when things are hard. I wanted to be in the class a couple of times because I actually understood what you guys were talking about. I just found it kinda easier and when the classes are easy, I’d rather be in them. But when the classes start to get difficult, that’s when I just give up as a whole. I don’t to talk or share my ideas. (May 23, 2016)

Katie also echoed that language was a barrier to her participation, claiming in class, “I sometimes just don’t know how to say something. Because sometimes I try to write or say something and they [the teachers] don’t actually meant what I wrote or said” (Field notes, February 19, 2016). This fear of failing, as a result of students’ perceptions of their language ability, was impeding on students’ motivation to participate in class.

**Teachers’ perceptions of student engagement.** Ms. Fink completed a teacher survey, which captured a rating of the extent to which each student was an engaged reader and writer in her English classroom. The survey was only administered to Ms. Fink. In total, Ms. Fink completed one survey per student for a total of 20 completed surveys. One survey was started, but not completed; therefore, results were not included in this analysis. Table 9 below presents descriptive statistics related to the pre- and post-unit teacher surveys.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>58.4000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20.70698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>59.7500</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22.94129</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Ms. Fink reported that a closer inspection of the survey results showed that eight out of 20 of her students were less engaged in her English class following the implementation of the unit. Survey results indicate she felt 12 of her students’ engagement increased as a result of the unit.

A t-test was conducted to determine if there was statistical significance in Ms. Fink’s perceptions of the impact of the unit on her students’ engagement. Results of the \( t \)-test indicate that there was no statistical significance in the impact of the unit on her students’ engagement as \( t(19) = -1.07, p = .30 \). These results suggest that, based on Ms. Fink’s perceptions of her students’ engagement in her class, the unit did not have an impact on their literacy engagement.

Prior to the unit, I asked Ms. Fink during our first interview to comment on her ELs’ engagement in her English class. Without hesitation, she automatically responded, “unmotivated and disengaged” (Personal interview, December 11, 2015). Ms. Fink voiced a serious concern for her students’ disengagement in her class, claiming the following:

I wish I knew why they weren’t engaged in my class. I have a couple of students who will say, ‘I’ll just take a zero. Why am I at school? This is so boring. What’s the point of all this anyway. How am I going to use this in my life?’ It’s just a fight I have to battle with on a daily basis in this class. (December 11, 2015)
This idea of going to battle against students’ reluctance and disengagement from learning was deeply troubling for the three of us. On many occasions, Ms. Fink claimed her students would sit in silence, several with heads down on their desks or doodling in their books for the duration of class (Personal interview, December 11, 2015).

However, Ms. Fink attributed her students’ lack of engagement to several factors. For instance, she argued her students were less engaged because “as ESOL students, they are less open to be vulnerable to their peers. There’s a pressure to act like you don’t care…They’re trying to look macho and cool” (Personal interview, December 11, 2015).

In the following journal entry, she also attributed the lack of engagement to the time of her class period – first thing in the morning:

That being said, I have been discouraged with the ½ class’ engagement level. Although, as Marriam and I discussed, engagement could mean many things. I wonder what that class would look like in the afternoon versus first thing in the morning. There are many students that have good things to say, and that will work independently, but will not discuss with the class. Whole class discussions tend to be pretty quiet and reluctant to share. I am curious how they will do on the quiz, because with their quietness it is hard to gauge how many of them are actually understanding what we are doing… With a class that is majority ESOL (and first thing in the morning) it is very possible that they are used to being the “quiet ones” in the room, and not the “smart ones” with the answers. (April 8, 2016)
Prior to the unit and at junctures throughout the unit, Ms. Fink remained concerned about some of her students’ lack of active participation in class discussions and engagement with literacy tasks. However, analysis of qualitative data revealed that following the implementation of the unit, Ms. Fink witnessed an increase in her students’ level of engagement in a few literacy related tasks, particularly classroom discussions and the social action project. In what follows, I highlight evidence to support the idea that this unit, embedded in a critical literacy approach, impacted students’ literacy engagement from the perspective of the teacher, Ms. Fink.

Evidence suggests that Ms. Fink noticed an increase in her students’ engagement during whole group classroom discussions. In her post-interview, for instance, Ms. Fink emphasized how she witnessed more active whole group discussions during the unit than she had prior to the unit.

And a lot of times they’ll like whisper answers and it will drive me crazy, you know. They like don’t want to speak up, but then one of them was like ‘this is my favorite class now.’ I feel like they were getting something out of it now and they were paying attention. We had really good discussions that I had never really seen much of before. (May 27, 2016)

Ms. Fink continued to emphasize how certain topics, such as police brutality and discrimination against illegal immigrants, aroused more of her students’ curiosity and engagement and it became evident to her that engaging students in personally relevant topics resulted in more active participation during whole group discussions in her class (Personal interview, May 27, 2016).
This observation that more students were actively engaged in classroom discussions, as evidenced by asking and responding to questions, was also supported by my observational field notes. For instance, during one lesson, we asked students to discuss current injustices they were experiencing and to connect them to the school and the broader community. Students, including some of our less vocal ones, shouted answers including illegal immigration, school bullying, and how school cafeteria food is unhealthy and results in an injustice to youth (Field notes, March 3, 2016).

During another class discussion around gender following a teacher read aloud of *Adam’s Diary*, a satire of the biblical story of Adam and Eve, for example, we witnessed reluctant students making personal connections and engaging in a heated debate around how women are perceived by men based on appearances and societal expectations (Field notes, April 4, 2016). Ms. Fink acknowledged the importance of utilizing critical lenses as a way to access texts, noting the following in her reflection journal:

As far as general successes, I do believe that the critical literacy lenses have created a great starting point for discussions around texts. The lenses lend themselves to the real world and making real world connections for the students. Students have no grounds to complain that ‘this has no importance or meaning for my life’ since all of the lenses are applicable to everyday living in some way and I think that is part of the reason why they have been actively engaged in our discussions. (April 8, 2016)

Discussions around race and ethnicity also resulted in active participation. For instance, in one lesson (Field notes, March 15, 2016), we wanted our students to examine
how not only a structure of a text and symbolism can impact the theme of the text, but also how it is critical to examine how values and viewpoints are included and excluded in texts. We began by showing students a photo from a *Washington Post* article entitled, “So a White Comic Grows Up with 11 Brothers, All Races…” The photo includes Ryan Conner, a white stand-up comedian in the midst of a racially diverse group of men. We asked students to critically examine the picture – What do you first notice? Who are these men? What is their relationship? We engaged students in a whole group discussion and although we were not surprised to hear that an overwhelming majority of our students noticed race as an issue, we were surprised when they assumed that these men either worked together or that the two white men in the photo were doing “mission” work with African and Asian immigrants or refugees. We continued to probe and discuss the differences between race and ethnicity and their relationship to power in society. Our field notes from this lesson highlight that approximately 90% of all students were taking part in the class discussion, making relevant connections to their lives and society in general.

Secondly, based on Ms. Fink’s perceptions of her students’ engagement, the social action project was the most engaging aspect of the entire unit for her students. For instance, Ms. Fink was excited to see so many of her students taking an interest in researching, claiming, “I definitely feel like their engagement increased on the research part. Like when they researched it wasn’t drudgery. They actually were curious and interested and wanted to find information about it. Their topic” (Personal interview, May 27, 2016).
As with her students’ engagement in classroom discussions, Ms. Fink also attributed her students’ active engagement in their social action projects to choosing topics that were personally relevant to them, as evidenced in the following journal entry:

…the majority of students have been engaged and thoughtful in the process of narrowing down what they will write about. The biggest success has been the connection between the topics and their own lives. [ESOL] students who have had personal experiences with domestic violence, alcohol abuse (family members), gangs, divorce, and teen pregnancy have chosen those topics to research and write about. (March 3, 2016)

For Ms. Fink, students’ ability to make personal connections contributed the most to their participation in class and their engagement with literacy tasks.

However, as with any unit, there were moments when Ms. Fink’s students failed to actively engage with literacy tasks in class, particularly when we asked them to analyze a text independently or critically discuss a text during their literature circles. This made us especially concerned and often frustrated given that we were spending a significant amount of time planning and adapting lesson plans in hopes of seeing higher engagement levels. Ms. Fink voiced her frustration in her reflection journal, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Lit circle discussions tend to be pretty quiet and they are reluctant to share. I am curious how they will do on the quiz, because with their quietness it is hard to gauge how many of them are actually understanding what we are doing. I am a little disappointed because we have been working hard to use engaging texts, including
showing songs with music videos. However, I have to say that the level of work
between song lyrics and a nonfiction text is not much different these last few days.
(April 8, 2016)

For Ms. Fink, student engagement was defined as students discussing the texts in their
literature circles and exhibiting interest in the topics. However, what we noticed was that
it depended on the topic at hand, and not necessarily the genre or modality we were
using. For instance, some students did not appear more engaged or interested in music
videos or movies. In our observational field notes, I noted that it depended on if students
could make a “personal and emotional connection to the topic” instead (Field notes, April
9, 2016).

As we approached the end of the unit, evidence suggests that Ms. Fink continued
to reflect on impediments to her students’ engagement. She argued, for instance, that a
lower language ability impacted her students’ confidence and ability to actively
participate and engage with literacy tasks in her classroom. In one of her reflection
journals, she noted the following:

This issue, however, is definitely not an issue with critical literacy, but rather a
motivational issue that perhaps stems from confidence…I am not sure how much
of this has to do with reading confidence or time of day. There are several students
who will not even go back to the text to find information. They would rather stare
at me and wait for me to point! (April 12, 2016)

Once again, Ms. Fink attributed the lack of active engagement on the part of some of her
students as a result of students’ self-efficacy with literacy tasks as well as the time of day.
Ms. Dunmead’s Class

**Student perceptions of engagement.** I administered a student survey adapted to capture students’ self-perceptions of engagement in their English class. Results from student surveys suggest that the unit did not impact their engagement in any significant way. In fact, there was a decrease in the mean score between pre- and post-unit surveys. Students in this class had an engagement mean score of 62.53 (SD=8.08) on the pre-survey and 60.33 (SD=8.52) on the post survey. Table 10 below presents descriptive statistics related to the pre- and post- student surveys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 10</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Student Engagement Pre- and Post-Surveys, Paired Samples Statistics – Ms. Dunmead’s Class</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post</td>
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A *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between pre- and post-unit student engagement scores. The results from the *t*-test indicated there was no statistically significant difference between student engagement pre- and post-unit implementation as *t*(14)= 1.18, *p* = .26. These results suggest that the unit did not have an impact on students’ perception of their literacy engagement as evidenced by this survey. Results from student engagement surveys revealed that 14 out of 15 of the students reported feeling extremely disengaged in English class prior to the implementation of the unit.
In contrast to what quantitative results suggest, five out of six of the students whom I interviewed following the implementation of the unit emphasized the unit made a significant impact on their levels of engagement, specifically referring to the social action project. For Roberto, for example, an extremely shy student, the social action project impacted his overall identity and gave him a sense of worth:

It really made me feel like I was doing something with my life. You know, I usually do nothing but just play video games at the house…this project really helped my grade a lot and gave me courage to do something to help other people (Personal interview, May 11, 2016).

As noted earlier in this chapter, Roberto completed a project with two of his peers related to animal rights. The three boys, one of whom was not identified as ESOL, organized a fundraiser at the local dog park and collected over $1000 to donate to the local dog shelter. For these three boys, animal rights was a personally relevant issue. The boys eventually presented to the class on why discriminating against animals is just as problematic and disheartening as discrimination against humans.

Another student, Jessica, who had only ever attended schools in Maxville City, did not appear engaged throughout the unit. In fact, she was consistently absent and when she was present, often put her head down and slept in class (Field notes, March 7, 2016). When we inquired about her chronic absenteeism, Jessica confided to Ms. Dunmead that she was experiencing family circumstances that made her unable to devote energy and time to school. During our one-to-one conference, Jessica also explained the following:
[My] family life is a bit rough, you know. It is really hard for me to concentrate sometimes in school cause I am always thinking about what I need to do when I get home. You know, it’s like, I always have to take care of my brothers and sisters cause my mom has too many things going on. (Field notes, April 4, 2016)

However, Jessica’s enthusiasm about the social action project surprised us. Along with two of her non-EL peers, Jessica decided to tackle the issue of teen suicide. Her group decided to create a PowerPoint presentation that they intended to share with the seventh graders in the school. In their presentation, Jessica began by sharing the following from the slide deck:

We choose suicide because a lot of young teens are taking away their lives because of family and personal reasons but sometimes for stupid reasons. It’s sad that a lot of teens are taking away their lives and we’ve been through this situation ourselves at one point. No one should take away their life because it can and will become better later on. (Work sample, April 18, 2016)

It was apparent that suicide was a topic of personal significance to Jessica and her peers, and this was the reason we witnessed her taking more of a leadership role throughout the project stage of the unit. When asked about the impact of the unit on her engagement during our final interview, Jessica told me the social action project “was cool cause it really helped me reflect on life in general and made me understand a lot more about the issue of suicide. I felt like I wanted to convince others to not commit suicide and that’s really important to me.” (May 10, 2016)
Similar to students in Ms. Fink’s class, students in Ms. Dunmead’s class vocalized their engagement as it related to the social action project. Although quantitative results from the student survey suggest that the unit did not have a statistically significant impact on students’ engagement, qualitative data from our interviews with students and their work samples suggest that the social action project was the most engaging aspect of the unit for many of these students in Ms. Dunmead’s class.

**Teacher perceptions of student engagement.** Ms. Dumead also completed a teacher survey, which captured a rating of the extent to which she believed each student is an engaged reader and writer in her English classroom. Table 11 below presents descriptive statistics related to the pre- and post- teacher surveys.

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<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>55.2143</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.65549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>60.9286</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19.94402</td>
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A t-test was conducted to determine if there was statistical significance in Ms. Dunmead’s perceptions of the impact of the unit on her students’ engagement. Quantitative analysis of her pre- and post-unit surveys indicates that there was a statistical significance in the impact of the unit on her students’ engagement as $t(13) = -2.28$, $p = .04$. The mean score on the pre-surveys was 55.21 (SD=18.66) while the mean score on the post-surveys was 60.93 (SD = 19.94). These results suggest that, based on
Ms. Dunmead’s perceptions of her students’ engagement in her class, the unit impacted their classroom engagement.

Prior to the unit, Ms. Dunmead described her students’ engagement level as “a little below average” (Personal interview, December 15, 2015). Ms. Dunmead’s teacher survey results indicated that 78% of students in her class were “easily distracted” and 83% were “disruptive.” In addition, Ms. Dunmead reported that 63% of her students were not confident readers and writers. Yet, unlike Ms. Fink, Ms. Dunmead attributed this disengagement to her own ability as a teacher, noting the following in one journal entry (February 23, 2016): “Totally an excuse on my part, but I think this disengagement of the students is due to my lack of planning, or maybe is the cause for it.”

Qualitative analysis of classroom observations, journal reflections, as well as teacher and student interviews, however, suggest that, similar to students in Ms. Fink’s class, students in Ms. Dunmead’s class became engaged in the social action project and in critical classroom discussions centered on analysis of texts. In her final interview, for instance, Ms. Dunmead reiterated she was surprised when she saw ELs do the most work she had witnessed all year:

I think they had some genuinely great ideas. I mean, they genuinely wanted to help… they really had some amazing ideas and diverse ideas about how they can help people. They truly wanted to help people…I was surprised that some of these students did the most work I had ever seen them do. (May 26, 2016)

In Ms. Dunmead’s class, this was particularly noticeable when we discussed the concept of “othering,” a notion that seemed foreign to students at first. Lisa, a student
who was often suspended for aggressive behavior in school, rarely attended our class on a regular basis. However, when she did we often struggled to manage classroom behavior as she would frequently interrupt the teacher and distract her peers. Yet, when we engaged Lisa in discussions around “othering,” we saw a different side of her – an intelligent, articulate and very insightful student who showed great potential to succeed in academic tasks (Field notes, April 1, 2016). In one journal entry, Ms. Dunmead noted that although Lisa “typically tries her best to derail class and garner as much attention as possible, today she was fully engaged and nearly shouted out her answers after watching the ads and co-constructing the “Be Ladylike” and “Act Like a Man” charts” (April 1, 2016).

Many of our apparently disengaged students were also very active participants in classroom discussions around class and power when we had them critically analyze popular song lyrics. What we noted with this class, however, unlike Ms. Fink’s reticent group who participated more in whole group discussions with teacher support, students in this class actively participated more often in these discussions when we gave them an opportunity to reflect on passages and tasks independently prior to sharing as a whole group. For instance, on one occasion we modeled a think aloud of “Eve’s Diary” with the whole class and then asked students to reflect on the role of women through a free-write response. We then asked students to share their reflections: “What do you think this means? What is her view of herself? Why do you think the author uses the word ‘supreme’ here?” ELs in the classroom were able to make connections, claiming that
females are often accused of being over-dramatic, overly sensitive, and judgmental (Field notes, April 5).

As in Ms. Fink’s class, we saw evidence of student engagement in the social action projects in Ms. Dunmead’s class. Many of her students were excited about their topics and coordinated large-scale efforts. For instance, Ms. Dunmead also commented on how Roberto took on active role in his group’s effort to coordinate a fundraising project related to animal rights. In one of her journal entries, Ms. Dunmead reflects on her students’ excitement about the projects:

Groups are each actively engaged in their social action topic, to varying levels of success. [Adam’s] dog park group [Roberto’s group] is taking the lead in the accomplishment race. They come to my classroom each morning to share with me the successes of the group. For instance, they have already secured a location for the event, made fliers, collected over $150, and spray-painted a donation box for the main office. They’re so enthusiastic about the project! (April 8, 2016)

This excitement was also apparent in the classroom. We witnessed many groups actively completing their research, discussing and writing down their plans to orchestrate their projects, and coordinating efforts to actually embark on their social action projects in the school and beyond. One of our students, Jenny, a reticent long-term EL, exclaimed that the unit overall was engaging because of the following:

I think it just made me see more things out there all the problems, everything that’s happening in the world. I think the project gave me a voice to say my own ideas about a topic. (Personal interview, May 23, 2017).
Although Jenny never fully executed her full social action project, she did conduct research and began to create a presentation around child abuse.

Overall, quantitative results differed in both classrooms. In Ms. Fink’s class, students reported higher engagement in the unit as compared to Ms. Fink’s own perceptions of each student’s engagement level. On the other hand, results from the student survey in Ms. Dunmead’s class suggest that the unit did not have a statistically significant impact on students’ perceptions of their own engagement. Yet, qualitative data such as interviews, field notes, and journal entries, suggest that in both classes, the social action project and some classroom discussions positively impacted students’ engagement.

**Impact of Unit on Student Literacy Achievement**

The following section presents findings related to the third research question:

*How does a unit grounded in critical literacy impact ELs’ literacy development in the English class?* To answer this third research question, I present results from a dependent *t*-test that was conducted to determine if there was statistical significance between the means of the scores on the pre- and post- student assessment. In this section, I share quantitative results from students in both classrooms and describe the themes that emerged from qualitative analysis, which included student and teacher interviews, observational field notes, student work samples, and teacher and researcher reflection journals.
Ms. Fink’s Class

I administered a teacher-created critical literacy unit assessment pre- and post-unit implementation (Appendix K). The unit assessment was comprised of three sections: 1) multiple choice questions measuring higher level reading comprehension skills (i.e., making inferences, identifying main idea and theme, etc.); 2) open-ended short answer response questions that required students to use a critical literacy approach to respond to the passage they read; and, 3) a short essay prompt that required students to identify a social issue in their community and write a letter persuading the audience to address the social issue.

Results from student assessments suggest that the unit did impact their literacy achievement in a significant way. There was an increase in the mean score between pre- and post-assessment. Students in this class had an achievement mean score of 19.80 (SD=8.87) on the pre-unit assessment and 30.40 (SD=4.42) on the post-unit assessment. Table 12 below presents descriptive statistics related to the pre- and post-unit assessments.

Table 12

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<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>19.8000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.86507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>30.4000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.42362</td>
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A *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between pre- and post- unit student assessment scores. The results from the *t*-test indicated there was a statistically significant difference between students’ literacy achievement pre- and post- unit implementation as $t(19) = -6.22$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that the unit had a substantial impact on students’ literacy achievement as evidenced by the pre- and post- unit assessment.

Ms. Fink was very vocal during our first interview about her perceptions that her students struggled as readers and writers. In fact, when I asked her how she would describe her ESOL students as readers and writers, she automatically referred to them as “reluctant” (Personal interview, December 11, 2015). She had also noted in her reflection journal that one of her students had mentioned to her in class, “Why am I even going to try if I know I will fail?” This lack of confidence had caused many of her students, according to Ms. Fink, to “give-up” (February 23, 2016).

Prior to implementing the unit, Ms. Fink noted that her students particularly struggled with higher order thinking and answering higher level analysis questions on an exam. The following dialogue during our first interview (December 11, 2015) highlights Ms. Fink’s concern for her students’ literacy success:

Marriam: What in particular do you think your students struggle with the most as readers and writers?

Ms. Fink: I think with reading, it’s that higher order thinking is what I am finding. A lot of them could like find an example of imagery in a story, but they couldn’t tell you why it was important. What it
means. They couldn’t take it to that next level of analysis. They
couldn’t make inferences of draw conclusions. They could make a
description of a character but they couldn’t make inferences or
draw conclusions.

Marriam: What about as writers? What do they struggle with the most?

Ms. Fink: I think definitely you could pick up a paper and say this is an
ESOL student based on the grammar, verb tense is just a huge
one. Agreement, just plurals, and all those things.

Marriam: How important is it to you for conventions to be correct?

Ms. Fink: Last year, I was more concerned with structure and I barely did
anything with grammar. They bombed the grammar piece of
multiple choice, so this year I am more concerned with that.

Especially, in the professional world it is something that stands
out.

Based on this initial conversation, it was evident that Ms. Fink wanted her students to
think critically and to engage in higher-order thinking skills, but she was still very much
concerned with her SOL pass rate, and that she planned to emphasize grammar skills
given that when she neglected to last year, her students “bombed the grammar piece of
the multiple choice” section on their standardized exam.

I, too, had observed similar behaviors at the beginning of the unit. On one
occasion, I reflected in my journal about Ms. Fink’s students’ reluctance to write when
they are asked to engage in independent writing tasks:
I did, however, notice that the minute I asked students to write, they shut down. They just wanted to discuss the topic without writing anything down. I am wondering if this is because they are consistently asked to write all day, or because they never write or simply too lazy in the morning to write. I definitely sense this is a self-efficacy issue and students feel unsuccessful as writers. I will continue to monitor this throughout the unit. (February 10, 2016)

However, Ms. Fink’s perceptions of her students’ literacy development evolved following implementation of the unit. I asked Ms. Fink if and how she thought the unit impacted her students’ literacy achievement. She claimed that her students gained a great deal from the unit, but she witnessed the greatest impact in their writing, as highlighted by the following statement:

You know, I think I saw it in their writing more. At one point in the unit I had them write about a stereotype they had experienced and take a critical approach in their analysis of the situation. A lot of them said some pretty interesting things. A girl saying someone telling me I eat rice and beans for breakfast has to do with the fact that I am poor. You know, they were really able to talk about stereotypes and they were able to be real in their writing. I had never seen that raw writing before from this group. (Personal interview, May 27, 2016)

In terms of writing development, qualitative data analysis also echoes this sentiment. Overall, we witnessed many of Ms. Fink’s students successfully engaging in the writing process. At one point, for instance, Ms. Fink noted in her reflection journal that her students had “a fairly successful time coming up with reasons [to support their
social action], and going through the writing process. They are successfully writing a solid thesis statement, coming up with topic sentences, and researching supporting details to make their argument” (March 3, 2016).

During another class session, we engaged students in collaborative discussions with their peers around their research topics. Analysis of my observational field notes suggests that the research and writing process was supported not only by teacher one-to-one conferences as described in detail earlier in this chapter, but also by peer discussions. We asked our students to brainstorm ideas with their groups (those who had indicated that they were interested in exploring similar topics) and to begin creating an outline. We scaffolded this process by continuously prompting students to question, “Why should people care about this social issue? What will happen if society addresses it? What does a solution look like in your mind?” (Field notes, March 9, 2016). Two of Ms. Fink’s students, Julio and Oliver, both students who rarely engaged in writing, were actively brainstorming ideas about the pros and cons of online gaming and the stereotypes surrounding gamers. These students successfully conducted online research and outlined the structure of their essay during this pre-writing phase (Field notes, March 9, 2016).

Similarly, some of our students also noted that the unit impacted their growth as writers. Jenna, a fairly capable student who often required a bit of prompting to complete her writing tasks, revealed during her post-unit interview that the unit impacted her writing resilience: “I can write longer for a long period of time. And I can write more. I think my writing is just stronger cause I am thinking about what I am writing more” (May 23, 2016). Not only did Jenna reflect on her writing growth, but she also noted that she is
“reading a lot more lately and I think I can read more and understand more” as a result of the unit (Personal interview, May 23, 2016).

As teachers, we, too, noticed how the unit impacted some of our students’ reading skills. With regards to reading achievement, Ms. Fink had originally noted how her students used to take everything they read for face value, rarely questioning texts and not really engaging with what they were reading. However, following implementation of the unit, Ms. Fink claimed her ELs were beginning to question texts in a different manner, using a more critical and explicit approach. She attributed this growth to the unit and our “explicit approach to critical literacy,” as she highlighted during our interview (May 27, 2016):

I think being explicit in our approach with critical literacy was a good thing. I think it opened up awareness for them. I think kids tend to take things at school at face value, especially things that someone else has written. At this age, a lot of times, they don’t want to question it. Honestly, I think they did a great job questioning the text, and I saw more of that as the unit progressed.

In addition, Ms. Fink highlighted that close reading of texts and particular reading strategies aided her students’ literacy achievement in class. In one of her reflection journal entries, she reflected on the following:

The literacy lenses have created a great starting point for discussions around texts. The lenses lend themselves to the real world and making real world connections for the students. Students have no grounds to complain that “this has no importance or meaning for my life” since all of the lenses are applicable to
everyday living in some way. I also believe that students are able to practice more “close reading.” We have been doing a lot of annotations, and have been spending a lot of time studying word choice, which lends itself to SOL skills and reading skills in general. So I guess my point in all this rambling is that I absolutely DO believe that reading using critical literacy lends itself to any English class and to any reading standards. (April 8, 2016)

Throughout the unit, we saw evidence of students’ literacy skills being exercised in ways that exceeded our expectations. This explicit focus on posing critical questions of texts and authors, as well as presenting multiple viewpoints and discussing our personal connections to texts, was also a theme that many of our students noted as making an impact on their own literacy achievement. For many students in Ms. Fink’s class, the unit impacted how they viewed themselves as readers and writers and how they spoke about reading and writing tasks.

Aiden, for instance, had revealed during his pre-unit interview with me that he struggled with understanding new vocabulary and that he did not utilize any strategies to decipher meanings of new and unfamiliar words. Although Aiden viewed himself as a more capable reader than writer, he was constantly worried about tackling any new writing tasks in class and claimed he was not a strong writer because he often “takes a long time to come up with ideas” (Personal interview, February 19, 2016).

However, upon completion of the unit, Aiden not only appeared more confident as a student, but he openly expressed how he “got better” as a reader and writer. The excerpt below highlights our discussion during his post-unit interview (May 23, 2016):
Marriam: You say you got better as a reader and writer. How? What got better? Can you describe what you have noticed?

Ahmed: Yeah. The tests that I took at the beginning of the year in this class, like I got really bad grades. But the test that I took at the end, I got really good grades.

Marriam: Great! Any specific tests you are referring to?

Ahmed: Well, I passed my writing SOL! I was surprised. It was hard.

Marriam: Wow, that’s fantastic! Nice work. Why do you think your writing improved, or got better?

Ahmed: I think because I was more excited to do it.

Marriam: Hmmm… why? Tell me more.

Ahmed: Um, like I was, it was a bit easier. You know, it was easier to do a slide show at the end rather than write a full essay. I knew what she [Ms.Fink] wanted us to do because it was clear. The teachers, like, all of you really helped me understand the writing process.

For Aiden, the unit impacted his own perceptions of his ability as a reader and writer. He emphasized that it was the supports that we provided in class that impacted his achievement the most.

Like Aiden, Katie also noted how the unit had positively impacted her literacy achievement overall, as well as her relationship to reading and writing. From the start of the unit, we had noticed that Katie was very hesitant to share her writing with her teachers (Field notes, February 10, 2016) and even expressed how she was “scared when
the teacher will evaluate my writing. I feel like I have to explain everything to her first” (Personal interview, February 19, 2016). Although she claimed she was a confident reader and writer, Katie was worried about failure and always conscious about meeting her parents’ high expectations for her school success (Personal interview, February 19, 2016). Yet, upon completion of the unit, Katie noted how the unit impacted her reading, claiming:

I used to just read and don’t make connection with what I already know. But this unit helped me cause now that I know I can make connections I look for things that might be related to the topic and all that. I guess it makes it more easy for me. (Personal interview, May 23, 2016)

This notion of making connections while reading as a way to impact literacy achievement was also echoed by Katerina. During our post-interview, for instance, Katerina described how the unit helped her make connections while reading and reflect on her world as a whole:

I think this unit just makes me think differently when I read. It makes me think about what it would be like if I were in that position. I noticed I was asking a lot of questions when I read. I didn’t used to do that a lot, well, sometimes, but not as much. Like I was reading a lot for my project and it made me think about how different people around me are being bullied. Like people who are trans are being bullied, lesbians, gays, and all those. They’re all being bullied because of their way of being. (May 24, 2016)
For her social action project, Katerina collaborated with Katie to create an online site to raise awareness around the impact of bullying on suicide. As described earlier in this chapter, these two girls engaged in an action research project where they interviewed and surveyed newcomer ELs about their experiences being bullied and the implications of such experiences.

Overall, evidence suggests that the unit impacted Ms. Fink’s students’ literacy development and achievement. Not only did some students tell us that they felt more confident as readers and writers, but they also demonstrated greater skills in reading and writing tasks during class sessions.

**Ms. Dunmead’s Class**

I administered the same teacher-created critical literacy unit assessment pre- and post-unit implementation in Ms. Dunmead’s class. Results from student assessments suggest that the unit did impact their literacy achievement in a significant way. In fact, there was an increase in the mean score between pre-and post-assessments. Students in Ms. Dunmead’s class had an achievement mean score of 11.09 (SD=6.41) on the pre-unit assessment and 23.60 (SD=9.18) on the post-unit assessment. Table 13 presents descriptive statistics related to the pre- and post-unit assessments.
Table 13

*Student Literacy Achievement Pre- and Post- Unit Assessment, Paired Samples Statistics – Ms. Dunmead’s Class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>11.0909</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.41022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>23.5909</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.18373</td>
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A *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between pre- and post- unit student assessment scores. The results from the *t*-test indicated there was a statistically significant difference between students’ literacy achievement pre- and post- unit implementation as *t*(10)= -3.55, *p* = .005. These results suggest that the unit also had a major impact on Ms. Dunmead’s students’ literacy achievement as evidenced by the pre- and post- unit assessment.

When I first interviewed Ms. Dunmead, she seemed more hesitant than Ms. Fink about letting her ELs analyze texts independently and often felt that she needed to provide ongoing support for their reading and writing tasks. Similar to Ms. Fink, Ms. Dunmead also felt her students “lack(ed) the ability to have those good [reading] skills” and she did not feel that her students were “comfortable enough with reading” to be able to independently make predictions and ask questions of the text (Personal interview, December 15, 2015). However, when I asked Ms. Dunmead why she did not let her students read and analyze texts independently in class, I was surprised to hear that her modeling and support were more of a classroom management tactic rather than a
conscious pedagogical choice, as highlighted in the following quote from our pre-unit interview (December 15, 2015):

Ms. Dunmead: At this point in the year, they have done very little reading on their own. I have done the reading with them. I have done the modeling of the good reading strategies or skills, you know, I have done the questioning and the predictions. And that really gets them, but on their own, not as invested.

Marriam: Can you explain why you read with them?

Ms. Dunmead: Classroom management mostly. To make sure that they are actually doing the reading. It’s a very large class and if I put them in partner reading, it would be 16 groups, I just couldn’t guarantee, it would just be a lot to deal with.

Also similar to Ms. Fink, Ms. Dunmead defined her students as “reluctant” readers and writers, and mainly “hurried” writers. When asked why, she claimed it was because “they are just not comfortable doing it. I just don’t think they enjoy it very much” (Personal interview, December 15, 2015). I probed to find out what about reading and writing were difficult for Ms. Dunmead’s students. The following dialogue from our first interview highlights her perceptions regarding her students’ literacy achievement prior to implementing the unit (Personal interview, December 15, 2015):

Marriam: As readers, what concerns you the most?

Ms. Dunmead: Um, that’s tough. I would say it’s a lack of like, word attack skills. But that goes with just like vocabulary. Those two just go
hand in hand, and I would say that’s what it is. It’s so hard to just decipher a text if you just don’t have that vocabulary.

However, also as Ms. Fink, Ms. Dunmead was very concerned with her students’ grammar skills, emphasizing that she is a “stickler” for conventions and was aware that her students needed to master these skills in order to succeed on their state writing assessment (Personal interview, December 15, 2015).

Following the unit, Ms. Dunmead’s perceptions also evolved. In her opinion, the unit impacted her students’ literacy achievement in some ways, but it was “difficult to really gauge” the success. She told me that she “saw some really amazing strides that I don’t think would have been duplicated in a typical lesson or a typical unit.” These strides referred to “extending their ideas in writing” and “really questioning the text” (Personal interview, May 27, 2016).

There were a few students in Ms. Dunmead’s class who also emphasized how the unit positively impacted their literacy achievement, as well as their self-efficacy as readers and writers. One particular student, Roberto, was particularly vocal not only about his engagement in the project, but also about how this unit impacted him overall. He noted how he was “getting better as a reader” as a result of this unit. During our post-unit interview, Roberto reminisced quite a bit about how he used to be an avid reader in elementary school, yet he stopped reading due to all the distractors in his life. He described how this unit helped him realize that his reading could improve if he “practices” more.
I want to get back to my reading phase. Like when I was in kindergarten, all I did was read, read, read. And, now, like with all the technology and stuff, I just don’t read anymore. You know, like consuls, phones, television, and all that. I think this unit helped me see that I can get better at reading if I practice. We practiced a lot in this class and now I see I can get better at it. (May 11, 2016)

Like Roberto, many of our students found the explicit and close reading of texts to be the most impactful on their reading achievement. For instance, Julio, who appeared seemingly disengaged with every literacy task presented in class, particularly writing tasks, emphasized how the unit impacted his reading ability. He attributes this positive impact to “reading as a group. It was easier for me as a group when we were using all the strategies and asking critical questions of the passages. It was more interesting, I guess” (Personal interview, May 23, 2016).

Jenny also told me during her post-unit interview that she thought her reading improved as a result of “reading more in class and learning new words and ways to read” (May 11, 2016). This was in stark contrast to her conversation with us before the unit, in which she confided she struggled with reading and writing tasks because she did not understand all the vocabulary and with presenting in front of her peers. What we noticed throughout the unit, however, was even though Jenny was a quiet student, she was able to engage in group discussions and participate in her final presentation (although she did not complete the action portion of her final project), often with more success than Ms. Dunmead had witnessed all year (Field notes, May 4, 2016).
Qualitative data from field notes also suggest that students engaged in critical reading of texts and answered higher-level analysis questions. For instance, while reading a poem titled “Looking in the Mirror,” students answered many of our higher-level critical analysis questions, such as “How does the girl’s gender and culture impact her self-esteem?” and “Why do you think the author neglects to capitalize the first-person pronoun?” (Field notes, April 1, 2016). In another class session, students did a great job annotating an excerpt from *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. I noted in my field notes that the “majority of students were able to identify issues of language, power, and status” and how the author’s word choices reflected those broader issues (Field notes, April 12, 2016). These examples illustrate how students successfully participated in our critical discussions and activities.

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data related to the impact of the unit on students’ literacy development suggest that the unit had a positive impact. Student performed significantly better on their unit assessment at the end of the unit and both teachers and several students commented on the success they encountered as related to reading and writing tasks.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have reported the results of the qualitative and quantitative data to answer my three research questions. The process of co-constructing and implementing a unit grounded in critical literacy proved to be complex and complicated in nature. The qualitative data suggest that five key themes arose related to challenges we experienced in the process. These include: locating quality resources; balancing requirements with
core beliefs; finding sufficient time; managing projects; and negotiating the researcher role. Yet, although the process of co-constructing and implanting a unit grounded in critical literacy was complex, we relied on each other and our relationship with our students to navigate the process. In doing so, we experienced several successes as evidenced through three themes that emerged from the qualitative data. These include: impacting professional learning and growth; fostering collaborative and trusting partnerships with students; and taking risks and acting as leaders.

With regards to research question two, quantitative results differed in both classrooms. In Ms. Fink’s class, students reported higher engagement in the unit as compared to Ms. Fink’s own perceptions of each student’s engagement level. On the other hand, results from the student survey in Ms. Dunmead’s class suggest that the unit did not have a statistically significant impact on students’ perceptions of their own engagement. Yet, qualitative data such as interviews, field notes, work samples, and journal entries, suggest that in both classes, the social action project and some classroom discussions positively impacted students’ engagement.

Finally, data related to research question three suggest that the unit positively impacted students’ literacy development in both classes. Qualitative data also highlight that students and teachers felt the unit impacted critical reading skills and overall writing developments skills. Students noted that the unit also impacted their confidence as readers and writers.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings from this study and highlight several implications for educational practice, teacher education, and educational policy. I will
also offer directions for future research studies. Finally, I will outline several limitations that impacted the study and offer my final conclusions.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The teachers in this study and I had been troubled by diverse youths’ literacy disengagement and their lack of literacy achievement. Clearly, our ELs were disengaged from literacy-based activities in school, consistently experiencing failure on state standardized exams and making minimal progress on language proficiency assessments. We were most frustrated with educational systems that continually marginalize students and fail to address the opportunity gaps between these adolescents and their most often Whiter and wealthier counterparts. In response, I endeavored to find alternate curricular ways to promote democratic and social justice ends through my work as an educator and researcher. Thus, this study emerged around research principles grounded in the belief of the need for reform within U.S. schools.

At the core, I believed that a primary goal of education is to produce productive citizens of society. As Frey and Fisher (2005) describe, “citizenship requires participation, and that participation is based on an understanding that we can question without fear” (p. 13). I, along with the teachers in this study, saw critical literacy as an avenue to help our ELs find meaning in English instruction that extends beyond the classroom walls. We knew our students needed to develop language and literacy skills for academic achievement and future professional employment, but also for civic participation. Given we are at a point in our nation’s history when our adolescents are surrounded by a proliferation of social justice debates in a country that continues to
define its beliefs, our critical literacy study seemed timely and urgent. The teachers and I ultimately aimed to expose our students to the broader institutional and societal practices that so often marginalize them based on markers of identity, such as race, gender, class, and language.

Overall, I see value in how the findings from this study could contribute to a set of ideas or principles that may be considered when other educators attempt to engage in similar critical literacy oriented curriculum and instruction. In this final chapter, I discuss guiding principles that resulted from each of the study’s three research questions, with a focus on how the processes and outcomes from this study are critical for educators to consider. I also highlight several implications for educational practice and teacher education, and present directions for future research studies. Finally, I outline several limitations that impacted the research study.

**Discussion**

By far, one of the most important points to consider as a result of this study is that engaging in critical literacy curriculum and instruction is not an easy task for teachers and students. Findings from this study suggest that critical literacy work provokes both struggles and questions for teachers. Thematic analysis highlights that the teachers and I experienced several challenges in the process, including difficulty locating appropriate and quality resources, balancing the district’s core requirements with our beliefs about critical literacy, time constraints, and difficulty managing students’ social action projects.

It is important to consider, however, that these tensions should be viewed as an expected, and even interesting and engaging component of the process. There is no one-
size fits all critical literacy curriculum and teachers must learn to navigate these new spaces within their given context. This finding is supported by Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) notion of productive uncertainty, which suggests teacher learning communities should construct a language of inquiry in which unfinished thoughts, struggles, and difficult questions are normalized and seen as a necessary part of justice-oriented practice. Thus, our struggles and the challenges we experienced in the planning process and throughout implementation should not be regarded negatively or as potential barriers that should impede teachers’ efforts to consider such critical literacy work; rather, these struggles should be welcomed and wrestled with if we want to see positive outcomes.

In this sense, we must be sensitive to the ongoing struggles that shape the educational terrain as a whole and reflect on the corporate take-over of curriculum standards and testing that continues to dominate our system today. Apple (2000) asserted almost two decades ago that education is full of “contradictory discourse of competition, markets, and choice on the one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing, and national curriculum on the other” (p. 231). These latter elements are obvious steps towards increased marketization. He argues it is crucial to document the processes and how contradictory elements might be mediated, compromised with, accepted, used in different ways by different groups for their own purposes, or struggled over in the policies and practices of people’s daily educational lives” (p. 231). Thus, confronting our struggles and documenting our successes throughout the co-construction and implementation phases of this study is a critical step
in illustrating how critical literacy can still take shape in conservative contexts and potentially disrupt rightist policies.

Ultimately, teachers should embrace these struggles and work collaboratively to navigate these new teaching spaces. It is important for teachers to constantly cultivate a deliberate, intentional stance toward supporting critical literacy in order to successfully construct and implement units and lessons grounded in these practices within the classroom. We found that an initial way to cultivate these partnerships was to connect on a personal and professional level during the co-construction process. For instance, we spent numerous hours reflecting on our own values and beliefs, and even engaging in critical conversations around our ideas of justice and our positions of power. Thus, teachers engaging with critical literacy curriculum development should continue to explore their values and connect on a more intimate level in order to delve deeper into beliefs, values, and issues of power. In this manner, rather than beginning by identifying desired results and establish goals in terms of learning standards, teachers might want to first consider grounding the unit on a shared vision and engaging in their own critical self-reflection.

This stance helps position the teacher as an intellectual and challenges popular and often damaging representations of teachers’ work. As teachers engage in these critical conversations, they act more as “intellectuals and cultural workers” and illustrate a more progressive image of teaching (Shannon & Crawford, 1998, p. 258). As Shannon and Crawford (1998) argue, we must continue to “display the complexities of our work and the sophisticated ways we have developed to address those complexities” (p. 262).
In such a way, this project helped us examine the context-bound complexities of constructing and implementing a critical literacy curriculum, which we now understand is not a static or individualistic process, but rather a relational one in which students and teachers work across partnerships that rely on mutual trust and collaboration to navigate unfamiliar territory.

Another critical discovery in the process of co-constructing a critical literacy curriculum was that our experience constructing a framework for the unit and writing lesson plans relied on our professional partnership, and we discovered that the very basis of a critical literacy partnership was mutual trust and power sharing. That is, we trusted each other’s expertise as well as the students’ abilities to successfully navigate this new territory. These partnerships impacted our professional growth and learning as educators. Participating in this unit helped solidify our understanding of critical literacy and social justice pedagogy, providing us with an opportunity to reflect on some of our most common practices. For instance, we consistently discussed what resources to include and how to adapt instruction to meet students’ needs during the implementation phase.

This idea of teacher collaboration as related to critical literacy work is also supported by Riley (2015). She argues that teacher study groups can be “generative spaces for teachers to support each other in sustaining critical literacy practices” (p. 417). Results from this study emphasize the need to view curriculum planning and implementation as a partnership endeavor grounded in trust and collaboration. This relies on a critical inquiry orientation that is more collaborative in nature as noted by Cummins (1993) and Flores-Duenas (2005).
This study points to the need to also engage in partnerships with students as they navigate unfamiliar critical literacy territory. These findings highlight the importance of engaging in a personal, relationship-based partnership approach to engaging in critical literacy work. I agree with Lau (2012) that critical literacy education is a social and cultural practice. Not only did the increased student engagement allow our students to build partnerships with their peers and the broader community, but it allowed them to establish a more unique relationship with their teachers. Because critical literacy requires taking risks and sharing personal experience, value should be placed on getting to know each other, building trust, sharing stories, and setting group norms. In this case, we often relied on one-to-one writing conferences to engage in personal conversations with our students about their experiences. It was also during these often brief conversations that many students revealed very intimate details of their lives. Although we struggled with some of these revelations, we continued to use these personal opportunities to dig deeper into students’ lives and to facilitate projects that were most meaningful to them. We believe that many of these ELs were able to succeed in the unit as a result of our partnership orientation. As such, this study also supports research that suggests literacy learning is a social process. This notion is supported not only by sociocultural theorists (Vygostky, 1978; Wenger, 2006), but also by proponents of critical literacy (Freebody & Luke, 2003; Morrell, 2008).

Throughout the process of implementation, our role also shifted – we were no longer teaching students what to do, but rather guiding and facilitating their own process as they chose to navigate their different social action projects. Their increased
responsibility for their individual projects and their investment in completing these projects with their peers suggests that they valued the experience. In this sense, the very structure of the classroom changed – the power shifted from teacher to student and students worked together to invest in their own priorities, simply with the guide of us as teachers. In some cases, our students acted as teachers telling us through their own experiences and helping us understand some of these critical issues from their lens. In other cases, we took more of a traditional, didactic teacher role because we noticed that the students needed explicit support that we had not anticipated in order for them to find success. This was most apparent while attempting to support students through the writing process and conducting research for their social action projects, for instance. Overall, our students’ increased academic focus and on-task behavior during the project phase helped us as teachers support their process so that they can find some measures of success.

In addition, we discovered in this process that critical literacy required more flexibility and reflectivity in planning and implementing instruction, which supports work by Ivey and Broaddus (2007), who learned through their formative experiment the importance of remaining flexible while selecting texts and instructional strategies to support adolescent ELs. Throughout the entire planning and implementation process, we also found ourselves consistently reflecting on the process through a culture of questioning and interrogating our decision-making process and how we were implementing our practices in the classroom with our students. As teachers, we negotiated what texts to include, how to define aspects of critical literacy, and what activities serve students best. For instance, while we engaged in lessons with our
students, we continuously searched for alternate resources based on students’ needs and interests, such as when we consulted online resources including CommonLit.org to find adapted reading material. We primarily realized that engagement depended greatly on finding appropriate and meaningful texts and that we were sometimes wrong to assume in advance what was relevant for our students. This became clear to us when one choice we made in texts related to social class was not engaging for our students and many failed to participate in our lesson. Therefore, the process of investigating and searching for resources and texts never ended, and therefore, our lesson planning process continuously evolved based on the context and our students’ immediate needs and interests.

The situation described above demonstrates that our true learning happened through talking about these barriers together and reflecting on how we could navigate such new territory. Given the complexities of this process, it became apparent that the process was not static or linear by any means, but rather complex, cyclical and iterative in nature. As Jones (2012) notes, “critical literacies are always in the making, as individual teachers and researchers learn with and from readers who will undoubtedly challenge our best-laid plans and most eloquent theories” (p. 220). Vasquez (2004) also argues that a critical literacy curriculum needs to be “lived,” arising from the social and political realities of the community. In so many ways, we, as teachers, needed to remain reflective and open-minded about decisions throughout the entire process and not simply at the onset of lesson planning.

This study also points to the need to view critical literacy practices from the perspective of specific school contexts. In this particular case, critical literacy looked
different with ELs in a standardized environment. We needed to strategize and negotiate the classroom practices due to the many constraints that were imposed upon the teachers. For instance, the teachers were required to use the *Springboard* curriculum and the Learning Focused Schools planning tools to construct their daily lessons. They were also required to prepare students for standardized testing and ensure that their students could pass periodic departmental benchmark assessments.

Findings from this study suggest that both teachers, but more so Ms. Fink, were concerned for students’ performance on traditional assessments. Although they both vocalized their concern for students’ engagement in critical literacy work, there was a constant underlying struggle to be able to manage both desires. It became evident that the process of constructing and implementing a critical literacy unit is even more complex in the midst of standardized environment. Both teachers, for instance, were often timid about creating materials from scratch. In their school context, there tended to be an over reliance on pre-packaged material that is standards driven. For example, on a daily basis, these teachers were used to opening their *Springboard* texts and engaging students in these lessons. Although they were involved in professional learning communities that incorporated lesson planning elements, the focus in these groups was simply to take the *Springboard* lessons and expand on them so that they could fit the structure of Learning Focused lessons. For instance, if the *Springboard* lesson plan did not explicitly include an activating strategy or a vocabulary strategy, teachers planned these elements in their planning teams. As a result, what became evident throughout this study was that the process required us to do more original and creative planning in order
to meet the divisions’ requirements, address the standards, as well as engage our students in meaningful critical literacy tasks. In this way, we needed to have an understanding of our students and the context in order to create a curriculum that allowed them to succeed in critical literacy learning.

Perhaps most importantly, however, was the power of this study to challenge the assumption that ELs are unable to handle complex literacy learning, which others have made clear is a specious and potentially harmful pre-conception (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Alford, 2001). These assumptions are based on the premise that ELs do not have the prerequisite degree of control over language to assess and critique texts. Therefore, the cultural and linguistic demands are simply assumed to be too high (Alford, 2001). Not granting ELs this opportunity and failing to engage our ELs in these critical literacy practices, simply because of an underlying assumption that ELs cannot handle the demands of critical literacy and higher-level thinking skills, is a social justice issue. As Haneda (2008) points out, we engage in social tracking if we fail to engage our ELs in complex, higher-order thinking skills. By engaging our adolescent Els in these critical practices, we were helping to empower them. As Bean and Moni (2003) suggest, through these critical practices, “students develop an understanding that the worldview represented in a novel is not a ‘natural’ one, and it can be challenged and actively resisted,” which helps to place the reader “in a position of power in relation to texts” (p. 647). Ultimately, as Olsen (2014) writes, “a narrowed school-wide curriculum – and only partial access to that curriculum – impedes the academic growth of ELs” (p. 12).
However, both qualitative and quantitative results from this study suggest that adolescent ELs can in fact successfully navigate a critical literacy unit within the constraints of a standardized learning environment with the necessary scaffolding, which is supported by Lau (2012) in her study of adolescent newcomer ELs. The unit not only helped our adolescent ELs become leaders and risk-takers as they engaged in navigating their social action projects, but our students also experienced tremendous success and growth on their post-unit critical literacy assessment.

With careful scaffolding and guided practice, our students were able to develop a critical orientation to engaging with various texts. For instance, we consistently asked students to interrogate texts in whole and small group discussions, to reflect on social norms, and to engage in a collaborative inquiry-based social action project. All these tasks require a great deal of higher order thinking skills and it was evident that our adolescent ELs could successfully navigate these tasks if they were given appropriate supports. These supports included consistent modeling, explicit reading and vocabulary strategies, as well as multiple opportunities for guided practice. Furthermore, since our students had never conducted a social action project before we needed to provide more explicit and guided support. Not only did we showcase examples through online resources, such as DoSomething.org, we also discussed with students the various ways they could take social action by engaging them in one-on-one conferences. Additionally, our students wanted to participate in our literacy activities on many occasions, but asking them to write independently was an impediment to their engagement in our critical literacy efforts. However, when we took the time to listen to students’ personal
experiences during writing conferences, in which we asked probing questions about their social issues and injustices, we witnessed more insightful writing full of voice and a clear and compelling passion for the issue at hand.

Thus, the findings support the idea that critical literacy strategies can be taught using a guided comprehension direct instruction process. Our lesson plans, for instance, included explicit modeling and literacy strategies, time for guided practice, as well as opportunities for collaborative discussions and writing. As McLaughlin and Allen (2002) suggest, teachers can engage students in explicit critical literacy strategies by first explaining the strategy and its use, demonstrating the strategy, guiding students to work with small groups and practice the strategy independently, and finally, reflecting on how the strategy helps us read from a critical stance. We found that our lessons that relied on such guided practice helped our students improve their reading and writing skills.

This research study has also demonstrated that critical literacy with ELs requires these social practices and opportunities for students to become “acculturated” into the necessary critical skills needed to read and interrogate multiple texts. For instance, our students needed to be explicitly taught how to question a text, how to not take everything at face value, and how to view normalized societal issues from a critical orientation. In our case, we relied on a balanced belief that our EL students should not be deprived of any type of literacy learning – they needed the traditional literacy practices as well as critical practices in order to gain a deeper understanding of texts and the opportunity to “read the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987).
Findings from this study also highlight that our unit grounded in critical literacy positively impacted our adolescent Els’ engagement in English class. Qualitative data highlight that students were primarily engaged in whole class discussions centered on analysis of texts and the social action project. This increased student engagement was one of my primary goals, as research suggests that literacy engagement has a positive impact on literacy achievement (Guthrie, 2007). Qualitative data reveal both teachers perceived the unit to positively impact their students’ engagement in meaningful ways.

Interestingly, however, teachers and students differed in their perceptions as evidenced on the engagement surveys. Results from the engagement surveys suggest that Ms. Fink did not find the unit to have a statistically significant impact on her students’ literacy engagement, whereas her students did, as evidenced by their survey results. The opposite was apparent in Ms. Dunmead’s class, where students’ survey results suggest that the unit did not have a significant impact on their literacy engagement.

There could be a variety of reasons for these contrasting findings. For one, the actual survey instrument, which was comprised of a combination of existing survey tools meant to capture student engagement, could play a role in the contrasting findings. Response options may not have been specific enough to capture the details of the specific unit. Additionally, students in Ms. Dunmead’s class, for instance, may not have interpreted all the questions appropriately and may have been responding through a set of eyes that do not necessarily reflect the intent of the questions. The teachers could have also had different perspectives due to various factors, including their teaching experience and definitions of engagement more generally.
Implications

I believe that this research study has a great deal of significance for several populations, including English and ESOL teachers, middle school ELs in our schools, teacher educators, school-based and district-based coaches and curriculum specialists, and in a broader sense, for educational policymakers in the United States. This study contributes to the research evidence related to the positive impacts of engaging ELs in critical literacy practices in the classroom and begins to highlight how teacher professional development and coaching may look different when engaging teachers in critical literacy curriculum and pedagogy.

Implications for Practice

When considering implications for teachers, I want to remain cautious about recommending a list of practices that other educators should follow to yield the same results because, as we learned in this research study, critical literacy is largely dependent on school and classroom context. I do, however, believe that the ideas I discussed earlier in this chapter serve as a way for teachers to consider altering their practices if they aim to engage in critical literacy work. English teachers of ELs should focus on infusing a critical approach to understanding language. Students, particularly long-term ELs may be more engaged in language study and skills if it is taught through a critical lens. Given the fact that many of this study’s participants were LTELs, it becomes imperative for teachers to empower these students by exposing them to these skills from a younger age. This further underlines the importance of dedicated supports and interventions for LTELs that are designed specifically for these students.
In addition, teachers should not shy away from giving their adolescent ELs opportunities to take risks and leadership positions, more specifically through engaging in their own social action activities in their own community. Literacy assessments should be structured to explicitly call on students to have an impact in their world, relying on their literacy skills to engage in broader social action projects. From the perspective, the key question shifts from “How can we help ELs gain traditional literacy skills so they can pass standardized exams?” to “How can we structure learning for ELs so that they can simultaneously gain traditional literacy skills and abilities as well as engage in critical literacy practices successfully so they can become empowered, contributing members of society?” In this way, teachers should not shy away from engaging in critical conversations around often uncomfortable and risky topics. As Tolentino (2007) notes, uncomfortable conversations do arise in critical literacy work. Yet, it is important to remember that issues that come to the forefront in discussions and perhaps through writing, typically reflect students’ immediate needs and concerns.

In order to successfully engage ELs in critical literacy work, teachers should frame their practices from a partnership perspective, one that relies on building strong relationships with their students and shifting the power structure so that teachers and students can learn from one another’s experiences. This partnership orientation ultimately impacts the way we view the very nature of literacy instruction in schools. The nature of curriculum and instruction moves from a solitary activity in which teachers may craft lesson plans independently, to one where curriculum is designed and implemented in collaborative teams. As evidenced through this study, the teacher’s role
becomes more of a facilitator and guide, shifting the power dynamics that are typically found in traditional classrooms. Teachers need to also constantly reflect on their social identities (race, ethnicity, and class) that shape the power dynamics in collaboration with their students (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Additionally, teachers should rely on student voices and find ways to include their students’ voices in the curriculum. In this case, we relied on students’ needs and the broader social and contextual issues to design our unit and specific activities. Cook-Sather (2002) reminds us of the need to invite students’ perspectives into our curriculum and instruction. Brozo (2006) also asserts that literacy reform initiatives would be more successful if students’ voices were taken into account, as “when students are taken seriously as knowledgeable members of a reform community, they feel empowered and motivated to participate constructively in their education” (p. 411). Therefore, students should have opportunities to engage in critical action work.

One way that teachers can continue to engage students in critical action work is by experimenting with participatory classroom instruction. Participatory classroom instruction has become increasingly important within the current socio-political climate because of its potential to engage students in literacy and social action practices that challenge pervasive discourses (Cammarota & Romero, 2011). It has also gained popularity among middle and high school teachers as a method for engaging youth voices, particularly around issues of educational justice (Carlo et al., 2005; Torre, 2009; Zenkov, Ewaida, Bell, & Lynch, 2014). In an effort to engage ELs in meaningful critical action work, practitioners should recognize adolescents as informants for how curricula
should be revised to better suit their needs (Ayala & Galletta, 2009; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Also, professional development should focus on informing teachers about critical literacy and providing them with the necessary resources to use this approach with their ELs, even in the face of standardized testing. This study underscored the need to view teacher professional development and coaching from more of a partnership perspective, and also points to the need to view curriculum design from a different perspective. Co-construction, in this case, was key to the design process.

The literature surrounding professional development also supports this notion that peer collaboration is a necessary component of effective professional development. For instance, Neuman and Cunningham (2009) suggest that “since the work of effective teaching occurs in practice, professional education aimed toward developing effective teachers needs to occur in the learning context of their own practices” (p. 536). Several studies have highlighted that teachers who spend more time in coaching sessions are more likely to transfer that knowledge into their practice and see higher outcomes on student achievement measures (Joyce & Showers, 1996; Shidler, 2009). Although research supports the notion that coaching, in this case literacy coaching, has the potential to be a valuable source of professional development, the teachers in this study found that the secondary coaching model in their school was a top-down model, regardless of school efforts to portray the coach as a supportive colleague, and that they were being evaluated. In conversations with the teachers, they felt the coach played more of an administrative role, often dealing with student achievement data and helping support the department as a
whole rather than contributing to teachers’ meaningful individual professional growth. If we rely on a collaborative coaching model in which the teacher and coach engage in a relationship throughout the entire planning and implementation process, we may continue to see more classroom-based successes.

Therefore, teacher professional development might begin with teachers being more critical and analytical about teaching beliefs. As we engaged our students in critical explorations of their own biases, we, as teachers, felt compelled to explore our own assumptions throughout the planning and implementation processes. Overall, teacher professional development and coaching may work best when the coach is entrenched in the same classroom with teachers for an extended period of time. In this study, I was situated in the context for several months, which ultimately allowed me to understand the context and the teachers with whom I was collaborating. More specifically, coaching may work best if both the teachers and coach engage in a collaborative action research project with students in the classroom, sharing the responsibility of constructing and implementing a unit together. If teachers and coaches share their expertise and skills in a more collaborative environment with more power sharing and continually reflect on their practices, students may find more success in the classroom.

Another key component of professional development for teachers with LTEL students is ensuring that when students with academic gaps are placed in rigorous courses, instruction should be catered to their needs (Olsen, 2014). In other words, teachers should receive training on how to adapt their pedagogy in different situations, specifically those that require differentiated instruction or supports for LTELs. In this
study, for example, the teachers needed more explicit guidance on how to support students’ reading and writing skills. However, professional development should center on not just literacy strategies, but also language acquisition strategies that align with students’ language proficiency levels. Teachers should be aware of which students continue to need English language support, and school systems should provide avenues for those educators to acquire critical skills and dispositions for helping these students.

Implications for Teacher Education

This study indicates a need for teacher educators to train future teachers on critical literacy approaches to teaching English. It points to the need to include a critical literacy element and focus on social justice issues in teacher education courses. Due to its complexity and the risks involved, I now realize, just as Lau (2012) suggests, that teachers need to practice it before they feel comfortable and safe to try it in the classroom. As a result, future teachers would benefit from pre-service courses that offered more training and practice with implementing lessons grounded in a critical literacy orientation. An example of this is the notion of “partnership literacies,” highlighted in a study by Zenkov et al. (2016) in which university teacher educators, current teachers, and pre-service teachers engage in inquiry-driven, literacy pedagogies with students. These opportunities not only impact youths’ literacy engagement and development, but also act as professional development opportunities for current and pre-service teachers.

Yet, not only should teacher educators rely solely on training pre-service teachers to engage in critical literacy practices in classrooms. Early career and veteran teachers
can all engage in critical literacy practices if they are given the appropriate supports and training. As evidenced in this study, both teachers were early career teachers and it was through our collaboration that they were able to design and implement the critical literacy unit with their ELs. It is also important to consider these teachers’ dispositions and orientations; both Ms. Fink and Ms. Dunmead had an interest in social justice pedagogy and were more open to the idea of taking risks in their instructional approach in the classroom. Thus, teacher educators should continue to examine teachers’ social justice dispositions and collaborate with both pre-service and veteran teachers to experiment with critical literacy in the English classroom.

Teacher educators should foster boundary-spanning collaboration with English teachers in the classroom. In this study, we relied on each other’s expertise and we viewed each other as equal partners working towards the same goal. Zenkov, Taylor, and Harmon (2016) argue that “these partnership-driven projects also allow us to develop our own new literacies, our own novel capacities” (p. 509). In this case, the project allowed us to appeal to our unique strengths and we felt safe taking a risk in curriculum design and implementation because we were supportive of each other. Yet, I also agree with Sharplin (2011) that for this collaboration to be effective, our attitudes as educators need to shift. We need to approach the process through a partnership lens instead, one that relies on our unique skills and needs.

Green (2001) also reminds us that teachers need a conscious awareness of their own understanding of language and language choices. This is critical if they aim to assist their students in questioning and understanding language and how language reflects
power relationships. As such, future teachers should have opportunities to reflect on language in texts and social encounters, as well as on their own identities. Teacher educators should engage preservice teachers in critical discourse analysis as a way to reflect on language and power.

I also believe there is a need for teacher educators and researchers to broaden the definition of literacy. As Riley (2015) argues, we need to see it as a social, cultural, and political construct, not just a set of skills that includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Through the co-construction and implementation phases of this study, the teachers and I examined the components of critical literacy and experimented with how this approach moves beyond a simple set of literacy skills with which we so often rely on to frame our lessons.

**Implications for Research**

This study is significant not only because it documented the process of how teachers can co-construct and implement a unit grounded in critical literacy, but also because of the lessons learned throughout the process. It also highlighted the impact of using a critical literacy approach on ELs’ literacy engagement and achievement. The teachers and I relied on a curricular approach that was informed by second language research and underscores the importance of incorporating students’ needs and interests into the curriculum as well as providing them with appropriate scaffolding (George, Raphael, & Florio-Ruane, 2003). However, the work the teachers and I did needs to be expanded to include more community involvement and through more extended periods of time with students.
Future research should continue to explore the process used in constructing units grounded in critical literacy tasks and examining the impact of these units with various subgroups of students in a variety of contexts. It is important to continue to document efforts by teachers in how they navigate the constraints of a standardized environment or their own school mandates to negotiate space for critical literacy in the classroom. Thus, we need more examples of what critical literacy looks like in the classroom, as well as how it manifests in different contexts. What does that process look like? What barriers do teachers and students experience? What helps facilitate the process? In this line of research, we need to account for how teachers are making strategic choices, navigating school policies, and acting on behalf of social justice (Nieto, 2003).

In addition, future research should continue to explore students’ perspectives on these practices (Cook-Sather, 2002; Brozo, 2006). Researchers should examine the impact of critical literacy practices on students’ literacy engagement and achievement. Although research on critical literacy is typically more qualitative in nature, more accounts of how these practices impact students’ achievement, both through qualitative and quantitative methods, is needed, especially in an era of standardized testing. Furthermore, there is a need for a critical literacy engagement tool, which could gather students’ and teachers’ perceptions of critical literacy tasks.

Finally, future research should explore the impact of professional development and coaching on teachers’ use of critical literacy practices in the classroom. It would be interesting to explore how coaches and curriculum specialists impact teachers’ self-efficacy in employing critical literacy practices in the classroom. Studies should
investigate how engaging in coaching partnerships may impact a teacher’s use of critical literacy practices or his or her confidence in employing these practices in the classroom. It would be interesting to explore teachers’ perceptions of their own abilities as it relates to critical literacy curriculum development and implementation.

**Limitations**

In spite of the value of this study, the findings must be interpreted in light of its limitations. One major challenge I struggled with throughout the duration of the study was how to ensure that the teachers and I engaged in meaningful tasks and that I supported the teachers in doing so while also maintaining an attitude of openness to alternative perspectives and for continuous reflection. I noticed on several occasions I was trying to control the situation in the classroom because of my knowledge and assumptions about the necessity of engaging these students with literacy strategies and appropriate scaffolds so they could access the critical literacy tasks with more comfort and ease. Since I was often preoccupied with my own agenda, especially at the beginning of the study, I may have missed opportunities for more critical exploration. As the unit evolved, however, I learned to allow myself to listen and observe more intently, which also allowed the teachers and students to guide the process a bit more. Yet, because of my strong beliefs, I still tried to push my agenda or perspective related to critical literacy and English language learning pedagogy. However, I was willing to admit this with the two teachers and at one point, even asked them to remind me to remain flexible throughout the process.
Another potential limitation was a bias I brought into the study because of my relationship to the research setting. Since I worked in the school division in which this study was conducted, I already possessed a considerable amount of inside knowledge, but also was viewed as an “expert” with some authority due to my central office position. I also supervised the ESOL department at the school; although I did not evaluate the teachers, I did offer coaching and professional development to the team. However, I attempted to address this complexity by engaging in a collaborative partnership with the teachers – we worked together and relied on each other’s expertise while planning and implementing the unit.

Our social identities as teachers, researchers, and an ESOL Specialist also played a large part in determining the power relationships during the planning process and in the classroom. Although there was evidence of collaboration between the teachers and students in the classroom, the teachers and I determined the teaching process. Ultimately, we relied on our background knowledge and expertise around language instruction and literacy pedagogy to design and implement the unit. However, we did not rely on students during the planning process to guide our decision making. If students were included in the planning process to a greater extent, the unit might have been even more responsive to their needs.

In addition, I only collected data in two classrooms and there was a small number of participants, specifically two teachers and a total of 36 students. This makes findings from this study difficult to generalize. The quantitative component of the study may have yielded different results if there were more student participants. I am aware that the t-
tests were conducted with a very small sample size. A larger sample size could have produced more reliable conclusions.

Although I conducted the study over several months, it is not a long enough timeline to ensure that the literacy engagement and achievement results of this study were only due to the critical literacy unit. Other factors, such as teachers’ backgrounds, prior training, personalities, and students’ prior exposure to such critical literacy tasks were not controlled for in the study. The study may have yielded different results had the students only been engaged in critical literacy tasks since the beginning of the school year, rather than only during the second semester. Due to constraints of the school calendar and the requirements of the district’s mandated curriculum, teachers were also required to complete each unit of instruction within a specific amount of time. As a result, students may not have had enough time to fully engage in and reflect on critical literacy tasks and the teachers may have needed more time to become comfortable with this type of instruction.

Overall, grounded in tenets of social justice, this study explored the process of co-construing a critical literacy unit alongside middle school English teachers of ELs and examined what happened when English teachers engaged in critical literacy practices with their adolescent ELs. This study highlights the necessity of using a curriculum approach that fosters collaborative learning with adults and empowers students to think creatively and critically about their own lives to challenge the inequities they face in hopes of producing a more socially just society.
APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance
Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: November 16, 2015

TO: Kristien Zenkov
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [803206-1] The Process of Co-Constructing and Implementing a Critical Literacy Unit for English Language Learners

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: November 16, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: November 15, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The George Mason University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations. Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.
Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure. All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Office of Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA). Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed (if applicable).

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the ORIA.

The anniversary date of this study is November 15, 2016. This project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. You may not collect date beyond this date without prior IRB approval. A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the ORIA at least 30 days prior to the anniversary date or upon completion of this project. Prior to the anniversary date, the ORIA will send you a reminder regarding continuing review procedures.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.
If you have any questions, please contact Bess Dieffenbach at 703-993-5593 or edieffen@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.
APPENDIX B

Teacher Consent Form

The Process of Co-Constructing and Implementing a Critical Literacy Unit for English Learners

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
This research is being conducted to explore the process of co-constructing a critical literacy unit with secondary English teachers of English language learners (ELLs) and to examine the effects of critical literacy practices on students’ literacy engagement and reading and writing development. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to co-construct a critical literacy unit alongside the researcher, and participate in two interviews that will be recorded (each interview will last approximately 30 minutes). Unit planning sessions will take place twice a week for 45 minutes/session during your regular planning periods and will last for four weeks. You will also be asked to keep a short reflection journal throughout the entire process, one reflection per week. Finally, you will be asked to complete a short survey for each of your students about their literacy engagement. A total of one hour will be necessary to complete all the surveys. The researcher will also be an active participant in your classroom twice a week (90 minutes each) during the implementation of the unit, which will last 9 weeks.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS
The benefits for you as a participant will be teacher professional development in literacy, as you engage in co-constructing and implementing the critical literacy unit with your students. In addition, the unit may impact your students’ engagement and ultimately literacy development and achievement. Finally, this study will further research in the areas of teacher education and curriculum and instruction.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The data in this study will be confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by creating a number code for each student and teacher. After each test and interview, the participant’s name will be converted to the code, and the name identification will be removed from the data. Once the interviews and curriculum planning sessions are recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, the information will be stored on a password protected computer without your names or any identifiers. In the research report, all students and teachers will be referred to by assigned pseudonyms. All files will be deleted within a minimum of five years. None of the information
you share with me will be shared with faculty members at the school. However, I may discuss my findings with my professors at George Mason University for analysis purposes. Your identity will be confidential and identifiers will not be used in the research paper.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

CONTACT
This research is being conducted by Marriam Ewaida, Doctoral Candidate, at George Mason University as part of her dissertation. Dr. Kristien Zenkov (kzenkov@gmu.edu) and Dr. William Brozo (wbrozo@gmu.edu) are co-directing this project and may be reached for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

CONSENT
I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

__________________________________________
Name

__________________________________________
Date of Signature
APPENDIX C

Parent Consent Form

PARENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
This research study is being conducted to explore the use of critical literacy practices with adolescent English language learners and examine the effects of such practices on students’ literacy engagement and reading and writing development. Critical literacy is defined as an instructional approach that encourages readers to actively analyze texts in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships. This project will take place in your child’s English class for nine weeks. I will be present conducting observations in the classroom twice a week for the duration of the class period. If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, he/she will be asked to complete a short English test before and after the unit (students will have 90 minutes to complete the test), take part in two semi-structured interviews (each interview will last 20 minutes), and complete a pre and post survey assessing his or her engagement in English class (each survey will take 30 minutes to complete). The interviews will be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription.

If you do not agree to have your child participate in this study, it will not affect his or her standing in school or his or her grades in any way. However, since the unit will take place during your child’s English class, your child will still be expected to participate in daily instruction and complete assessments as part of the regular classroom practice. Yet, he/she will not be interviewed nor will he/she be required to complete the surveys. His/her work will also not be used as part of the research. During research activities, such as interviews and completion of surveys, your child will be asked to complete an alternate reading activity if he/she is not participating in the study. This project will be guided by a George Mason University doctoral candidate in cooperation with your child’s English Language Arts teacher.

RISKS
The tasks proposed for use in this project pose no significant threat to your child. All publications resulting from the study will refer to your child only through a pseudonym (or made-up name) of his/her choosing. The research team will be the only ones with access to the key linking pseudonyms and identities. Results of this study may be used in presentations and publications.

BENEFITS
There are no direct benefits for participating in this research study. However, benefits to your child based on his/her regular instruction during the unit may include opportunities to increase literacy engagement and gain reading and writing skills. In addition, your child may gain an
enhanced understanding of social justice issues, with a particular focus on analyzing texts in English.

CONFIDENTIALITY
As your child’s parent or legal guardian, you are being provided with this informed consent form. You are encouraged to ask questions about the project. Your child’s participation is completely voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating. After each test, survey or interview, your child’s name will be converted into a code, and the name identification will be removed. All electronic files (recordings and transcriptions) will be saved on a password-protected computer and maintained in a password-protected Dropbox folder without the participant’s name and will only be made available to the research team. Once the digital recording is transcribed and assigned a pseudonym, the recording will be deleted. All copies of data will be stored on Mason property and maintained on a password protected computer in a password-protected Dropbox folder and/or in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office. All data will be kept for five years. After five years, the printed data will be shredded and all files will be deleted from the Dropbox folder.

All of the information your child provides will be confidential in that they will not be shared with the school’s staff other than your child’s English teacher unless your child and you choose to do so or have given permission to the investigators to do so. All of the information will be used only for research purposes.

Contact information for the principal investigator is included at the bottom of this consent form. You can request a time to meet with her if you have additional questions or if questions arise after reading the provided materials.

PARTICIPATION
Your child’s participation is voluntary. Your child may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to allow your child to participate, or to withdraw from the study, there is no penalty. There are no costs to you, your child, or any other party.

CONTACT
This research is being conducted by Marriam Ewaida, 7-12 ESOL Program Specialist for Manassas City Public Schools. Mrs. Ewaida is a doctoral student at George Mason University and is working under the Directions of Dr. Kristien Zenkov and Dr. William Brozo, College of Education and Human Development, Graduate School of Education at George Mason University. If you have any questions about this study, you can call me, Mrs. Ewaida (703-459-0142), Dr. Zenkov (703-993-5413), or Dr. Brozo (703-993-3894). You may also contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have any questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in this research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing participation in this research.

CONSENT
I have read this form, all of my questions have been answered by the research staff, and I agree to allow my child to participate in this study.
Dear Student,

**Research Procedures**
I am a doctoral student at George Mason University. I will be working in your English Language Arts classroom during the spring semester of the 2015-2016 school year. I will be trying to find better ways to teach students like you who are in middle school and who are developing as readers and writers in English. I will be working on this project with your classroom English teacher and we will create a unit aimed at helping students like you question texts you read for issues of power and injustice. This unit will help you become more actively engaged in your English class and increase your reading and writing development. As part of this project, you will be asked to take a short test at the beginning of the unit and at the end of the unit. You will have the entire class period to complete this test. It will help determine your skills in reading and writing English. While this test is part of the regular classroom procedure, I will use the test results for research purposes. The tests are not for a grade so it is OKAY if you make mistakes.

If you agree to participate, you may be asked to participate in two short interviews—one at the beginning of the unit and one at the end of the unit. These interviews will be about your previous experience and attitude toward reading and writing in English class. They will take about 20 minutes. Your answers to these questions will also be used for research purposes. Finally, I will ask you to complete a survey about your level of engagement in your English class at the beginning of the unit and at the end of the unit. Once again, your answers will be used for research purposes. If you agree, sometimes if I ask you questions, I may tape-record our conversations. Your answers will not be for a grade. Throughout the quarter, I may also collect some of your class assignments. However, if you do not agree to participate, you will still be required to complete activities in this unit as part of your regular classroom instruction, but you will not be asked to complete the surveys or interviews. Instead, during this time you will be asked to work on an alternate reading activity. I will be present in your classroom twice a week for nine weeks observing what is happening in your classroom. This will not be to grade you, but to see how you are learning and what can be done to teach you better. It is important that you come to school every day in order to participate in this project that will take place over the quarter/9 week period. If you do not agree to participate in this project, nothing bad will happen to you and your grade will not be affected.

**Risks**
Nothing bad will happen to you if you take part in this study. However, some people may feel a little bit nervous when they have to complete a test, a survey or answer interview questions to a person who they do not know like me. There are no rewards or money paid for being in this study. But the things I find out may help teachers and other researchers learn more about how
this English unit might benefit students who are English language learners.

**Benefits**
There are no direct benefits for participating in this research. The regular classroom instruction may benefit you to be more actively engaged in English class and develop as a reader and writer. This project may also enhance your critical thinking and analysis skills in English class. The results of the project may help teachers, administrators and researchers understand the best methods for approaching English language arts instruction for English language learners.

**Confidentiality**
For purposes of research, the information collected in this project will be confidential. Your name will be given a number and that number will be assigned to your interview and survey responses, classroom assignments and test results. Through the use of an identification key, I will be able to link test scores to you. I will only have access to the identification key. In addition, all demographic data (age, sex, country of origin) will be kept confidential in a similar manner, through the use of an identification key accessible to me, the researcher, only. All data will be stored on a password-protected computer in a password-protected folder only accessible to the researcher.

**Participation**
Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may be entitled. There are no costs to you.

**Alternatives to Participation**
All research will be conducted in the classroom. While the use of this instructional unit is part of the regular school curriculum in which you must participate as part of the classroom requirement, you do not have to allow the release of test results, writing assignments or demographic data to me, the researcher. You also do not have to complete the interviews or surveys. If this is the case, and you decide not to participate in the project, you will follow classroom protocol of participation in the unit, however, no student data will be released to me, the researcher.

**Contact**
This research is being conducted by Marriam Ewaida, 7-12 ESOL Program Specialist for Manassas City Public Schools. Mrs. Ewaida is a doctoral student at George Mason University and is working under the direction of Dr. Kristien Zenkov and Dr. William Brozo, College of Education and Human Development, Graduate School of Education at George Mason University. If you have any questions about this study, you can call me, Mrs. Ewaida, at 703-459-0142, Dr. Zenkov (703-993-5413) or Dr. Brozo (703-993-3894). You may also contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.
Consent
I have read this form, and I give my permission to participate in this study.

____________________________________
Name (Print)

____________________________________
Name (Signature)

____________________________________
Date of Signature
APPENDIX E

Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Protocol

A) Questions related to social justice beliefs and culturally-relevant pedagogy:
   1) Tell me about the types of classroom lessons and/or projects you implement in your classes? (Disrupting the commonplace)
   2) How do you center student voices, interests & experiences in your classroom? (Interrogating multiple viewpoints)
   3) Why should lessons include real-life issues for students’ to address, discuss & problematize? (Focusing on sociopolitical issues)
   4) How do you approach issues of diversity & equity when they arise in the classroom? (Taking action and promoting social justice)
   5) How important do you feel it is for a teacher to examine his or her beliefs and attitudes about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation? Explain.
   6) Do you believe that issues related to racism and inequity should be openly discussed in the English classroom? If yes, can you describe a time when this occurred in your classroom?
   7) Can you give me an example of when you have used any multicultural literature or texts in your classroom?
   8) How important is it for you to incorporate diverse cultures and experiences in your classroom discussions and lessons?
   9) Do you feel it is your job as a teacher to change society? Why or why not?

B) Questions related to student interests:
   1) Can you describe your students’ interests? What topics get them motivated and engaged in class?
   2) Describe a motivating and engaging lesson with your students.
   3) What social issues are occurring at your school that are of concern to you and your students?

C) Questions related to student engagement:
   1) How would you describe your students’ level of engagement?
   2) How engaged are your ELLs with reading tasks in the classroom?
3) How engaged are your ELLs with writing tasks in the classroom?
4) Do you believe your students care about doing well on your class assignments?
5) Do you measure your success based on student engagement?

D) Questions related to reading and writing achievement:
   1) Describe your students as readers. Writers?
   2) Tell me about your ELLs reading and writing abilities.
   3) What do your ELLs struggle with as readers? Writers?
   4) What are their strengths as readers? Writers?
APPENDIX F

Student Interview Protocol

Questions related to engagement may include:

1. Do you look forward to coming to English class? Why or why not?

2. Do you find reading and writing tasks required in your English class fun and exciting? Explain.

3. Describe some activities that you find enjoyable in English class?

Questions related to reading and writing development may include:

1. How would you describe yourself as writer? Reader? How confident are you as a reader and writer?

2. Do you have any fear when your teacher is about to evaluate your writing? Why or why not?

3. What types of writing tasks do you enjoy? Reading tasks?

4. What types of tasks do you find difficult?

5. How has this unit impacted you as a writer? Reader?

Questions related to the overall implementation and result of the unit may include:

1. Tell me about the ________ unit we just completed. What did you enjoy? What did you not enjoy?

2. What were some challenges you encountered?
3. What activities did you find meaningful?
### APPENDIX G

Observation Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students are engaged in <strong>higher order thinking</strong>:</td>
<td>(authentic project work; cooperative learning, hands-on, research, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are engaged in <strong>active conversations</strong> around texts:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students are engaged in critical <strong>reading</strong> task:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students are engaged in critical <strong>writing</strong> task:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning/ Student responses</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H

Reflection Journal Prompts

1. Describe the process used in today’s planning session—what was discussed?
   What are the goals and tasks? In the lesson?

2. Describe the successes of today’s session/lesson.

3. Describe the barriers involved in today’s session—stressors? Impediments?
   Difficulties encountered? Lesson?
APPENDIX I

Teacher Survey of Student Engagement

Part A: Use the following four-point scale to rate the student on the following items:

1= Not True
2= Somewhat True
3= True
4= Very True

1. This student often reads independently. 1 2 3 4
2. This student reads favorite topics and authors. 1 2 3 4
3. This student is easily distracted in self-selected reading. 1 2 3 4
4. This student works hard in reading. 1 2 3 4
5. This student is a confident reader. 1 2 3 4
6. This student uses comprehension strategies well. 1 2 3 4
7. This student thinks deeply about the content of texts. 1 2 3 4
8. This student enjoys discussing books with peers. 1 2 3 4
9. This student often writes independently. 1 2 3 4
10. This student is easily distracted when writing. 1 2 3 4
11. This student works hard at writing tasks. 1 2 3 4
12. This student is a confident writer. 1 2 3 4
13. This student is able to use the writing process well. 1 2 3 4
14. This student develops ideas well on a variety of topics. 1 2 3 4 5
15. This student enjoys writing in class. 1 2 3 4 5

**Part B:** Rate the student using the 5-point scale.

1 = not at all true  
2 = a little bit true  
3 = somewhat true  
4 = fairly true  
5 = totally true

1. In my English class, this student actively participates. 1 2 3 4 5
2. In my English class, this student works as hard as he/she can. 1 2 3 4 5
3. In my English class, this student seems interested. 1 2 3 4 5
4. In my English class, this student refuses to do anything. 1 2 3 4 5
5. When it comes to reading, this student does not really like it. 1 2 3 4 5
6. When it comes to writing, this student does not really like it. 1 2 3 4 5
7. In my English class, this student can be disruptive. 1 2 3 4 5
8. When faced with setbacks, this student gets overwhelmed. 1 2 3 4 5

Please provide any additional comments regarding this student’s engagement in your English class.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX J

Student Survey of Classroom Engagement

**Directions:** How much do you agree with the following statements about your English class? Use the four-point scale to respond to the statements.

1. The topics we are studying are interesting and challenging.

   1    2    3    4  
   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree

2. I usually look forward to this class.

   1    2    3    4  
   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree

3. I work hard to do my best in this class.

   1    2    3    4  
   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree

4. I am usually bored with what we study in this class.

   1    2    3    4  
   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree

5. Sometimes I get so interested in my work I don’t want to stop.

   1    2    3    4
6. I often count the minutes until the class ends.

1  2  3  4

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

Please answer the next 4 questions about your ENGLISH class.

Directions: Circle your response.

1) How much time do you put into homework each week, including reading assignments?
   1 = None
   2 = About 15 Minutes
   3 = About 30 Minutes
   4 = About an hour
   5 = About 2 or 3 hours
   6 = About 4 hours or more

2) How often do you cut (an unexcused absence) this class?
   1 = Almost everyday
   2 = Once or twice a week
   3 = A few times a month
   4 = A few times a year
   5 = Never cut

3) How often do you really pay attention during this class?
   1 = Never
   2 = Seldom
   3 = Fairly often
   4 = Usually
   5 = Always

4) How often does your mind wander in English class?
   1 = Never
   2 = Seldom
   3 = Fairly often
   4 = Usually
   5 = Always

Directions: Read each question and respond using the 4-point scale.
1. I like being the best at reading.

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2. I like it when the questions in the book make me think.

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3. If the teacher discusses something interesting I might read more about it.

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4. I know I will do well in English class this year.

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5. I enjoy reading books about different people from different countries.

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6. It is very important to me to be a good writer.

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7. It is very important to me to be a good reader.

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8. I do as little schoolwork as possible in English class.

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9. I make pictures in my mind when I read.

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10. I always do my English work exactly as the teacher wants it.

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11. I enjoy learning new things in English class.

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12. When I am in class, I participate in classroom discussions.

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13. When we work on something in class, I get involved.

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14. When I am in class, I act like I am working.

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15. When we work on something in class, I feel bored.

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APPENDIX K

Pre- and Post- Unit Critical Literacy Assessment

Directions:
Read the narrative excerpt below and answer the following comprehension questions.

Excerpt from *The Best Bad Luck I Ever Had* by Kristin Sims Levine

The girl looked about my age and wore a fancy navy dress. Her hair was carefully combed and pulled back into a neat braid, tied with a red ribbon. She clutched a small suitcase of smooth leather. She was also black.

The girl stood in the doorway of the train as the whole town looked her over. My little sister Pearl stared at her shoes—shiny, black patent leather without a scuff on them. Pearl’s ten years old and ain’t never had a pair that ain’t been worn by two sisters before her. The girl’s mother stepped into the doorway right behind her. She was black too and wore a yellow dress made of a gauzy material—Mama later said it was organza.

The girl and her mama stepped carefully down onto the platform. Her daddy got off last. He wore a tailored suit, walked with a limp and was just as black as the rest of them.

The man looked around and in a crisp, Northern accent asked, “Is there a Mr. Sims here?”

“I’m Mr. Sims,” said Pa, looking a bit confused.

“I’m Mr. Walker,” said the man, holding out his hand. “The new postmaster.”

It got real quiet for a moment. Everyone stared at Mr. Walker.

“They is black,” said Uncle Wiggins, just as loud as could be.

Pa stepped forward then and shook Mr. Walker’s hand.

“The boy’s a girl,” I mumbled. Mama poked me with her elbow, then went to speak to Mrs. Walker.
I scowled at the girl. “What’s your name?”

“Emma,” she said, and scowled right back.

Mama made me carry home Emma’s trunk in my old wagon. We had a cabin on our property that we always rented out to the postmaster and his family. I didn’t understand how one little girl could have more stuff than me and all my brothers.

“You play baseball?” I asked as we walked.

“No,” Emma said. She shook her feet as she walked, trying to keep the dust off her fancy shoes.

“I got a real glove.” I tugged at the wagon. “The only one in town.”

“Maybe down south girls play baseball,” she answered, “but we’re from Boston.”

I didn’t say nothing.

She pulled at the ribbon in her hair. “You probably don’t even know where that is.”

“Kentucky,” I answered. “I ain’t stupid.”

Emma slowed down to walk beside her mama. “Mama,” Emma said, loud enough for me to hear. “Why’d we have to come down south?”

“Emma” Mrs. Walker said softly. “Daddy can’t protest where they send him. There aren’t many blacks in the postal service.”

Emma glanced back at me, then back at her mama. “I don’t think I’m going to like it here.”

“It’s only for year,” Mrs. Walker continued. “Then Daddy can ask for a transfer.”

A whole year, I thought. That was a long time to wait for another postmaster. But maybe then we’d finally get a boy.

Next morning at breakfast, I sat down next to Ulman. He’s four years older than me and real smart. I leaned over to him and asked, “Boston’s in Kentucky, ain’t it?”

“No,” he said. “It’s in Massachusetts.”

“Oh,” I answered. I was suddenly mighty interested in my scrambled eggs.
Part 1: Multiple Choice
Select the best answer to the following multiple choice questions:

1. Which point of view does the author use in this story?
   a. Third person limited
   b. Third person omniscient
   c. First person
   d. Second Person

2. What is the overall theme of this passage?
   a. First impressions can be deceiving
   b. Love conquers all
   c. It doesn’t cost anything to be nice
   d. The narrator is upset the newcomer is a girl

3. What can we conclude about Emma?
   a. She is looking forward to making new friends
   b. She doesn’t like sports
   c. Girls are smarter than boys
   d. Her family is wealthy

4. What is the implied main idea of this passage?
   a. The arrival of the postmaster causes tension in the town
   b. Emma is unhappy with her new home
   c. Organza is an expensive fabric
   d. Emma prefers the North over the South

5. According to the information in the story, what is most likely to happen next?
   a. Emma and the narrator become friends
   b. Emma’s family will request a transfer as soon as possible
   c. There are too many differences for Emma and the narrator to be friends
   d. The narrator memorizes a map of the United States

Part 2: Short Response
Answer the following questions using complete sentences:
1. How does the text depict age, gender and/or cultural groups?

2. a) Whose voices are heard in the text?

   b) Whose voices are not heard, marginalized, or discounted? Why not?

3. How would the text be different if it were told in another time, place, culture, or perspective? What details would be included and why?

4. What biases (cultural, linguistic, gender, ability, sexual orientation, religious, etc. values and beliefs) do you, as the reader, bring to the text?
5. What assumptions, beliefs, and values does the author bring to the text? What is your evidence?

6. What other questions might you, as a critical consumer, ask of the text?

Part 3: Essay
Read the following prompt. Your persuasive letter should be at least 5 paragraphs in length and should provide concrete evidence to support your opinion.

Think about a negative stereotype that exists in your community. Examples of stereotypes include race, class, gender, religion, and/or language/dialect. Write a persuasive letter giving reasons why someone should or should not change his or her viewpoint.
## APPENDIX L

Critical Literacy Assessment Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Level 4 Advanced</th>
<th>Level 3 Proficient</th>
<th>Level 2 Developing</th>
<th>Level 1 Beginning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading/ Text Analysis</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge and Understanding</strong></td>
<td>Demonstrates thorough understanding of text and perspective</td>
<td>Demonstrates considerable understanding of text and perspective</td>
<td>Demonstrates some understanding of text and perspective</td>
<td>Demonstrates little understanding of text and perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifies the perspectives and/or biases evident in text and comments on any critical questions they raise with a high degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Identifies most of the perspectives and/or biases evident in text and comments on any critical questions with considerable effectiveness</td>
<td>Identifies some of the perspectives and/or biases evident in text and comments on some critical questions with some effectiveness</td>
<td>Identifies some of the perspectives and/or biases evident in text and comments on some critical questions with limited effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applies critical questions to a text with a high degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Applies critical questions to a text with a considerable degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Applies critical questions to a text with some degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Applies critical questions to a text with limited effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link to Personal experience/knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Able to recognize links between text and personal experience/knowledge with a high degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Able to recognize some links between text and personal experience/knowledge with a considerable degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Able to recognize few links between text and personal experience/knowledge</td>
<td>Is unable to recognize links between text and personal experience/knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of critical/creative thinking processes</strong></td>
<td>Analyzes perspective and evaluates information with a high degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Analyzes perspective and evaluates information with a considerable degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Analyzes perspective and evaluates information with some degree of effectiveness</td>
<td>Analyzes perspective and evaluates information with limited effectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple Viewpoints</strong></td>
<td>Able to recognize multiple viewpoints;</td>
<td>Able to recognize multiple viewpoints;</td>
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<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Strong control of topic</td>
<td>• Writing stays on topic</td>
<td>• Has an acceptable beginning, middle and end</td>
<td>• Powerful connection with audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relevant, accurate, specific details that support topic</td>
<td>• Complete details given</td>
<td>• Includes a lead and conclusion</td>
<td>• purpose is clearly communicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Powerful introduction/lead and conclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Transitions are used correctly</td>
<td>• Maintains strong viewpoint (perspective) throughout entire piece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Effective transitions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mostly logical order</td>
<td>• Writing is expressive, engaging and has lots of energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Logical order/sequencing</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mostly correct paragraphing</td>
<td>• Awareness of audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses appropriate paragraphing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• purpose is clear most of the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Uses viewpoint (perspective) throughout most of the paper</td>
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<tr>
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<td>• Writing is pleasant, agreeable and satisfying</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Details are unclear</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Topic too broad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Details are limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Weak beginning, middle and end</td>
<td>• Not concerned with audience or purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Has evidence of a lead and/or conclusion but missing elements</td>
<td>• No viewpoint (perspective) used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Transitions are used sometimes</td>
<td>• Writing is mechanical and lifeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Some logical order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Fluency</td>
<td>Word Choice</td>
<td>Conventions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| • All Sentences are clear  
• Variety of sentence structure is used  
• Run-ons and/or fragments are not present | • Powerful and engaging words  
• Artful use of figurative language and/or sensory detail | Few errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization and/or spelling |
| • Most sentences are clear  
• Some sentence variety is used  
• Run-ons and/or fragments are rare | • Some active verbs and precise nouns  
• Effective use of figurative language and/or words that enhance meaning | Errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization and/or spelling are present but don’t distract from meaning |
| • Some sentences are clear  
• Sentence variety used rarely  
• Some run-ons and/or fragments are present | • Generally correct words  
• Attempt at figurative language and/or words convey general meaning | Errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization and/or spelling are present and some distract from meaning |
| • No sentences are clear  
• No variety in sentence structure  
• Frequent run-ons and/or fragments are present | • Vocabulary is limited/used incorrectly  
• No figurative language; words do not convey meaning | Many distracting errors are present in grammar, punctuation, capitalization and/or spelling |
APPENDIX M

Validity Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do I need to know?</th>
<th>Why do I need to know this?</th>
<th>What kind of data will answer the questions?</th>
<th>Analysis Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1: What are the challenges and successes the teachers and researcher experience in the process of co-constructing a unit grounded in critical literacy and in implementing the unit with adolescent English learners?</td>
<td>Very few studies examine the practical nature and process of developing and implementing a critical literacy approach in the classroom No studies documenting this process with ELLs Too much emphasis on standard language approach/deficit approach in ELL classrooms—need to document if critical literacy language approach is feasible in light of standardized testing and expectations Shed light on existing literature on CL education—</td>
<td>Interviews (semi-structured) with teacher Audiotaped curriculum planning sessions Teacher and researcher memos/reflection journals</td>
<td>Transcribe interviews and curriculum planning sessions Code for themes—similarities and differences that answer the question Compare the themes to the memos/journals Thematic analysis describing the process/instructional choices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
what instructional and curriculum choices teachers make/what conditions constitute the effectiveness of a CL approach

May help locate and identify the context bound complexities in the implementation of CL education in EL classrooms

This will be important for other teachers so that they can look to replicate/adapt the process

Approach may empower students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ 2: How does a unit grounded in critical literacy impact adolescent English learners’ engagement in the English class?</th>
<th>Research highlights how reading engagement linked to academic achievement</th>
<th>Surveys</th>
<th>Quantitative analysis—surveys (Likert scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need to understand how this unit impacts student engagement—if it does, can be a factor influencing success of project</td>
<td>Classroom observations</td>
<td>Transcribe interviews; code for themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student and teacher interviews</td>
<td>Classroom observations related to engagement—quantitative checklist will be used as triangulation method related to student interviews and surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher and researcher reflection journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shed light in ESOL pedagogical approaches that are more congenial to literacy engagement

Approach may impact student empowerment as ELLs and foster language development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Validity Threats</th>
<th>Possible strategies for dealing with validity threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher bias in interpreting data and reactivity influenced by researcher bias</td>
<td>Researcher’s identity and relationship to participants and setting will be reported in the study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All three data sources—to see if they all say the same thing or if there are differences in results between each data source
Multiple methods may (but won't necessarily) provide more plausible conclusions and reduce researcher bias

Careful during planning process and interviews not to guide the process nor shape their responses

Member checking and triangulation of data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misinterpretation of interview and observation data</th>
<th>Respondent validation/ member-checking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-reporting bias</td>
<td>Triangulation of data—observations conducted as well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants reacting to researcher in the environment</td>
<td>Become familiar with the classroom, students and teacher before the study begins- multiple visits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX N

Learning Focused Lesson Plan Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEARNING-FOCUSED Lesson Plan</th>
<th>Name:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plan for the concept, topic, or skill – Not for the class period</td>
<td>Topic:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Goals for this Lesson</th>
<th>Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students will know:</td>
<td>Students will be able to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>·</td>
<td>·</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Objective:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Essential Question</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activating Strategy:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key vocabulary</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Instruction</th>
<th>Graphic Organizer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Activity 1:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Prompt for LA 1:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Activity 2:</td>
<td>Assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Prompt for LA 2:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Activity 3:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Prompt for LA 3:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing Strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX O

Sample *SpringBoard* English Language Arts Lesson Plan

**ACTIVITY 3.9**

**Finding Light in Film**

**Learning Targets**
- Explain how writers use literary elements such as setting, character, plot, and mood to develop a theme.
- Present an effective and reading and transform a written draft into talking points for discussion.

**Finding Light in the Darkness**

1. Return to Activity 3.2 and read the quotes. Notice that each speaker uses the imagery of light and darkness to express his or her ideas about good and evil, love and hatred, hope and depression—all of which are opposites. How do you think this conflict between opposites might be portrayed in film?

   *Life is Beautiful* is a fictional story about a family in Italy that is sent to a concentration camp. The father and son are Jewish, but the mother is not. The father tries to protect his son from the ugly realities of the Holocaust by making it seem as if they are playing a game whose prize is a real tank.

2. Based on the information above, predict conflicts that the father might encounter as he tries to convince his son that the concentration camp is just a game.

3. Work in groups of four to take notes on setting, character, plot, and mood in each film clip. Share notes and trade jobs after each clip to complete the graphic organizer on the next page.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Character(s)</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Mood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clip 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clip 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Clip 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clip 4</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expository Writing Prompt: How is the theme “finding light in the darkness” expressed in the film? Write a draft that explains how setting, characters, and/or plot are used to develop theme. Be sure to:
- Begin with a topic sentence that responds to the prompt.
- Provide textual evidence and commentary for support.
- Use precise diction to inform or explain.

Prepare and present an oral reading of your written draft. Use the chart in the previous activity to guide your preparation. Present your response to another pair of students. Provide feedback about ideas and oral reading.

Check Your Understanding
Work with your group to transform your draft into talking points to guide a class discussion about the theme. After your class discussion, prepare talking points for a small group discussion on at least two of the following prompts. Be sure to include textual evidence from the film to support your opinion. During your small group discussion, create and use a graphic organizer like the one on page 169 to record and respond to the other speakers’ talking points.

Discussion Prompts:
A. Is it disrespectful to make a film about the Holocaust that has so much comedy in it?
B. What aspects of the Holocaust, as portrayed in the film, are similar to or different from what you learned in your research?
C. How and when did the mood change during the film clips, and what settings, characters, or events caused those shifts?
APPENDIX P

SpringBoard - Unit Three Table of Contents

The Challenge to Make a Difference

GOALS:
- To engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.
- To analyze the development of a theme or central idea of a text.
- To research an issue of national or global significance.
- To create an informative and persuasive multimedia presentation.
- To strengthen writing through the effective use of voice and mood.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY
communication
resume
exposition
argument
media
media channels
target audience
evaluate

Literary Terms
enumeration
found poem
call to action

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*Texts not included in these materials.
APPENDIX Q

Samples of Literature Circle Role Sheets

Discussion Leader Role Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Title/Genre:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group:</td>
<td>Author:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Task:**
Your job is to develop a list of questions that you think your group should discuss about the assigned text. Use the critical literacy question prompts to help you develop your list of questions. Try to incorporate levels of questioning to create thought provoking literal, interpretive, and universal questions (Ask “how” and “why” questions). It is important to create questions that encourage your group to consider many ideas. Help your group explore critical ideas and share their reactions. You will be in charge of leading the day’s discussion.

Diction Detective Role Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Title/Genre:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group:</td>
<td>Author:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Task:**
Your job is to carefully examine the diction (word choice) in the assigned section. Search for words, phrases, and passages that are especially descriptive, powerful, funny, thought provocing, surprising, or even confusing. Consider the following critical questions:

- What kind of language is used in the text?
- How does the word choice influence the message and meaning?
- How does the language (word choice) depict issues of power, race, culture, age, and gender?

Complete the graphic organizer below on the selected words, phrases, or passages. During the discussion, you can read the words, phrases, or passages yourself; ask someone else to read them; or have people read them silently before sharing your thoughts on it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page #</th>
<th>Word, Phrase, or Passage</th>
<th>Reason for selecting word, phrase, or passage</th>
<th>Why did the author select this word or phrase? What is the author trying to say? How does the diction help the author achieve his or her purpose?</th>
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</table>
APPENDIX R

Critical Literacy Discussion Questions

Textual Purpose and Features
- What is the author’s purpose? How do I know?
- What kind of language is used in the text?
- How does the word choice influence the message/meaning of the text?
- What techniques did the author use to influence my thinking?

Construction of Characters/Subject
- How are the characters/subjects constructed in this text?
- Why has the author represented the characters in this particular way?

Power and Interest/ Gaps and Silences
- Is this text presenting a balanced view of the issue? Is it fair? Why or why not?
- How does the text depict age, language, gender, race and/or cultural groups?
- Whose voice(s) is/are represented here?
- Whose voice(s) is/are missing?
- Whose interests are being served by the text? Who benefits?
- How would this text be different if it were written from a different perspective? What details would you include and why?

Portrayal of Social Reality/Worldview
- What view of the world and what values does the text represent?
- How does the text construct a version of reality?
- What is the author’s point of view on the issue/topic? How do I know?
- What have I learned about myself/ the world from reading this text?
- Who or what may have influenced the author’s worldview? Explain using evidence from the text.

Interpretations and Social Action
- What different interpretations of the text are possible? How might different people interpret the message/main idea?
- How is this text influencing my thinking? What biases (cultural, linguistic, gender), values, and beliefs do you, as a reader, bring to the text? What other questions might you, as a critical consumer, ask of the text?
- What action can I take to impact society after reading this text?
APPENDIX S

Final Unit Project Description

There are so many issues that affect our community and the broader world. Social action projects go beyond volunteering and service learning, where people help others in need and learn about social issues in local and global communities. A social action project is a multi-step process in which youth address an issue they care about, learn about it and potential solutions to solve it, then take action to create positive change on this issue.

Your end of unit assessment involves the following three components:

Part 1: Persuasive Essay

Part 2: Action Project

Part 3: Multimedia Presentation

Your campaign will require you to write a research-based persuasive essay and develop a multimedia presentation that informs your peers about ONE issue of local, national, or global significance and convinces them to take action. You will conduct and synthesize research into an engaging persuasive essay that challenges your audience to make a difference. As a youth leader in your community, you will work collaboratively with your peers (2-3 students) to design, implement and evaluate a social action project. Remember, your main goal will be to justify why targeting and addressing this issue is important and communicate what action you took to address the issue.

Good social action projects:

- Involve community members and stakeholders in their implementation
- Both educate and motivate others to take action too
- Focus on solutions to address the root causes of a social issue

Here’s an example of a social action project that address these factors:

*Your school has a recycling program, but the bins around campus are almost always empty. Last year, students made posters to hang around campus, but this didn’t seem to have much of an impact. This year, the green team decides to survey students and staff about why they aren’t recycling. They used this information to change the location of some bins, to develop not just awareness but also educational campaigns about climate change and the importance of recycling, and to encourage accountability for recycling by*
sponsoring contests, incentives, and electing recycling captions. All these efforts have led to a huge increase in recycling and a reduction in the trash across campus.

Types of Social Action Projects:

Use the graphic below to guide your thinking. Think creatively and critically about how you personally can have an impact on the problem!

| Educate    | Develop educational workshops for your peers or younger students  
|            | Present at local organizations |
| Advocate   | Organize a letter writing campaign or petition to local/national representatives |
| Unite      | Organize a school-wide event to raise awareness and get students to take action  
|            | Sponsor a social event to raise money for an organization working to solve your issue |
| Speak Out  | Share your research through art or dramatic performances  
|            | Develop a multimedia campaign and post on social media |
| Engage     | Commit to change your behavior in some way and start a campaign to encourage others to as well |
Serve

- Organize a fundraising campaign for a non-profit working to advance your solution
- Volunteer your time at a local agency to help in your cause

Outline of Steps

**Phase 1: Planning phase**

- Define topics of interest and determine a focus for inquiry and action
- Where could you look online to find out about more issues of national or global significance?
- How will you evaluate the credibility and timeliness of sources?
- How will you investigate what others are doing about your issue in order to evaluate possible solutions to incorporate into your call to action?
- Develop a plan for inquiry and action, including goals and intended outcomes, required resources, partnerships, team members/tasks (if a collective project), time allotment, feasibility, communication and sharing plan
- Identify inquiry questions to guide research: what will we need to know and be able to do in order to carry out this project?

**Phase 2: Research phase**

- Determine inquiry questions and gather data from a variety of sources--Maintain Learning Log
- How will you use rhetorical appeals (pathos, logos, and ethos) to persuade your audience to care?
- How can you raise awareness by informing your peers about compelling facts related to your issue?
- How will you use your peers and teachers to offer guidance in the revision and editing process?

**Phase 3: Implementation phase**

- Execute Action Plan: review and modify as required
- What will be your mission statement, logo and/or slogan?
- How will you organize talking points to inform your audience about the issue, convince them to care, and provide a call to action (what, why, and how)?
- Establish timeline, time allocation, budget and materials requirements and review as needed
- Carry out your action project and collect data during the process

**Phase 4: Reflection and assessment**

- Create photographic journal/multimedia presentation that captures key insights
- Communicate results with larger community and solicit feedback
Multimedia Presentation

Your presentation is your final product. Each of the following elements is required in your final presentation to the class.

1. **Identify the problem**-- Your presentation should include the research background to the problem.
   a. Description of the problem
   b. Who the problem affects
   c. Who is concerned about this problem
   d. Where this problem is occurring

2. **Explanation of your motivation:**
   a. The actions you have taken in support of this cause
   b. Your thoughts and feelings about this cause
   c. The reason why you chose this cause
   d. The reason why you were motivated to act in support of this cause

3. **Plan of Action:**
   a. Detailed description of your action plan
   b. Detailed description of the way you took action-- -you will need to share at least 8-10 photographs that capture your “story.”
   c. Reflection and assessment
APPENDIX T

Template for PowerPoint Presentation

Social Action Project: Topic

Group Members' Names
Date

Agenda

• Identify the problem– Research Background
• Explanation of why problem needs to be addressed
• Our action
• Reflection and Assessment
The Social Justice “Issue”

- Provide a hook related to your issue
- Provide background information---Who is the problem affecting? Where is the problem occurring? Who is concerned about this problem?---- you will need to provide statistics here
- Thesis statement

Explanation of Motivation

- Describe the reasons why you chose this cause and why you were motivated to act in support of this cause
First Reason Why the Problem Needs to be Addressed

- Topic sentence
- Give at least 2-3 points of evidence from your research
- Provide examples

Second Reason Why the Problem Needs to be Addressed

- Topic sentence
- Give at least 2-3 points of evidence from your research
- Provide examples
Third Reason why the Problem Needs to be Addressed

- Topic sentence
- Give at least 2-3 points of evidence from your research
- Provide examples

Our Action

- Detailed description of the action you took to address your cause
Photographic Story

• Provide 8-10 photographs with captions that describe your “story”

Reflection and Assessment

• What did you learn from this project?
• How has this project influenced you as a person?
• Did your engagement increase as a result of this project? Why or why not?
• What reading or writing skills were impacted as a result of your work on this project?
• How will you continue to support this cause?
REFERENCES


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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2012.636335


doi:10.1080/00405840902997352

produce the nation’s dropouts? Where are they located? Who attends them?

Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.


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