AN INVESTIGATION OF LITERATURE CIRCLES AND CRITICAL LITERACY: DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGH-ABILITY STUDENTS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction

Charlotte

2009

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ABSTRACT

LINA BELL SOARES. An investigation of literature circles and critical literacy: differentiated learning opportunities for high-ability students. (Under the direction of DR. MARYANN MRAZ)

This qualitative research study investigated how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers that centered on the connection between critical pedagogy and collaborative reading of sociocultural issues. The research questions focused on the ways that literature circles provide differentiated learning opportunities, how literature circles provide a context to consider multiple viewpoints, the types of new texts and identities that gifted students create, and the types of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills gifted sixth-grader readers demonstrate in literature circle interactions.

This study was conducted in one sixth-grade gifted reading classroom. Data was collected through a number of procedures that included participant observation, field notes, anecdotal records, interviews, questionnaires, audiovisual transcripts, and student-produced artifacts. Data analysis was conducted using principles of ethnographic coding, grounded theory, and discourse analysis.

This study found literature circles provide *zones of opportunity* for gifted middle school students, a forum for gifted readers to consider multiple viewpoints on issues of social justice, a context to try out new subjectivities and create counter texts, and a forum for gifted readers to apply their analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills by taking a critical stance, creating intertextual connections, and resymbolizing the unfamiliar worlds in texts into understandable worlds through lived experiences.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the twenty-one participants who were the sixth-grade gifted readers in this study. Their love of learning, their unwavering participation, and their shared experiences were invaluable. This study is a tribute to them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my dear children, Lacy and Forrest, who have supported me behind-the-scene and made endless sacrifices on my behalf, they are very much appreciated. And to my mother who first taught me to read, but more importantly instilled in me a belief that I could accomplish any goal I set out to do, a heartfelt thank you goes to her.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Maryann Mraz, who spent countless hours guiding, instructing, and encouraging me with this endeavor, I want to send a big shout-out. Her trust in me as a student, her wisdom and vision for this project, and her honest and professional guidance has given me a strong foundation to journey forward. I value Maryann's friendship and the many laughs we had a long the way and look forward to more great encounters together.

To my dear committee member, Dr. Karen Wood, who brings vitality and spirit to the profession, I am forever grateful. Her love for teaching, writing for publication, and presenting to masses or a very few has become a part of me and I cannot thank her enough for taking me under her wing and showing me the way in the reading world.

To my dear committee member, Dr. Chuang Wang, I am forever thankful for his tremendous wisdom, the countless hours spent pouring over my methodology, and the thoughtful suggestions he made. I was very lucky when he agreed to serve on my committee and I am a stronger researcher for it.

To my dear academic advisor, Dr. Jeanneine Jones who shared her love for middle school, provided helpful suggestions about my doctoral course of study, and provided a great dose of love and laughter, I give an enormous thanks to her!

To my dissertation committee member, Dr. Robert Algozzine whose plate was

more than full, a very special thank you is extended for serving on my committee. His generosity and time is greatly appreciated.

To my doctoral buddies whose kindness, valuable insights, and first-class collaboration on all our doctoral projects made this a wonderful experience, a special thank you goes to each one.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ongoing longitudinal studies have demonstrated that advanced learning opportunities for the gifted during the K-12 schooling years provide positive pathways for development (Brody & Stanley, 1991; Lubinski & Benbow, 2006; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991). In conjunction, recent meta-analyses have shown that grouping the gifted only matters if it is linked to differentiated curricula (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Nevertheless, only a few classroom-based intervention studies have been undertaken to demonstrate the direct impact of differentiated curricula on high-end student learning (Avery & VanTassel-Baska, 1999).

Differentiated instruction for the gifted learner is an approach to teaching that is all-inclusive and guides teachers in all aspects of their practice. It does not mean grading gifted students harder than other students or providing more work for students to stay busy (Tomlinson, 1995b). It is a continuous process of learning about students' needs and interests and using that knowledge to guide instruction. Teachers use their knowledge of students to determine how content is presented, what activities are appropriate, and how to guide students in demonstrating what they have learned (Tomlinson, 1999). According to Winebrenner (2000), teachers of the gifted and talented are interconnected by two themes: (1) providing challenging opportunities for gifted students and (2) making classroom provisions to accommodate gifted students' unique needs.

The process of differentiating instruction is most effective in a flexible and

supportive learning environment which encompasses both the physical setting of the classroom and its climate. Literature circles are a literature-based instructional strategy employed in literacy classrooms today as a way to encourage students to talk about literature (Daniels, 1994, 2002a). In addition, literature circles have the potential to provide students with a forum from which to question as they read, to know the author's intent, and to understand the historical, social, cultural, and political influences in their lives (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997). A bevy of research has shown that student engagement in discussion about texts improves reading comprehension, higher-level thinking skills, and increased motivation (Almasi, 1995; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Furthermore, Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) contend that student discussion provides the opportunity to "communicate one's ideas in a clear, detailed manner through conversation, writing, or an aesthetic response" (p. 108).

While research supports the importance of high-powered curricula in creating defensible programs for gifted learners in schools, examinations into how gifted students respond to sociocultural issues that requires them to identify the messengers of knowledge and their interests (Banks, 1993, 1996), to unpack assumptions of knowledge, to view knowledge from varied and cultural perspectives, and to use knowledge to guide action that will create a humane and just world (Freire, 1970) is sparse. The value in having educators create culturally responsive classrooms has been determined (Asante, 1991, 1992; Au, 1995; Au & Raphael, 2000; Gay, 2000; Erickson, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 1990). The need for research that examines the connection between critical pedagogy and collaborative reading of sociocultural issues for gifted students has been identified (Banks, 1993, 1994; Ford & Harris, 1999; Rogers & Soter, 1997). This study

addressed that need.

<div align="center">Literacy for the Gifted and Talented Learner</div>

Traditionally, some educators view literacy as something children do in order to read and write (Chall, 1967). The instructional methodology, as well as materials and resources, lacks the critical examination of the social, cultural, and linguistic context for students with exceptionalities. It is rooted in a paradigm that transmits or "banks" knowledge, rather than one that engages in inquiry and discovery of relevant experiences (Freire, 1973). In this study, literacy was grounded in a socially conscious philosophy and utilized instructional practices that promoted critical thinking processes and recognized that students' voices were central to social learning interactions. In conjunction, the significance of texts was not that they provide information or opportunities for practice, but rather that they were used as "thinking devices" (Lotman, 1988) to promote epistemic engagement and interpretation (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). Because this study demonstrated that reading curricula for high-ability readers can engage students in holistic, constructivist, and transformative learning, it is necessary to highlight some of the salient features of a curriculum based on critical literacy.

Sociocultural Perspectives on Reading

A sociocultural perspective perceives reading to be a multifaceted, interconnected process of literacy. A sociocultural perspective acknowledges that literacy is not an isolated cognitive skill (Vygotsky, 1978), but rather it is influenced by the social, cultural, historical, and linguistic processes that relate to students' literacy development and life experiences (Gee, 1992; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wells, 1999; Wertsch, 1991). Accordingly, a sociocultural perspective regards literacy as the

involvement of daily social interactions within classroom settings that are crucial sites for the attainment of literate practices and identities (Alvermann, 2001) that are deemed essential for access to educational opportunities and academic success (Au, 1997). In this tradition, literacy is a cultural practice and one that is best understood through exploration of the ways in which students can co-construct subjectivities and knowledge through literacy practices enacted in real classroom contexts (Cairney, 1995; Edwards & Mercer, 1987). Wells (1994) elaborates on this point by offering that learning is inherently social and that all learning involves the process of inquiry whereby all members within a social group are involved in the construction of meaning.

The learning experiences for high-ability students have predominantly focused on extra-cognitive aspects of development, achieved through higher-order thinking processes that involve the skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Shavinia & Ferrari, 2004). Apart from a few exceptions on the impact of culture and context, such as Tannebaum (1983) who viewed giftedness as an interaction with environmental influences (parents, classrooms, peers, culture, and social class), sociocultural influences on learning have been largely ignored, albeit neglected. This theoretical deficit is linked to the overemphasis on gifted students' psychological development; consequently, this lack of integration has limited the power of reading to evoke praxis, meaningful reflection, action, and transformation for high-ability learners.

Critical Perspectives on Reading

Scholars, who describe literacy as a transformational process for developing the knowledge, skill, and moral courage to change one's self and one's society in the interests of justice and equity, have ascertained that literacy must be framed by critical

perspectives (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Giroux, 1983, 1989; Shor, 1992; Shor & Freire, 1987). Critical literacy aims to sharpen students' sensibilities toward social injustices in society (Ciardiello, 2004). According to Freire (1970), critical pedagogy centers on the examination of those sociopolitical and historical forces that have shaped and determined conditions for learning. In essence, critical pedagogy examines ways in which schools reflect society by reproducing existing relationships of social inequality and promoting a society based on hierarchies of race, class, gender, and cultural differences. As Shor (1999) points out, critical literacy is grounded in the personal and embraces the political in the interests of "remak[ing] ourselves and society, if we choose, through alternative words and dissident projects" (p. 1).

From a critical pedagogy orientation, literacy for high-ability learners involves the opportunity to question and search as adolescents strive to understand who they are and how they fit in their world. Through the examination of sociocultural issues presented in diverse texts, students learn to discover their voice through discussion and begin to ask why things are the way they are, to analyze what is going on in their world, to question who benefits from the way things are, and to act on the belief of making things more equitable (Bean & Moni, 2003; Ciardiello, 2004; Comer & Simpson, 2001). Critical literacy provides opportunities for gifted students to engage in differentiated literacy experiences, including the making of meaning and voicing their reflections while reading culturally and diverse literature. It is through these experiences that students can transact with and reflect on stories that can transform their reality.

Communities of Practice

From a sociocultural and a critical perspective, attention is paid to the learning

environment, the local context of learning, and the literacy lesson or classroom is considered as a "site" of literacy formation. Lave (1988) posits that learning is situated and is a function of the activity, context, and culture in which it occurs, and through social interaction, Lave and Wenger (1991) explicate that learners become a community of practice. The use of collaborative groups is an effective method of social interaction because the collective thinking of the group helps each individual group member's thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). Central to this concept of a community of practice is that "the common endeavor is organized around a whole process involving multiple but integrated functions, not single, discrete, or decontextualized tasks" (Gee, 2000, p. 3). Gutierrez, Bacquedano-Lopez, and Turner (1997) agree by explaining that appropriating literacy, as a valued practice of a community, occurs through participants' co-constructions. In conjunction, Moll (1990) reinforces this position by acclaiming that the collective and shared knowledge of students' cultural knowledge becomes a "fund of knowledge" that teachers can tap for bridging home and school.

Reading researchers have determined that activities focusing on reader response, such as literature circles, dialogue journals, and classroom discussions are ways of connecting students' life experiences to texts, increasing understanding of texts, shaping subjectivities, and building communities of learners (Broughton, 2002; Encisco, 1994; Lewis, 2001; Moller & Allen, 2000). Subsequently, literacy development for high-ability students is best achieved in literature-rich environments with opportunities for students to participate extensively in discussions, activate their consciousness, connect to prior experiences and knowledge, and elicit high-level cognitive responses (Matthews, 1992). The recognition and affirmation of diversity is a fundamental way to promote democracy

and build community among learners (Cummins, 1986). Reading high-quality, diverse literature provides opportunities for gifted students to create a community of discerning readers who discover similarities within their own culture, the commonalities across cultures, and look beyond the cultural differences to perceive a wider view of the world (Landt, 2006).

Reader Response Theory

Literary response researchers in the 1990s turned their focus on response to include more than a transaction between texts and readers, "but as a construction of text meaning and reader stances and identities within larger sociocultural contexts" (Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 64). The transformation that occurs when a child has an experience with a story that is read is considered to be a transactional event (Rosenblatt, 1978). The meaning the reader constructs from reading is the transaction. Essentially, students create this meaning by connecting prior experience and knowledge and by offering a personal response. Subsequently, the transaction occurs when a reader brings and creates meaning from the text (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Rosenblatt, 1978). Smagorinsky (2001) defines the reader-text transaction as a transactional zone of meaning construction.

Response to literature involves not only connecting the text to one's own personal experiences but also includes constructing alternative versions of reality and self (Dressel, 2005). Luke (2000) advocates the development of critical abilities which are best achieved when students appraise the ideological stance from a wide range of texts. Both critical literacy and reader response emphasize cultural influence on the literacy experiences (Au & Raphael, 2000; Beach, 2000; Heath, 1983). Furthermore, response is influenced by actions, political and social conditions, and practices within education and

in the community. It is this influence that will lead the reader to confront the "causes of human actions and social condition" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 126).

Reader response theory provides students of high abilities the opportunities to challenge themselves and each other with appropriate reading materials and discussion with students of similar abilities. Bartelo and Cornette (1982) espouse both exposure to a wide variety of materials and the design of activities that encourage creative reader response. The goal is to emphasize that reading is less of a skill activity and more of a personal experience to be shared and discussed. In addition, Anderson (1982) recommends exposure to a broad range of genres and multiple opportunities to write and share personal responses to build awareness of the commonalities among readers of the same texts. The aim is for high-ability learners to begin to understand their membership in a cultural and literary community. Subsequently, instructional strategies that center on adolescent literature and permit students to question, read from a resistant perspective, reflect, and then voice their reflections are appropriate forms of instruction that foster reader response.

Literature-Based Strategies

Instructional application of reader response and critical theory can be achieved through the implementation of literature-based strategies where emphasis is on the social context of learning. From the sociocultural perspective, Raphael and Au (1998) state that the purpose of literature-based instruction is to "engage students in active meaning-making with literature, and to give them both the ability to learn from and to enjoy literature throughout their lives" (p. 124). Additionally, literature-based instruction has been found to increase students' cognitive understanding of reading processes and written

language conventions (Snow & Ninio (1986), fosters literary interpretive possibilities (Rogers, 1991), and develop students' affective reading behaviors (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Rosenblatt (1978) sheds further light by positing that literature-based instruction engages students in an aesthetic reading experience, whereby readers engage the affective nature of texts as opposed to the efferent reading experience, in which readers engage texts for informational purposes. From this perspective, reading aesthetically is an emotional process whereby readers actively transact with words on a page to create meaning. At the same time, literature-based instruction supports a continuum in the development of reading stances and McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) assert that a critical reading stance can be viewed as another part of that continuum. When students read from a critical stance, they are encouraged to question the construction of the text and how they are influenced during their reading (Bean & Moni, 2003). Questioning the author's intent helps students understand the sociocultural influences in their lives (Ciardiello, 2004), to understand their role in society and others around them, and to raise questions about who is not represented and who is not heard (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Evidence to support that literature circles provide a meaningful context for reading response activities through literature-based instruction has been studied (Raphael & Au, 1998; Rogers, 1991; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1978). The findings illuminate that literature circles provide a space for student participation as a collaborative community of learners who work together to make meaning (Gee, 2000; Moll, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991), a forum for connecting students' life experiences with the text (Broughton, 2002; Encisco, 1994; Lewis, 2001), a context of diverse and differentiated learning experiences (Au & Raphael, 2000; Bartelo & Cornette, 1982;

McLaughlin & Allen, 2002), and a site that promotes the development of novel

reading identities (Wells, 1999; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1998). These findings are

all requisites that fulfill the literary needs of high-ability learners.

Influence of the Text

Reading is a multifaceted process that creates meaning and is a social experience.

In addition, reading requires the interaction and transaction of the reader and the text;

therefore, the text is essential to reading (Pike, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1976). Reading

texts connects with and evokes students' experiences. Stephens's (1992) examination of

ideology in children's fiction determined that texts work to situate student readers in both

implicit and explicit ideologies. In addition, other research has explored the types of

intertextual connections that individual readers make between texts and their life

experiences (Short, 1993; Sipe, 1998) and determined that intertextual connections can be

defined in terms of links to topics, themes, or stances that are connected to the social and

cultural practices that students have. Diverse literature provides the texts, the stories that

provide the connections, and the examinations of life's experiences from a sociocultural

and critical stance. Galda (1998) explicates that multicultural literature, combined with

dialogic instruction, can provide students with a view of the world, its cultures, and an

opportunity to be reflective. Likewise, Ford, Howard, and Harris (1999) advocate using

multicultural literature in gifted educational classrooms to open students' eyes and minds

to discern the differences across cultures, while seeing the commonalities.

Statement of Problem

The problem of providing differentiated literacy experiences for gifted learners

has been identified. In a climate of educational reform, the role of exemplary curricula

becomes a primary vehicle to improve gifted literacy education; however, the search for materials and strategies to challenge gifted students has reached a difficult crossroad (Borland, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1993; Gallagher, 1991; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Maker & Nielson, 1996; Renzulli & Reis, 1991; VanTassel-Baska, 2004). The field is also assailed for grouping practices seen as counter to the current interest in inclusion (VanTassel-Baska, 1992). Subsequently, gifted education is considered irrelevant by some critics because reform initiatives promote critical thinking, inter-disciplinary curriculum, and project work for all students, thus hypothetically providing more challenging curricula for gifted students in the regular classroom (VanTassel-Baska, 1998; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2006).

One of the major dilemmas for classroom teachers is how to meet the needs of their diverse learners. Given time restraints and working in an era of high-stakes accountability, it has been reported that many classroom teachers now focus their attention on low-performing students (Davis & Rimm, 1994). As a result, many students who are identified as gifted and talented are not challenged in classrooms today. In addition, gifted and talented students are instructed in a vast array of settings. Most gifted and talented students are educated in regular education classes, while other gifted students receive pull-out services or set aside programs (VanTassel-Baska, 1991). As questions occur about what constitutes a defensible gifted program persist, coupled with questions about meaningful settings for delivery, the nature and extent of student learning becomes the central concern.

Research shows that a differentiated curriculum is frequently not a central feature in regular classrooms (Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993); yet, according

to Winebrenner (2000), ignoring the needs of the gifted student is an inappropriate strategy because "the discrepancy in learning ability between the students who struggle to learn and gifted students is simply too wide to facilitate positive role modeling" (p. 54). Scholars in the gifted field strongly recommend that the practice of acceleration (Reis & Renzulli, 1992; VanTassel-Baska, 1985), the use of enrichment (Renzulli & Reis, 1997), the opportunity to engage in novel experiences (VanTassel-Baska, 1993), and the use of sophisticated materials to appropriately challenge gifted learners (Maker, 1982) are necessary modifications for gifted programs. Subsequently, if gifted education exists primarily to serve the learning needs of high-ability students, then a differentiated curriculum must be at the center of deliberations on program worth (Renzulli, 2001; VanTassel-Baska, 1998).

<div align="center">Purpose of the Study</div>

The purpose of this study was to understand how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers. More specifically, this study investigated how strategic practices in critical literacy influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye, address tough issues of cultural dominance, cultural privilege, and power differentials between cultural groups, and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read by engaging in dialogic discourse that centers on discussions of diverse literature and multiple perspectives. Subsequently, this study recognized the cognitive processes associated with constructing meaning from print, but expanded this view of reading to also include sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy, having proposed that interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context

are critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end, sixth-grade readers. Literature circles attempt to group students together and promote social interaction and discussion as students collaborate to create meaning (Daniels, 1994). In addition, literature circles provide spaces for student transformation that are characterized by ongoing dialogic discourse, the venue to question and rewrite cultural narratives, and to allow for discussion of multiple literatures and perspectives (Kong & Pearson, 2003). Therefore, this study demonstrated the importance of high-powered, differentiated curricula in creating defensible programs for gifted sixth-grade reading students.

Research Questions

This study sought to understand how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for gifted readers. More specifically, this study investigated how strategic practices in critical literacy influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye; address tough issues of cultural dominance, cultural privilege, and power differentials between cultural groups, and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read. Villegas and Lucas (2002) state, "Our world view is not universal, but rather, is profoundly shaped by our life experiences, as mediated by a variety of factors, chief among them race/ethnicity, social class and gender" (p. 27). This statement echoes those of Zimet (1976) who ascertained, "Both personal testimony and empirical research strongly suggest that while our attitudes, values and behaviors may be influenced by what we read, when left to our initiative we read what we are" (p. 17). Yet, Zimet adds that it is possible to change and transform attitudes and behaviors so that readers learn from what

they read. From this stance, it is imperative that teachers provide specific guidance that will help students connect to the real world and come to know the real world.

In light of the above, this research examined the following research questions:

1. How does the environment of literature circles provide differentiated learning opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students?

2. How does critical literacy help gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students understand viewpoints different from their own?

3. What types of new texts and identities do gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students create from participation in literature circles?

4. How does the environment of literature circles with the inclusion of a critical literacy perspective provide opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills?

Definition of Terms

1. Social Constructivist Theory refers to the social, intersubjective nature of knowledge construction (Au, 1998). Because reality is created through exchanges of social processes, historically situated, social constructivists are involved in understanding how meaning is derived collectively among people. Social constructivism provided one theoretical paradigm for this study.

2. The term sociocultural perspective acknowledges that literacy is not an isolated cognitive skill (Vygotsky, 1978), but rather it is influenced by the social, cultural, historical, and linguistic processes that relate to students' literacy development and life experiences (Au, 1993; Gee, 1992; Scribner &

Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). A sociocultural perspective as applied in this study regards literacy as the involvement of daily social interactions within classroom settings that are crucial sites for the attainment of literate practices and identities that are deemed essential for access to educational opportunities and academic success (Au, 1998).

3. <u>Critical Social Theory</u> is a view of the world through critical lens in order to see dominant groups of people as power holders who control social, political, and historical ideologies. The goal is to look at social interactions critically in an effort to emancipate all people by raising man's critical awareness of the systems at work in a dominant culture (Giroux, 1993; McLaren, 1988). The philosophical groundwork was laid by neo-Marxists members of The Frankfurt School of Germany. Critical Social Theory provided a second theoretical grounding for this study.

4. The term <u>critical literacy</u> is an approach to reading that focuses on the political, social, cultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young adolescents' lives. While derived from Critical Social Theory, critical literacy in this study was a pedagogical approach implemented to teach high-ability readers how to become critically conscious of their own values and responsibilities in society (Ciardiello, 2004), but more importantly, critical literacy provided a framework that engaged students in textual response activities that required them to determine author biases, discover their voice, interrogate texts (Luke & Freebody, 1997), and then to take action to change their world by providing alternative perspectives and rewriting texts to correct

for the social injustices encountered while reading (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

5. The term <u>literature circle</u> refers to a temporary group of four to six students who meet to discuss the same text (Daniels, 1994, 2002a). Each member of a group is assigned a role to facilitate discussion of the text they are reading. Group members meet on a regular basis and the roles rotate. When a group finishes a text, the group then shares their understanding in a whole-class setting. For purposes of this study, literature circles provided the context for the implementation of critical literacy practices to be used in response activities by gifted sixth-grade readers.

6. The term <u>Reader Response Theory</u> in this study provided the theoretical perspective from which to understand the ways gifted sixth-grade readers engaged with text, the communicative tools they used in responding, and how the context influenced the construction of textual meanings and subjectivities that learners used in social interactions. Rosenblatt (1994) posited, "Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context" (p.1063). This means there is no inherent meaning in a text until a reader transacts with it and brings meaning to the written word.

7. The <u>Transactional Theory of Reader Response</u> acknowledges that a transaction occurs between reader and text. Rosenblatt (1978) theorized the process of reading engagement as a reader construction of the text and student response as a transactional event. The active engagement the reader takes with

text consists of two forms of response. "The efferent stance pays more
attention to the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the logical,
and the quantitative aspects of reading. And the aesthetic stance pays more
attention to the sensuous, the affective, the emotive, the qualitative"
(Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1068). The meaning the reader constructs from reading
is the transaction. In this study, the Transactional Theory of Reader Response
provided a third theoretical framework for the research.

8. <u>Literature-based instruction</u> refers to the type of instruction in which authors'
original narrative and expository works are used as the core for reading
experiences to support literacy activities. Wells (1994) explicates that students
develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and thinking) through real literacy
experiences in support from peers and adults. For purposes of this study,
literature-based instruction was implemented through application of reader
response and critical literacy.

9. The meaning of <u>high-ability learners</u> in this study was based on the school's
web site definition that was the setting for this study and approved by the
district's school board. High-ability learners (sixth-grade students) are
students who score in the 95 percentile range and above on the North Carolina
End-of-Grade achievement test in reading and who possess an Intelligence
Quotient (IQ) of 95% and above. In conjunction, the students have
demonstrated the ability to work with complex and abstract ideas, ponder in-
depth and multiple perspectives, comprehend in-depth and complex concepts,
and manipulate information.

10. <u>Differentiated instruction</u> refers to instruction specifically designed to meet the needs of individuals or groups of individuals with similar learning characteristics. For this study, differentiated instruction was tailored to the unique characteristics of the learner by taking into account students' abilities, interests, and learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2005). In addition, this study involved responsive instruction that emphasized advanced content knowledge, provided higher-order thinking and processing skills, and focused on learning experiences around major issues, themes, and ideas that defined real-world applications.

11. <u>Identity</u> in this study refers to the manners in which individuals behave, such as speaking, believing, acting, and valuing, in order to be a member of a social group in a situated context (Gee, 2002; Harre, 1987). It is conceptualized that each individual has multiple identities that they can draw upon, depending on the social activity, and the discourse that results in recognition as a member of that particular social group. For this study, identity provided the analytic lens to examine the socially situated positions and roles that the students assumed in reading activity over time.

12. <u>Subjectivities</u> reflect a changing self that reconstitutes itself during social interaction (McCarthy, 1998; Rogers, 2002). Hagood (2002) posits subjectivities are like identities that can be multiple, contradictory, and shifting, and at times include a de-centered self in order to reposition and reinvent during reading activities. Broughton and Fairbanks (2002) describe a changing self during social interactions. In this study, subjectivities were used

to describe the changing nature of self during moment-to-moment literacy activities.

13. Agency is intentionally acting on the world in meaningful and reflective ways, and at times, remaking the lived world through different perspectives and planned action which is the foundation for the change (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). For purposes of this study, agency was determined by student responses, student actions, student artifacts, and by the changes that transpired by these mediating factors and the changes that occurred due to participation in literature circles.

14. Community of practice involves the social relationships between participants, the literacy activities, and the literacy context as the site of learning. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning occurs as members participate in literacy activities and co-construct knowledge and this participation crafts and guides further knowledge over time. For purposes of this study, the community of learners consisted of the teacher and students who worked together to construct meaning in a collaborative social context. It is the branch of constructivism that suggests that knowledge grows through the interactions of internal (cognitive) and external (environmental and social) factors (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987).

15. Co-construction in this study represented the construction of knowledge through social exchanges between participants and between the participants and teacher. Vygotsky (1978, 1987) posited that participation structures, roles, and instrumental and psychological tools, mediate students' attainment of

educational outcomes, such as accomplished reading. Basic assumptions in social constructivism include active engagement in processes of meaning-making, text understanding as a view to these processes, and the nature of knowledge, specifically as to how knowledge is developed as a product from participation in a social group (Spivey, 1997).

16. Funds of knowledge is a term first used by Moll (1990) to mean the "the cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead or to thrive" (p. 21). For purposes of this study, funds of knowledge were applied to the cultural backgrounds, interests, and the sociohistorical experiences that the gifted readers brought to the literacy activity (Moll, 1992).

17. Multicultural literature is defined as literature that reflects a power differential between groups created by such things as ethnicity, race, gender, or class (Banks, 1988, 1992). It is perceived to be a powerful tool for teachers to build culturally responsive classrooms (Bishop, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1990). Multicultural literature was operationalized in this study as a means to engage gifted readers in criticality.

18. Intertextuality is the relationship between texts. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) view intertextuality to be a social construction located in the social interactions people have. The fundamental construct is that people act and react to each other. Intertextuality in this study signified the social and cultural processes involved in how the students responded to each other in literature circle discussions (Short, 1992).

19. <u>Intercontextuality</u> is the interrelationships between practices within specific

contexts. In this study, intercontextuality was a construct used to explain the

connections across literacy events and took into account the social worlds of

the students and their prior experiences and relationships within the school

culture (Floriani, 1994; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000).

20. <u>Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)</u> refers to an approach to the study of

discourse, which views language as a form of social practice (Fairclough,

1989). CDA acknowledges that language is manipulated by power and

determines access to communicative events. For this study, CDA was

operationalized through strategic questions to uncover "gaps and silences" in

the literature, whose interests were served in the literature, and to position

high-ability readers to accept or reject the author's point-of-view.

21. <u>Big "D" and little "d"</u> are terms that Gee (1996) uses to distinguish discourse

in language and literacy. According to Gee, discourses represent language as a

cultural form and involve the ways in which people think, behave, value,

believe, read, and write in particular ways that instantiate them into a

particular group of people. From this stance, discourses represent ideologies

that further underscore language as social, political, and historical. In this

research study, discourse was used as an analytic tool for examining and

explaining the manner of discussions among participants in literature circles.

22. <u>A logic-of-inquiry</u> (Gee & Green, 1998) is an approach that combines

discourse analysis with ethnography to understand the ways in which learning

can be studied in social settings, the questions that can be asked, the research

decisions and procedures used, and the manner of reporting and representing

findings. In this study, a logic-of-inquiry was used as a conceptual framework

to highlight the different types of new texts the gifted sixth-grade readers

produced, while interacting in different discourses across literacy activities

and social contexts.

Assumptions

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how the use of critical

pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles functioned as a

differentiated learning context for high-ability learners. As a result, this natural inquiry

was methodologically eclectic, making use of full participant observation as teacher-

researcher and grounded theory development (Creswell, 1994, 2003; Merriam, 1988;

Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), and used an ethnographic perspective to describe the

literacy events, the collection of data, and the narrative findings. In this study, the

teacher's immediacy and interconnectedness to the student participants was unavoidable;

therefore, it was important to acknowledge the potential for bias from the teacher-

researcher's position. In conjunction, Goetz and LeCompte (1984) claim ethnographic

methods provide rich, descriptive data regarding the experiences of the participants.

Qualitative assumptions that supported this study included an emphasis on process, the

interest in meaning, the researcher as an instrument, descriptive data analysis, and

fieldwork (Creswell, 1994). To achieve this purpose, this research study was framed by

two research traditions (social constructivism and critical perspective), each with a set of

assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge, and the goals and aims of the

research process.

Wells (1994) describes social constructivism as an approach to learning that is simultaneously exploratory and collaborative. It is a learning process that requires curriculum to be reconceptualized such that activities are chosen to sufficiently challenge students to move beyond themselves and draw upon multiple sources for assistance as active participants in meaning-making activities while meeting their goals. Social constructivism means reconstituting classrooms as communities of inquiry (Wenger, 1998). Accordingly, a social constructivist paradigm provided a meaningful lens for this research study in order to interpret and describe how gifted learners engaged in transforming experiences that facilitated construction of a deeper understanding of whole concepts through learning experiences that were cognitively challenging within an interactive social setting. The assumption that reality is created through exchanges of social processes, historically situated, social constructivists examine how knowledge is derived collectively among people, in which the inquirer attempts to understand meaning within this social context, seeking a broad range of inputs and interpretations (Au, 1998). Because inquiry is a human activity, the researcher rejected the possibility of a value-free, objective human science (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, the researcher assumed the responsibility to be reflexive and continually reflect upon research practices, decisions, and personal values.

Social constructivism further acknowledges that literacy is a social and cultural practice (Au, 1998; Gee, 1989; Moll, 1990) and what matters is not literacy as an isolated skill, but the social practices into which students are enculturated as members of a specific social group (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This assumption underscores that learning cannot be understood without reference to the contextual,

historical, and cultural factors associated with entering and participating in that particular community of learners (Baker & Luke, 1991; Greene & Ackerman, 1995; Street, 1993).

A critical perspective paradigm assumes that reality and knowledge are constructed but driven by power and power relations, and the inquirer attempts to uncover the dynamics of the ideology and power (Paul, 2005). Correspondingly, inquiry involves social and cultural criticism. One basic assumption was that multicultural literature was a way for gifted students to enter into criticality (Mellor & Patterson, 2000). By reading diverse texts, students were encouraged to unpack different layers of meaning from texts, specifically when texts represented the language of power and to negotiate real-world experiences that engaged them in response, inquiry, and social action (Banks, 1994). While critical pedagogy works in marginalized contexts, the daring, positive, and affirmative character of critical literacy can appeal strongly to a range of students, whether personally disadvantaged or not, who find the world unjust. Critical literacy was an important approach to teaching high-ability, privileged students, based on the assumption that developing critical consciousness is personally liberating to all, and on the premise that the world needs more privileged people to develop a passion for social change.

One final assumption was that a differentiated literacy program for gifted readers assumes that the curriculum, instructional strategies, and materials are sufficiently challenging, in-depth, and varied to meet the needs of high-ability learners (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005; Winebrenner, 2000). This assumption facilitated the development of critical literacy, including the responses of readers and contextual practices that facilitated it, and the influence of the multicultural text that evoked the

responses from a sociocultural perspective. Typically, curriculum is subject-mattered and knowledge-based. Knowledge from a critical perspective is transformational; it is praxis, reflection, and action. Using Freire's words, praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (1970, p. 36). Knowledge from a critical perspective is therefore achieved when students can differentiate between the historical, social, and cultural traditions that are deemed as acceptable ideologies within a particular society and what are not (Johnson & Freedman, 2005).

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

The significance of this study lies on the assumption that being a member of a particular learning community leads to the development of a particular way of being a student, to the construction and development of particular types of knowledge and competencies, and to reshaping literacy experiences for high-ability readers. From this stance, the development of critical literacy, including the responses of readers and contextual practices that facilitated it, and the influence of the multicultural text that evoked the responses from a sociocultural perspective adds a new dimension to the field of gifted literacy and gives high-ability readers a fresh alternative to literacy appropriation.

A plethora of literature exists from seminal scholars who have focused attention on curriculum needs for high-ability learners to include: (1) accelerated curriculum in all relevant subject areas for gifted learners (Jacobs & Borland, 1986; VanTassel-Baska, 1986, 1992), (2) higher-level thinking processes (Paul, 1992) , (3) problem-solving (Gallagher & Stepien, 1996), (4) thematic study (Davis & Rimm, 1998), and (5) research that may result in a high-quality product (Renzulli, 1992). In short, much is known about

the pragmatic nature of instruction that is central to effective gifted curricula today.

However, calls for changes in gifted education have been slow to respond. Passow (1988) addressed the National Association for Gifted Curriculum and outlined curriculum instruction that was finely balanced between cognitive and affect. The speech advocated the formation of gifted curricula that called for concerns about self-understanding, service to others, and moral and ethical development around real-world issues. Passow further emphasized the need for liberal arts with specialized service opportunities, which attested to his deep belief in developing gifted individuals who could and would help construct a better world. In conjunction, Borland (2003) has argued the concept of giftedness, like the concept of intelligence, is socially constructed, and "gains its meaning, even its existence, from peoples' interactions, especially their discourse" (p. 107). While Passow outlined a gifted program that centered on the sociocultural influences that shape and influence students' lives and Borland has called for rethinking gifted education, an inadequate amount of attention has been paid on literacy programs for high-ability learners. Only recently, Ford and Harris (1999) designed a matrix that infuses Bank's (1994) multicultural education model with Bloom's (1956) cognitive taxonomy.

As scholars in the field of gifted education continue to explore ways of improving the educational services provided to gifted and talented students, attention must be paid to the intersection of sociocultural theory and gifted education. This study adds to the argument that a greater understanding of diverse people and cultures is critical for establishing social justice awareness and while critical pedagogy works in marginalized contexts, critical literacy is an important approach to teaching high-ability, privileged students, based on the assumption that developing critical consciousness is personally

liberating to all, and on the premise that the world needs more privileged people to develop a passion for social change. More specifically, it extends sociocultural theory to the field of gifted education by having proposed a new lens for not only expanding the responsibilities of the field in terms of meeting the needs of gifted students, but by offering the ability to properly identify gifted students and for educating new teachers of the gifted.

Summary

Current research demonstrates that the development of reading comprehension skills is a functionally organized process that is developed through socially mediated experiences (Au, 1995; Au & Raphael, 2000; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Gee, 2000; Baker & Luke, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Because literature circles group students together and encourage social interaction and discussion, it is important to understand how literature circles provide a meaningful context for literary activity with high-ability learners. The reading of diverse literature and the use of literature-based strategies provide comprehensible input that gifted students can relate to their own experience and prior knowledge. These literacy opportunities allow students' responses to be shared and can facilitate reading from a critical stance. Literature circles engage high-ability learners in reflection and response through discussions. Furthermore, literature circles promote a context that is conducive for students to learn how to question, challenge, develop higher-order thinking skills, and to discover their identities as readers. Several studies (Diaz-Gemmati, 1995; Enciso, 1997; Short, 1997) provide strong evidence in support of reading pedagogy that promotes reading a wealth of diverse literature for students who participate in literature circles; yet, very little was known about how literature circles function as a

literature-based instructional strategy for gifted readers. Specifically, less was known about the development of higher-order thinking when gifted students take a critical stance; while engaged in literature circle discussions, respond to issues of cultural dominance, cultural privilege, and power differentials between cultural groups; and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read. This research study addressed these needs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to understand how literature circles provide an optimal, differentiated learning context for high-ability sixth-grade readers. More specifically, this study investigated how strategic practices in critical literacy influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye, address tough issues of cultural dominance, cultural privilege, and power differentials between cultural groups; and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read by engaging in dialogic discourse that centers on discussions of diverse literature and multiple perspectives. Subsequently, this study recognized the cognitive processes associated with constructing meaning from print, but expanded this view of reading to also include sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy, having proposed that interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers. Literature circles are a widely accepted approach to reading instruction in American schools. While the practice is popular among teachers of elementary, middle, and high school students, research that examines the sociocultural significance that literature circles play in promoting learning for high-ability readers is sparse. In addition, while the benefits of literature circles and reading response activities have been widely published, much less was known about the strategic use of critical literacy to address issues of social justice through exposure to multicultural literature, and

to prompt students to question (Bean & Moni, 2003; Ciardiello, 2004; Comer, 2001), to challenge the status quo (Giroux, 1993), and to discover and develop their identities as gifted readers (Gee, 2002).

Based on these premises, this study focused on acceptable practices and interpretive frameworks that emerged in the classroom culture that influenced the learning opportunities available for gifted, sixth grade readers (Banks, 2002; Bloom, 1985; Borland, 1989, 2003; Feldhusen, 1993; Ford & Harris, 1999; Maker, 1982; Maker & Nielson, 1996; Renzulli & Reis, 1991; Roberts, 2005; Taba, 1962; Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 1986) and gave attention to the learning environment or the specific context of learning (Au, 1998; Daniels, 1994; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Gallagher, 1997; Gee, 1996; Lopez & Mackenzie, 1993; Sipe, 1999; Vygotsky, 1987). Accordingly, the review of relevant literature as a foundation for this study was organized into five categories.

The first category addressed the concept of literature circles, including a description and an explanation of how the approach is most commonly used in classrooms today, followed by the research evidence that delineates the critical benefits students receive from literature circle participation. Accordingly, the literature review examined literature circles as unique social spaces. The second category addressed the concept of high-ability sixth grade readers, including the nature of their learning characteristics, how gifted students engage in the reading process, and a review of differentiated curriculum requirements and current models in place for differentiated gifted programs. In conjunction, the teacher-researcher addressed what the literature outlines for a gifted reading program. The third category examined critical literacy,

including the meaning of the concept, as well as brief descriptions from scholars in the field. A discussion follows that focused on the origin of critical literacy, its roots in critical social theory to its appearance in the educational arena, and the connection between language and power. The fourth category addressed how critical literacy is implemented in today's classrooms as a means to confront the power differentials found in school and the society at large and then, based on research evidence, a discussion entails how strategic instructional practices in critical literacy play influential roles in developing reading identities and student agency within the context of literature circles. Next, the review addressed multicultural literature by first providing various scholars' understanding of the term, the purposes for implementing multicultural literacy in the classroom, and the rationale for multicultural education. Subsequently, the literature review examined multicultural literature as a venue to teach gifted readers about language, power, and text and as a medium from which gifted readers can engage criticality. The final category addressed the strategic, instructional strategies to promote reading from a critical stance.

<div align="center">Definition and Description of Literature Circles</div>

Literature circles are a form of literary engagement that is widely used in classrooms today. Essentially, literature circles are formed when a group of readers gather to discuss a book in-depth (Almasi, 1995; Daniels, 1994, 2002a; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Maloch, 2002; Villaume & Hopkins, 1995). The use of literature circles promotes social interaction and discussion, as students learn to comprehend text, and encourages students to read with a focus and report on what they have read. These discussions are guided by student responses to what they have read, determining for themselves what is

significant in their reading (Strube, 1996), rather than by more traditional means, such as a list of teacher questions.

Daniels (1994) defines literature circles as a small, temporary reading group in which each member undertakes certain responsibilities during discussion time. The students meet regularly, and the roles or responsibilities rotate at the conclusion of each session or meeting. When the group finishes reading and discussing the text, group members determine the manner in which to share their comprehension to the whole-group audience. A new cycle then begins. Typically, the reading approach centers on content, rather than a random offering of material. Six different texts are usually an optimal number (Burns, (1998). Accordingly, students choose from the offered reading material, develop their own schedule for reading, and facilitate each other in discussions of the text.

In some versions of literature circles, students are individually assigned roles or tasks that they must prepare for each discussion group. The roles that are most often associated with elementary and intermediate students engaged in reading narrative text include the *Discussion Director*, the student who leads the group by devising open-ended questions; W*ord Finder*, the group member who selects four to five words to teach group members through various vocabulary activities; and the *Literary Luminator*, a group member who chooses an interesting part of the reading to share. Additionally, roles include the C*onnector*, who finds ways to link the reading to his or her own life, real world events, and other texts; and the *Illustrator*, a group member who depicts a part of the reading and then provides justification for their interpretation (Daniels, 1994). The purpose of the roles is to give students a focus, as well as a task to help them through

their own comprehension of the text. The goal is for students to become proficient in literature circle participation so that the classroom teacher can eventually guide students away from the strict roles. Daniels (2002b) warns that strict over-dependence on role sheets should be avoided when he writes, "What was originally designed as a temporary support to jump-start peer-led discussion groups can actually undermine the activity it was meant to support" (p. 44). To state succinctly, Daniels perceived participation roles as a means and not a means to an end.

In middle and secondary school, the more prevalent name for literature circles is the text-based collaborative, learning strategy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Students work in small groups to discuss the text, but more importantly, students interact with each other about the text. When discussion is a basic part of the classroom context, students learn how to work with each other, how to be a part of the discussion, how to stay focused on the discussion, and the importance of listening and contributing to the topic at hand. Texts can be either assigned or self-selected and can be utilized in all subject-area classes with a wide range of student abilities. Text-based, collaborative learning is an effective model for nonfiction reading, as more middle and high school classrooms now recognize that students should be reading many of the same trade books that members of the adult community are reading. Primarily, learning is decentralized in these small groups because the meaning-making process requires students to negotiate, construct meaning, and to consider alternate interpretations in order to arrive at new understandings (Alvermann et al. 1996). During this collaborative group time, the role of the teacher is to be a facilitator and a model for the students, who guides correct student discussion and response techniques.

Findings from Research

A bevy of research has examined literature circles and the benefits for students from literature circle participation. The following sections address the studies.

Thoughtful, Competent, and Critical Readers

Literature circles provide the opportunity to develop literacy skills that lead to thoughtful, competent, and critical readers. In addition, literature circles function as a strategy to help students generate their own ideas about what they read and provide conversational structures that help students and teachers break away from typical discourse patterns. Mercer (1993) asserts that learning is talk; learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to talk about the ideas and to respond to the ideas of others. Further evidence suggests (Kucan & Beck, 2003) that small-group discussion supports intellectual engagement with text and findings show that in order for students to learn how to think at higher levels about text, they need participation in conversations with others. Correspondingly, Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) contend that student discussion provides the opportunity to "communicate one's ideas in a clear, detailed manner through conversation, writing, or an aesthetic response" (p. 108). The authors further argue that as students engage in discussion, the act of studying, pondering, and thinking carefully leads students to be more thoughtful and evaluative of their own responses. In conjunction, the value of discussing literature has also been shown to enhance thoughtful and critical writing. Calkins (1994) describes the merits of peer discussion in her classroom when she offers that literature circle discussions are an impetus for student writing because the context provides the opportunity for more reflective writing on their reactions to the story.

Allington (2001) asserts that true equal opportunity lies in the power of literacy and by raising all students to higher levels of thoughtful literacy is one venue through which to view opportunity. From this stance, Diehl (2005) conducted a case study to determine if literature circles are a viable means of promoting thoughtful literacy. As an active participant in the study, the researcher described the scaffolded support given to the five student participants who could easily decode words, but were unable to comprehend. For purposes of the study, Diehl modeled strategies to promote thoughtful reading. She demonstrated how to ask clarifying and thinking-aloud-type questions while she read to illustrate for the students the process of metacognition. In addition, she modeled for the students her own approach to meaning making. The researcher explained that as the five students' comfort levels with language discussion increased, she spoke less because the students became increasingly skilled and more adept at self-regulation during literature circle discussion by applying the strategies and monitoring their own comprehension without teacher prompting.

This study underscores the fact that reading is a highly metacognitive activity where the reader not only thinks about the material being read but also monitors that thinking. Diehl (2005) articulated that as the students in her study developed more autonomy and more positive feelings about the process of comprehending, the students became more active participants in the literature circles.

Brabham and Vilaume (2000) found that literature circles can gradually enable students to take responsibility for reading, comprehending, interpreting, developing discussion for text, and engaging in increasingly more complex levels of reading and thinking. Further evidence provided by Gambrell and Almasi (1996) ascertained that

exchange and exploration of ideas are central elements to the understanding and the creation of competent readers. In addition, McMahon and Raphael (1997) discovered that Book Club discussions provided students the time, space, and opportunities to share developing thoughts, pose questions to each other, and to collaborate while making meaning of the texts and their own life experiences. Similar results from a study of twenty-seven fourth-grade students who participated in literature circle discussions and were taught how to investigate and find out about explicit and implicit text information, ask open-ended questions, and pose and solve problems, promoted critical thinking and responses as students grappled with prejudice and racism (Gove & Long-Wies, 2003, 2004).

Increased Comprehension, Higher-Order Thinking, and Motivation

Student engagement in discussion about texts improved reading comprehension, higher- level thinking skills, and increased motivation (Almasi, 1995; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). In addition, lively discussions emerged when students added to or challenged the comments of others. One study found that literature circles aided comprehension through the practice of retelling (Hanssen, 1990). Students spent time reading and then retelling what they had read, and then they demonstrated the ability to answer comprehension questions. This type of exchange provides students with scaffolding for higher-level thinking skills as they hear the comments of their peers, and it enables them to make similar points (Almasi, McKeown, & Beck, 1996).

A number of studies have investigated the value of discussions that focused on identifying and revealing conflicts between personal and textual ideas during literature discussions. Research on peer-led discussions (Almasi, 1995), questioning the author

(Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997), and book clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997) revealed that discussions that provide opportunities for students to ponder confusing aspects of text or to challenge the text helps students "gain not only a deeper understanding and appreciation of text ideas, but also a deeper understanding of what it means to think about those ideas" (Kucan & Beck, 2003, p. 3). This fundamental construct of intertextuality (Short, 1992) highlights the social and cultural processes involved in how students act, react, and respond to each other during literature discussions. Further evidence is provided by McIntyre, Kyle, and Moore (2006) who ascertained that small-group dialogue played a pivotal role in shaping students' co-construction of meaning because the literature circle context provided the problem-solving environment in which the learners could draw from prior experiences and then probe, challenge, and collaboratively work together in the meaning-making process.

Moller (2004) provides more support that literature circles play a pivotal role in increasing comprehension and higher-order thinking through an inductive case study that examined one fourth grade student's participation in a heterogeneous literature discussion group who had difficulty with print-based literature. Working closely with the classroom teacher, discussion group dialogue was introduced, appropriate behavior for a literature group was modeled, and role-play activities were conducted to increase bonding among students for the two discussion groups that participated in the study. Recognizing that many at-risk students are excluded from the social aspects of reading, the researcher situated her work to focus on one student in particular who struggled with decoding, comprehension, and group acceptance. A culturally diverse selection of picture books was first introduced to address social issues and then the researcher and classroom

teacher moved the two discussion groups to a more advanced level of participation by having the students read and respond to three novels that varied by genre. The results were positive.

The focal student of the study advanced from a literature group outsider to a more capable peer who worked at her actual level of reading development. Moller (2004) concluded that a learning context, rich in engaging literature and supporting of discussion, contributed to the focal student's demonstration of competence. In addition, research findings showed that with explicit teaching strategies, an environment of trust, and the student's personal belief that she had something significant to contribute and learn were positive factors to her increased identity as a valued member of the community of learners and her strengthened abilities to decode, comprehend, and engage in critical discussions within literature circles.

Literature circles have also been linked to positive motivation. Research findings reveal that literature circles encourage students to become more engaged in reading because students are situated in a context that promotes response and challenge to one another's interpretations, share opinions about texts, and question the meaning of texts (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Correspondingly, Lloyd (2004) found that high quality discussions through student interaction on a reading activity provided the stimulant needed to sustain conversation. Further research shows that interesting and relevant texts motivated students to read (Evans, 2002). The twenty-two fifth-grade participants in the study confirmed that when they were given an opportunity to choose what aspects of the text they wanted to discuss, they were more engaged and motivated to participate in discussions.

Identity and Gender Equity

One seminal study confirmed that the culture of discourse in the classroom is not only interaction, but also the ideologies that frame the social context and activities. Lewis (2001) conducted a yearlong ethnographic study to determine if literacy practices in the classroom are indicative of the social codes and cultural norms of the larger community. Assuming that classroom communities are subject to frictions that arise during literacy activities, the focus of the study involved five students who were representative of the community at large and who provided contrasting traits by socioeconomic status, gender, and reading ability. Four literacy activities were integral to the classroom reading culture and included: (1) read-aloud to support commonalities among the students, (2) peer-led literature discussion which provided the opportunity for students to establish social roles, (3) teacher-led literature discussions so the researcher could examine the influences of community cultural norms, and (4) independent reading so that students could examine their own beliefs and question the beliefs they held.

Research findings showed that the assumption of power by certain students in peer-led discussions resided with the more socially dominant, white middle-class students. Further data revealed that gender, age, and reading ability were contributing factors to changing subjectivities as some students were observed to reposition and reinvent identities within reading group discussions. For example, many of the boys in her study became non-participants who often resisted their teacher's expectations by symbolically sitting on the margins during whole-class literacy activities. Yet, these same boys repositioned themselves to take up power in the presence of females during literature circle discussions. As a result, Lewis (2001) posits that teachers must give

students the opportunity to try differing roles to encourage personal growth in reading and identity development. At the same time, students must be given opportunities to accept, reject, or reinvent social codes and societal norms that affect their lives.

Book clubs have also been found to advance gender equity in the classroom as students work together to examine gender roles in literature and how gender differences are portrayed in texts (Evans, 1996; Evans, Alvermann, & Anders, 1998). In addition, Clarke (2006) found during a study of fifth-graders that literature circles provide the context to illuminate larger issues of gender and social class. In the fifth grade study, the female participants repositioned themselves into positions of power when the girls were able to try out the strong female voices in the storylines during circle discussions. In conjunction, Smith (2000) described an all-girls book club that allowed the girls to "negotiate their identities and visit dangerous places" (p. 37) within a teacher-assisted learning environment that emphasized student interaction and discourse.

A Context for Collaboration

Martinez, Roser, and Wood (2001) articulate what can happen in supportive classrooms when students come together and form communities to discuss books. The authors introduce collaborative literacy as a construct to describe groups of students who work together to read and discuss literature. Based on research that was conducted with elementary and middle school teachers, the main component of collaborative literacy is that students read about characters in selected works who cooperate and work together for a common goal, and from reading the literature, classroom students are positioned to understand the importance of collaborating and cooperating to achieve classroom objectives and personal life goals. The authors stress that literature circles promote an

effective framework for promoting collaborative literacy, divergent thinking, explorations of and respect for different cultures, and making connections to real-life experiences through positive discussions.

Eeds and Wells (1989) explored what happens when children and teachers come together to talk about a work they have all read. The researchers were interested to see if the theories that support reader response and discussion would be readily apparent in promoting literacy during these "grand conversations." The focus of the naturalistic inquiry was specifically whether or not groups of young children, talking with their teachers in a collaborative group, would indeed address themselves to literary issues and would these issues of literacy immerge as a natural part of conversation and include talk that reflected and related to what they had personally experienced.

The participants in the study were seventeen college students enrolled in an undergraduate reading practicum who were students of the researchers. Correspondingly, the undergraduates acted as literature leaders for student groups of four to eight fifth and sixth-grade students. Book talks were presented and then the fifth and sixth-grade students were heterogeneously grouped according to the book they chose to read and discuss. All discussions were audiotaped and transcribed when instances of transaction showed the student-teachers and students constructed meaning from what they and the authors brought to the text.

The data analysis revealed that the children and the college-aged leaders carried out traditional comprehension skills even though the group leaders refrained from posing traditional questions of an efferent nature. Five major categories of talk were identified from the coded data and were classified as: (1) simple talk that included comments that

began conversation, (2) personal involvement, which included comments that required a personal association, (3) literal talk, which included all retellings, (4) inference, which included all comments that seemed to have required interpretation, and (5) evaluation, which included judgments about the texts and the authors' purposes. The results indicated that young heterogeneously grouped students are capable of addressing themselves to literacy practices during collaborative discussions about literature. As a result, the researcher concluded that collaborative literature discussions help to validate, broaden, or transform individual interpretations and promote greater understanding of text (Eeds & Wells, 1989).

Meacham (2001) provides an interesting discussion based on a yearlong case study in a combined third, fourth-grade classroom of twenty-eight students with eleven different cultures and languages to demonstrate that a culturally diverse learning environment embodies important advantages in higher-order conceptual development with respect to reading comprehension through the practice of literature circles. In this study, the classroom teacher was able to weave the personal, cultural, and educational diversity of her students toward the enhancement of reading comprehension. Essentially, the classroom teacher asked questions that provoked the students to weave their own personal connections between sociocultural themes discussed and their own prior knowledge. As a result, students began to function on their own in literature circle discussions by posing questions, countering, and responding in ways that allowed them to form connections across cultural domains.

The principle that learning does not take place in cognitive isolation (Vygotsky, 1978), but within the context of activities and social interaction likely informed by the

day-to-day contingencies of culture is affirmed by the classroom teacher's decision to place a premium on using her students' diverse cultural experiences to build upon higher-order conceptual development and reading comprehension. When the classroom teacher prompted her students to weave their own connections between the textual themes discussed and their own prior knowledge (language, culture, and social practice) by crafting questions that enabled students to move beyond their own society's social parameters, learning occurred with the assistance of others (Vygotsky, 1978). Accordingly, the structure of the literature circle provided the participatory structure for the attainment of reading comprehension. Finally, students in the study were able to internalize cognitive structures, such as reading comprehension and cultural connections, from the social activity of the literature circle, as the students' conceptual learning reached a stage of generalization (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). This phenomenon becomes evident when the students reached a consciousness that their home language was actually one language among many.

The implications from this study suggest that the linkage between higher-order conceptual development, reading comprehension, and culturally diverse connections is of considerable importance. Literature circles offer a culturally diverse context in which intercultural connections can be emphasized and provide the beneficial activity structure for the development of higher-order thought processes.

<div align="center">Unique Social Spaces</div>

Classrooms are simply physical spaces, but through multiple learning activities that involve interaction between teachers and their students, a social group emerges (Collins & Green, 1992). Literature circles are unique social spaces where each reader

becomes an active participant in the construction of meaning by drawing on both textual

and contextual information as well as his or her own prior learning knowledge and

experiences, with the teacher, peers, and texts (Short, 1992; Sipe, 1998) mediating in an

environment that encourages shared knowledge and social interaction (Gambrell &

Almasi, 1996). In fact, reading researchers have found that activities focusing on reader

response, such as literature circles, dialogue, dialogue journals, and class discussions are

ways of connecting students' life experiences to texts, and in addition promote reading

engagement, shape identities, and increase comprehension (Almasi, LcKeown, Hamilton,

& Kucan, 1997; Broughton, 2002; Encisco, 1994; Lewis, 2001; Moller & Allen, 2000).

Trezise (1978) emphasizes that reading curricula for gifted readers should be

modified in order to meet their needs. The fact that gifted readers come to school already

reading requires a difference in approach to reading instruction. Because of their

advanced cognitive abilities and interest in complex ideas and theories, gifted readers

respond to less tightly structured reading approaches and desire to delve deeper into

controversial topics about which to talk at-length and in-depth. Gallagher (1997)

reinforces this point by arguing that gifted students require the least restrictive

environment (LRE) for them to obtain maximum educational benefits. Studies have

shown that when students are involved in authentic conversation about literature, they are

more engaged in their reading (Alpert, 1987; Encisco, 1997) and take more risks in

"grand conversations" (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Literature circles support inquiry, the use of

questions to stimulate and expand thinking about what has been read, experienced, or

seen (VanTassel-Baska, 2003). In addition, literature circles provide unique social spaces

for expanding previously developed comprehension skills, for building a rich vocabulary,

and for becoming thinking readers who look beyond the printed word as they interact and make meaning.

<div align="center">Definition of High-Ability Readers</div>

Gifted readers are defined as students who have been identified both as gifted and as reading on a level two or more years beyond their chronological grade placement (Catron & Wingenbach, 2001). Criteria for giftedness vary widely from school program to school program; however, it is generally agreed upon that gifted students are those who have outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance, and who require differentiated educational programs (beyond those normally provided by regular school programs) in order to realize their contribution to society (Marland, 1972). In addition, VanTassel-Baska (2005) offers that emphasis is placed on performance because the gifted reader quickly integrates prior knowledge and experience with text information, is comfortable and productive in the application of higher-level thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and is capable of integrating these skills to communicate outcomes from both print and non-print sources.

Gifted students are classified as precocious; they are advanced learners and can master new material rapidly ahead of other learners. They have the ability to memorize and learn rapidly, maintain a wide information base, and enjoy multiple interests (VanTassel-Baska, 1985). In addition to precocity, gifted students are characterized as intense learners. The intensity often manifests itself affectively in the domain of emotional responsiveness but this characteristic also has saliency in the cognitive realm (Maker, 1982; VanTassel-Baska, 1993). Furthermore, intensity is often demonstrated through the ability to focus and concentrate for long periods of time with complex

concepts. High-ability readers enjoy working on multiple levels simultaneously, such as problem solving complex, real-world problems that have many parts and perspectives to study (Feldhusen, 1993). As a result, curriculum planners purposely design instructional material around gifted students' characteristics of precocity, intensity, and complexity in order to match the nature and needs for these students.

<div align="center">Gifted Characteristics and the Reading Process</div>

Gifted readers may intuitively develop reading skills prior to formal instruction or may learn to read at an accelerated pace after entering school (Clark, 2002). By the time gifted readers reach secondary school, cognitive processing or linguistic interaction with print occurs at a level of sophistication even though the reader may not be aware of this occurrence (Wingenbach, 1983). In addition, gifted readers usually understand difficult and new vocabulary through the use of context clues, semantic and syntactic analyses, rereading, and connecting to prior experiences (Maker, 1982; VanTassel-Baska, 1993). In actuality, these students have progressed beyond the skill acquisition stage and have internalized their own word attack processes. Clark (1979) explicates that "differential cognitive characteristics of the gifted play an integral part in the high level of reading performance that gifted readers demonstrate" (p. 163). As a result, gifted readers are likely to absorb extraordinary quantities of information, possess a high degree of retentiveness and advanced comprehension, exhibit high levels of language development, and possess thought processes that move at an accelerated pace (VanTassel-Baska, 2005). Based on these gifted reading behaviors, teachers who work with gifted readers intentionally provide advanced instruction and expose their students to reading concepts and materials not usually taught.

Gifted readers have the ability to read faster and understand more. They are able to interact personally while drawing on their own values and knowledge with the message put forth by the author. Thus, the literal message within the text moves quickly to a personal interpretation. Wingenbach (1983) states, "Reading at least for the gifted reader, has become an interactive process of different knowledge sources within the reader and within the print" (p. 9). In fact, gifted readers generally process text top down, adding their own knowledge and experience (Anderson, 1977; Brown, 1977; Johnson, 1981). According to Pearson and Johnson (1972), comprehension is more than just recording and discussing what is read, but involves a great deal of inference making. From this stance, gifted readers interpret and alter what they read in accordance with their prior knowledge about the topic. In conjunction, gifted readers are also metacognitively aware of which strategies they need or what activities will be most effective to implement within their reading process. They intuitively progress to metacognition. As Guthrie (1982) explains, "The emphasis in metacognitive studies is on how people take control of their own learning and regulate their attention and integrative efforts to comprehend new ideas and concepts" (p. 512). While gifted readers appear to intuitively develop and use comprehension and metacognitive strategies early in their reading development, the fact remains that reading instruction should be differentiated in order to sharpen and refine these developed skills.

<div align="center">Curriculum Differentiation</div>

Because all students are not alike, differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary so that students have multiple options for obtaining information and meaning making (Tomlinson, 1999). To

differentiate instruction is to recognize students' varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, interests, and to react responsively (Hall, 2002), based on the intent that maximizing each student's academic growth and individual educational success will in turn meet each student's needs in the learning process. It is respect for the unique characteristics of each learner (Tomlinson, 2002). Therefore, adaptation and modification of advanced learning expectations should also be included in the concept of differentiation for high-ability learners. VanTassel-Baska (2003) contends that the curricula demands for gifted learners should be adapted to gifted students' needs for advancement, depth, and complexity, and Winebrenner (2000) articulates that creative thinking should be nurtured through different perspectives, open-ended learning experiences, and opportunity for problem solving. When teachers enable their high-end students to experience novel activities that are specifically matched to their students' needs, they are engaging their students in a qualitative learning experience that consists of core knowledge about the world, but also opportunities for their students to think at higher levels (Welte, 1996).

<p align="center">Key Features That Guide Differentiation</p>

Because the curricular level for gifted learners should be adapted to the gifted students' need for advancement, depth, and complexity (Van-Tassel-Baska, 2003), Tomlinson (2005) details several key features that are specific to a differentiated gifted program. The essential components are content, process, and product differentiation.

Content differentiation (Tomlinson, 2005) refers to what is taught as well as to how it is taught. Specifically, it requires the teacher to adapt or modify material according to the students' learning traits. In concept-based teaching, the focus is on key concepts,

generalizations, and principles rather than mere facts. This allows for curriculum compacting in which advanced learners can "test out" of a unit or topic and skip over part or all of the whole-class activities, using the time to pursue greater challenges of interest to them. Teachers can use multiple texts and supporting materials to appeal to students' varied interests.

Accordingly, Tomlinson (2005) defines process differentiation as the lesson process or the activities planned for students to make sense of the learning materials. A differentiated process for high-ability learners should entail high-level thinking and require the use of a key skill to understand a central concept. Further, content and sense-making activities can be differentiated by interest, readiness, and learning style.

The third component, product differentiation, refers to the product assignments that should help students individually or in groups, rethink, use, and extend what they have learned over a long period of time. Assignments can be presented in writing, orally, or through multimedia presentations, but the goal is for high-ability students to demonstrate with understanding what has been expected of them in terms of core learning goals, with quality, and multiple options for expressing their learning (Tomlinson, 2005).

Kaplan (2005) refers to curriculum that is modified for content, process, and product differentiation as the *layered approach* and offers support for this approach by stating:

> Altering the content, processes or product elements of the curriculum equation provides opportunities to differentiate the core curriculum for gifted students. Recognizing those elements that are appropriate to differentiate the curriculum for gifted students, the teacher as curriculum designer can modify one, some, or all elements of the core curriculum (p. 112).

When teachers learn to differentiate instruction, they began to view their roles as

organizers and creators of learning opportunities, rather than controllers of knowledge (Tomlinson & George, 2004). They craft learning opportunities that involve their students in meaningful, sense-making activities while acquiring new knowledge. In addition, teachers who differentiate instruction perceive their role as coach or facilitator and gradually release the responsibility for learning to their students. Correspondingly, these teachers focus on listening to their students and know how to respond to the reality of learner variance (Brandt, 1998).

Enrichment as Differentiation

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (2009) defines giftedness as students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the core curriculum in order to fully develop those capabilities. Such activities are frequently referred to as enrichment activities that are tailored to provide challenging experiences that can strengthen the overall academic process for gifted students (Winebrenner, 2000). While enrichment programs comprise many different models, Roberts (2005) enumerates three common components found in enrichment models that are: (1) exposure to concepts, principles, and skills beyond the regular standard course of study, (2) extension of the regular curriculum but emphasis on more in-depth study of the stated goals and objectives, and (3) concept development through inductive thinking processes.

The Enrichment Triad Model

The Enrichment Triad (Renzulli, 1977) is a frequently implemented model that can be described as a hierarchy of learning experiences that consists of three phases.

Type I enrichment consists of exploratory activities that are designed to expose gifted students to a wide variety of topics and areas of possible interests. This phase provides students the freedom to search for a time; however, students then decide upon a specific area for an in-depth investigation (Renzulli & Reis, 1997). The second phase, Type II enrichment, comprises a group of training activities that are designed to develop the intellectual, affective, and social skills necessary for investigation. The Type II activities include: (1) process-oriented activities with advanced problem-solving skills, (2) open-ended exercises that provide for a wide range of responses that enable children with superior thinking power to be challenged, and (3) high level cognitive processing that prepares children to work productively in advanced fields of study. The final phase, Type III enrichment, includes the examination and pursuit of real problems by individual students or small groups to accomplish a purpose. In this phase, students appropriate methods of inquiry and emphasis is on new learning through discovery, rather than recall of old information through new means (Tannenbaum, 1983).

For this study, Type II and Type III enrichment provided appropriate curricula differentiation because the high-ability sixth-grade readers were asked to question what they read, confront their personal values, and grapple with real-world problems that characters faced in the literature they read. The aim was for the high-ability learners to begin to understand their membership in a cultural and literary community through diverse literature that fostered new learning through discovery.

The Integrated Curriculum Model

The Integrated Curriculum Model (ICM) (VanTassel-Baska, 1986, 1992, 1993) is a newer approach to talent development that integrates appropriate differentiation for

gifted learners with academic areas of study. The model specifically addresses the cognitive and affective domains of high-ability students while attending to the characteristics of precocity, intensity, and complexity that gifted learners possess. First, the ICM centers on intense, diagnostic-prescriptive approaches to continually ensure that new learning occurs for gifted students and that instruction is adjusted accordingly. This requires that teachers determine what students already know and implement strategies for new learning opportunities. A second feature of ICM is to promote opportunities that provide higher-order thinking and processing by exposing students to complex levels of information. The final component of ICM involves attention to learning experiences that centers on major themes and issues that pertain to real world applications. Based on the current trend that gifted students are being served in self-contained classrooms or heterogeneous settings, the ICM is a synthesis of three documented approaches to curriculum development for gifted and talented learners (Benbow & Stanley, 1983; Drake & Burns, 2004) that is responsive to their unique needs.

Problem-Based Learning and Creative Problem-Solving

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a pedagogical strategy for focusing on significant, real-world situations (Parnes, 1967).This type of learning involves finding and focusing on a "messy" problem or a problem with incomplete information, identifying relevant information, categorizing, critically analyzing, and synthesizing that information, and effectively communicating the results. Authentic and experiential learning is the vehicle through which everything from basic skills to advanced content and processes come together in the form of student-developed products (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2003). PBL is typically done in small discussion groups where students

must engage in inquiry and the teacher's role becomes one of facilitator or resource guide.

Creative problem solving (CPS) is a way of thinking and a process for finding acceptable solutions to potential or identified problems (Osborn, 1963; Parnes, 1967; Treffinger & Isaksen, 1992, 2005). Although CPS can be applied individually, problems are solved most effectively by a team of learners who can generate more ideas. The major processes associated with CPS are: (1) mess finding - an effort to identify a situation that presents a challenge, (2) data finding - an effort to identify all known facts related to the situation, (3) problem finding - an effort to identify all the possible problem statements and then to isolate the most important, (4) idea finding - an effort to identify as many solutions to the problem statement as possible, (5) solution finding – to use a list of selected criteria to choose the best solution for action, and (6) acceptance finding – to make every effort to gain acceptance for the solution, determine a plan of action, and implement the solution. The ultimate goal of CPS is for students to be generative learners and to move away from deductive thinking to investigative, inductive creative thinking in situations that have real-world value (Parnes, 1988).

Autonomous Learner Model

Betts and Kercher (1981) define autonomous learners as those students who solve problems and explore new ideas through a combination of divergent and convergent thinking with little help from their instructors. As a result, Betts and Kercher developed the autonomous learner model (ALM) to promote self-directed learning for gifted students and to foster independence, skill and concept development, and positive attitudes within the emotional and social domains. The goal is to move students toward the role of

learners who control the learning process and for teachers to adopt the role of facilitator. Further, the ALM advocates the development of students' love for learning by focusing on in-depth lifelong learning, rather than studying the breadth of a topic. Specifically, the model includes five major dimensions that include: (1) orientation – group building activities and self-development, (2) individual development – interpersonal and intrapersonal understanding, (3) enrichment – explorations, cultural activities, and community services, (4) seminars – small group presentations consisting of problematic, controversial, and advanced knowledge topics, and (5) in-depth study – individual projects of self-interests.

The essence of higher-end learning that ICM, PBL, CPS, and ALM promote is applying relevant knowledge and skills to solving real-life problems. This type of learning is supported by social constructivist philosophy that contends that thinking and learning are influenced by the structure of the activity in which one participates (Vygotsky, 1978) and the structure of the activity directs attention to the meaning-making resources in the learning environment. Vygotsky (1987) further postulates that social interaction, guided by inquiry, makes the implicit thinking structures that are underneath the lesson framework explicit for students. These experiences translate into authentic opportunities for gifted students to increase their ability to think productively.

<div align="center">Needs of Gifted Readers</div>

Durkin (1981) cites a great void in the teaching of comprehension skills, the area where gifted readers should be spending their time. Questions tend to be at a low level of thinking and any attention to higher-level activities, concentrates on assessment and practice rather than actual instruction. Amerin and Berliner (2002) reinforce this point

through a study of high-stakes testing. Faced with the threat of sanctions and pressure

from school administrators and the public, public school teachers have responded by

placing greater emphasis on test preparation, such as spending an inordinate amount of

time on drills, rote memorization of facts, and test taking skills in order to increase the

likelihood that their students will improve test scores. This trend has had devastating

effects on reading programs for the gifted learner.

  Experts in the field of gifted education (Maker, 1982; VanTassel-Baska, 1993)

have stressed that a program for the gifted reader should include concentrated work in

three types of reading: (1) critical reading (2) creative reading, and (3) inquiry reading.

As a result, Spires (1999) offers ways for gifted students to become critical readers by

emphasizing the need for high-ability readers to read multiple texts on the same topic in

order to understand whose values are being promoted in these different versions. Mellor

and Patterson (2000) concur and find that the use of multiple texts on the same theme or

topic gives students the opportunity to disrupt the notion that textual meaning is fixed.

Reading from a resistant perspective is another approach to critical reading and affords

students the opportunity to explore how a text is constructed based on different identities

such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion (Foss & Carpenter,

2002). Subsequently, the types of materials used in a reading program may help to

instantiate a critical reading program. While fiction is often analyzed in the upper grades,

there is also a need for more expository material, such as newspapers, news magazines,

and research findings. Since these materials are necessary for efficient, informed living,

they should be a basic part of a critical reading program (Catron & Wingenbach, 2001).

  Creative reading may be regarded as the highest and most neglected aspect of

reading (Torrence, 1965). It involves synthesis, integration, application, and extension of ideas. A story may be dramatized through the use of music, dance, or visual arts, or a character or theme may be developed in a new and different way (Boothby, 1980). Crucial to creative as well as critical reading, inquiry reading is also important for the gifted reader. Cassidy (1981) urges teachers to utilize inquiry reading for gifted students because this form of reading allows gifted students a forum in which they can conduct research on a topic of interest to them and develop their reading and writing skills in a meaningful context.

A program for the gifted should include critical, creative, and inquiry reading. Their strong reading abilities require modifications in their reading program if they are to achieve their potential. In addition, curricular emphasis for these students should be on reading to learn rather than learning to read (Maker, 1982; VanTassel-Baska, 1993). Today, what is essential for gifted students at this time is to realize that their spoken and written words can have the power to influence others; to influence others in a positive direction in confronting societal issues of power and dominance. This would involve knowledge of critical literacy practices.

Definition and Description of Critical Literacy

The identities that students bring to classrooms are shaped by prior experiences in school, community, and family contexts (Gee, 1996). These lived experiences contribute to the way students speak, styles of interaction, the values they hold, and the expectations they have found for school and learning (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Literate practices further shape identities as students interact in social, meaning-making activities around texts. From this stance, teaching students to comprehend texts and

interact with textual genres is a practice of "situated meaning" (Gee, 2001) whereby particular discussions are brought to bear by readers who learn to view reading in the contexts of power.

The term critical literacy is an approach to reading that focuses on the political, social, cultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young adolescents' lives. It is an approach that teaches readers to become critically conscious of their own values and responsibilities in society (Ciardiello, 2004), but more importantly, critical literacy provides a framework that engages students in reader response activities that require them to discover their voice and take action to change their world (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Further, Luke and Freebody (1997) contend that critical literacy opens up possibilities for social change by teaching students to recognize that literacy often works by opposition in a system that defines some members as inferior.

Critical literacy in the classroom allows students to bring their own lived experiences into discussions, offering them opportunities for participation, engagement in higher levels of reading and discussion, and to become empowered as readers and young adults. Banks (1993) argues "students should be given opportunities to create knowledge themselves and identify ways in which the knowledge they construct is influenced and limited by their own assumptions, positions, and experiences" (p. 11). From this stance, critical literacy can assist students in becoming more reflective about their perspectives and the origins of their perspectives. In conjunction, critical literacy allows readers to critically examine the text from their own unique lens. Comber (2001) describes critical literacy as allowing students to take an analytical stance and "involve people using their language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to

question practices of privilege and injustice" (p. 2). Shannon (1995) offers a further

understanding of critical literacy by stating:

> Critical perspectives push the definition of literacy beyond traditional decoding or
> encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text or society until it
> becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture, to recognize
> connections between one's life and the social structure, to believe that change in
> one's life and the lives of others and society are possible as well as desirable and
> to act on this new knowledge in order to foster equal and just participation in all
> decisions that affect and control our lives (p. 83).

<div align="center">Origin of Critical Literacy</div>

Critical literacy has a complicated philosophical history. With roots in critical

social theory, it is concerned with the alleviation of human suffering and the creation of a

more just world through the critique of existing social and political problems and the

posing of alternatives (Kellner, 1989). The word "critique" from this perspective,

involves criticism of oppression and exploitation in a struggle for a better society.

According to Held (1980), critical social theorists view the world through critical lens

and see dominant groups of people within a specific society as the primary power

holders. To the critical social theorist, hegemony is comprised of overt, covert, and

subversive methods of replicating social conditions for the purpose of holding power and

to serve special interests (McLaren, 1988). From critical social theory, critical literacy

evolved.

Freire's (1985) commitment to literacy pedagogy moved the concerns of critical

social theory from philosophy to education. Like the critical social theorists, Freire saw

language as the key mechanism for social reconstruction. For him, the very pedagogy of

literacy had to be transformed to make central the issues of justice and the struggle for

emancipation (Taylor, 1993). The pedagogical goal for Freire was the development of

critical consciousness. Students read texts and the world critically to become actors against oppressive situations. He believed that being critically more aware of one's world, leads one to have greater control of it, and he believed that one must read the world in order to read the word. The implication is that critical awareness is accompanied by the ethical and social responsibility that students have to change the injustices in their society.

<div align="center">Language and Power</div>

Critical literacy involves examining the conditions that exists in the classroom, those that strip the student of any poser to influence his or her learning. Through an examination of how words and grammatical structures shape images of the world, critical literacy brings conscious awareness that literacy is never neutral but assumes an ideology (Morgan, 1997). However, reading from a critical stance involves more than reading the words, but requires readers to "read the world" so as not to be manipulated by it (Shor & Freire, 1987). Lankshear and McLaren (1994) offer that the type of engagement in reading and writing that critical literacy demands, enables humans to both understand and engage in the politics of life that leads to a more democratic society.

Critical literacy additionally focuses on empowering learners to become change-agents engaged in social action. It consists of negotiating real-world experiences that will engage students in response, inquiry, and social action (Ciardiello, 2004). Students engage in various activities designed to give them opportunities to use language persuasively in addressing a particular issue, select an issue and take a stance, and use argumentation to interpret information effectively. Typically, curriculum is subject-mattered and knowledge-based. However, knowledge from a critical perspective is

transformational; it is praxis, reflection and action. It is an open examination of public

issues and opportunities for learners to communicate and share.

<div align="center">Critical Pedagogy in Today's Classrooms</div>

Critical literacy curricula today address important societal issues. Cervetti,

Pardeles, and Damico (2001) posit that critical pedagogy, designed to focus on

controversial issues, such as race, gender, class, and politics, can best be achieved in a

classroom with students of diverse cultures. In addition, teachers who practice critical

literacy bring the social injustices and cultural differences to the forefront of their literacy

curriculum so literacy is viewed as a social issue (Ciardiello, 2004). These practitioners

are concerned with raising awareness for whom the audience was intended, who plays a

dominant role, and whose voices are missing in a socially stratified world. Teachers of

critical literacy offer a student-centered classroom that focuses on dialogue. Dialogue is

crucial, for it is the vehicle by which students can discover their voice and begin to

question who has power and who benefits from the power (Comer, 2001). Texts are

perceived to contain author biases that serve their interests (Luke & Freebody, 1997) and

texts are to be interrogated to discover those purposes. Further, Luke and Freebody state

that texts have multiple meanings told from multiple perspectives and often silence

others' points-of-view. Readers assume the power to view authors' words in alternate

ways. In this process, students become more than code breakers, meaning-makers, and

text users, but assume the role of text critics (Luke & Freebody, 1999) as they enact

different literacy practices in the classroom. Subsequently, students read in opposition to

texts to understand the sociocultural influences and to use their language to inquire and

explore how their personal lives are affected by a world that is socially and politically

stratified (Giroux, (1993).

In conjunction, critical literacy teachers adapt popular culture and forms of media literacy into their curricula. Researchers in the field stress that students develop critical awareness by interacting, analyzing, and interpreting the popular culture of life in which they are exposed everyday (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Mraz, Heron, & Wood, 2003). Correspondingly, Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood further state that as students become critically literate, they are better prepared for the stereotypes and targeted audiences encountered in newspaper articles and various forms of media literacy. Students can accept the implicit messages or reject them. In addition, the explosion of technology in the 21st century requires students to become literacy proficient through multiple modes of learning, and thus, The New London Group (1996) encourages classroom teachers to adopt "new literacies" into their pedagogy. Subsequently, reading from a critical stance requires both the ability and the deliberate tendency to think critically about, to analyze and evaluate information sources, such as texts, media, lyrics, and hypertexts, to meaningfully question their origin and purpose, and to take action by presenting alternative perspectives. Finally, critical literacy fosters a classroom culture that is supportive and student-centered so that students can re-envision their world, discover their voices, and create a more caring, respectful society (Ciardiello, 2004).

<center>Findings from Research</center>

Literature is replete with an examination of critical literacy in the classroom (Comber & Nixon, 1999; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Vasquez, 2004) and as a result, the majority of research conducted has been through the development of case studies (Hagood, 2002; Nussbaum, 2002; Powell, Cantrell, &

Adams, 2001) in the field to observe what role critical literacy plays in fostering

collaborative learning and the role critical literacy plays in promoting responsible

democratic action. In addition, a plethora of research has been conducted to determine

how a critical literacy approach might sit in relation to conventional approaches to

reading and writing, and listening, speaking, and viewing (Eken, 2001; Hertzberg, 2001;

Moller, 2004; Rush, 2004).

Critical Literacy: Collaboration of Learners

Collaboration involves the ability to read, write, speak, and listen while working

in small groups to achieve intended aims, problem-solve, and understand the value of

collective agency. Nussbaum (2002) found that poor inner-city language-minority sixth-

grade students could improve their ability to participate in critical discussions about the

existing social conditions and power relations in their city when introduced to a complex,

ill-defined task that required them to actually redesign parts of their city through

cooperative learning, interact through discourse, and explore critical social and power

issues that would be fair and equitable to its citizens. The results further

showed the amount of talk by the language-minority students increased overtime and

simple responses transformed into more mature, semantically correct responses. In

addition, the minority students' questioning skills became more involved, and the

students increased their comprehension of the social and political norms at work in their

city.

In conjunction, Hertzberg, (2001) found that the language of drama needs to be

articulated within a critical literacy framework as drama is another medium that can be

used to help students interpret and communicate the meanings of themes in narrative

texts through collective interaction. The case study was designed to explore how the use of still images could be interpreted through the participants' creations of still bodies in order for the participants to see things from different perspectives and to experience someone else's reality. The researcher concluded that when the participants took on the role of the character in the text, they were better able to develop empathy for the character's motivations. Correspondingly, results showed that the use of drama strategies permitted the students to actively engage with the emerging themes and issues that exist in real-world contexts and collaborate on their interpretations.

Responsible Democratic Action

Powell, Cantrell, and Adams (2001) reported that words do matter in a study of fourth-graders in a Kentucky elementary school. In a study that involved a group of fourth graders who were concerned about a mountain being overrun by coal miners and lumberjacks, the fourth graders researched the many stakeholders' points-of-view in order to address their concerns from a position of knowledge. The focus was to show the children there is always more than one side to a story or more than one perspective to consider and to teach the students how to offer alternatives through responsible democratic action. As a result, the students reached a compromise with the coal miners and other Kentucky businessmen and saved 1850 acres of Black Mountain from destruction by strip-mining and logging.

Similarly, Vasquez found that a kindergarten class, who petitioned their school about the "dominant school definition of community" (2001, p. 65) when the students were not invited to attend the annual 'French Café', discovered the power of words can bring about changes. The students won the opportunity to be invited the following

school-year and made the 'French Café' an all-student event for future cafes.

Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Viewing the World

Research on the educational importance of introducing critical literacy into classroom practices has also examined the connections between critical pedagogy and collaborative reading. Moller, (2004) examined one fourth-grade student's participation in a heterogeneous literature discussion group who had difficulty with print-based literature. The purpose was to understand what role the learning environment and the role of the teacher, peers, and the chosen texts played in the student's learning, and what elements of her learning were most empowering. The research concluded that with explicit teaching strategies, the student became an important contributor in literature discussions by using her personal knowledge to counter others' perspectives. Further results showed that the focal student developed a greater understanding of textual content and increased her abilities to decode and comprehend. Rush (2004) found that critical pedagogy increased students reading competencies, as students were better able to understand, analyze, apply, and evaluate information and concepts from visual, written, spoken, and mass-mediated texts in a literature discussion context. In conjunction, research has revealed that a critical literacy program that focused on tracking and remediation policies on a college campus permitted the college students in a developmental reading class to develop a voice about socially-determined inequities in their lives, to develop metacognitive awareness, and to reconstruct their identities as critical readers and writers in an academic environment (Lesley, 2001).

Autobiography has been used with practicing women teachers as a way to help them reclaim their voices and roles in education (Grumet, 1988). As a result, the use of

critical autobiographies has become a method of writing in urban secondary schools because critical literacy recognizes the power of narrative to foster empathetic understanding for the experiences and struggles of urban minority students and to develop a voice about socially determined inequities. Sharkey (2000) found that when students were given the opportunity to craft critical autobiographies, the writing process allowed student voices to be heard and the collective struggle to develop successive drafts provided not only a meaningful lesson in the classroom, but built a community of writers and participants as they grappled to understand their roles in a real-world context. Research results further showed that the critical writing assignments allowed the students to develop metacognitive awareness, and to reconstruct their identities as critical readers and writers in an academic context.

Research into the critical literacy domain of listening, speaking, and viewing has examined students' abilities to suspend initial judgment or avoid prejudgment in order to consider diverse perspectives. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) found that by teaching students to examine the power relationships in videos, films, and illustrations, students learned to seek multiple perspectives, become critical thinkers about the values conveyed in visual messages, and comprehend from a critical stance. Additionally, the research determined that strategic practices in critical literacy had enabled students to expand their reasoning and deepen their understanding of those who represented power and those who did not, allowed students to seek out multiple perspectives and become active thinkers through juxtaposition and reading from a critical stance. In conjunction, Eken (2001) found that critical media education could develop students' critical and creative powers through analysis and production of media artifacts that can facilitate their ability to

understand the validity of the information received and provide practice with media deconstruction skills that can be transferred to other formal and informal learning experiences. The researcher further determined that when students were given the opportunity to explore the sociocultural influences in films, they increased their ability to analyze and detect the ideology and manipulation underpinning media texts in the context of their own historical, political, and economic existence.

Reading from a critical stance requires not only reading and understanding the words, but reading the world (Freire, 1970) and understanding a text's purpose so readers will not be manipulated by it (Harste, 2003). From this stance, critical literacy's transformative potential in the classroom can serve as an important catalyst in the process of students' developing their own use of language to challenge injustice in the world. Through discursive practices and challenging the norm, critical literacy equips students with the language and knowledge they need to make personal responses and to assume the social responsibility to resist injustices in their lives (Christensen, 2000).

More than fifty years ago, Dewey (1938) wrote, ". . . [it is] the total social set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged that is most important in interpreting his or her experiences" (p. 45). Transformation of the classroom world, in order to understand the world, is not a passive process, but an active process that will challenge and disrupt the ideals for the purpose of relieving the social inequities and injustices that are replicated in today's schools.

<div align="center">Multicultural Literature</div>

Multicultural literature is literature that reflects a power differential between groups of people (Banks, 1994). To elaborate on this point, multicultural literature

addresses a wide range of perspectives, with emphasis on members of society who have

been marginalized because of race, ability, age, social class, religion, and sexual

orientation (Muse, 1997). However, Sleeter and McLaren (1995) assert "many White

educators have pulled multicultural education away from social struggles and redefined it

to mean the celebration of ethnic foods and festivals" (p. 12). In addition, some

classroom teachers' attempts to establish a multicultural literacy program have been

ineffectual because the teachers themselves ". . . have little contact with people of color

in their everyday lives and are, therefore, much more dependent upon cultural stereotypes

and assumptions when trying to imagine the situations of others in American society"

(Wills, 1998, p. 385). As a result, scholars in the field urge teachers to transform their

own thinking and allow themselves to step into another's shoes and to experience

another's life, rather than reading side-by-side with their students and pouring over

endless facts (Boyd, 1997; Campbell & Wittenberg, 1980; Stover, 2000). To state

succinctly, teachers must embrace the idea of integrating multicultural literature with

their teaching in order for young adolescents to connect to other cultures and learn about

other adolescents their age who grapple with life's challenges and problems

<div align="center">Purposes for Using Multicultural Literature</div>

The purpose for using multicultural literature in literacy programs is to expose

students to differing viewpoints and life experiences. Zitlow and Stover (1998) articulate

that providing young adolescents with the opportunity and ability to see how others

experience life is paramount for young adolescents who are in the stage of becoming self-

determining actors in their community. Correspondingly, Ford, Tyson, Howard, and

Harris (2000) reinforce this point by endorsing multicultural literature in the classroom so

that young adolescents can broaden their conception of self within their world. As Boyd

states, "In a profound sense, children look to story for self" (1997, p. 107). Not seeing

oneself or representations of one's culture in literature has been shown to prompt feelings

of marginalization; a point emphasized by Colby and Lyon (2004) who assert, "Students

need to be able to make connections between literature and their everyday lives. To state

succinctly, children need to receive affirmation of themselves and their culture through

literature" (p. 24).

A further purpose for using multicultural literacy in the classroom is to equip

students with the functional skills, attitudes, and duties needed to become adults who will

confront social justice issues in their communities and in the world. Eeds and Wells

(1989) assert that provocative texts have the potential for creating rich discussions.

Therefore, when Freire (1970) refers to reading the world, this involves more than

students mastering the basic reading and writing skills. Reading the world requires

students to question dominant forces and institutionalized practices that make the world

unjust for many in school and to live in a democratic world. Literature can be powerful; it

can be reaffirming and transforming. From this stance, readers should look to literature

for the missing voices in their community and to interrupt the inner boundary of prejudice

and social injustice (Greene, 1995).

Multicultural literature provides the means by which students read, analyze, and

challenge, and reflect on important societal issues. Cai (1992) adds to this point by

articulating that multicultural literature offers students the opportunity to look beyond the

differences and take a closer look at the cultural connectedness among mankind. For

many students, adolescence is a period when students question and search as they try to

understand their place in the world. Stover (2000) posits that reading multicultural literature provides young adolescents the opportunity to see the universal similarities that students face each day, such as coming to grips with a set of moral, ethical, religious, or political principles, developing peer relations, and defining sexuality. At the same time, young adolescents are confronted with issues of prejudice and misunderstanding. Cai (2002) states,

> Ignorance and prejudice are two main stumbling blocks to mutual understanding and appreciation among ethnic groups. To remove these blocks we need more culturally specific books that give readers insights into cultures other than their own (p. 25).

The Rationale for Multicultural Literacy

One basic assumption in multicultural education is that multicultural literature is an important instructional tool that helps students develop understanding and respect for people of different cultures other than their own. However, research reveals that there are clear cultural differences in the ways students respond to literature. Rosenblatt's (1938, 1976) seminal work on reader response theory acknowledges that the reader's past experiences with literature, together with the purpose of the reading and the social-situated circumstances in which the reading is done, all have an effect. Purves, Foshay, and Hansson (1973) found after an extensive study of ten different countries that readers do reflect the varied traditions and teaching emphases to which they were exposed. Further research has determined that cultural knowledge does influence students' understanding and interpretation of texts (Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirley, & Anderson, 1982), peer group attitudes and values reflect the attitudes of the local community (Ianni, 1989), and students hold tightly to attitudes reflective of their own cultural groups (Delpit, 1995; Graham, 1985; Heath, 1983). In conjunction, Jordan

(1997) found that students read out of their own experiences, personalizing their responses and often supplying information in order to understand about cultures different than their own. At times, students incorporate what they read into their own view of the world. As a consequence, students think they have heard another voice; yet in actuality, it is only their voice replayed (Dressel, 2005).

A Forum for Gifted Students to Enter Criticality

Response to literature involves more than identifying the characters, themes, and experiences in a story with one's own life, it also involves constructing alternative versions of reality and self (Hagood, 2002). For readers to construct such alternatives, they first must be cognizant of their own ideologies and how these perspectives shape their responses (Luke, 2000). Beach (1997) found that students who benefit from power and privilege are often unaware of their ideologies because educational systems reflect power and privilege as the norm. They are never given opportunities to challenge their ideals and perspectives and as a result, privileged readers are unable to associate with cultures different from their own.

Using multicultural literature in gifted education provides those opportunities for gifted students to challenge the norm and question their perspectives. To meet the needs of these students, teachers create culturally responsive classrooms whereby gifted students understand and negotiate differences across cultures and students learn to be pluralistic in their thought, behavior, and affect (Au, 1993; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ford et al. (1999) stress that culturally responsive classrooms provide a framework for gifted readers because (1) they challenge gifted students by promoting critical thinking and reasoning, (2) they meet the needs of minority students because they are

multicultural, and (3) they expose white students to quality multicultural literature and important multicultural issues.

<center>Strategies to Promote Criticality with Multicultural Literature</center>

Luke (2000) asserts that students must develop the critical abilities necessary to evaluate the ideological stance of a variety of texts. By raising questions that promote high-level thinking about multicultural issues and themes and by providing experiences that promote cultural empathy, gifted students can begin to engage in criticality. In other words, readers need to develop the skills to determine how books bring differences into visibility, how books position readers in relation to differences, what kinds of authors write what kinds of texts, whose interests are served, and which voices are silent or absent. Luke further argues that teachers need to engage students with diverse "texts, images, information, data, signs, and symbols" (2003, p. 21) in order to disrupt their limited ideologies so they are free to connect to other worlds and cultures.

Mellor and Patterson (2000) recommend that multiple texts be used as entry to criticality. Reading multiple texts allows students to understand authorship as situated activity; the premise is to disrupt the idea that textual meaning is fixed. Students are instructed to consider how the text is constructed, by whom, and for what purposes so they can recognize that texts not true in any absolute sense of the word, but rather, what the author considers to be truth.

Reading from a resistant perspective introduces students to the idea that texts can be interpreted from multiple positions (Alford, 2001). Students are encouraged to unpack different layers of meaning and to examine how the same reader can approach a text from different identities, such as race, class, and gender. Reading from a resistant perspective

teaches students to see how their values, coupled with the author's stance, can position them to form certain interpretations.

Juxtaposing texts, photos, videos, and lyrics to present multiple perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), problem posing through questioning strategies to determine gaps and silences in literature (Fairclough, 1989), and creating alternate texts through alternate points-of-view (Harste, 2003) are additional classroom practices that teachers can implement when embracing a critical stance. According to Harste et al. (2000),

> The best teachers think about curriculum in terms of what conversations they want their students to be engaged in, not in terms of what concepts they wanted to introduce through reading or direct instruction (p. 511).

For multicultural literature to be an effective tool for helping gifted sixth-grade readers learn about cultural diversity and act upon improving intercultural understanding, teachers must use it proficiently. Classroom practices that involve students reading and writing as "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1992) are not merely communicative acts but need to be part of the habits, customs, and behaviors that shape classroom practices.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers. Current research demonstrates that the development of reading comprehension skills is a functionally organized process that is developed through socially mediated experiences (Au, 1995; Au & Raphael, 2000; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Gee, 2001; Luke, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Brabham and Vilaume (2000) found that literature circles can gradually enable students to take responsibility for reading, comprehending, interpreting,

developing discussion for text, and engaging in increasingly more complex levels of reading and thinking. Because all students are not alike, differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary so that students have multiple options for obtaining information and meaning making (Tomlinson, 2005). To differentiate instruction is to recognize students' varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, interests, and to react responsively based on the intent that maximizing each student's academic growth and individual educational success will in turn meet each student's needs in the learning process. It is respect for the unique characteristics of each learner (Tomlinson, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1986). Therefore, adaptation and modification of advanced learning expectations should also be included in the concept of differentiation for high-ability learners. Gifted readers have the ability to read faster and understand more. They are able to interact personally while drawing on their own values and knowledge with the message put forth by the author (VanTassel-Baska, 1998). Based on these gifted reading behaviors, teachers who work with gifted readers should provide advanced instruction and expose their students to reading concepts and materials not usually taught. However, Durkin (1981) cites a great void in the teaching of comprehension skills; the area where gifted readers should be spending their time. Questions tend to be at a low level of thinking and any attention to higher-level activities, concentrates on assessment and practice rather than actual instruction. Luke (2000) asserts that students must develop the critical abilities necessary to evaluate the ideological stance of a variety of texts. By raising questions that promote high-level thinking about multicultural issues and themes and by providing experiences that promote cultural empathy, gifted students can begin to

engage in criticality. In other words, readers need to develop the skills to determine how books bring differences into visibility, how books position readers in relation to differences, what kinds of authors write what kinds of texts, whose interests are served, and which voices are silent or absent. Luke further argues that teachers need to engage students with diverse "texts, images, information, data, signs, and symbols" (2003, p. 21) in order for students to address their restricted ideologies and become free to connect to other worlds and cultures.

Critical literacy additionally focuses on empowering learners to become change-agents engaged in social action. It consists of negotiating real-world experiences that will engage students in response, inquiry, and social action (Ciardiello, 2004). Students engage in various activities designed to give them opportunities to use language persuasively in addressing a particular issue, select an issue and take a stance, and use argumentation to interpret researched information effectively. Typically, curriculum is subject-matter and knowledge-based. However, knowledge from a critical perspective is transformational; it is praxis, reflection and action. Reading from a critical stance requires not only reading and understanding the words, but "reading the world" and understanding a text's purpose so readers will not be manipulated by it (Freire, 1970). From this stance, critical literacy's transformative potential in the classroom can serve as an important catalyst in the process of high-ability students' developing their own use of language to challenge injustice in the world. Through discursive practices and challenging mainstream society, critical literacy equips students with the language and knowledge they need to make personal responses and to assume the social responsibility to resist injustices in their lives (Christensen, 2000).

The development of critical literacy, including the responses of readers and contextual practices that facilitate it and the influence of the multicultural text that evoke the responses from a sociocultural perspective adds a new dimension to the field of gifted literacy and gives high-ability readers a fresh alternative to literacy appropriation. Because literature circles group students together and encourage social interaction and discussion, it was crucial to examine how literature circles provided differentiated learning opportunities for gifted sixth-grade readers involved in a study of multicultural literature.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how the use of critical pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles functioned as a differentiated learning context for high-ability sixth-grade learners. In addition, this study investigated how strategic practices in critical literacy influenced high-ability students to read with a more critical eye and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs were shaped by what they read. Literature circles are a popular, literature-based reading strategy that promotes social interaction among groups of students who meet on a regular basis to create meaning from texts through discussion and collaboration (Daniels, 1994, 2002a). In addition, Kong and Pearson (2003) assert that literature circles provide spaces for student transformation. Specifically, literature circles are sites for continuing dialogic discourse, a forum to question and rewrite cultural narratives, and a context for discussion of multiple texts and viewpoints. In support, research has documented that literature circles provide a meaningful context for reading response activities through literature-based instruction (Jime′nez, 2001; Short, 1995). Subsequently, this study recognized the cognitive processes associated with constructing meaning from print, but expanded this view of reading to also include sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy, having proposed that interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for gifted sixth-grade readers.

This natural inquiry was methodologically eclectic, having made use of full participant observation as teacher-researcher and grounded theory development (Creswell, 1994; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1988; Spradley, 1980; Strauss & Corbin, 1997), using an ethnographic perspective to describe the literacy events, the collection of data, and the narrative findings. To achieve this purpose, this research study was framed by two research traditions (social constructivism and critical theory), each with a set of assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge, and the goals and aims of the research process. Transactional reading theories, as well as empirical research on multicultural literacy further informed this study. Subsequently, the relevant methodological components as a foundation for this study were organized into separate sections.

Accordingly, this chapter first addresses the theoretical perspectives that informed the method from which to investigate the research questions in this study. The chapter then addresses the salient features of an appropriate qualitative case study, including the characteristics of practitioner inquiry and the justification as to why this approach was suitable for the study. Following this discussion, a description of the research context, including the research site, gaining entry, the teacher and the participants in the study, the classroom reading program, and a brief research timeline are provided. Next, a discussion follows on the research procedures, the data sources and the data collection procedures, and the phases of data collection that followed traditional qualitative research conventions and procedures for case studies. In conjunction, a brief discussion follows on the data analysis techniques that are discussed in detail in Chapter Four. The final section in Chapter Three addresses the research limitations of this study, the research

delimitations, and the research integrity in terms of the specifications put forth by Lincoln (1995).

Theoretical Frameworks

Eisenhart (1991) has described a conceptual framework as "a skeletal structure of justification, rather than a skeletal of explanation" (p. 210). Specifically, Eisenhart offers that a conceptual framework is often composed of multiple theories that are brought together by a researcher in an attempt to address the research problem and to serve as a framework for gathering data, analyzing, and explaining the findings. It is a set of coherent ideas that are organized in a manner that makes them easy to communicate how and why a research project takes place and how to understand its activities. In addition, Green and McClelland (1999) further endorse the implementation of multiple perspectives for the expressive language that is made possible only through this combination, emphasizing that a multiple set of understandings provides the necessary theoretical languages in which to describe and explain the research work.

The conceptual framework in this study defined particular points-of-view and identified underlying assumptions from which the research questions were generated. Specifically, this study drew from ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2003; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Spradley, 1979), social constructivism (Au, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Moll, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1991), critical transformational theory (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997), and transactional theory of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1994; Smagorinsky, 2001). In light of this, it is necessary to examine each research tradition as to how each relates to a system of practices.

An Ethnographic Perspective

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) offer that an ethnographic perspective uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret how people think, believe, and behave. In conjunction, Green, Dixon, and Zaharlick (2003) state that an ethnographic perspective seeks to understand what members of a social group need to know, understand, and produce so that they can participate in culturally and socially acceptable ways within a certain social group. To arrive at this understanding, these researchers offer three principles that support and define an ethnographic perspective as: (1) a study of cultural practices, (2) a contrastive perspective, and (3) a holistic perspective. Because this study sought to examine and explain the cultural practices that emerged in the classroom and the manner in which these practices translated into learning opportunities for high-ability readers, an ethnographic perspective was assumed.

Cultural practices were important to this study because they provided the means by which a grounded theory of culture in the activities of literacy response within literature circles was constructed and further permitted a description regarding the nature of participation and interaction among gifted readers. Culture has been defined as "a historically situated, collective product constituted by the values, beliefs, perceptions, symbols, and other humanly created artifacts which are transmitted across generations through language and other mediums" (Misra & Gergen, 1993, p. 226). Because it is based on social construction, culture is interchangeable and can be "borrowed, blended, rediscovered, and reinterpreted" (Nagel, 1994, p. 162). Therefore, as students come into contact with different cultures through multicultural literacy, these interact with the self and can result in reprising a cultural identity that allows the self (Harre, 1987) to be

viewed as a participant in a multicultural world and to view the world from different perspectives. For purposes of this study, analyzing the situated meanings, social languages, and the cultural practices across reading activities while gifted sixth-grade readers made sense of their world provided insight into how culture influences behavioral responses and cognitive attributions.

Accordingly, an ethnographic perspective allowed for a contrastive approach which provided the basis for triangulating multiple perspectives of participants (students, teacher as practitioner, and teacher as researcher), theoretical assumptions, methodology, and data sources (journal entries, questionnaires, interviews, audio and videotapes, transcripts, and student artifacts). For purposes of this study, contrasting talk during literature discussions allowed for the emic and the etic perspectives (Geertz, 1973; Pike, 1967; Spindler, 1982, 1997) to be utilized.

In conjunction, the holistic perspective provided yet another lens for this study because the qualitative inquirer gathered data on multiple aspects of the setting under study in order to pull together a complete picture of the social dynamics of the particular situation (Patton, 2002). This means that at the time of data collection, each event or setting under study was understood as a complex system that was greater than its parts. For purposes of this study, the description and interpretation of sixth-grade high-ability readers' interaction in a social environment and the social environment of literature circles as the external context, was essential for the overall understanding of what was observed or said during interviews (Gee & Green, 1998).

Research studies with an ethnographic perspective view the classroom as a socially constructed context and acknowledge the patterns of social interaction in

classroom events and patterns of social interaction that occur in groups, such as the

groups formed for literature circles (Green & Dixon, 1993). More specifically, an

ethnographic perspective allows researchers to seek an understanding of what participants

do to create the culture in which they interact and how the culture develops over time.

Therefore, an ethnographic perspective provided the lens from which to describe the

learning culture in which the gifted readers socially interacted to construct meaning in

literacy events.

A Social Constructivist Perspective

Wertsch (1991) informs readers that one goal of a sociocultural understanding of

the mind is to develop a synthesis of human mental processes that acknowledge the

relationship between these processes and their cultural, historical, and institutional

contexts. In agreement with all theoretical approaches, basic assumptions underlie what

one is trying to describe and what one is explaining. A social constructivist perspective

provides the necessary lens to describe and explain how readers engage in socially

mediated experiences that facilitate construction of a deeper understanding of whole

concepts through learning experiences that are cognitively challenging within an

interactive social setting (Wertsch, 1985). Emphasis is placed on the social nature of

learning (Au, 2000; Moll, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978) as learning does not occur in isolation.

In conjunction, Au (1998) explicates that social constructivism is grounded in a realism

that is based on multiple mental constructions that are created by groups of people, as

well as individuals.

Social constructivists place significance on communities of learners versus

individual learners in regards to the attention of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In

addition, social constructivism further acknowledges that participation structures, roles, and instrumental and psychological tools, mediate students' attainment of educational outcomes, such as accomplished reading (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). As students are engaged in a reading activity arranged by a lesson framework, the reading instruction, strategy, and conceptual tools mediating the lesson will blend together with each other and form a bond that is comprised of the characteristics of the set of tools. These opportunities to learn are defined by the situational characteristics of the sources and the interacting members. From this point on, how students engage in reading activities and regulate their participation is fundamentally changed. The characteristics of the changes are related to the types of lesson structures and tools mediating the activity. Bloome (1985) refers to the socially constructed nature of classroom life as shared ways of interacting with text and shared interactional patterns between members of groups.

Because reality is created through exchanges of social processes, historically situated, social constructivists are involved in understanding how meaning is derived collectively among people (Au, 1998). Thus, the social nature of students makes the social surroundings in which they find themselves, such as literature circles, integral to their engagement with learning (Wertsch, 1985). In conjunction, the nature of discourse in literature circles helps to conceptualize the ways high-ability readers use language and assume socially situated identities to be recognized as members of a learning community and helps to understand situated meanings inherent in social interactions among members in a reading activity (Gee, 1996). Therefore, a sociocultural perspective provided the lens from which to describe, understand, and explain how learning took place within the context of literacy activities and social interaction as high-ability readers wove their own

connections between the textual themes discussed and their own prior knowledge based on language, culture, and social practices.

A Critical Transformative Theory Perspective

A critical theory perspective grounds the participants' reading experiences in the contexts of their lived experiences, views literacy as a social experience that is mediated by power relations associated with historical, cultural, political, and economic forces, and is dynamic and transformative in creating new social futures. Additionally, a critical perspective of literacy provides a language to describe how reading is influenced by the social, cultural, political, and historical forces that function as interrelated processes in socially situated experiences. Based upon Freire's (1973) critical pedagogy, the critical transformative stance consists of utilizing an "active, dialogical, critical method" that involves "changing the program content of education" (p. 45). The content is determined from "speaking the word" that means "names the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 69). It involves the process of moving toward a more humanizing and democratic way of life (Freire, Freire, & Macedo, 1998) that can be achieved through praxis. It involves engaging a humanizing relationship that promotes a true democratic, participatory experience. It requires people to take a hard look at reality, to become critically aware and caring citizens, and then put the lessons learned into practice. Further the task can be accomplished by stripping away the oppressive forces that surround students' lives, teaching students a language to do so, and taking action to liberate their world.

Asking high-ability readers to pay attention to things in a text they do not understand requires them to open their minds and to see others (Giroux, 1989). It is a process that requires students to think beyond their cultural parameters and look for

commonalities within different societies and cultures. Graham (1985) noted:

> . . . rather than adapting to their changing world and environment to realize 'a new perception of things,' students seem to react on presuppositions inherited from their parents and their culture, presuppositions that may be based on intolerance, resistance to change, and hostility (p. 1).

From this perspective, a critical transformative stance allowed the high-ability readers to hear another voice rather their own voice replayed (Dressel, 2005) and to act to change harmful stereotypes and social injustices in their world. In conjunction, a critical transformative perspective of literacy further provided the language to describe how the participants' reading was influenced by the social, cultural, political, and historical forces that functioned as interrelated processes during the socially situated experiences of literature circle discussions.

A Transactional Perspective of Reader Response Theory

The focus of investigation in this study involved literacy activities from which high-ability sixth-grade readers responded to reading. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reader response describes the process of reading engagement as a reader construction of the text and student response as a personal event when she writes:

> The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his or her response to the peculiar contribution of the text (pp. 30-31).

Therefore, as readers interact personally with the words on the page, multiple meanings can develop as these interactions between the reader and text are personal and relate to each individual reader's experiences. One reader's interaction with the text will be different from another reader's interaction. Defining the reading process in this way helps researchers understand that readers will take away different meanings from a text

and the meaning the reader constructs from reading is the transaction (Beach, 2000; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Raphael, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1978; Smagorinsky, 2001).

For purposes of this study, reader response theory provided the theoretical perspective for understanding the ways in which gifted readers transacted with text, the communicative tools they used in responding, and how social and cultural contexts influenced the construction of texts' meanings and the subjectivities (Broughton, 2002) that the learners used in social interactions. In addition, a transactional lens of reader response, afforded the researcher the means to understand and explain how gifted sixth-grade readers created meaning by connecting prior experiences and knowledge and by offering personal responses.

Smagorinsky (2001) defines the reader-text transaction as a transactional zone of meaning construction. From this stance, reader response is perceived to be a joint accomplishment, not just of readers and text, but of the cultural practices through which the two become engaged. In this case, meaning is a function of what occurs among readers and text, rather than a process between a reader and a text. Readers read, discuss, and reflect and this transaction has the potential to produce further texts. The reader's construction of these new texts is the source of meaning in reading. These constructions, while personal in nature, are culturally mediated, locating meaning not only in the reader and text but in the cultural history that has preceded and conditioned both and in the social practices that provide the immediate environment of reading. For purposes of this study, it was each reader's constructive participation in the creation of new texts during the process of reading that was the transaction.

Today's students are confronted with a more diverse world that often creates

confusion and apprehension about cultural issues that are ingrained in their society such that a transactional theory takes on greater relevance. Rosenblatt (1980) argues that a "classroom encouraging active inquiry that addresses broad social and political concerns will move students closer to an embodiment of our ideals" (p. 386). Reading and responding to literature from a transactional perspective connects students with their lived experiences and the needs, emotions, and problems of characters they read about. This aesthetic experience can occur when "students experience literature as something to be 'lived through' rather than directed by the teacher" (Rosenblatt, 1976, p. 240). Because an aesthetic stance calls for reading with attention to what one is experiencing, these aesthetic experiences provide fulfillment that "can be enjoyed in itself—and at the same time have a social origin and social effect" (Connell, 2000, p.27). Furthermore, Rosenblatt (1983) posits that aesthetic experiences obtained through the study of literature foster students' understanding about their social responsibilities and to envision the effect of their actions on others' lives. In essence, the argument is put forth that attention given to the humanistic qualities in literature can spawn the development of critical citizenry.

The theoretical perspectives that framed the implementation for literature circles were integrated into a conceptual framework that provided the necessary lenses for examining and explaining the participation of high-ability sixth-grade readers within the social context. A social constructivist perspective provided a lens from which to explain how gifted readers gained an understanding of text in a manner that perceived reading as a social practice, a manner of learning that required participation in an activity. Correspondingly, a critical transformative perspective provided a lens from which to

understand that literacy, as a social experience, is mediated by power relations and also provided a framework in which to characterize the process that high-ability sixth-grade readers take to overcome the asymmetrical power relationships presented in their texts and the wider community at large. The transactional theory of reader response provided a lens through which to understand and explain the literate practices of high-ability readers engaged in social interactions of reading response. In addition, this study was designed in the tradition of teacher-researcher that allowed for a naturalistic inquiry. As teacher-researcher, an ethnographic perspective guided the study of discursive practices within the context of literature circles for reading response activities and provided a logic-of-inquiry that informed this examination. From this stance, the teacher-researcher was actively involved as a full participant in the personal reading process for each of the students in the study.

The Research Design

This study was based on the assumption that the use of critical pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles functioned as a differentiated learning context for high-ability learners. Differentiated instruction for the gifted learner is an approach to teaching that is comprehensive and guides teachers in all aspects of their practice (Tomlinson, 1995a). According to Winebrenner (2000), teachers of the gifted and talented are interconnected because they are committed to providing challenging opportunities for gifted students and making classroom provisions to accommodate gifted students' unique needs. Research evidence supports that advanced learning opportunities for gifted readers provide positive educational outcomes (Brody & Stanley, 1991; Lubinski & Benbow, 2006; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991). While research supports the

importance of high-powered curricula in creating defensible programs for gifted learners in schools, examinations into how gifted students respond to sociocultural issues is limited (Banks, 1996).

Focusing on the nature in which high-ability sixth-grade readers responded and participated in literature circle discussions, this study was both descriptive and exploratory and was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the environment of literature circles provide differentiated learning opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students?

2. How does critical literacy help gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students understand viewpoints different from their own?

3. What types of new texts and identities do gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students create from participation in literature circles?

4. How does the environment of literature circles with the inclusion of a critical literacy perspective provide opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills?

Based upon the purpose of the study, the review of the literature and research, and because these questions derived from classroom experiences that focused on concerns about what constitutes a defensible gifted program, a qualitative research design (Creswell, 1998; Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990, 2002; Yin, 1994,) in the tradition of teacher-researcher (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001; Hubbard & Power, 1999) that assumed an ethnographic perspective as a logic-of-inquiry (Gee & Green, 1998, Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran & Yeager, 2000) was used in the study.

Correspondingly, this qualitative study was designed to follow interpretive, generative, and inductive guidelines that allowed for a comprehensive and appropriate research approach. The study was interpretive (LeCompte & Prissle, 1993) in that it sought descriptions of, explanations to, and shared meanings - a hermeneutic - for the phenomena by both the researcher and the participants. In addition, the study was generative because it created multiple sources of data in which grounded theories were drawn and connections were made, having proposed that interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers (Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Finally, the study was inductive (Patton, 1990) in that the researcher explored details of the data to discover important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships that emerged.

A multilayered approach was necessary for this qualitative study because it provided for a broad examination of the study across the learning context and then tapered down the focus to activities within smaller units of interaction that Lubeck (1988) refers to as "nested contexts." Lubeck's approach provided a more comprehensive accounting by suggesting "there is value in looking reflexively at different levels of action, for each layer offers a perspective that informs the others" (p.44).

A Qualitative Study

Strauss and Corbin (1998) articulate in broad terms that qualitative research is "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 17). A qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because the study sought to understand what role the context of

literature circles played in shaping differentiated reading opportunities for gifted readers,

the transaction of literacy events during literature circle discussion, and the role of critical

literacy as high-ability sixth-grade readers grappled to analyze and interpret the

sociocultural influences in multicultural literature. Thus, qualitative methods were needed

to provide the interpretive character of this study; the meaning the events had for the

research participants and the interpretations of those meanings because very little was

already known about this phenomena. Because this study used the natural setting as the

source of data, prominent characteristics of this study must be considered according to

qualitative methods.

Patton (1990) offers that a naturalistic inquiry involves "studying real-world

situations as they unfold naturally" (p. 40). Such methods were appropriate for this study

because the goal was to understand how literature circles provide a differentiated context

for high-ability sixth-grade readers while reading multicultural literature and engaging in

discussion from a critical literacy perspective. An underlying assumption to a naturalistic

inquiry is that the researcher remains open as events unfold and is not guided by

predetermined restrictions and limitations in order to reflect on emerging patterns and

themes. Accordingly, Creswell (1998) articulates:

> Writers agree that one undertakes qualitative research in a natural setting where
> the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures,
> analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a
> process that is expressive and persuasive in language (p. 14).

Correspondingly, the research design was flexible to allow for emerging data,

having proposed that the nature of the inquiry will evolve as understandings are

constructed or change occurs over the course of the study. This refers to the idea that

qualitative methods are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive

logic (Patton, 1987). In addition, the research design was inductive to the extent that the

researcher attempted to make sense of the situation based on what was found, without

preconceived expectations on the contextual setting. Correspondingly, the inductive

process used in grounded theory does not assume a theoretical point-of-view from the

outset. Rather, theory building from a grounded theory perspective is a way of bringing

reality to the forefront. Building a theoretical framework is the result of collecting,

analyzing, and interpreting data that has emerged from a particular phenomenon. As

Strauss and Corbin (1990) offer:

> A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge (p. 23).

For purposes of this study, the teacher-researcher attempted to step-back from the

day-to-day teaching in order to analyze and interpret the full battery of data obtained

from literature circle discussions, journal entries, field notes, and interviews. The goal

was to formulate a conceptual framework that was connected to current theoretical

discussions regarding the instructional application of reader response and critical theory

through the implementation of literature-based strategies with emphasis on the social

context of learning.

The third quality of a qualitative design (Patton, 1987) used in this study was that

a research study engages a holistic perspective. In other words, researchers should try to

understand the phenomenon under study as a whole because as Patton states, "[A] holistic

approach assumes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (p. 40). This means

that qualitative researchers either observe or participate in the phenomena under study to understand the context of behavior, events, and interactions among participants.

Case Study

The research tradition utilized in this study was case study design. Case study involves the collection and presentation of detailed information about a particular participant or small group, frequently including accounts of subjects themselves (Purcell-Gates, 1995) and draws conclusions only about that participant or group and only in that specific context. Researchers do not focus on the discovery of a universal, generalizable truth, nor do they search for a cause and effect relationship. Instead, emphasis is placed on exploration and description.

Patton (1987) describes the application of case studies as follows:

Case studies become particularly useful where one needs to understand some particular problem or situation in great depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information-rich in the sense that a great deal can be learned from a few examples of the phenomenon in question" (p. 26).

Correspondingly, case studies typically examine the relationship of all variables in order to provide as complete an understanding of an event or situation as possible. This type of comprehensive understanding is best achieved through a process known as thick description, which involves an in-depth description about the unit to be evaluated, the circumstances under which it is used, the characteristics of the people involved in it, and the nature of the community in which it is located (Yin, 1994, 2003). Merriam (1988) reminds researchers that case study is not an experimental design, but rather it is an empirical inquiry. An additional defining characteristic is that case study (Stake, 1997, 2000) is a research design that is characterized by its boundedness for it determines what is included or excluded. Because of this characteristic, case studies require a problem to

be explored by seeking a holistic understanding of the event or situation in question using inductive logic, or reasoning from specific to a more general term, and from the viewpoint of the participants using multiple sources of data (Yin, 1994, 2003).

Research scholars in the field have defined different types of case study research. Merriam (1988) outlines four different types of case study which include: (1) the particularistic case study that focuses on a particular event or phenomenon, (2) the descriptive case study which provides a rich description of the study, (3) the heuristic case study that is undertaken to inform the reader, and (4) the inductive case study that is designed to allow for understandings to emerge from the data. Correspondingly, Yin (1993) asserts that all case studies can be identified as exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive.

Beyond the definition of case study, Stake (1995) has identified three other types of case studies. The first type, intrinsic, means the researcher explores because of an interest in the case. The operative word is interest and the study is not conducted as an effort to contribute to theory. Stakes's second type of case study is instrumental and is used to understand more than what is obvious. The researcher is looking for insight into the phenomenon. Stake's third type of case study is collective and signifies multiple case studies. In other words, the researcher explores many cases to study the phenomenon, group, issue, or event. Because this research study explored how the use of critical pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles function as a differentiated learning context for high-ability sixth-grade learners and how strategic practices in critical literacy influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what

they read, intrinsic and instrumental case study were the primary means for reporting this qualitative research.

Practitioner Inquiry

For purposes of this study, the methodology further adopted a natural inquiry approach that supported the teacher-researcher tradition. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), a teacher inquirer is considered as the "passionate participant . . . engaged in facilitating the multi-voice reconstructions of his or her own construction as well as those of all other participants" (p. 215). From this perspective, the role of teacher-researcher requires a focus on the meanings of the interacting communities from a theoretical and methodological base (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Correspondingly, the role of teacher-researcher involves a study in hermeneutics as the researcher searches for the meaning of the students' engagement in the learning context as students transact with texts, the communicative tools they use in responding, and how social and cultural contexts influence the construction of textual meanings and subjectivities that learners use in social interactions.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to the concept of *theoretical sensitivity* when outlining the role of teacher-researcher in qualitative inquiry. This concept can be viewed as an evaluation tool to assess the researcher's skills and preparedness for qualitative inquiry and is believed to come from professional literature, as well as professional and personal experiences (Glaser, 1978). Strauss and Corbin state:

> Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data . . . [It] refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't (p. 4).

> Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that people possess certain qualities that make

them the *instrument of choice*. In other words, humans are social and are able to interact with the environment while at the same time adjusting for environmental changes, have the ability to collect voluminous amounts of information and verify the data, and explore emerging themes as they become apparent. Correspondingly, humans possess the ability to view the whole picture or to perceive situations holistically.

Accordingly, assuming the role of teacher-researcher was an active one. It required the role of an active investigator who was involved in the research setting's central activities and who assumed the responsibilities to move the group forward (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). To make informed decisions, the teacher-researcher needed to be able to see what was happening and what was being produced in the context of literature circles (Agar, 1996; Goodenough, 1981; Gee & Green, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1980) that further allowed the engagement with data in a reflexive manner and responsive process, ask questions of the data, analyze, and raise new questions. In addition, the subjectivities of both researcher and the researched guided the research process and content providing an interconnectedness of shared experiences. The teacher-researcher's knowledge of the participants and knowledge in the field of reading assisted in probing more effectively, asking appropriate questions, and interpreting the data. Mohr, et al. (2004) explains that when a teacher assumes the role of researcher, the teacher is "paying attention in a different way" (p. 49). In other words, the role of teacher-researcher provides a unique perspective in which to examine classroom events and to pose questions that cannot be asked by anyone else. This ability to move between the insider's and outsider's perspective has been referred to as the emic and etic perspectives in research (Pike, 1967).

Dewey (1927) envisioned democracy as a way of being and living with others. He viewed it as a constructive process of living, rather than a preparation for future living, and believed that much of these life skills and dispositions would be learned in schools. From this stance, an argument can be made that learning to teach is inseparable from learning to inquire. Scholars have agreed that one of the most effective methods for teachers to develop the deep understandings and special expertise they need to teach well is through inquiry (Baumann & Duffy-Hester, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Darling-Hammond, & McLaughlin, 1995; Stenhouse, 1989).

Research Context

Smith Intermediate School (a pseudonym) is one of seven schools located in a small, city public school system in the southeastern United States. The city is historic, having been founded in 1850 with roots in textiles, but has recently experienced growth and revitalization because of its connection with stock car racing. At one time, the city was home to a minor league baseball team, having had two of its members play in the Major Leagues and inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

As of the 2000 census, there were approximately 18,800 people residing in the city and the racial make-up was 81.54% White, 14.23% Black, 0.36% Native American, 1.66% Asian, 0.02% Pacific Islander, 2.55% Hispanic, and 1.14% from other ethnic minorities. The median income for a household in the city was $42,900, and the median income for a family was $51,000. About 7.2% of the population was below the poverty line.

Smith Intermediate School currently has a population of 787 students in grades three through sixth. The demographics of this school are 76% European Americans, 15%

Black, 4% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 1% Native American, and 2% Multi-racial. Economically disadvantaged students account for approximately 29% of the student population and 1% of the student population is limited English proficiency. Expenditures per pupil are just under seven thousand dollars with a student teacher ratio of 23:1 and a computer to student ratio of 4:1 with 100% of all classrooms linked to the Internet.

The school offers English as a Second Language (ESL) to students on a pull-out basis. In addition, Smith Intermediate School houses two self-contained special education classrooms, and students who are identified learning disabled (math, reading, and writing) are served by special education teachers in a resource capacity. Smith Intermediate School provides a gifted program for reading and math. Third grade students who are identified gifted and talented are served by a licensed gifted teacher who instructs students in a separate setting. Correspondingly, students who are identified as gifted and talented for grades four and five attend a special differentiated program in reading and or math one hour a day, five days a week in a separate room. Sixth-grade students who are identified gifted and talented in reading and or math are served in a resource capacity for an hour and a half, five days a week.

Gaining Entry

The issue of gaining entry was not difficult to achieve. The teacher-researcher had direct entry to the classroom where the participants were present. However, Lofland and Lofland (1984) posit that researchers who conduct a naturalistic inquiry need to remove all obstacles to entrance and treat all respondents with courtesy. The authors further stress that all stakeholders be given a straightforward understanding of the study's goals since the researchers are essentially asking the participants to "grant access to their lives, their

minds, [and] their emotions" (p. 25). Prior to the study, the teacher-researcher sought and

gained permission from the school principal to conduct the study and met with the

student participants and their parents to address the intended research goals and

implementation procedures.

The Teacher

The teacher in this study had a dual role; she was also the researcher. The teacher

brought a wide range of experiences and a diverse teaching background, including

regular, English as a Second Language, gifted, and reading specialist. The teacher holds

certification in K-12 gifted education, K-12 reading specialization, K-6 elementary

education, and grades 5-9 National Board Certification in Early Adolescent/English

Language Arts. In addition, the teacher holds a masters degree in Curriculum and

Instruction and has completed the required course work as a doctoral student. During the

last ten years, she has used a literature-based approach to reading instruction, grounded in

sociocultural and critical perspectives to align with her philosophy that reading is social

in nature and that knowledge is never neutral, but is influenced by human interests. In

conjunction, the teacher viewed her practice as eclectic, having found that commercially

produced, scripted-lessons do not address the needs of gifted students. Emphasizing less

reliance on lecture and direct instruction to engage the learners, numerous differentiated

and creative teaching strategies and materials were utilized.

The Participants

Student participants for this research study were twenty-one high-ability sixth-

grade students and all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Because the twenty-one students met the criteria for service in this classroom, a

convenient sampling technique was in place. The twenty-one, student participants were "identified" academically and intellectually gifted in reading by the district's guidelines for intermediate students or had "qualified" to receive gifted services. "Identified" students are sixth-grade students who score in the 95 percentile range and above on both the state's reading achievement test and an intelligence test. "Qualified" students are high-ability students who do not score in the 95 percentile range and above on the state's achievement reading test and an intelligence test, but who have strong teacher recommendations and strong test scores. Therefore, the focal students for this study were eleven sixth-grade students (six females and five males) who were "identified" and ten sixth-grade students (five females and five males) who were "qualified" to receive academically and intellectually services in reading.

The student participants assigned to this classroom were reflective of the diversity of backgrounds that existed in the larger community, representing professional, middle, and working class families in addition to the ethnically and culturally diverse populations of the city population (see Table 1). Appreciating the diversity in the classroom was central to this study.

In accordance with University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Institutional Review Board guidelines, parents of the students were sent consent letters the first week of school. The students were also given assent forms to take home in order to discuss this study with their parents. Parents and students were directed to independently sign the consent and assent forms indicating their agreement to be included in the study. While this study focused on literacy practices that were an integral part of the reading program, the students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Data

Code	Student's Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Gifted Classification[a]	Socioeconomic Status[b]
P1	Tim	Male	European American	Identified	Middle Class
P2	Sabrina	Female	Hispanic	Qualified	Middle Class
P3	Bridgett	Female	European American	Qualified	Middle Class
P4	Tina	Female	European American	Identified	Wealthy Class
P5	Lief	Male	European American	Identified	Upper Middle
P6	Jeremiah	Male	African American	Identified	Middle Class
P7	Steve	Male	African American	Qualified	Working Class
P8	Zoe	Female	Asian American	Identified	Upper Middle
P9	Kimberly	Female	European American	Qualified	Middle class
P10	Holly	Female	European American	Identified	Middle Class
P11	Dottie	Female	European American	Qualified	Upper Middle
P12	Jane	Female	European American	Identified	Middle Class
P13	Robert	Male	European American	Identified	Upper Middle
P14	Tomas	Male	Hispanic	Qualified	Working Class
P15	Daniel	Male	European American	Qualified	Middle Class
P16	Nicholas	Male	European American	Identified	Middle Class
P17	Annabelle	Female	European American	Identified	Middle Class
P18	Guy	Male	European American	Qualified	Upper Middle
P19	Candice	Female	Asian American	Qualified	Upper Middle
P20	Rachel	Female	European American	Identified	Middle Class
P21	Casey	Male	European American	Qualified	Working Class

Note. [a]Gifted Classification: Identified = Student scored 95% or above on both intelligence and achievement testing. Qualified = Student did not score 95% or above on intelligence and achievement tests but had strong teacher recommendation. [b]Socioeconomic Status was based on parents' level of education, occupation, and free or reduced lunch.

The Classroom Reading Program

The twenty-one student participants who were "identified" academically and intellectually gifted in reading by the district's guidelines for intermediate students or who "qualified" to receive gifted services arrived each day for an hour and a half of instructional time. During this instructional block, the students received the curricular objectives informed by the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (2008) in reading and language-arts, but in the form of an enriched curriculum in order to meet the needs of a gifted reading program that has been adapted from *The William and Mary Language Arts Program for High-ability Learners* (VanTassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, & Little, 2002). Specifically, the reading program was modified to promote development of the intellectual, emotional, and moral aspects of the mind, to promote advancement and complexity, and to include the three essential components of a gifted program (Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2003) which are differentiation of content, process, and product. Further, the reading program is a thematically oriented reading curriculum that has been designed to provide the advancement, complexity, and in-depth critical reading, writing, and thinking skills needed to challenge high-ability learners. Students read and discuss multiple genres and keep response journals to clarify thinking and to help prepare for written and oral assignments.

The reading workshop teaches students how to respond to literature and to think critically about it by analyzing ideas, vocabulary, and literary structure. In conjunction, popular culture and forms of media literacy are an essential part of each thematic unit so that students' critical abilities to interact, analyze, and interpret the popular culture of life in which they are exposed everyday is developed. Correspondingly, the thematic units

include research activities that require work outside of class. Instruction focuses on active learning, problem solving, research, and critical thinking through direct instruction, with emphasis on cooperative learning groups. The students in the class have each been given a laptop and keep a portfolio of written work that documents their growth in writing.

Organization of the reading program has been adapted from *The Reading Workshop Block* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001), which is an organized set of language and literacy experiences that consists of independent reading, guided reading, and literature study. Reading response activities were operationalized through interactive read-aloud, literature circle discussions, reading response journals, and reading conferences. While the bulk of this study focused on literature study through the context of literature circles, all components of the reading workshop were utilized to provide explicit instruction and demonstrate effective strategies that student participants applied in literature study.

The reading workshop in this study began with a whole-group meeting in which the readers learned effective strategies to work together as a community, followed by independent reading, guided reading, and literature study. The whole-group meeting included book presentations, book talks, and mini-lessons that were short focused lessons on topics that the readers applied throughout the reading workshop time. It was during this period that groundwork was laid in order to understand how the literary culture of a classroom was shaped by the social contexts of the classroom and community (Lewis, 2001).

During the independent reading block, students read a text, usually of their own choosing and responded through journal writing. The teacher conferred with individual students to support and assess reading, as well as teach to specific individual needs. The

purpose of this period was to develop individual readers' tastes and broaden their perspectives through a variety of texts.

In guided reading, the teacher pulled together small groups to explicitly teach effective reading strategies for processing a variety of fiction and informational text. It was during this period that the teacher-researcher revisited strategies for engaging in complex literature discussions, such as learning how to ask open-ended questions and what constitutes quality written responses. In addition, notes recorded on anecdotal records during literature study or notes made on dialogue journals were shared with the students. Examples were: (1) listens to everyone in the group and makes eye contact, (2) shows enjoyment, (3) shares reaction to their story, (4) explains why they feel a certain way or why they think a certain way, (5) discusses authors' elements or craft, (6) challenges the author and writes alternative texts, (7) examines multiple perspectives, recognizes social barriers, find's one authentic voice, and (8) responds by crossing barriers of separation. In addition, students watched videos of themselves in literature discussion groups or role-played how to have effective discussions and how not to have effective discussions.

In literature study, the teacher and students set up assigned reading and writing tasks and agreed on meeting times. Students engaged in in-depth discussion about a text they had read. The purpose of literature study was to enable readers to develop a deeper understanding of the things they read. The meaning they constructed as they listened to one another's interpretations was greater than any of them could construct alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Literature study also helped students develop an understanding about the inner workings of texts, such as how the plot unfolds and how characters develop. In

addition, literature study of multicultural texts presented opportunities for the gifted sixth-grade readers to develop comprehension from a critical stance. More importantly, literature study helped students connect complex concepts and ideas to their own lives and was the central focus of this research study.

At the end of the reading workshop, the students came together for a whole-group meeting to share with their classmates something about their reading. During this time, they shared connections between the books, evaluated the authors' stances, and engaged in critical discussions about the multicultural issues presented in each book.

Research Timeline

This qualitative natural inquiry was conducted during the entire school year (2007-2008) and was divided into three time periods to align research procedures with data collection time frames. During the first week of school (2007), the teacher-researcher obtained parent consent and student assent forms and gathered the participants' demographics. In addition, secondary sources of data were collected from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, the language-arts strand for sixth-grade students, as well as school district and state-related policy and curriculum documents.

In mid- August 2007, the teacher-researcher introduced the participants to the concept of multicultural literature through read-aloud to begin to build a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and to set the tone for the project. Further, the teacher-researcher explicitly taught effective strategies for engaging in complex literature discussion, such as how to ask open-ended questions, how to ask questions to promote critical literacy, and what constitutes quality written responses. During this time, the teacher-researcher began a research log, recorded field notes, and administered two forms

of student surveys to obtain information on participants' reading interests, prior experience in literature circle discussions, and to gather information on the participants' reading attitudes and beliefs about texts. This first time period roughly spanned the first quarter of the school year (mid-August to mid- October 2007).

Acting as full-participant (Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980), the teacher-researcher then introduced the participants to the concept of literature circles, discussed the associated roles, and introduced the books that were used in literature study. The study continued with the enactment of teacher-led literature circles, using a fishbowl strategy to guide and model correct discussion and response techniques. This structure allowed the teacher-researcher to gradually move from full participant to a participant observer role by gradually releasing responsibility to the high-ability readers (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). In addition, this time period allowed for the participants to practice sequential turn-taking and open-ended question and response techniques. During this stage, data was collected through field notes, interviews, observations, anecdotal records, student dialogue journals, and student-produced artifacts. This time period occurred from late October 2007 to mid- January 2008.

The third and final time period involved the bulk of the study and during this period, students began full participation in literature circles and the teacher-researcher assumed the role of observer. Students participated in literature circle discussion five days a week for ninety minutes each meeting. This time period was also marked by more in-depth data gathering in the form of field notes, observations and anecdotal record keeping, audiovisual techniques, student response journals, interviews, and various student-produced artifacts. The time period for this stage of the research study began in

the final week of January of 2008 and continued through the month of May 2008.

Research Procedure

The purpose of this study was to examine, understand, and explain how the environments of literature circles provided differentiated learning opportunities for high-ability middle school (sixth-grade) students and how the pedagogy of critical literacy enabled gifted sixth-grade readers to understand viewpoints other than their own. During literacy activity, students have the opportunity to practice and develop their literacy skills and learn about texts, the author's interests, and learn to understand themselves, others, and the world around them (Galda, 1998; Purves, 1993). Studies of different student populations have shown that all children, when given the opportunity and appropriate guidance and support, are capable of participating in conversations about texts and co-constructing meaning by interacting with others and making connections from their own lived experiences (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995). However, these conversations do not occur automatically. Even proficient readers need explicit instruction through modeling and guided practice and then opportunities to try techniques on their own through collaborative practice, independent practice, and application. Literature circles permit teachers to move from teacher-centered discussions (explicit instruction and modeling), in which they control the flow of activity, to shared stances (scaffolding and coaching), in which responsibility is more equally shared, to more student-centered stances (facilitating and participation) in which students take primary responsibility (Raphael & Au, 1998). This flow of activity allows for a "gradual release of responsibility" (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) and corresponds to three developmental stages (Kong & Pearson, 2003) of development (see Figure 1).

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┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│   A Gradual Release of Responsibility │
│                                       │
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| Teaching by Telling | Teaching by Modeling and Scaffolding | Learning by Doing |
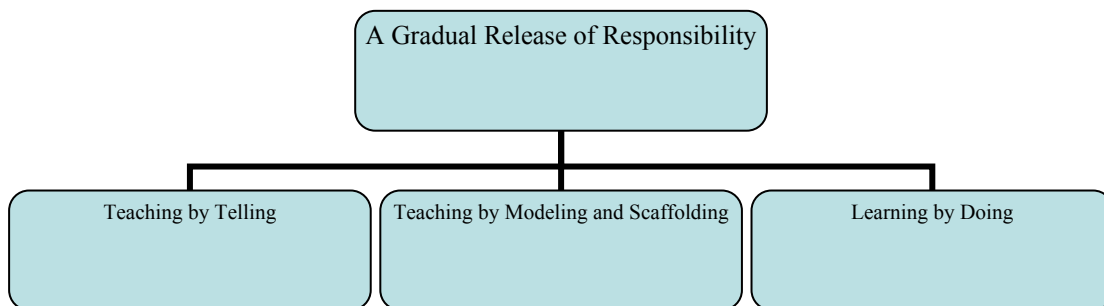
Teacher responsibility is high.   Student responsibility is high.

Figure 1. A gradual release of responsibility permits teachers to play multiple roles with their students, moving from teacher-centered discussions (explicit instruction and modeling), to shared stances (scaffolding and coaching), to more student-centered stances (facilitating and participation) in which students take primary responsibility for enacting activity structures. This flow of activity can be characterized by three stages of development: (1) teaching by telling, (2) teaching by modeling and scaffolding, and (3) learning by doing.

Teaching by Telling

Kong and Pearson's (2003) first stage is characterized as "Teaching by Telling," in which the teacher and teacher-led discussion dominates the activity structure. This stage involves explicit instruction and modeling. For this study, "Teaching by Telling" encompassed a period that roughly spanned the first quarter of the school year (mid-August to mid- October 2007). During whole-class meetings, the practitioner-researcher created a collaborative learning community by leading discussions on how students can help and learn from each other and directing students' attentions to the idea of response, rather than the concept of correct answer. The goal was to allow the students to accept that all responses are interpretations and that each student has life experiences to share as

contributing members of a learning community.

The dual role of teacher-researcher required the teacher to be very active at this point in the study. Interactive read-aloud were implemented to allow students to experience quality multicultural literature and to engage in critical literacy practices. The purpose was to provide an in-depth study in some area of social justice that was culturally relevant and age-appropriate. The main objective of this practice was to lead students to raise questions about dominant and oppressive ideas that were related to an issue of social justice and presented through the civic actions of relatively obscure young historical figures (Ciardiello, 1994). To reinforce this point, specific multicultural texts were chosen for the interactive read aloud lessons (see Table 2).

Table 2

Multicultural Literature for Teacher Read-Aloud

Title	Author	Year
Through My Eyes	Bridges, R.	1999
Voices in the Park	Browne, A.	1998
Fly Away Home	Bunting, E.	1998
The Story of Ruby Bridges	Coles, R.	1995
White Wash	Shange, N.	1997
The Other Side	Woodson, J.	2001

Note. Multicultural literature selections for teacher read-aloud.

Through interactive read-aloud, the practitioner-researcher taught the connection between the concepts of critical literacy and democracy and engaged students in critical conversations about germane social justice issues. By modeling for the students critical

questions to be asked, students began to view the classroom as a society from which

literature can be perceived as a space for constructing critical conversations and

interpretations (see Appendix A). The goal was for the participating students to learn that

texts are to be interrogated and that meaning is coming to know how the political, social,

cultural, and historical forces impact their lives (Luke & Freebody, 1997). During the

community meetings, emphasis was placed on the participating student voices as

dialogue was crucial in literature circle discussions.

In addition to creating a classroom learning community, "Teaching by Telling"

was a time to introduce students to the books that were read during literature circle time

(see Table 3) and to introduce students to various components of effective literature study

(Kong & Pearson, 2003). Mini-lessons addressed key components of literature circles,

such as role participation and effective discussion techniques, materials, and assessment

tools.

Table 3

Selected Texts for Literature Circles

Texts	Author	Year
The View from Saturday	Konigsburg, E. L.	1996
Sounder	Armstrong, W.	1969
The Devil's Arithmetic	Yolen, J.	1988
Red Scarf Girl	Jiang, J.	1997
The Breadwinner	Ellis, D.	2000

Note. Selected literature for literature circle reading.

For purposes of this study, the students were introduced to modified guidelines that are typical procedures for the implementation of literature circles (Daniels, 1994) and included:

1. The teacher presents the text through a book talk.

2. Students choose numbers by ballot, numbering one through four, and the teacher forms the groups and disperses the books.

3. The groups decide how much each member can read before they next meet. Each member is allocated a role (see Appendix B).

4. Students complete their reading individually and prepare for their literature circle discussion.

5. Discussion takes place within the literature circle. At the end, the group decides how much each member can read before they next meet. Each member is allocated a new role.

6. Steps 3 and 4 are repeated until the text reading is complete. The group plans and presents a literature showcase, an extension project and/or a sharing session. The group, individual group members, and the teacher evaluate learning progress.

Correspondingly, the teacher-researcher explicitly taught and modeled the various literature circle roles and the response log formats that corresponded with each literature circle role used in this study. The roles included *Discussion Director*, the student who led the group by preparing a brief summary of the pages read and then devised questions to provoke meaningful thought and discussion (see Appendix C), the *Literary Illuminator*, the student who identified a controversial or a provocative passage to share with the group (see Appendixes D1 and D2), the *Creative Connector*, the participant who found a

way to link the reading to his or her own life experiences (see Appendixes E1 and E2), and the *Wordsmith*, the group member who selected a few words to share with other group members and planned an activity to teach the words (see Appendixes F1 and F2).

In addition, two new roles were developed for this study to challenge the gifted students to interrogate the author, perform personality profiles on the stories' characters, to investigate silenced voices, and to examine the sociocultural influences of the texts. First, the *Character Investigator* role required the student to consider character profiles (physical, intellectual, and socioeconomic status) and to examine characters with limited roles to determine if their presence had been silenced for a reason because they were rejected by the author and to examine main characters to determine if they were favored by the author (see Appendixes G1, G2, and G3). The second new role was the *Critical Profiler* which required the student to challenge the author's stance, examine the sociocultural influences in the text, and provide alternative texts by offering how the text would be if told from a different point-of-view or time and place (see Appendix H). To do this, the student participants with this role had to first understand the author's version of reality, question the author's motives for writing, peel away the power differentials, and then rewrite the text to provide an alternative reality that would benefit mankind. The most significant aspect of this job was to examine the power relationships between the characters and then relate the cultural and power differentials to the real world and their world.

In creating a classroom learning community, the practitioner-researcher also introduced the student participants to specific discussion strategies. Using an overhead, students viewed a prepared list of strategies on how to share that included: (1) how to

keep the conversation going and taking appropriate turns, (2) how to respond to questions, (3) how to elaborate responses, (4) how to challenge interpretations and provide alternative text, (5) how to engage in higher-order thinking, and (6) how to engage in appropriate questions that promote critical conversation and critical literacy. In conjunction, students viewed a list on what to share that included: (1) role discussion (2) clarification of literary elements, concepts, and themes, (3) construction of meaning, (3) evaluation of text and author's intentions, and bias (4) sharing personal experiences and connection to text, (5) evaluation of points-of-view, (6) recognition of gaps and silences and how the author positioned readers, and (7) provision of alternative texts.

"Teaching by Telling" (Kong & Pearson, 2003) was a further critical time to explicitly instruct students on effective reading, writing, speaking, and thinking techniques that were used in literature study discussions and for independent dialogue journaling. Specifically, the teacher-researcher led discussions on how to ask open-ended questions (see Appendix I) during literature circle activity that required participants to think and use higher levels of cognitive reasoning in response as they interacted as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, considerable time was allotted for instructing the participants on how to make quality written responses using multiple critical response forms for dialogue journals (see Appendixes J, K, L, M, N, and O for types). These forms were carefully designed and adapted to permit the student participants to enter into criticality and therefore they were introduced one at a time. Emphasis was given to higher levels of comprehension instructing the participants that dialogue journaling should reflect literature circle discussions. In conjunction, emphasis was placed on responses and interpretations that they experienced through the voices and

perspectives of others. Hence, the response forms provided a way to nurture this process and to be both informative and transformative for their developing sense of "selves" as individuals and members of society. Correspondingly, the students were given an evaluation form that the teacher-researcher used to measure the level of their personal and critical responses. The evaluation form was a hybrid of taxonomies that specifically related to cognitive skills (Bloom, 1956; Marzano, 1993; Vandergrift, 1990) and was adapted by the teacher-researcher for purposes of this research study (see Appendix P).

Teaching by Modeling and Scaffolding

Stage Two, "Teaching by Modeling and Scaffolding," highlighted literacy activities through the implementation of fishbowl discussions (Kong & Pearson, 2003). Central to this stage was a shift from teacher and students talking about literature circle discussions to actually enacting literature study dialogue. This stage initiated an increase in student-centered talk and provided the time, space, and opportunity for participants to observe, appropriate, practice, and develop the knowledge and skills they needed for participation in literature circle discourse while the teacher-researcher acted as a facilitator. For purposes of this study, this time period occurred from late October 2007 to mid- January 2008.

This change in activity structure allowed for the student participants to engage in formulating open-ended questions for oral and written response and to make personal and intertextual connections (Short, 1992). This activity structure also provided the practitioner-researcher the opportunity to model and scaffold key concepts, such as point-of-view, text and character analysis, and to continue to reinforce strategic practices in critical literacy. Through the implementation of fishbowl discussions, all students were

invited to ask questions and comment on each other's ideas, which became a forum for their voices to be heard. In addition, the fishbowl activity structure allowed the participants the time to develop comfort levels with each other.

The "Teaching by Modeling and Scaffolding" stage (Kong & Pearson, 2003) was a further time to show students commercially prepared videos on literature circles. Through mini-lessons, the teacher-researcher participated in literature circle activity to reinforce how to engage in higher levels of thinking and engage students in critical conversations about the text. It also was a time when the teacher research conducted student conferences to share anecdotal records and evaluations of their personal and critical responses to address areas to strengthen in participation structures.

Learning by Doing

Kong and Pearson (2003) offer that the third stage, "Learning by Doing," distinguishes itself from the first two stages by the teacher's explicit effort to push students to a higher level of engagement with the texts. In this research, this stage was characterized by a shift in power, in which the teacher no longer led the discussions. Subsequently, the participants took ownership of their discussion, responding to discussion through dialogue journaling, and then reuniting with the teacher for reading conferences to discuss their responses to the questionnaire for literature circle participation, review anecdotal records, and to discuss and review the teacher evaluation of journal responses. During this stage, the student participants had the opportunity to make connections between what they read in their books and what they had experienced in their real lives. Correspondingly, it was a period of time for the gifted readers to develop multiple perspectives and to recognize that different people view things

differently and to begin to consider the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which events occur. From this perspective, the student participants were given the opportunity to formulate personal world views about serious issues and begin to explore their own value systems by examining the ways that texts define the world and to determine the ways that such ideology impacted their reading. "Learning by Doing" was further characterized as a period in which students began to challenge each other, challenge authors' views, to express different opinions, and to rewrite narratives, giving voice to the voiceless in their texts. During this stage, the students tried out new subjectivities and discovered new reading identities. Finally, this stage reflected the phase of highest student responsibility, having fully transitioned from one of high teacher responsibility to one of high student responsibility. This stage began during the final week of January of 2008 and continued through the month of May 2008.

<center>Data Sources and Collection Procedures</center>

Since cultural practices were significant to this study, they were the means by which a grounded theory of culture (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) in the transaction of reader response activities (Rosenblatt, 1976, 1994) within literature circles was constructed. Further, cultural practices allowed for the teacher-researcher to describe the nature of participation and interaction among gifted readers; therefore, multiple data sources were collected by multiple methods. Specifically, data was collected from student records and documents, across literacy practices, and participation in literacy activities that focused on the social interaction, the oral and written responses to literature, and the products or student artifacts created from literature discussion over the course of the study. Data sources and collection procedures were consistent with qualitative study methodology.

Data Sources

In order to gather data, the teacher-researcher used a multiplicity of data sources. For purposes of this study, data sources are best understood in terms of primary and secondary sources (see Table 4). Primary sources consisted of original materials that were created at the time of each event or shortly thereafter and were created by the teacher-researcher and participants. These sources presented original thinking, new discoveries, and new information, and further provided research credibility because the sources provided authentic data upon which the study was based. The primary sources included: (1) transcripts of audio-tapes and videotapes, (2) anecdotal records, (3) research log and field notes, (4) dialogue journal entries, (5) student and teacher conference transcripts, (6) student surveys and questionnaires, and (7) student-produced artifacts.

The secondary sources were used to evaluate the primary sources (Fetterman, 1989). These documents were in the form of lesson plans, the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, language-arts' objectives for sixth-grade, and school district and state-related policy and curriculum documents. Data from primary and secondary sources enabled the data to be triangulated across the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection Procedures

This research study was a natural inquiry and required the social world to be studied as much as possible in its natural state. From this stance, the teacher-researcher was required to act from within and to interpret the infused meaning of the social context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Purcell-Gates, 1995) while collecting data that developed in a real-world culture (Geertz, 1973). This task was accomplished through a number of different procedures.

Table 4

Primary and Secondary Data Sources

Source	Content Description	Amount
	Primary	
Audiotape transcripts	Literature circle discussions	100 pages
Videotape transcripts	Literature circle discussions	200 pages
Research log and field notes	Reflections	50 pages
	Field notes	150 pages
Anecdotal records	Literature circle discussions	42 records
Dialogue journals	Literature circle written response	21 journals
Interview transcripts	Participant-researcher conferences	84 records
Student surveys/questionnaires	Reading interest survey	21 records
	Pre-LRQ[a]	21 records
	Post- LRQ	21 records
Student-produced artifacts	Interrogate-Connect-Take Action	84 records
	Critical Response Form	84 records
	Expressing the Moment	84 records
	Critical Text Analysis	84 records
	Interpretive Inquiry	84records
	Response Letter	84 records
	Secondary Sources	
Lesson plans	Differentiated plans	150 plans
NC[b] Standard Course of Study	Sixth-grade language/arts	1 record
Policies	School district	1 record
	State	1 record

Note. Primary and secondary data sources for teacher-researcher study.
[a]LRQ = Literary Response Questionnaire (Miall & Kuiken, 1995); [b]NC = North Carolina.

These procedures included: (1) participant observation, (2) field notes, (3)

anecdotal records, (4) formal and informal conversations with the student participants

through interviews, (4) videotaping and audiotaping through electronic means, (5)

analyses of student-produced artifacts, such as student journal entries, surveys and questionnaires, and (6) internal documents.

Participant Observation

Lofland and Lofland (1995) describe participant observation as an observer who intentionally wants to understand the action as to how and why practices and relations change, and at the same time record their own experiences in order to capture the cultural setting. The practice of participant observation is more than just looking, listening, and writing it all down. Rather, the researcher is the instrument of data collection. Specifically, *participant observation* is defined as a process in which a researcher establishes a many-sided and long-term relationship with individuals and groups in their natural setting for the purposes of developing a scientific understanding of those individuals and groups. Gold's (1958) classic text that outlines four types of roles for a naturalistic inquiry that can be understood through different levels of involvement were implemented in this study. The roles are: (1) the complete participant, (2) the participant-as-observer, (3) the observer-as-participant, and (4) the complete observer.

The role of *complete participation* is when the researcher engages fully in the activities of the group under investigation and intentions are not made explicit. This stance is advantageous for gaining accurate information and a greater understanding of the events that are not available by other means. *Participant-as-observer* is an active role in which the researcher adopts an overt role and makes his or her intentions known to the group. The role of *observer-as-participant* is a more moderate role in which the researcher engages less in participation and calls for more formal observation. The final participation stance, *complete observer*, is a passive stance in which the researcher is

uninvolved or detached and passively records behavior at a distance (Gold, 1958).

For purposes of this study, the practitioner-researcher utilized a method of flexibility that allowed for a myriad of stances. During times of "Teaching by Telling" (Kong & Pearson, 2003), the interactive read-aloud, explicit instruction on effective reading and writing response techniques used for dialogue journaling, and direct instruction and demonstration of the essential components and the roles involved in literature circle participation required a stance of *complete participation* that was operationalized by the role of teacher. In addition, the duality of teacher-researcher further required a stance of *complete participation* for purposes of leading discussions on how to ask open-ended questions that would prompt the students to think and use higher levels of cognitive reasoning in literature circle discussions and interact as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Because this study was a natural inquiry, the teacher-researcher was an active investigator who observed and made informed decisions about what was happening and what was being produced in the context of literature circles. During the course of the study, the method of flexibility allowed the practitioner-researcher to move between the roles of teacher and researcher and apply different stances along the continuum. For example, during the stage of "Teaching by Modeling and Scaffolding"(Kong & Pearson, 2003), the teacher-researcher moved between a stance of active participation to allow for initial guidance in the enactment of literature circles, to a more moderate engagement, which was characterized by more active observation as responsibility was released to the student participants. Central to this stage was a shift from teacher and students talking about literature circle discussions to actually enacting literature study dialogue. As a

marked increase in student-centered talk began, the teacher-researcher enacted the role of *participant-as-observer*. The stance also provided the time, space, and opportunity for the participants to appropriate and practice the knowledge and skills they needed for participation in literature circle discourse and the roles of teacher and researcher to shift between the two. Subsequently, as responsibility was gradually released (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), the students took primary responsibility for enacting activity structures, and the teacher-researcher assumed the role of *observer-as-participant*. Finally, the stage of "Learning by Doing" permitted the teacher-researcher to become a *complete observer* as this stage was characterized by a shift in power in which the teacher no longer led the discussions but assumed the role of researcher. The participants took complete ownership of their discussion, responded to discussion through dialogue journaling, considered multiple views, and made connections between what they read in their books and what they had experienced in their real lives. Meanwhile, the researcher observed each group's reading activities and recorded the specific behaviors, the types of responses during interaction, and made notes about what was observed.

As Neuman (2000) offered, "A field researcher examines social meanings and grasps multiple perspectives in natural social settings" (p. 349). These myriad of observation stances allowed the teacher-researcher to move between the insider roles of teacher, the emic view, to a more objective outsider role as researcher, the etic view, in order to gather data from differing perspectives (Pike, 1967). Further, the changing stances allowed the teacher-researcher to become immersed in the setting so as to grasp the depth of experiences. As Neuman has reminded field researchers, the goal was to be a learner, not an expert.

Field Notes and Log Reflections

In recording observations, researchers often use notebooks to enable themselves to highlight particular observations of interest, to make analytic notes, and to serve as a reminder to investigate an event or relationship in more depth. According to Yin (2003), the protocol for field notes goes beyond a recording of events but involves a description of the setting and content observed, identification of those under observance, and documentation and evaluation of the interactions observed. In addition, field notes must be factual, accurate, and thorough without judgment. Field notes can provide more in-depth background and help the observer remember salient features of the observed events. In addition, field notes allow the researcher to make meaning from what is being observed by writing about it and because field work can occur over several months, this data collection procedure requires organization and can be conducted in different ways. Spradley (1980) offers four types of records that were used by the teacher-researcher in this qualitative case study to gather data. The four formats were: (1) a condensed account, (2) and expanded account, (3) a research journal, and (4) "thinking on paper."

Field notes were a common way for the teacher-researcher to collect non-participant data during the early stages of the study. Without taking an active part, the researcher recorded the participants' reading habits, the readers' interests, and the selection of reading topics during independent reading. As the study progressed and the dual role of teacher-researcher heightened, it became impossible to write down everything that was observed or said; therefore, the teacher-researcher adopted what Spradley (1980) refers to as *condensed accounts*, consisting of phrases, single words, or short sentences. This process proved to be helpful because it allowed the teacher-

researcher the ability to capture significant observations at the moment without an extensive loss of time. In addition, it permitted the teacher-researcher the opportunity to gather data that may not have been captured by electronic means, such as facial expressions, gestures, and other body language.

A second type of field note used in this study is what Spradley (1980) calls the *expanded account*. A short time after each field observation, the teacher-researcher wrote expanded notes from the condensed accounts to fill in the details and to recall things not recorded at the moment. From key words earlier recorded, the teacher-researcher was able to construct stronger descriptive accounts of the observed events and to implement what Merriam (1988) suggests - verbal descriptions of the context, the participants, and the activities.

In the evening following the day's observations, the teacher-researcher kept a *research journal* (Spradley, 1980) that became a record of experiences, ideas, problems, and personal reflections from the field work process. Qualitative researchers often keep a log as an organizational tool to formulate and modify searches, plan the research activities, and document sources. Merriam (1988) suggests that researchers carry their log to the field site to record their comments, hunches, and interpretations of what is happening. For purposes of this study and given the enormity of this natural inquiry, the teacher-researcher kept a diary to note areas of the study that could be strengthened or where adjustments could be made. Subsequently, the research journal was utilized as a program evaluation log.

Spradley's (1980) fourth method of writing field notes is "*thinking on paper*" and this method allowed the teacher-researcher to design a system that was used for data

analysis. Working with the *expanded accounts*, transcripts from the electronic data, and the students' journal entries, the teacher-researcher formulated questions and recorded initial impressions by making notes in the margins. To question the data, the teacher-researcher asked: What is this about? To what does this refer? This ongoing analysis permitted the teacher-researcher to look for additional data and therefore guided further data collection that greatly enhanced data analysis and interpretation.

Qualitative methodology provides a design for research that attempts to describe and understand educational phenomena. To better understand and describe how literature circles provided a differentiated learning context for gifted readers, the researcher observed and documented the environment in which the learning occurred (Creswell, 1994; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Field notes were utilized to document the educational experiences of students participating in literature circle activity, to guide data collection and analysis, and to provide an interpretive chain of evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) while seeking to discover unique and common patterns in the interest in meaning.

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal records (Tierney & Readence, 2005) provide a method for recording teacher's observations of significant events as students engage in actual reading. Because classrooms are busy, teachers must be prudent about what to record. Although there are numerous forms that may be taken, for purposes of this study, the teacher-researcher developed a hybrid of Luke and Freebody's (1997) four resources model to correspond with Bloom's (1956) and Marzano's (1993) taxonomies of higher-level thinking (see Appendix Q). This record sheet provided an expeditious manner in which to monitor

instances of students using critical literacies and asserting identities, record students'

reactions and support from the text, make predictions, ask questions, and draw

conclusions. In addition, anecdotal notes were taken to record students' ability to refer to

elements from the literature from which to make connections to their own lives and

challenge the text from a critical literacy stance. This process allowed the teacher-

researcher a mode in which to gather information on each student participant in literature

circles during the second and third stages, "Teaching as Modeling and Scaffolding" and

"Learning by Doing" (Kong & Pearson, 2003). This in turn permitted the teacher to

become an *observer-as-participant*, while positioning as researcher to observe and listen

to student responses.

As a form of data collection, anecdotal records provided the teacher-researcher a

useful tool to record observations and to use those observations to point out significant

events during whole-class discussions, guided reading instruction, and student-teacher

conferences. Similarly, anecdotal records permitted the teacher-researcher the

opportunity to draw an understanding of how strategic practices in critical literacy

influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye, and for the teacher to

adjust instructional practice when necessary. Thus, anecdotal records provided the

teacher-researcher with information that could be used in the classroom, leading

ultimately to action and then collecting more information as needed.

Interviewing

Interviews provide very different data from observations and are particularly

useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. The interviewer can pursue

information in-depth around the topic and further investigate students' responses for

clarification in order to capture both the perspectives of the project's participants and the meaning in given responses (Spradley, 1979). The use of interviews as a data collection method begins with the assumption that the participants' perspectives are meaningful, and because participants are knowledgeable, their perspectives affect the success of the study (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990).

For purposes of this study, interviews were recorded on tape (with the permission of the participants) and summarized in notes. Detailed recordings were a necessary component of the interviews because they formed the basis for analyzing the data. Throughout the study, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix R) were conducted during reading conferences using a protocol of open-ended questions that allowed for individual variations on specific topics (Patton, 1990). This informal communication procedure provided the opportunity for the teacher-researcher to probe further with the participants to gain a greater understanding about the students' literacy experiences, such as students' reactions to material read, their individual feelings regarding literature circle participation, students' understanding about the sociocultural influences in the material, and students' attitudes about the social inequities in their daily lives (Spradley, 1979). In addition, informal interviews became a valuable tool for data clarification purposes because participants were given the opportunity to further explain responses made in literature circle participation and to extend their responses by providing more detail. Furthermore, this system worked to provide credibility to the study because multiple interviews were conducted with each participant and because follow-up questions ensued to clarify ambiguities and fill-in gaps. The goal was to challenge the interpretations arising from literature circle discourse, ask more specific questions, pursue deeper

understandings and explanations, and understand disagreements during literature circle discussions.

The teacher-researcher in this study also conducted formal interviews during the first phase of data collection during the students' study hall schedule to find out more about the student participants' reading experiences at home, engagement with the town's library, number of books at home, and how literature helps them to understand the nature of people and events in their world. This in-depth exploration was planned to capture the respondents' perceptions in their own words and to provide possible topics to explore in support of the research questions.

Audiotaping and Videotaping

Patton (2002) writes, "As a good hammer is essential to fine carpentry, a good tape recorder is indispensable to fine fieldwork" (p. 380). Because no information should be trusted to future recall, the use of technological tools, such as audiotapes and videotapes, were employed to capture learning in the social world. As with observations and interviews, detailed recoding is a necessary component of data collection since it forms the bases for analyses and interpretations and allows the researcher access to multiple viewings and recordings of the data. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) assert that audiovisual techniques are necessary supplements for extensive written notes in ethnography and further posit that audiovisual techniques are especially beneficial to data collection when human interaction is the focal point of the research.

Videotaping began immediately during the "Teaching by Telling" stage and continued through "Teaching by Modeling and Scaffolding" and "Learning by Doing" stages (Kong & Pearson, 2003). As the participants began to assume a higher level of

engagement with the texts and the teacher no longer led the discussions, audiotapes were used in conjunction as a means of data collection. This practice allowed the researcher the ability to capture all four literature circle discussions by positioning two hand-held digital video recorders at two tables and two hand-held digital audio recorders at the other two tables. The electronic devices were shared among the four tables every other day in order for the researcher to capture significant facial expressions and gestures that could not be captured from the audio recorders.

Transcription occurred on a nightly basis after the classroom day was over. For purposes of this study, transcription related to the theoretical basis of the study, as well as the importance given to the respective research questions. The initial goal was to begin with a broad perspective then "funnel down" (Spradley, 1980) to specifics. Because transcription is an overwhelming process in qualitative research, the teacher-researcher followed guidelines (Schensul et al., 1999) that deliberately involved sampling the tapes and reviewing the tapes to select key incidences in support of the research questions. First, the teacher-researcher conducted multiple viewings of the video recordings which provided a preliminary coding and analysis for determination of major categorical units, and once those were determined, the teacher-researcher conducted complete transcription of those units. While transcribing is often assumed to come before data analysis, Kendon (1979) describes content analysis of video data as preceding transcription. Therefore, all remaining video data was summarized and logged in the researcher's field notes as *expanded accounts* (Spradley, 1980). This process facilitated stronger support of the observed events in the context of interaction during literature circle discussions for purposes of data analysis.

A similar routine was implemented with audiotaped data. During playback of the audio record, major categories surfaced in support of the research interests and were selected for coding and analysis. These events were coded using mutually exclusive categories. Identities of the speakers were added and notations of nonverbal activities were recorded by the researcher. As descriptions of specific sequences and episodes were developed, these incidences were then compared to the selected video events to determine the degree of similarity. Emphasis was placed on finding the common categories in the development of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

In qualitative research, using audiovisual equipment for data collection purposes provides numerous advantages for the researcher. Human interaction can be captured and studied in detail, including gestures and various facial expressions. In conjunction, audiovisual recordings enhance field observation and provide the researcher with data that can be observed by the participants to verify or correct the researcher's interpretations. On the basis of such factors, this data collection technique provided more accuracy and improved the research credibility of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Student Artifacts

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), student records provide information about insights into reading behaviors, comprehension, lived experiences, and interactions within the learning community. Student-produced texts provide rich data that can be examined on an on-going basis. For purposes of this study, the following components comprised student artifacts: (1) student dialogue journals (role preparation, activity write-ups, and sociocultural responses), (2) sociocultural narratives, (3) surveys, and (4) questionnaires. The student artifacts in this study allowed the teacher-researcher to make

intextextual links (Short, 1992) to other literacy activities and provided insight into the actions of the participants.

Student Dialogue Journals.

Dialogue journals allow readers to picture events and identify with characters. Furthermore, dialogue journals permit readers to reflect on characters' actions and to reflect on the author's telling of the story. Through this deliberate cognitive activity, learners have the potential to intentionally connect thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the learning activity in which they are engaged. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) state, "Reflection in the context of learning is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations (p. 19).

For purposes of this study, the twenty-one participants were given reading spirals that were used as dialogue journal writing on a daily basis to reflect ongoing development in critical thinking, critical literacy development, reading subjectivities, and to make personal and intextextual connections (Short, 1992). Journal entries consisted of role-related preparation in anticipation of literature circle discussion, comprehension entries to reflect levels of cognitive thinking, and critical stance responses that required the students to assume a position from which to interrogate the author, to unpack assumptions of knowledge, to investigate silenced voices, and to examine the sociocultural influences in their texts.

While journal writing was a hallmark of this classroom, data from dialogue journals was collected when the students began full participation in literature circles and the teacher-researcher assumed the role of observer. This data collection procedure

spanned a period of time from the final week of January 2008 through the month of May 2008. The journals were coded on a weekly basis and during the data analysis process, the journal entries, the audiovisual transcripts, and the field notes were reviewed and theoretical notes were made through a constant comparative analysis in order to determine what properties were comparatively the same and which properties were different (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Sociocutural Narratives.

Students' talk and writing have been analyzed in the context of discussion groups (Routman, 2000); "grand conversations" in literature study groups (Eeds & Wells, 1989), Book Clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), and literature circles (Daniels, 1994). Nevertheless, Bishop (1992) argues that literature can do more; literature can act as a mechanism for the discussion and social transaction that will affect how children think about the world and children's response to literature can either validate or challenge their own ideology and world view. From this stance, literature is perceived to be an agent of socialization and for purposes of this research study, student written productions were examined for evidence of implicit understandings of their developing beliefs and attitudes (identity and agency) of what a more just society would look like.

From the end of January 2008 through the month of May 2008, the twenty-one participants developed a sociocultural narrative around a main character who had been oppressed or who had been discriminated against because of race, ethnicity, class, or gender differences. In this piece of writing, the students then allowed the main character to discover his or her voice, confront the social problem, plan a social action, and then put the action into effect to change his or her world for the better. World in this context

could be considered the classroom, neighborhood, or even much larger, their state or country.

This sociocutural narrative was utilized as a form of performance assessment to gauge to what degree each participant had developed insights into how power is used and abused, who has it and who does not, to make moral judgments about how to act and what to believe, and to work for the common good by acting and then transforming society. In addition, the narrative gave the participants the opportunity to consider different perspectives and multiple viewpoints. Data obtained from these personal and creative documents were helpful in understanding the participants better, making comparisons between participants, understanding how the participants view the world, and what he or she wanted to communicate to an audience. Furthermore, the sociocultural narratives provided a way for the researcher to determine through writing how well the students were able to hear multiple viewpoints from their reading and then transfer and use this knowledge when creating their own works.

Surveys.

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that surveys are a means to collect more in-depth information from participants and are a preferred manner to address a research question or questions when it becomes most efficient to simply ask those who can inform. In this study, survey data was collected from a pre-study reading survey (see Appendix S) to obtain information on the participants' reading interests both inside and outside of school, how frequently they went to their local library, and to learn about the students' prior exposure if any to literature circle instruction. This data proved to be helpful during student-teacher reading conferences by providing the researcher information in which to

formulate questions for probing deeper about their attitudes towards literature circle texts and any problems that arose from controversial topics during literature circle interactions.

Questionnaires.

Data was further collected from administering a literature circle questionnaire (see Appendix T) four different times upon conclusion of each of the four books used in the literature study. This systematic practice over time allowed the researcher the ability to gather more information from the students in terms of personal responses, test emerging themes, find negative case examples, and to triangulate the data while analyzing to determine the research findings. Finally, data was collected on pre- and post-study student responses from the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) (see Appendix U) to determine what influence the literacy activities, the texts, and the multicultural influences had on sixth-grade, gifted students' ability to understand viewpoints other than their own and their ability to analyze and interpret the sociocultural influences in their lives.

Documents

Existing records can provide insight into a group of people under study and can be found in document form. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define a document as any written or recorded material not prepared for the purpose of the evaluation or at the request of the inquirer. Documents can be divided into two major categories, public records and personal documents (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Public records can be collected from external (outside) or internal (within) the setting. For purposes of this study, only internal records were used in data collection. The internal documents consisted of student cumulative folders, which were used to collect

demographic information; students' transcripts and standardized test reports; the North Carolina Standard Course of Study sixth-grade language-arts curriculum (2008), and the local school policies on reading and writing curricula. These internal documents provided the teacher-researcher with meaningful information on each of the participants involved in the study and were used to generate interview questions or to identify events to be observed. Furthermore, the existing records proved to be useful for comparative analysis of institutional policies and program descriptions prior to and following implementation of study activities.

<div align="center">Data Collection Time Frame</div>

Data collection began with the start of the 2007 school year and continued through the end of May 2008 to correspond with the proposed timeline for this study. This plan allowed for the sixth-grade high-ability readers to understand daily routines, become familiar with the three-block reading workshop (independent reading, guided reading, and literature study), and provided the teacher-researcher with ample data for future and ongoing analysis while developing a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). From this stance, the teacher-researcher was actively involved as a full participant in the personal reading process for each of the students in the study. In conjunction, this span of time enabled complete cycles of "Teaching by Telling," "Teaching by Modeling and Scaffolding," and "Learning by Doing" (Kong & Pearson, 2003) to be implemented and provided both a holistic and contrastive perspective within and across the literacy activities and student participants. For purposes of this research study, data collection followed three stages developed by Spradley (1980) that first began with *descriptive observations*, moving to more *focused observations*, and finally the collection of data

through *selective observations*.

Following Spradley's (1980) guidelines for the *descriptive* stage, the teacher-researcher "mapped the classroom" to have a graphic layout of where time for reading activities would be spent. This meant literally diagramming the classroom to provide a context for where the interactions would be observed. This process proved to be beneficial because it enabled the teacher-researcher to consider the difference between group space and personal space and established the context for literature study and reading response activities. In addition, the beginning of the school year was essential in obtaining parent consent and student assent forms and to begin to set the tone for the whole year as new literacy practices were implemented for many of the students. It was during this time that *The Reading Workshop Block* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) was first implemented as a laboratory of reading activity, giving the student participants the opportunity to become familiar with the three different literacy experiences organized by independent reading, guided reading, and literature study. In addition, the teacher-practitioner gathered the participants' demographics, the internal documents, and administered two student surveys; a student survey questionnaire to gather information on participants' reading interests and prior experience in literature circle discussions and a pre- Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ), adapted from Miall and Kuiken (1995) to consider the range of beliefs, attitudes, and predilections that readers bring to a text. The first time period roughly spanned the first quarter of the school year (mid- August to mid-October of 2007). Observations at this point were very broad as the teacher-researcher wanted to have a feel for the interests, cultural and reading identities, and background experiences in reading that the participants brought to the study.

The second time period began with greater emphasis on the practice of literature circles, introducing, explaining, and modeling the literature circle roles, introducing the participants to the chosen texts, and introducing appropriate involvement for the participants. Observations became more *focused* (Spradley, 1980) during this stage. What had begun initially as a descriptive record of the classroom activities then developed into more focused observations and represented choices the researcher made based on the research questions and on what was learned from being in the setting. These observations provided structure to the teacher-researcher's understandings of emerging categories and simultaneously allowed for the teacher to participate from the emic perspective and observe through the role as researcher from the etic perspective (Pike, 1967). Further, this time period was marked as a period in which more data was gathered through field notes, interviews, anecdotal records, and student response journals. This time period coincided with the second quarter of school and continued into the early part of the third quarter of the year (late October 2007 to mid- January 2008). It was a period for the teacher-researcher to gradually move from full participant to a participant observer role.

The third stage of data collection involved the final period of the study. During this period, *selective observations* became highly focused as core categories were identified that represented overarching themes and the teacher-researcher iteratively revisited data through the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Students began full participation in literature circles while the teacher-researcher assumed the role of observer. The third time period began during the final week of January of 2008 and continued through the month of May 2008. Students participated in literature circle discussions five days a week for ninety minutes each meeting. This time period

comprised the bulk of the research study and also marked the period of more in-depth

data gathering in the form of field notes, observations and anecdotal record keeping,

audiotapes, videotapes, student response journals, student interviews, and the gathering of

student artifacts. Upon the conclusion of each book discussion, a literature circle

questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions and

allowed the teacher-researcher to expeditiously obtain each participant's individual

reading experiences with a book. In addition, the teacher-researcher interviewed

participants during student conferences to probe further into the written response

questionnaires, to gain clarification when responses were confusing or inadequate, and to

function as member checks on emerging themes during data collection. Upon conclusion

of the research study, a post- LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) was administered for

comparative purposes to evaluate participants' orientation toward literary texts.

Subsequently, this stage enabled the researcher to compare the attributes of various

categories and activities across multiple sources of data.

<div align="center">Data Analysis</div>

In order to understand how the interaction between learners, the use of

multicultural texts, and the literacy context with the infusion of critical literacy practices

were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end

sixth-grade readers, the teacher-researcher utilized a hybrid of qualitative research

approaches to analyze the data. Specifically, ethnographic coding and analysis (Gee &

Green, 1998; Leininger, 1985; Schensul et al., 1999), grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin,

1997), and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996, 1999; Gee & Green, 1998)

were applied to the literacy activities and the social languages used to promote the

literacy activities within the context of literature circle discussion.

First, an ethnographic theme analysis (Leininger, 1985) informed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) was conducted to analyze how the interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the environment of literature circles provided differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers. As patterns emerged in the ethnographic process, a more focused analysis occurred on what was happening and what was being produced in the context of literature circles to respond to the question: *How does critical literacy help gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students understand viewpoints different from their own*? The teacher-researcher combined inductive coding and grounded theory to analyze the types of literacy practices that related to the focused question and compared and contrasted data across sites of reading response activities during this level of analysis. Following this phase, a discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996, 1999; Gee & Green, 1998) was conducted to determine what types of new texts were created from participation in literature circle discussions. Finally, a summative program evaluation was conducted using Ford and Harris's (1999) matrix for multicultural gifted education to assess if literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy provided challenging, rigorous, and differentiated learning experiences for the high-ability sixth-grade readers.

The decision to use different analytical tools emphasized the need to examine the findings from multiple lenses to support what Duke and Mallette (2001) have argued for in qualitative research, deeper understandings of the natural setting, and to support Lubeck's (1988) assertion that a multilayered approach to data analysis allows the researcher a broader view of the data. For purposes of this study, a detailed discussion of

the data analysis process that guided the formation of the findings is provided in Chapter Four.

Research Limitations

The active role of teacher-researcher can be problematic. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) offer that when the teacher-researcher is completely engrossed in the realities depicted, what is being observed may be skewed by the observer's biases, beliefs, and reality. The objectivity of the research could influence the interpretation of the observation. An additional concern with teacher-research centers on the teacher who may attempt to provide evidence as to the effectiveness of a favorite teaching technique (Burton, 1986).

Because the researcher was the teacher, the potential did exist. This dual role presented a tension between the two as it was the teacher's judgment that very often determined the focus, and the teacher's experiences and beliefs through prior education that may have shaped what was observed and heard. As a result, the findings from the study could have been compromised had the researcher imposed meanings to categories, and patterns of behavior, values, and beliefs because the role of teacher-researcher positioned the teacher as the main instrument. To offset this compromise, the research focus remained foremost in the mind of the researcher throughout the entire study.

The complex reality as the researcher required the teacher-researcher to confront the question of objective distance (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) which is considered to be a safeguard against bias by acknowledging the assumption that in a classroom environment there is an ". . . intrinsic and ineluctable interconnectedness of all phenomena, human or otherwise" (p. 66). In this study, the teacher's immediacy and interconnectedness to the

student participants was unavoidable; therefore, it was important to acknowledge the potential for bias from the teacher-researcher's position.

<p style="text-align:center">Research Delimitations</p>

The goal of this study was to ensure that the findings have merit for a gifted reading classroom whereby gifted sixth-grade readers need advancement, depth, and complexity, and as a result, this study was developed as a naturalistic inquiry. Guba and Lincoln (1989) define a naturalistic study as one that focuses on a particular group of participants in a natural setting. Therefore, the gifted reading classroom became the setting for this study and high-ability sixth-grade reading students were chosen as the sole participants.

Given the research goal, to investigate how the use of critical pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles function as a differentiated learning context for high-ability sixth-grade learners and to investigate if strategic practices in critical literacy can influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read, contextual factors were vital to this study. A teacher research study by its very nature is context specific. The classroom in this study was a special case; it was a unique context and culture (Geertz, 1973).

<p style="text-align:center">Research Integrity</p>

Much of what teachers do every day is done so automatically and they are often unaware of it. In addition, their own thoughts into what they have observed can get in the way of the reality of what the students are doing. In an effort to deal with this source of bias and over the course of the entire research study, verifying the utmost accuracy of the

data was on the mind of the teacher-researcher. To provide scientific integrity, the teacher-researcher followed key concepts set by Lincoln and Guba (1995) that included: (1) trustworthiness, (2) credibility, (3) transferability, (4) confirmability, and (5) dependability.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative researchers perform extra steps during data analysis to ensure that findings are credible and are aligned with the data. Therefore, in order to connect the issue of credibility to this endeavor, the researcher took several steps to demonstrate a good faith effort and to increase the study's trustworthiness and authenticity. First, the researcher performed on-going informal member checks through brief conversations with students. The student participants were asked for their feedback on the research process and for their opinions of the preliminary findings to determine if the teacher-researcher's interpretations were valid. More formal member checks ensued through mid-study and final study phases, and correspondingly, the researcher participated in peer debriefings to report the analytic progress of the research. In addition, the researcher triangulated data through multiple data sources, multiple methods, and multiple participants (Yin, 1994, 2003). Finally, the teacher-researcher provided a strong chain of evidence (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1990) to support data analysis and the findings of the research.

The idea of transferability is related to the idea of representativeness and is concerned with the contextual boundaries of the findings. In this study, the focus was to answer questions that were relevant to the context of the classroom. Because the teacher-researcher thoroughly understood the local context under investigation and provided a thorough description of the phenomenon of interest, readers are better able to make

inferences about the transferability of the findings. In addition, the research process was transparent and can be confirmed. Detailed records of data collection, coding, and analysis procedures allow for an independent review so that others can tell what the teacher-researcher did, why, and how the teacher-researcher arrived at the conclusions. Finally, the research study is dependable. Dependability refers to the reliability of the coding procedures. For purposes of this study, the teacher-researcher provided a code book that was examined by faculty members of the dissertation committee.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how the use of critical pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles functioned as a differentiated learning context for high-ability sixth-grade learners. In addition, this study investigated how strategic practices in critical literacy influenced high-ability students to read with a more critical eye and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read. Literature circles are a popular literature-based reading strategy that promotes social interaction among groups of students who meet on a regular basis to create meaning from texts through discussion and collaboration (Almasi, 1995; Daniels, 1994, 2002a; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Maloch, 2002). Subsequently, this study recognized the cognitive processes associated with constructing meaning from print, but expanded this view of reading to also include sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy, having proposed that interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers.

To achieve this purpose, this natural inquiry was methodologically eclectic,

having made use of full participant observation as teacher-researcher and grounded

theory development (Creswell, 1994; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1988; Strauss &

Corbin, 1997), using an ethnographic perspective to describe the literacy events, the

collection of data, and the narrative findings. In addition, this research study was framed

by two research traditions (social constructivism and critical theory), each with a set of

assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge, and the goals and aims of the

research process. Transactional reading theories, as well as empirical research on

multicultural literacy further informed this study.

Qualitative methodology provides a design for research that attempts to describe

and understand educational phenomena. This study examined the manner of discussions

among participants in literature circles. To better understand and describe students'

learning in the context of literature circles, the teacher-researcher observed, investigated,

and documented the environment in which the learning occurred (Creswell, 1994; Geertz,

1973; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wilson,

1977). In addition, qualitative data analysis methods were utilized to understand the

reading response experiences of the twenty-one participants while seeking to discover

unique and common patterns. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) claim ethnographic methods

provide rich, descriptive data regarding the experiences of the participants. Finally,

qualitative assumptions that supported this study included an emphasis on process, the

interest in meaning, the researcher as an instrument, descriptive data analysis, and

fieldwork (Creswell, 1994).

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The purpose of this study was to understand how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers. More specifically, this study investigated how strategic practices in critical literacy influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye, address tough issues of cultural dominance, cultural privilege, and power differentials between cultural groups, and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read by engaging in dialogic discourse that centers on discussions of diverse literature and multiple perspectives. Subsequently, this study recognized the cognitive processes associated with constructing meaning from print, but expanded this view of reading to also include sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy, highlighting that interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers.

Because the central focus was to understand how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers, learning was intricately embedded in a sociocultural perspective. This means emphasis was placed on communities of learners versus individual learners in regards to the attention of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This further means that learning was observable through the reading of diverse texts as students worked to unpack different layers of

meaning, specifically when texts represented the language of power, and as students worked to negotiate real-world experiences that engaged them in response, inquiry, and social action. Subsequently, this required the social world to be studied as much as possible in its natural state. Therefore, a social constructivist and a critical perspective provided the lens from which to describe, explain, and understand how learning took place within the context of literacy activities and social interaction as high-ability readers wove their own connections between the textual themes discussed and their own prior knowledge (language, culture, and social practices). Transactional reading theories, as well as empirical research on multicultural literacy further informed this study. From this stance, data were collected and analyzed pursuant to the following research questions:

1. How does the environment of literature circles provide differentiated learning opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students?

2. How does critical literacy help gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students understand viewpoints different from their own?

3. What types of new texts and identities do gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students create from participation in literature circles?

4. How does the environment of literature circles with the inclusion of a critical literacy perspective provide opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills?

This task was accomplished through a number of data collection procedures. These procedures included: (1) participant observation, (2) field notes, (3) anecdotal records, (4) formal and informal conversations with the student participants through

interviews, (4) videotaping and audiotaping through electronic means, (5) analyses of student-produced artifacts, such as student journal entries, surveys, and questionnaires, and (6) documents, such as student cumulative folders, student transcripts and standardized test reports, the North Carolina Standard Course of Study's reading and language-arts' 2008 objectives for grade six, and the school's policies for reading and writing curricula.

In order to understand how the interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context with the infusion of critical literacy practices were critical factors while considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers, the teacher-researcher utilized a hybrid of qualitative research approaches to analyze the data. First, an ethnographic theme analysis (Leininger, 1985) informed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was conducted to analyze how the environment of literature circles provided differentiated learning opportunities for the research participants and to analyze the kinds of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills the participants developed during literature circle discussions. To analyze how critical literacy helped gifted sixth-grade readers develop viewpoints other than their own, the teacher-researcher combined inductive coding and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to question the data and to compare and contrast emerging categories across data sites. Focusing on everyday activity and classroom discourse, the teacher-researcher then conducted a discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996, 1999; Gee & Green, 1998) to determine what types of new texts were created from participation in literature circle discussions, followed by microanalysis of a "telling case" (Mitchell, 1984) to make visible theoretically what had not been visible before. A final analysis was

conducted as a summative program evaluation using Ford and Harris's (1999) matrix for gifted education to determine if the learning experiences for the high-ability sixth-grade readers were challenging, rigorous, and differentiated and to determine how the structure of the curriculum enabled the students to view concepts, issues, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups (Banks, 1994, 2001).

Subsequently, this chapter begins with a discussion of the data analysis phase that guided the discovery of patterns and themes that emerged in this study. A discussion is then provided that centers on the identified themes that provide the explanatory framework for the findings in relation to the four research questions. For purposes of this discussion, the findings from data analysis are organized in four sections to correspond with each research question.

The first section addresses how the environment of literature circles provided differentiated learning opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students; specifically how literature circles were *zones of opportunity* where each reader became an active participant in the construction of meaning by drawing on both textual and contextual information as well as his or her own prior knowledge and experiences. The second section provides an account of how critical literacy provided a forum for the sixth-grade readers to consider multiple viewpoints on issues of social justice and the third section addresses how the gifted sixth-grade readers constructed socially situated identities and created new texts from participation in literature circle discussions; specifically the students developed counter texts through their voice and their pen. In the final section, the teacher-researcher addresses the types of analytical reasoning and critical thinking responses that the gifted sixth-graders demonstrated when they were

given the opportunity to participate in literature circles with the infusion of strategic critical literacy practices.

Throughout the discussion of all four sections, the teacher-researcher provides examples of data to highlight the findings. In doing so, several criteria were followed. First, the teacher-researcher selected data accounts to illustrate the findings that were representative of the research questions, including excerpts from classroom conversations, the researcher's log, and the students' dialogue journals, and secondly, data examples were chosen that were typical of events and patterns across the research study.

Data Analysis Phase

In this study, analyses were carried out in several phases with special attention given to the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis was the socially situated interaction organized by the cultural beliefs that took place in the social context of literature circles in which the participants worked as a community of learners to make sense of their activities, which in turn were interwoven with social and cultural processes. In order to analyze patterns of activities, the contributions of every participant were considered to be mutually dependent, as well as on the context in which they appeared.

According to Spradley (1980), the goal of data analysis is to make sense out of data in order to discover similarities and differences, build typologies, or find patterns about the phenomena under study. For purposes of this research study, the data was analyzed according to the prescribed coding methods that follow the typical protocol of a case study involving an ethnographic perspective (Gee & Green, 1998; Schensul et al. 1999; Spradley, 1980), which meant perusal of the data for emerging themes and

categories, followed by revision of those themes and categories with every round of analysis.

The first phase of analysis consisted of *sampling and framing* as the nature and needs of the twenty-one gifted sixth-grade readers were used as the basis of selection. This existing frame was comprehensive due to the gifted characteristic and provided a convenient sampling for this study (Patton, 1990). The teacher-researcher established daily routines, time schedules, and mapped the classroom to allow for physical classroom arrangements that established student interactions. Using the research questions to provide focus and to further guide the analysis process, field notes, anecdotal records, and surveys were read, and in conjunction, interviews and initial audiovisual recordings were transcribed for coding purposes.

The second level of analysis involved *focusing and refining* the data as cultural principles within literature circle discussions emerged. In this stage, the analysis involved an ethnographically grounded approach and focused on the context of literature circles as unique social spaces and the manner in which readers construct meaning, the development of viewpoints other than their own, the creation of alternative texts through active participation, and the socially situated positions and roles that were shaped by reading activity over time. Grounded theory is a common approach in teacher-researcher studies because it is a way to generate theory from data that are grounded in the lived experiences of participants in a study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Subsequently, the teacher-researcher began the process of generating theory from data using a three-level process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify patterns, categories, and themes of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Using transcripts from audiotapes and videotapes, as well as recorded student and teacher conference transcripts and field notes, open coding required the teacher-researcher to read each line, sentence, and paragraph with the intention of determining what the data was all about. Pertinent words, phrases, and sentences were written and coded in the margins. Memos were made in reference to possible relationships between categories. The basic idea of the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) is to read and reread a textual database and discover or label categories, concepts and properties, and their interrelationships. The inductive nature of grounded theory enabled the teacher-researcher to embrace an interpretive stance in which subtle degrees of contextual meaning were considered, rather than an objective stance. From this stance, the teacher-researcher began to construct categories (Leininger, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) that emerged from analysis of the literacy practices within response activities to identify how the participants engaged the texts and the types of practices demonstrated, thinking comparatively in terms of properties that would permit further analysis between the data.

Subsequently, the third level of analysis, *comparing and contrasting*, involved an ethnographically grounded approach using axial coding to focus more on the significant words and phrases, reading line by line to see what themes emerged (see Figure 2). Throughout the data analysis process, the transcripts and the field notes were reviewed and theoretical notes were made using a constant comparison method in order to determine what properties were comparatively the same and which properties were different (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The researcher categorized data, developed codes, and then refined and renamed the codes as new data was integrated.
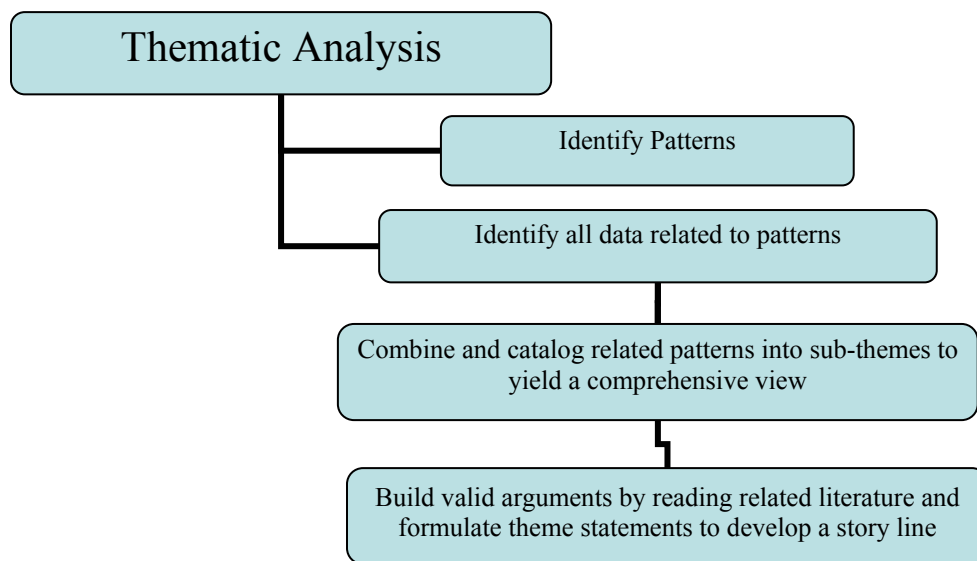
Figure 2. Thematic analysis (Leininger, 1985) focuses on identifying themes and patterns. When all codes are determined, the researcher observes relationships between the codes and places them within a specific pattern. When all data is related to their specific patterns, the patterns are catalogued into sub-themes. The researcher then turns to the related literature to find ways to build a valid argument. The theme statements are then used to develop the narrative findings.

In this study specifically, axial coding involved generating categories and searching for possible relations among the categories across activities, the data sources, and the student participants. As patterns emerged during this phase, the teacher-researcher scrutinized the data more closely to see what was happening and what was being produced in the context of literature circles to respond to the question: How does critical literacy help gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students understand viewpoints different from their own? This involved analyzing the literacy practices within response activities to identify the types of viewpoints that emerged. Specifically, the teacher-researcher used analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981) to code for instances where the students utilized critical literacies in writing or were inscribed in collaborative conversations that were coded to reflect both individual understanding of multiple viewpoints and how these were further developed within the interactions of the group

(Merriam, 1988). By continually asking questions on how the students' critical literacy practices demonstrated an understanding of multiple perspectives and then comparing and contrasting the data across sites of reading response activities, a framework of practices emerged.

Gee (1999) posits that language is about forming identities and promoting social activity within social settings. To understand how discourse practices and social processes shape learning as a sociocultural activity in communities of practice during the third phase of *comparing and contrasting*, the teacher-researcher combined discourse analysis and ethnography, using each approach to build a logic-of-inquiry (Birdwhistell, 1977) based on analysis of select focused situations. The MASS system (Gee & Green, 1998) identifies four inextricably key components of an ethnographically grounded approach to discourse analysis and includes: (1) the material aspect which are the actors, space, time, and objects present during interaction, (2) the activity aspect that is the specific activity or chain of interconnected activities, (3) the semiotic aspect which consists of situated meanings and cultural models connected to the activity, and (4) the sociocultural aspect which are the personal, social, and cultural knowledge, as well as the feelings and identities that are relevant in the interaction. The key to this analysis is that it allowed the teacher-researcher to conduct a more holistic picture of the focused situations and permitted the teacher-researcher to move back and forth among meaning, activity, and sociocultural practices in order to analyze what was accomplished through language that simultaneously shaped the discourse and social practices. By selecting segments of discussion interactions to determine what types of new texts do gifted middle school (sixth grade) students create and how gifted sixth-grader readers construct socially

situated identities during participation in literature circle activities, the teacher-researcher constructed a "telling case" (Mitchell, 1984) to make visible theoretically what had not been readily apparent. This procedure brought together the relationship between everyday activity and discourse analysis. It is significant because it demonstrates how the students explored subjectivities to the text world, demonstrated personal agency, and took on critically literate ways associated with novel reading identities.

In the *final stage of analysis*, the teacher-researcher conducted a program evaluation using Ford and Harris's (1999) matrix for multicultural gifted education that incorporates Bloom's (1956) cognitive taxonomy. The matrix was used as a program evaluation to assess if literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy provided learning experiences for the high-ability sixth-grade readers that were challenging, rigorous, and differentiated and to determine if the structure of the curriculum enabled the students to view concepts, issues, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups (Banks, 1994, 2001).

The decision to use different analytical tools emphasized the need to examine the findings from multiple lenses to support what Duke and Mallette (2001) have argued for in qualitative research, deeper understandings of the natural setting. The aim was to describe human behavior and interactions in a holistic, natural environment in order to answer the four research questions. Using the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as an explanatory framework to understand how the interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context with the infusion of critical literacy practices were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers, the teacher-researcher made meaning of

the data, interpreted the data, and discovered four overarching themes in this study (see Table 5).

The four themes ground the study's focus on the nature in which the high-ability sixth-grade readers responded and participated in literature circle discussions, emphasizing that the interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context with the infusion of critical literacy practices were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers.

Table 5

Four Research Themes

Interactions	Themes
LC-S	Literature circles were sites for the students to enact critical literacy
LC-S-ML	Multicultural texts became sites to use critical literacy and build multiple views
LC-S-ML	Classroom language and literature promoted acting for justice
LC-S	Social action occurred in the classroom

Note. Themes developed from ethnographic thematic analysis informed by grounded theory.
LC = literature circles; S = students; ML = multicultural literature.

Supported by the research findings, the four themes provided a comprehensible framework for this study and brought together components of individual students' responses. Based on this premise, the themes in this study represent the students' conversations from the recurring literacy activities that formed a comprehensive picture of their collective experiences.

For purposes of Chapter Four, the following four sections are an account of the findings to the research questions based on data analysis. Throughout the study, the

teacher-researcher selected data accounts to illustrate the findings that were

representative of the research questions; therefore, a list of codes (see Table 6) was

created by the teacher-researcher to indicate the original source of data and to explain the

meaning of each code as the findings are discussed.

Table 6

Codes by Data Source and Description

Code	Description
T-LC, M-D	Transcripts from literature circles by month and day
RJ, M-D	Student response journal entry by month and day
FN, M-D	Teacher-researcher's field note entry by month and day
I-PN	Interview during student conference by page number
AR-PN	Teacher-researcher anecdotal record by page number

Note: Transcript, response journal, and field note codes are recorded in the narrative findings to indicate the specific data source and indicate the specific month and day. Interviews and anecdotal records are recorded in the narrative findings to indicate the specific data source and include the actual page numbers of the source.

Result: Environment of Differentiated Learning Opportunities

The fact that the gifted sixth-grades readers came to school already reading

required a different approach to reading instruction (Trezise, 1978). Because of their

advanced cognitive abilities and interest in complex ideas and theories, the twenty-one

participants in this study responded to less-tightly structured reading approaches and

desired to delve deeper into controversial topics in which to talk at-length and in-depth.

Literature circles engage high-ability learners in reflection and response through

discussions. Additionally, literature circles facilitate reading from a critical stance.

Because critical literacy promotes high-level thinking about multicultural issues and themes by raising questions and by providing experiences that promote cultural empathy, the teacher-researcher embarked on the literature circle program with a keen interest in understanding how it would promote student learning.

Zones of Opportunity

Focusing on literature circles as an environment of differentiated learning opportunities for high-ability readers, data analysis found that literature circles are *zones of opportunity*. By analyzing data from field notes, interviews and questionnaires, transcripts, and dialogue journal entries, the inductive nature of grounded theory enabled the teacher-researcher to embrace an interpretive stance in which subtle degrees of contextual meaning were considered. Using a constant comparison method in order to determine what properties were comparatively the same and which properties were different (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), five zones of opportunity emerged. These five zones were: (1) zone of inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge formation, (2) zone of affective development and self-awareness, (3) zone of cultural awareness and place in the world, (4) zone of criticality and social action, and (5) zone of critical conversations (see Table 7).

While the focus of this study was on student interaction during literature circle discussions in terms of what the students said, what they did, and what they wrote, these five zones of opportunity were formed during daily classroom reading activities in the context of the three-block classroom reading program. For purposes of this analysis, each zone is discussed separately using excerpts taken from transcripts of classroom conversations, dialogue journal entries, and insights from the researcher's log.

Table 7

Five Zones of Opportunity and How They Were Formed

Zones	Tasks
Zone of inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge formation	Comprehension Student discussion Personal responses Connections Reflections Inferences Dialogue writing Critical thinking
Zone of affective development and self-awareness	Listening and responding Sharing opinions Making connections Dialogue writing Organizing values Internalizing values
Zone of cultural awareness and place in the world	Reading diverse texts Understanding differences Student discussion Making connections Appreciating diversity Dialogue writing
Zone of criticality and social action	Student discussion Reading diverse texts Dialogue writing Criticizing the author Identifying injustices Seeing multiple views Reshaping social world
Zone of critical discussions	Student discussion Comprehension Using critical literacy Dialogue writing Third spaces Connections Reflections Resymbolizing

Note. The five *zones of opportunity* emerged from the active participation of the gifted sixth-grade readers in this study, reflecting that interaction between the learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for the high-end sixth-grade participants.

For purposes of this study, the situated meanings constructed, the social languages used, and the cultural practices enacted across reading activities while gifted sixth-grade readers made sense of their world provided insight into how culture influences behavioral responses and cognitive attributions. As a result, the final zone of critical conversations was found to be a thread that binds the *zones of opportunity*.

Zone of Inquiry, Critical Thinking, and Knowledge Formation

In this study, literature circles were found to initiate collective inquiry, collaboration, and communication from which the student participants were able to make purposeful, conscious choices when finding solutions to problems, answers to their questions, and decisions regarding their reading content as they worked to co-construct meaning. In other words, this study found that literature circles provided a zone for thinking on the one hand and inquiry and knowledge formation on the other. From data analysis, three domains were found to support this finding: (1) inferential modes of thinking, (2) reflective modes of thinking, and (3) creative modes of thinking.

Inferential modes of thinking.

Critical thinking in the context of inquiry involves evaluating the truth of knowledge statements, such as when the students engaged with the author's words to determine what was "true" from the author's point-of-view. This process called for critical thinking that involved the use of inferential modes of thinking in order to make an evaluation. For example, while investigating the topics of prejudice and cultural privilege while reading and responding to *The View from Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1996), the students use of inferential thinking allowed the participants to arrive at inferences on the basis of a given body of information in the text. Following a brief overview of *The View*

from Saturday, excerpts from student discussions illustrate this point.

One of the four main characters in *The View from Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1996) was teased and bullied because he did not fit the norm found acceptable by popular students in Epiphany Elementary School. Julian was a polite student who had emigrated from India to Epiphany, New York. He was smart, enjoyed tea in the afternoon, and possessed a flare for magic. However, he was judged not for the person he was inside, but by the material things in life and his outward appearance and characteristics was cause for other sixth-graders in his classroom to exclude him and forgo any invitations to be friends. In reality, Julian was belittled by his classmates for his "different" (Giroux, 1993) status on the social scale. He typified how acceptance, or a lack thereof, is determined by cultural privilege and how prejudice is enacted by the dominant group.

While reading *The View from Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1996), the students displayed a high-level of interest, but most importantly defended Julian and his cultural traits where words like mean, insensitive, and bully came up in his defense as the students discussed Julian's mistreatment in the classroom. To do so, the students used information from the text as a reference and in doing so inferences in the form of conclusions were derived from the author's references. From this stance, inferential thinking can be viewed as the process of reasoning. Implicit in the students' responses were more assumptions about the harmful affects of negative stereotyping and prejudice. For example, Tim commented, "Julian shouldn't be treated that way just because he's different."

Holly added, "He's [Julian] being labeled in a harmful way just because he looks different and dresses different. The other classmates make fun of him just because he

dresses like someone who goes to school in India" [T-LC, 1-15].

Like Tim and Holly, many of the other students were very sensitive about Julian's mistreatment and concluded through reasoning that the popular students were biased because Julian was unlike them. The students drew upon references to Julian's habit of toting a book satchel, his dress attire of shorts and knee socks, and his sharp British accent, to draw the conclusion that Julian was a victim of social and cultural prejudice. One student, Kimberly, made the claim that people are judged by appearance, whether it is the condition of their home, the color of their skin, or the types of clothes they wear, and that appearances are misleading [FN, 1-15].

These brief excerpts highlight how reasoning was applied to critical thinking in order for the students to make the evaluation that Julian was bullied and labeled in a negative way. More importantly, through evaluation of the author's words, the participants developed knowledge about the negative effects of stereotyping for those who are viewed as "other" or "different" (Giroux, 1993) from the mainstream norm. Through interaction as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the participants co-constructed a deeper understanding of whole concepts, such as prejudice and negative stereotyping, and discovered the power differentials between cultural groups within the interactive social setting of a literature circle.

Reflective modes of thinking.

Critical thinking in the context of inquiry also involves the reflective modes of thinking in order to make an evaluation. Such reflective thinking includes perceiving patterns, relations, similarities, and differences, such as when the students in this study analyzed the content in *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1998) and made connections as it

applied to their own lives (text-to-self), real-world issues (text-to-world), and other texts (text-to-text). Following a brief overview of *The Devil's Arithmetic*, these assumptions are made explicit in an excerpt from a literature circle conversation.

The Devil's Arithmetic (Yolen, 1998) is a historical novel that tells the story of a Jewish girl, Hannah, who is transported back in time in 1942 as World War II rages. As the story begins, Hannah and her family are celebrating Seder, a Jewish tradition that bored her and held no significance, but when she symbolically opens the door to welcome the Prophet Elijah, she becomes the orphaned girl Chaya, living with her aunt and uncle in a small village in Poland. Soon, the three are rounded up with all the Jews in the village and relocated to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. While there, she learns the cruelties of ethnic persecution and the torture that her grandparents endured, and at the same time, she learns the significance of Jewish holidays and traditions.

With *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1998), the issue of prejudice became front and center in each of the four literature circle discussions. Most of the students readily acknowledged that issues of social justice in literature were relevant to today's problems of racial, ethnic, sociocultural, gender, and political prejudice. Data gathered from the pre- LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) indicated that fourteen of the twenty-one participants circled "Not At All True" on Item 16: *I don't' believe that literature is socially relevant*. Additionally, some students often spoke from personal, sometimes painful experiences that illustrated the strong connections they had for this piece of literature. For instance, Jeremiah confessed in an informal interview during a student-teacher conference his personal experiences with prejudice,

> I like reading this book and you know how Hannah's world is turned upside down when she goes to the concentration camp? Well (pause) that's how I felt when my

parents told me I was coming to this school. My world changed too. I don't know. The other Black students didn't like me 'cause I'm smart and tease me 'cause I hang out with white students. And then some white students just don't like me 'cause I'm Black. [I-P6]

However, more revealing is how critical thinking about this text opened up dialogue that promoted student understanding about the sociocultural influences in the material and provided insight into how the students' attitudes and beliefs were shaped by the social inequities in the reading. Through analysis of transcripts, the teacher-researcher discovered that as the students began to unpack the language of power in the text, they began to recognize issues of cultural dominance and some students grew outraged by the oppressive situations they read and wanted to know what the world was doing at the time and why more was not being done to help the Jews. In this context, learning occurred as students worked to unpack different layers of meaning and to navigate real-world experiences that engaged them in response and inquiry. Furthermore, discussion and critical thinking about the sociocultural influences in this text served to be a springboard for future literacy response structures (Beach, 1998).

The following conversation is from one literature circle group and illustrates the personal connections the students made and the reflective manner of their responses. The episode further reveals that as the students made connections, the process required them to think beyond the text and apply their knowledge to different situations. At times throughout the conversation piece, the teacher-researcher interrupts with analysis pulling out some of the key ideas to emphasize.

Episode 1: Literature Circle Participation in *The Devil's Arithmetic*

Sabrina: What have you learned from reading these last two chapters in *The Devil's Arithmetic*?

Bridgett: I've learned how hard it was in concentration camps like what they had to go through. It makes me think I need to respect life more and my family.

Sabrina: What do you mean when you say you need "to respect life and your family more"?

Bridgett: For one thing, I will not take things for granted when I don't understand why I can't be with my friends. Sometimes, I'd rather spend time with my friends over my family 'cause my friends are more fun, but now I see that time I might not spend with my family might be time I could lose.

Tina: Yeah, that's true, but I want to say that I have a better understanding just how bad it was and I never thought about girls my age having to go through this. I mean Hannah was my age and I don't think I could have survived. I would be screaming the whole time for people to help us. I have also learned that I don't like that word relocation. We have heard that word used in other books and it doesn't mean anything good.

[Tina shows prior knowledge while making a text-to-text connection to T*he Trail In Which They Wept* (Hoobler & Hoobler, 1992) which is a story about the relocation of the Cherokee. Tina's intertextual connection (Short, 1992) also shows empathy as she personally relates to the main character.]

Lief: It shows the extent of harmful stereotyping because the Jews were stereotyped as bad and were killed for being different and that's sick.

Jeremiah: I agree with Lief. Thinking back on these chapters, this is an example of how power can be abusive because the Jews were killed for all the wrong reasons. In other words, (pause) the reality is that those in power can turn

> people against others and dominate those who look different or who have
> different religions. I mean (pause), aren't thousands of people being killed
> in other places in the world because they have a different culture or a
> different ethnicity?

Sabrina: Do you want us to answer your question or like what do you mean? Please
           explain more.

[Jeremiah shows personal knowledge. He is tying together his understanding of prejudice

and negative stereotyping and making a text-to-world connection. At the same time, his

response indicates he is unpacking the sociocultural messages embedded in the text.

Sabrina challenges Jeremiah to go further and explain his question and in doing so, she

exhibits how the literature circle context supports inquiry, interaction, and knowledge

formation.]

Jeremiah: Well, I think that it's safe to say that you can take this story and put it in
            today's world. I mean thousands of people are mass-murdered because
            their skin is different or because groups in power often murder those who
            they feel are ethnically inferior. I'm thinking about Darfur.

[Jeremiah's transaction from reading and discussing acknowledges critical thinking and

while he is reflecting, an additional text is produced.]

Zoe: Oh yeah! Good point. We did talk about that in social studies. Darfur is
       another example of mass-murder and it seems the world is just watching.
       You know looking back on it, it shows that the world is a dangerous place
       and it's not always perfect and safe. It shows that there actually is racism
       out there. Yolen [the author] wants us to know how the Jews felt and to

never forget how they died so that we can do something to keep this from

happening in the future.

[Zoe's reflection on the lesson shows how she has analyzed the content to make

connections as it applies to real-world issues. This connection is linked to another context

and reflects how intercontextuality (Floriani, 1994) played a role in meaning making. Her

reflection also shows formation of knowledge based on criticality in that she offers "we

can do something to keep this from happening."]

Tina: Oh, I just thought of something. This book is a lot like *Number the Stars*

             where the Jews are threatened in both books and the Nazis have taken over

             towns and villages in both books. In both stories, the Nazis have assumed

             power and they are exterminators, which is sick. I would also like to say,

             um, that even though this book is about Jews, it shows the extent of

             negative stereotyping, um, and how bad it is. In other words, people are

             slaughtered just because they are different.

[Tina is drawing on prior knowledge, having read *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989), and

at the same time she is making a text-to-text connection in this transaction. Tina's

comments also indicate that she has learned the negative effects from harmful

stereotyping. Her reference to another book indicates she has made the connection that a

story can change its setting, but those in power dominate through abuse of others. This

intertextual connection has contributed to the overall development of knowledge (Short,

1992).

[T-LC, 3-6]

The preceding excerpt shows how the students reflected and responded to the

question: *What have you learned from reading these last two chapters in The Devil's Arithmetic?* They were able to create connections between texts and personal experiences as well as to monitor and take ownership of their own learning through discussion and sharing with each other. In addition, through reflection and response to text, the students gained insight into how the text related to personal knowledge. These connections were often expressed as comparisons or the synthesis of ideas, such as when Jeremiah and Sabrina applied references from the text to today's world and a previously studied text. Both students drew on their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992) and demonstrated their understanding of the extent of human experience.

The participants in this literature circle created meaning by connecting prior experiences and knowledge and by offering personal responses. As the readers in this literature circle interacted personally with the words on the page, multiple meanings were constructed and each participant took away a different but personal meaning from the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). At the same time, meaning in this case was a function of what occurred among the participants and text, rather than a process between readers and text. As the readers read, discussed, and reflected, the transaction produced further texts, thereby developing further knowledge (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000).

Creative modes of thinking.

Critical thinking in the context of inquiry also involves the creative modes of thinking in order to make an evaluation. Creative thinking involves inventing ideas and predicting, providing interpretations, as well as the conceptualizing, imagining, and synthesizing forms of thinking. From analysis of the data, this study found that as the students participated in literature circles, they had opportunities to listen to various

interpretations presented by others and through the process of interpretation the readers were able to extend their initial impressions of the text and to develop a more complete focusing on specific information. For example, while reading and discussing *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1998), one circle group engaged in creative thinking that stemmed from a prompt let by the *Literary Illuminator* in the group. Jane tells her circle members to refer to page 129, paragraph seven, and reread the passage. The following dialogue offers insight into how the circle members collaboratively worked to interpret the author's use of figurative language.

Episode 2: Participation in Creative Thinking

Jane: I chose this passage because there is something significant that Fayge tells the others. How do the words 'black heart' relate to the life in camp?

Robert: Maybe the 'black heart' could have been the concentration camp.

Dottie: Yeah but what is the 'black heart' and who is the 'wolf'?

Tomas: I thought the 'wolf' could be Hitler and he has the 'black heart' which is like all of the concentration camps because it said the 'black heart' is like 'unimaginable pain' and he has them [Jews] in his palm and he can destroy them any time he chooses and once he is taken down, then all the pain and suffering will be gone.

Tomas: I think he [Hitler] holds the camps as his heart. His heart is what he likes to do.

Annabelle: Wait a minute, wait a minute. What do you mean by "what he [Hitler] likes to do?"

Tomas: It's like to destroy the 'wolf,' you have to destroy the 'heart.' I think the

'wolf' is Hitler and the 'black heart' is his heart which are his camps.

Daniel: I think the 'black heart' symbolizes the Germans.

Jane: Whoa! That's a stereotype of Germans. Not all Germans were Nazis.

Daniel: Yeah, you're right. I meant to say Nazis because we have already read in

              Chapter 15 about how the Commandant goes about the 'choosing' so the

              'black heart' is the heart of the Nazis led by their 'wolf' who was Hitler.

              When the Commandant talked about the oven, I couldn't help but think

              about Hansel and Gretel and the oven they faced.

Jane: I can buy that. I remember reading that in Reader's Theater. Yeah,

              innocent children were threatened in that story as well. My interpretation

              is the 'heart' of the concentration camps would be Hitler and his heart is

              black. Hitler is the evil 'wolf' of the concentration camps and if the 'wolf'

              were to get shot, then the camps could die. On the other hand, I see the

              Jews like the good heart and their hearts keep beating so they can remind

              us about evils in the world.

[T-LC, 3-8]

This excerpt highlights the reader and text (intertextual) relationship (Short, 1992)
and the reader and the context (intercontextual) relationship (Floriani, 1994). Further, as
the group participants worked to interpret the textual passage, knowledge was often
shaped by borrowing and transforming a prior text (Bloome, & Egan-Robetson, 1993),
such as when Daniel references the oven from *Hansel and Gretel* (Grimm & Grimm,
1812) while discussing the reading of *A Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1998) and Jane
signaled the importance of intercontextuality by connecting the literature circle to a prior

Reader's Theater activity.

Additionally, this excerpt reveals the collaborative nature of literature circles as a useful technique in facilitating learning. In this instance, the context provided the group members the opportunity to interpret, share opinions, and use each other as a sounding board. It forced reflection of existing beliefs and values, raised questions, and initiated inquiry as members worked together to formulate meaning from the text. For example, while responding to a question on the literature circle questionnaire: *How was the literature circle discussion helpful to your critical reading?* Sabrina shared,

> It helped me in a way that as I read the story, I automatically think about the different views, how else the text could be written, how different it would be in another's eyes, if the author's information is accurate, and who is missing. It helped me understand the text and realize that we're not just in our own little world. That there is one big world out there that we can compare the text to and it can have an impact on me. [RJ, 3-25]

From data analysis, the findings showed the high-ability sixth-grade readers were capable of addressing themselves to literacy practices during collaborative discussions about literature. As a result, the teacher-researcher found that collaborative literature discussions helped to validate, broaden, and transform individual interpretations and promote greater understanding of texts. Through interaction as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the participants co-constructed a deeper understanding of whole concepts, such as prejudice and negative stereotyping, and discovered the power differentials between cultural groups within the interactive social setting of a literature circle.

Further, analysis of the data found that literature circles can gradually enable students to take responsibility for reading, comprehending, interpreting, developing discussion for text, and engaging in increasingly more complex levels of reading and

thinking. For example, the students applied reasoning to critical thinking in order to make thoughtful evaluations about textual themes and characters' behaviors. Through the use of inferential, reflective, and creative modes of thinking, this study found that literature circles provide a zone for thinking on the one hand and inquiry and knowledge formation on the other.

Zone of Affective Development and Self-Awareness

Research supports the position that human beings are inherently emotional beings and that emotion and affective development impact students' development and behavior in a wide variety of important ways (Bloom, 1985; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). As a result, this implies that for teachers to understand students' affective development, it is necessary to examine their emotional behavior and outward expressions. From analysis of the data, this study found that literature circles are zones of affective development and self-awareness for high-ability sixth-grade readers.

Goleman (1995) defined emotion as, "a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act" (p. 289). In conjunction, Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964), offered that emotion involves three subcomponents: feeling, cognition, and behavior. Furthermore, Bloom (1985) determined that the manner in which students deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasm, motivations, and attitudes can be classified as examples of the affective domain and the associated behaviors are both indicative and common to one's affective development. Guided by these suppositions, the teacher-researcher discovered through observations, recorded transcripts, and the students' dialogue journals, that literature circles promote a context that is conducive for students to question, challenge,

and relate their own experiences and emotions while reading and discussing diverse literature. Specifically, data analysis found a range of emotions were voiced and displayed that encompassed: (1) student self-awareness and discernment for other's emotions and (2) the ability to connect, prioritize, internalize, and regulate their own emotions in support of democratic ideals.

Self-awareness and discernment for others' emotions.

The manner in which the participants dealt with things emotionally can be found while exploring the imbalance of power and the silenced voices in *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969) where words such as discriminates, dominates, and unfair were used repeatedly while describing the main character's unfortunate circumstances in the novel. Following a brief synopsis of *Sounder*, excerpts are provided to illustrate this point.

The story *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969) involves a sharecropper family trying to survive under Jim Crow Laws in the South. The main character is simply named Boy which reinforces the concept that Blacks were deemed unworthy of name during this time, particularly in this region. The boy's father works very hard for very little money and often hunts with his devoted coon dog, Sounder, named for his loud voice.

One night the father leaves his dog behind in order to steal food for his family. When the sheriff and his posses come to take the father away, Sounder is shot while chasing after the men and painfully lives out his days waiting for his master to return. From this point forward, the story centers on the boy's efforts to find his father, and in the process, he is befriended by a teacher who teaches him to read and provides an education. Eventually, the father returns home and Sounder is heard one last time bellowing through the valley.

Bloom (1985) explains that simple affective behaviors, such as receiving and responding to phenomena, are the most basic examples in which students deal with things emotionally. Such behaviors involve an awareness of feelings in which students identify and analyze feelings of self. In addition, this category is often characterized by active participation on the part of the learners in which students ask, discuss, present, assist, and answer each other. These simple behaviors were observed while the participants discussed their reading from *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969). For example, Steve comments, "The Boy is the main character but he has no voice. He doesn't even have a name like I do or all of us for that matter. What do you guys think?"

 "Candice answers, "He [the Boy] is not heard because the sheriff is the authority and his voice dominates. He's [the boy] a nothing."

Rachel assists by pointing to the Boy's discrimination when she says, "I think this is an example of how Blacks in the South were treated unfairly because the sheriff had all the power and his voice dominated."

"It makes me mad and I feel sorry for him [the Boy]. I wouldn't want to shut up if someone shot my dog," Candice concluded [T-LC, 2-8].

Through this brief exchange, the students demonstrated their willingness to listen to their circle mates and react to the particular phenomenon being discussed. This dialogue further indicated that the students' emotional experiences were embedded in the conditions that justified them. In other words, through their social exposure and cognitive developmental capacities while listening to each other, the students gave meaning to the Boy's silenced voice and equated this to discrimination. Furthermore, this brief exchange revealed that as each student expressed their concern for how the main character had been

silenced, they did so having simultaneously analyzed their own feelings as they reacted to the phenomenon. In other words, each participant was aware of their own self and identity at that moment and this further allowed them to feel for the boy. As the students understood how the Boy felt, they did so by internally resonating compatible feelings and by offering sensitive reflection statements.

Connect, prioritize, internalize, and regulate emotions.

From data analysis, the teacher-researcher found that other students like Steve, Candice, and Rachel were aware of their feelings and connected their own emotions to those of others while attending and reacting in literature circle discussion. The following conversation is from one literature circle group and illustrates the emotional connections the students made to the main character in *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969) while engaged in a discussion led by the group's *Connector* and then reactions to different prompts from the group's *Critical Profiler*. The episode reveals that as the students made emotional connections, the process enabled them to demonstrate their sensitivity towards the Boy's unfortunate circumstances and then in the second part of the episode, the students reveal their knowledge of democratic values and their ability to bring together different values in order to resolve conflicts between them. Bloom's (1985) affective taxonomy categorizes these behaviors as valuing, organizing, and internalizing. At times, the teacher-researcher interrupts the episode with analysis to emphasize key ideas in support of the students' affective development.

Episode 3: Literature Circle Participation in *Sounder*

Stanza 1: Critical Connections

Dottie: Okay my role is the *Connector* and I have made several connections to the

boy in *Sounder*. First, my dog means more to me than most of my friends
and if something happened to her, I would be empty. I mean (pause) I
think I would feel pain that I can't even describe. I also connect to how the
boy loves his father 'cause my dad is my support. He takes me to all my
soccer games. I can hear him cheering, um, but not too loud 'cause, I don't
want him screaming like some parents. I don't even like it when he's out
of town for his business. Casey, what were your connections?

Casey: Well, first I said that I can connect to how bad the boy felt when he lost
his dog. My dog died last summer and it took me a long time to get over
him. I mean I still cry 'specially at night. Bear cuddled on my bed and
kept me company?

Bridgett: Yeah, I said the same thing.

Dottie: Yeah, I know what you mean. Sometimes when I'm scared or lonely, I just
grab Bella and she makes me so happy. She licks my face and perks me
up. Nicholas, do you have anything?

[Both Dottie and Casey demonstrate their understanding of the worth or value that
Sounder means to the main character by explaining and sharing the importance of their
dogs in their own lives. When Dottie presents how lonely she would be without her dog,
she is accepting the validity that the boy has the right to be lonely. In addition, she
attaches significant value to having a father, and in doing so, she demonstrates a more
complex commitment to the values she shares with the boy. She values the love and
comfort that her father provides and justifies this as a reason for the boy to feel lonely.
This also illustrates how Dottie's own identity is shaped by the objects around her that

provide emotional support.]

Nicholas: Well, mine are different. I don't have a dog. I wish I did (pause) but my

              mom likes cats, and I'm sorta allergic so I stay away. But I said I can

              connect to the boy's loneliness 'cause when I moved here, I felt like I had

              no friends. It was hard. I mean, I have sisters. But you know, sisters aren't

              the same and I felt alone.

Dottie: Yeah, that would be hard. I know how I feel when I have a fight with my

              best friend. I feel lonely and like everybody's against me. Jeremiah, do

              you want to add anything?

[Nicholas's connection to the boy's loneliness illustrates his sensitivity toward the boy's

feelings. Nicholas shares the same value. At the same time, through his participation in

the literature circle discussion, he differentiates his loneliness from the boy's by sharing

his feelings about his move and having to find new friends. In essence, he is prioritizing

and organizing his values.]

Jeremiah: Well, I had what you all had, but I also said I can connect to his [the Boy]

              discrimination. I mean, I know you guys are cool, but man, I'm not

              included in some things after school. It's like I'm friends here but I'm not

              friends outside of school. Sometimes I have to find the courage to say,

              "Hey, what about me?"

Dottie: Really? That's so sad. I have a lot of Black friends and we get together.

Jeremiah: Well, one thing I've learned is that I have it easy compared to my mom

              and dad.

[Jeremiah's connection shows his sensitivity towards the boy's discrimination. Jeremiah

has internalized this value based on a set of beliefs about discrimination. Dottie
demonstrates her understanding by adding her sensitivity for their racial differences and
sharing her commitment to social change through her belief that Blacks are more than
friends at school, but friends outside of school as well. By comparing and contrasting the
values in the story to the values of the real world, both students characterize a
commitment to a value system that predicates their behavior in the social world.]

Casey: You know I can somewhat connect to that 'cause some people don't like
            me because of my clothes. I don't have the "in" clothes (gestures with her
            two fingers on both hands) 'cause my mom can't afford them, so in a way,
            that's discrimination.

[Casey's connection makes two interesting points. First, she shares a sensitivity towards
cultural differences. Secondly, her overt behavior with her hands reveals that she has
internalized a set of beliefs about discrimination and the value she holds true is her belief
that clothes should not be the determinant for how a person is judged. Casey values her
own individuality which suggests that she is keenly aware of the self in her.]

Dottie: You're right. That is. Discrimination stinks period. Now, does anybody
            have anymore connections they want to make? Okay good. I think Casey
            is our *Critical Profiler*.

Stanza 2: Questioning the Author's Values

Casey: Alright, as Dottie said, I am the *Critical Profiler.* My first question is what
            are the author's values [Armstrong] that you see in the text?

Nicholas: Do you mean his [the author] beliefs?

Casey: Yeah, his [the author] beliefs and ideas so what are some of the ideas the

author [Armstrong] feels are important?

Nicholas: Well for one thing, Armstrong seems to value the importance of family

and love. He [the author] shows that by sending the boy out looking for

his father. I mean (pause) on Christmas Day he takes a cake to his father.

He's [the Boy] probably thought about him all day and he doesn't

want his father to think nobody thinks of him.

Casey: You're right. The boy spends a lot of time looking for his father after he

[the father] is arrested so that shows his love and loyalty.

Dottie: You know Nicholas hit on something. Um, that man at the jail took the

cake away from the boy which is so sad. I think this shows the bad side of

man.

Casey: What do you mean?

Dottie: Well, I think the author [Armstrong] also values human kindness because

he's teaching us about how bad it was for Blacks in the South, um, and

like he's [the author] also saying that he values human dignity. In a way

'cause the boy doesn't have much of a voice, he's [the author] speaking

for him and at the same time, he's [the author] making his values known.

Casey: Do you agree with the author's [Armstrong] values?

Bridgett: You know the author used the word 'nigger' which I hate but I think he

does that to show how awful the times were and to show the racial

prejudice.

Jeremiah: Well, you know I hate the word but what does that have to do with values?

Bridgett: Because like Dottie said, Armstrong values human dignity and he uses the

boy to show us dignity. Don't you get it? In other words, the boy shows

dignity when he faces terrible odds. Personally, I can agree with the

Armstrong's values because that's how it should be. I mean (pause) I just

think we need less hate in the world and we know too many people have

suffered 'cause of hate.

Jeremiah: Well that's true and yeah I can relate to his [the author] values.

Casey: Well, that leads me to my next question and that is what role does power

play?

Nicholas: Well, I think it's obvious. The whites have the power and the Blacks have

none. This shows why the Blacks are silenced. Shoot, the main character

doesn't even have a name.

Casey: So are you saying the author [Armstrong] is speaking for the boy?

Nicholas: I think he's [the author] speaking for the boy but I think he's [the author]

speaking for all the Blacks.

Dottie: Yeah, I think we are just skimming the surface though. I think the author

[Armstrong] uses power to show how many are silenced and treated

unfairly, and it's kinda like the author [Armstrong] wants us to speak for

those who can't.

Casey: Ooh very good. I like that.

Jeremiah: Yeah, I agree with Dottie and um the book does show the racial prejudice

and how the whites have power. And even though this book was from a

long time ago, well, some things are better and some aren't. I mean

(pause) Armstrong's values are just as important today and I know I don't

want to go back to that time.

Bridgett: Yeah, I agree and I think we need to keep this in front of us.

[T-LC, 2-12]

Analysis of this episode reveals the students' sensitivity towards individual and racial differences. At the same time, the discussion illustrates how the students were able to recognize responsible behavior on the one hand, and human indecency on the other. Implicit in the students' reactions to the *Critical Profiler's* prompts were the harmful assumptions made about the irresponsible behavior and the abuse of power that Blacks experienced at the hands of the whites. Dottie makes the case by saying, "I think the author [Armstrong] uses power to show how many are silenced and treated unfairly, and it's kinda like the author [Armstrong] wants us to speak for those who can't." This phenomenon became evident when the students reached a consciousness that the author was speaking for all silenced voices. By comparing, relating, and synthesizing the author's values with their own, the students organized a set of beliefs that provided them a value system to follow and Jeremiah provides evidence when he says, "I mean (pause) Armstrong's values are just as important today and I know I don't want to go back to that time."

From analysis of the data, the nature of literature circles provided the participatory structure for the students to internalize cognitive structures, such as power domination and silenced voices, as well as the feelings and identities that were relevant to the interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). The excerpts highlight the collaborative nature of literature circles as a useful technique in facilitating development of affective behaviors. In other words, the feeling dimension of learning became evident. In this

instance, the context provided the group members the opportunity to identify and analyze feelings of self (Bloom, 1985), to reflect on existing beliefs and values, and to weave their own connections (Rosenblatt, 1978; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000) between the textual themes discussed and their own existing value system through questions that enabled them to move beyond their own society's social parameters.

According to Greene (1995), readers should look to literature for the missing voices in their community and to interrupt the inner boundary of prejudice and social injustice. By reading multicultural literature that reflected a power differential between groups of people, the students were presented with diverse perspectives and engaged in socially mediated experiences that involved both cognitive and affective abilities, such as listening to key ideas and discerning core emotions in stories. As such, data analysis showed the students demonstrated their beliefs, attitudes, and emotions needed to confront social issues in their community (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and broadened their conception of self within their world (Harre, 1987). As the students perceived and inferred the emotional state of the Boy with their own, they in turn voiced their own conscious affective state through channels of communication. Bloom (1985) refers to this as a process of internalizing values and is characterized in such a manner that it is not enough to understand, even deeply, students must communicate that understanding through a prescribed internal system of beliefs and values.

Zone of Cultural Awareness and Place in the World

Cultural awareness is the foundation of communication and it becomes central when people have to interact with people from different cultures or read about different cultures. Misinterpretations occur primarily when people lack awareness. In absence of

better knowledge, people tend to assume, instead of finding out about what a behavior means to a particular culture. In addition, what is considered appropriate in one culture is frequently inappropriate to another. Luke, Comber, and O'Brien (1994) ascertain that in order to move beyond a perfunctory understanding of culture, students need to develop a sense of their own cultural identity and develop a sense that there are many ways of being in the world. In other words, students need to realize that their own individual viewpoints are culturally determined by their own attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotions, and variables such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic, religion, and age all work together to form an endless number of ways of being in the world.

In this study, the analysis showed that as the participants learned to analyze, challenge, and reflect on important societal issues by raising questions that promote high-level thinking about multicultural issues and themes and through literacy experiences that promoted cultural empathy, three domains emerged: (1) the participants developed the skills to recognize that people are not the same, (2) the participants learned that similarities and differences are both important, and (3) the participants learned to celebrate diversity by looking beyond the differences by taking a closer look at the cultural connectedness among mankind. In other words, this study found through the reading of diverse texts with an emphasis on critical literacy practices, that literature circles provide a zone for cultural awareness. At the same time, the participants developed a sense of their own place in the world.

Recognition that people are not the same.

In becoming culturally aware, the students had to develop the skills necessary to recognize that people are not the same, and by doing so, they first had to admit that their

assumptions about other cultures might be wrong and they had to suspend initial judgments before evaluating other cultures. For example, while reading *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), the participants were confronted with a culture that was not only foreign to them, but extremely opposite from their world, and at times their disbelief interfered with the ability to become more culturally aware. Following a brief summary of *Red Scarf Girl*, excerpts from classroom conversations will illustrate this point.

Ji-li Jiang was twelve years old, an outstanding student in school, and had a shining future in her beloved Chairman Mao's Communist China. However in 1966 with the advent of the Cultural Revolution, her world began to change. Her own intelligence and her family's educated and wealthy background invited suspicion, humiliation, and persecution from China's Red Guards, as well as neighbors, classmates, and her father's colleagues. When her father was arrested, she was faced with the decision to denounce her family background and break with her family or refuse to testify against him and lose her bright opportunities with her beloved Communist Party.

With the *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), suspending initial judgments about the Cultural Revolution and its impact on its people proved to be challenging for the participants. At first, the students vacillated between a belief that "My way is the only way" and a belief that "I know their way, but my way is better," by ignoring the impacts of cultural differences and believing that cultural differences were the source of problems in China. In order for the students to develop the skills necessary to recognize that people are not the same, they first had to admit that their assumptions about other cultures might be wrong. This required the students to assume differences, not similarities. The teacher-researcher found that this process was difficult for the students and that seeing cultural

differences appeared at first to be an obstacle. The hopes were that as the students became more culturally aware, they would become more comfortable with the notion that people are not the same. The following conversation is from one literature circle group and illustrates the moment-by-moment interaction from where the students began along their journey to develop cultural awareness. Led by the *Character Investigator*, Holly informs her group why she has chosen what she believes to be the author's disfavored character in *Red Scarf Girl*. Her assumption is based on the author's tone and Holly provides evidence from the text to support her choice. At times throughout the conversation piece, the teacher-researcher interrupts with analysis pulling out some of the key ideas to emphasize.

<div align="center">Episode 4: Cultural Awareness</div>

Holly: My role is the *Character Investigator* and for my disfavored character I chose Du Hai. For his physical characteristics I said he was skinny and weak and for his intellectual characteristics I said he seems unintelligent. He doesn't do well in school and we know that Ji-li had to help him with his work. His cultural identity is Chinese and that he gets his identity because he follows the Cultural Revolution and he agrees with it. And he's from the working class so his SES [socioeconomic] is low. And for his role, I am not sure, I think we have to get further into the story, but for his position, I said he is an enforcer of Mao and I think he's going to become a Red Guard. Now, on page 37, paragraph 1, Tim will you please read?

Tim: 'Du Hai and Yin Fan took turns attacking us so fiercely. . .'

[Holly's description of Du Hai speaks volumes about her own cultural identity. Her

references that Du Hai is weak because he is skinny and he is not smart because he gets help with his homework, illustrates that her judgment is based on her own personal attitude and emotions about what it takes to be an acceptable student.]

Holly: Now that Tim has read the passage, I think this shows the best how Du Hai is rejected by the author [Ji-li] because he bullied and made fun of others and bullies are not usually liked. What do you think?

Annabelle: I think he [Du Hai] doesn't have a very good family at home to teach him right from wrong because if he knew right from wrong then he wouldn't be teasing Ji-li and An Yi. He doesn't have what Ji-li has at home. It's not the same.

Lief: Well, I think he's [Du Hai] a bully because he makes fun of others and usually if you make fun of others, you don't like yourself, so you bully and you are even more disliked.

Tim: Yeah, he [Du Hai] doesn't act like Ji-li and her friends. I agree with you that he is not liked by Ji-li [the author] because he's poor and doesn't do well in school so that makes him different from her [Ji-li].

[T-LC, 4-6]

[At this point in the discussion, the students have determined that Du Hai is a disfavored character based on their own cultural parameters. The students' assumption that Du Hai is a bully reflects what the three students deem is acceptable behavior in their own society and culture, ignoring the fact that they might not know all the facts before they can make an accurate evaluation. Their statements reflect a "My way" and a "My way is better"

attitude.]

This brief excerpt illustrates how the students have ignored the impact of cultural differences. At this point in time, the students were operating from within their own cultural views, which included their shared assumptions or ideological perspectives of the world. What the students considered inappropriate behavior in their own culture, such as bullying, emphasizes they have not considered what might be appropriate behavior in another culture or what acts and circumstances might make sense of the situation. The students have not considered that their assumptions about another culture might be wrong because they are looking for similarities and they are not acknowledging the differences between the two cultures [FN, 4-6]. Only two students allude to differences in people. Annabelle acknowledges that Du Hai's home life sets him apart and Tim's remarks, ". . . he's poor and doesn't do well in school so that makes him different from her [Ji-li]" is an indication that an emerging recognition of people's individual differences do exist.

In addition, the students accepted the author's tone that Du Hai was a disfavored character and did not challenge the author's perspective or consider the author had a special interest to serve. The teacher-researcher found during student-teacher conferences other students disliked the character based on their cultural expectations. For instance Jeremiah commented, "Du Hai is a jerk" [I-P6]. In addition, Tina stated, "I can see how easy it is to hate him" [I-P4].

Similarities and differences are both important.

Through interaction and continued exposure to the sociocultural influences in *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), the students had the opportunity to see how others experience life. The literature circle interactions allowed the students to develop more knowledge

and gain more information considered important to another cultural group and this in turn, allowed the students to begin to see differences. For example, while discussing a passage in which a man had been stopped by the Red Guards on the street to check to see if his clothes were counterrevolutionary, Daniel asks, "Does anyone know why I chose this passage?"

Robert says, "Well, I think you chose this passage because it goes against our definition of freedom. It's not our way but it was their way at the time."

"It pretty much shows how the Red Guards were taking Mao's ideas to an extreme. The Red Guards were caught up in his cultural Revolution," Tomas offered.

Annabelle then says, "We don't understand it because we see Mao as abusing his power and we don't think people should have been treated like that, and while I disagree, um, the Red Guards believed in Mao and just followed his order" [T-LC, 4-12].

Through the interaction as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the context of literature circles, the students developed an awareness of the kinds of information, ideas, and attitudes considered important to a different cultural group and from the brief conversation, the dialogue reveals that the students were beginning to expand their cultural awareness and transition from an attitude of "My way" to "Their way." In other words, from the competing ideologies, the students developed a stronger awareness of their own way of doing things and how they fit into their world, but they began to see others' ways of doing things as well.

Celebrating diversity through cultural connectedness.

Increasing cultural awareness involves more than seeing similarities and differences. Through empathy, students begin to see that similarities and differences are

both important, and from this realization they can then begin to embrace diversity and begin to look beyond differences to see more commonalties and cultural connectedness. Crucial to empathy is that it involves understanding and communication as if from the other person's point-of-view, taking the other person's perspective, while at the same time not losing sight of the fact that the feelings and thoughts in fact belong to the other person (Goldstein & Michaels, 1985; Martin, 1999).

Based on this premise, the teacher-researcher implemented interactive read-aloud throughout the study in whole-class meetings to allow students to experience quality multicultural literature and to engage in critical literacy practices. The interactive read-aloud proved to be crucial to the success of connecting the concepts of critical literacy and democracy when the students were engaged in critical conversations with difficult social justice issues presented in their multicultural texts. By modeling for the student participants critical questions to be asked, the teacher-researcher was able to scaffold student learning, such that students began to view the classroom as a society in which critical conversations about the literature allowed the participants to examine the cultural differences around the world, to understand how cultural differences impact their lives, and how to connect to the real world as well as find their places in that world. This recognition and affirmation of diversity became one fundamental way to promote cultural awareness and cultural empathy. For example, while reading *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) the participants once again were forced to confront their own cultural identities and worldviews, particularly in the process of relating to other individuals. Following a brief overview of *The Breadwinner*, evidence is provided and illustrates that as the sixth-grade students increased awareness of their culture, they were able to recognize their own

cultural biases and their impacts.

The Breadwinner (Ellis, 2000) is a story about a young Afghan girl who lives in a bombed out apartment with her family during the Taliban rule of Afghanistan. Her parents were once rich and highly educated but under the Taliban regime, all that was taken away from her, including her father who was taken to jail. Because girls were not allowed to go to school or even outside without wearing a burqa and having a male escort, Parvana cut her hair and wore her deceased brother's clothes to sell goods in the market in order to help her family survive. In time, Parvana found that she needed more money than selling household items; thus, she resorts to bone digging in graveyards and selling the bones to a vendor. As the story progresses, Parvana makes enough money for her mother and sister to travel to a village for her sister's wedding, but Parvana stays behind to wait for her father who does eventually come home.

Shortly thereafter, Parvana discovers that the village where her mother and sister have gone has been attacked by the Taliban and many were murdered. *The Breadwinner* concludes as Parvana and her dad embark on a journey to find her mother and sister. Parvana's story continues in a sequel.

The following conversation occurred during a literature circle discussion after a teacher read-aloud and illustrates the manner in which the participants began to navigate the cultural differences between the text and their world. During discussion led by the *Critical Profiler*, the students became aware their own personal and cultural biases were preventing them from feeling comfortable when talking about other cultures. In part, the students began to see that culture cannot be based upon one common denominator and during literature circle interactions, the students began to demonstrate a sensitivity that

gradually transformed into an acceptance about a different culture.

Episode 5: Literature Circle Discussion in *The Breadwinner*

Kimberly: How would you feel if you had been Parvana?

Sabrina: I would be really mad but I think I would react the same. I realize that

digging for bones would not be fun, but I can understand that Parvana did

whatever to survive.

Zoe: Yeah, fortunately we don't live in a town that treats girls like second

citizens but who are we to judge? I mean in our own culture, people steal

to feed their families. Of course people steal for a lot of bad reasons too.

Kimberly: You know you touched on something. So, my next question is what have

you learned about the aspects of culture in this text?

Steve: Well, the Taliban doesn't even like education for girls. I don't know what

they [girls] did to them [Taliban] but remember even in our own country,

women couldn't always vote.

Tim: Yeah, I do see some similarities, even though I think they are pretty

extreme.

Kimberly: Can you explain?

Tim: Well, they have different celebrations and dress differently but we have

celebrations too and maybe our dress would be radical to an Afghan

person. Also, I think it's interesting about their parents picking who they

marry.

Jeremiah: But the cultures are kinda the same because when they [Afghans]

celebrate, they celebrate together and we celebrate as a family, so they [the

cultures] are technically the same. They [Afghans] just have different names for their celebrations.

Kimberly: I noticed that the Afghans also value books because remember Parvana hid her family's books when the Taliban came to take her father away. I can identify with that. I have to hide my books from my younger brother or he would ruin them.

Zoe: You know watching Parvana go through this is pretty interesting because even though there's bad all around her, there's a little bit of good. I mean (pause) she [Parvana] finds her own strength, kinda her own identity even with the cultural bias. So, I think it shows that what Parvana feels is important to her own culture she's fighting to hold onto it. I know sometimes people try to shape me and I have to fight for me.

Jeremiah: Oh yeah, something else that is similar in Parvana's culture is that there seems to be bias and this definitely affected her life. Parvana's opportunities were taken away from her. I mean (pause) she [Parvana] didn't get to do what boys in her culture could do. Simply because she was a girl, well, she [Parvana] was discriminated and we have discrimination in our culture.

Kimberly: Good point. Yeah, I think I can agree that negative stereotypes are against Parvana. Girls are lower class, but I admire her 'cause she didn't give up or think less of herself.

[T-LC, 5-3]

Analysis of the preceding dialogic discourse found that with greater exposure to

multicultural texts, the participants in this group were able to develop a worldview

through emerging subjectivities involving issues of social justice. In other words, through

continued exposure to multicultural texts, the students were able to let go of their cultural

knowledge that had previously influenced their understanding and interpretations of the

novels they read by posing questions, trying on new subjectivities (Hagood, 2002) while

revoicing the issues of Parvana, and reifying what counted as a cultural connectedness

between their world and that of Parvana's. During a final interview, Jane commented,

> Reading about how other children deal with difficult situations is inspiring and
> this forced me to rethink what I will do in the future. Will I put my head in the
> sand or will I take a stand? [I-P24]

In addition, the situated context within the social group allowed some members to

think about their own identity including how they would act or what they would believe

and value in order to be a member of Parvana's social world (Gee, 2002). Data gathered

from the pre- LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) indicated that two of the twenty-one

participants circled "True" and none of the participants circled "Extremely True" on Item

2: *In literature, I sometimes recognize feelings that I have overlooked during my daily*

life. However, data analyzed from the post LRQ indicated that nine of the twenty-one

participants circled "True" and nine of the twenty-one participants circled "Extremely

True" on Item 2 in that same survey. Further, findings of the analysis showed the students

had developed an attitude of "Our way" that was accomplished by learning to explore

differences in order to see commonalities presented in texts. This is evident when Zoe

stated, "So, I think it shows that what Parvana feels is important to her own culture, she's

fighting to hold onto it. I know sometimes people try to shape me and I have to fight for

me" [T-LC, 5-3].

Based on analysis of the data, reading diverse texts aimed at bringing people from different cultural backgrounds together, allowed the students to create a culture of shared meanings. Literature circles created zones of cultural awareness and allowed the students to develop a sense of being in the world. As the students engaged in socially mediated experiences while responding to texts (Rosenblatt, 1978), they developed the skills to recognize that people are not the same, that similarities and differences are both important, and to celebrate diversity by looking beyond the differences by taking a closer look at the cultural connectedness among mankind. From this stance, the students learned that while characters and people are individually different, each is also part of a cultural group and membership in that cultural group often defines opportunities or a lack thereof.

By reading diverse literature, the twenty-one participants learned that texts define the world and such ideology can affect their own reading of the world (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). In addition, the students learned how the characteristics of different cultures play a role in the everyday lives of real people in those cultures. Analysis of the data showed that literature circles bring students face-to-face with the present day ramifications of values that are inherent in cultural systems and as the students recognized their own values and cultural systems, they learned from what they read and how they fit into their world.

Zone of Criticality and Social Action

Advocates for critical literacy emphasize the empowering role that literacy can and should play in reshaping the world in which one lives and works (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). By gathering appropriate information, organizing, and defining specific objectives, literacy can serve as a means of achieving desired ends. In other words, the

literate person reflects on what is wrong in his or her world and uses the enabling power

of literacy to change that world. From this perspective, reading becomes understanding

the real world and comprehending is constructing or reconstructing that world. In this

study, data analysis showed that as the students questioned power relations, discourses,

and identities in a world that was incomplete, unfair, and inhumane, the students learned

to change and redefine their world. Changing or redefining one's world is doing critical

literacy. Subsequently, data analysis found that literature circles provided a zone from

which to demonstrate reading from a critical stance and to take social action.

To accomplish this, the students had to make a major shift in how they read. In

other words, asking students to reflect alternative perspectives did not occur

automatically as indicated by observations recorded in the teacher-researcher's field

notes,

> From observations today of all four table groups, it appears that many students read first for the lived-through experience of the literature and are more likely to give personal reactions, rather than treating the text objectively. There is very little focus on questioning the story or the author. The students are inclined to accept the presentation of the cultural group that the author provides. Possibly, their aesthetic responses to literature are interfering with their ability to assume a critical stance. Memo: conduct mini lessons. [FN, 4-7]

This field note entry indicated that the students responded to multicultural

literature much in the same way they read other literature. However, even proficient

readers need explicit instruction through modeling and guided practice and then

opportunities to try techniques on their own through collaborative practice, independent

practice, and application. Naidoo (1992) supports this finding by explicating that students

will not change their stance while reading if teachers do not challenge them to question

literature. As a result, the development of critical literacy practices was a gradual process

in which the students developed the knowledge over time to question their reading and to develop the necessary language to think in opposition to the author and fill-in the textual gaps and silences (Fairclough, 1989). First, the teacher-researcher initiated this process by creating a classroom culture that allowed the students to negotiate the meanings of "difference" by highlighting the cultural strengths of characters and engaging students in considering alternative perspectives through interactive read-aloud. Through literacy, the teacher-researcher established a pathway for the students to call into question the authors' words. This was a crucial procedure as data analyzed from anecdotal records while specifically observing literature circle discussions indicated a gradual increase in the students' ability to read from a critical stance. As such, the teacher-researcher specifically recorded the students' ability to question the meaning of the text, to demonstrate how texts influence people's ideas, to challenge the author, and to recognize different points-of-view. The following notes were taken while specifically observing one literature circle group during a reading session,

> Kimberly – Increasing ability to evaluate author's interests and view of the world.
> Zoe – Good meaning maker and text user. Beginning to challenge author.
> Sabrina – Strong meaning maker. Understands roles, positions, and power.
> Lief – Difficulty with some words and meaning. Progressing text analyst.
> Steve – Strong code breaker, meaning maker, and text user. Recognizes views.
> Tim – Good code breaker, meaning maker, and text user. Questions author.
> [AR-P1, 2, 5, 7, 8]

According to Luke and Freebody (1997), these strategic reading practices are representative of the literacy practices of the text analyst and when operationalized, students function as critically literate readers. In addition, analysis of the anecdotal records provided the teacher-researcher with information that could be used in the classroom, which ultimately led to action and further guidance in promoting critical

literacy.

Therefore, through teacher read-aloud that modeled how to pose questions that

engaged the roles of a text critic and analyst (Luke & Freebody, 1997), through carefully

guided fishbowl discussions to scaffold learning, and ultimately through the independent

practice in literature circle discussions, the participants developed the skills to examine

false assumptions, inconsistencies, and illogical conclusions by reading from a critical

stance. This gradual change was noted in the teacher-researcher's field notes,

> From today's observation of Table 1, the students were discussing why the main
> character in *Sounder* does not have a name. Holly was the *Discussion Director*
> and provided good open-ended questions to promote discourse. Guy thought it
> was because the author chose to show the history of the time. He explained to his
> group members that it was the author's message or viewpoint to emphasize that
> Blacks had no rights or privileges in the story. Interestingly, Jane added that it
> was part of the author's plan to show how the main character was marginalized
> and while the Boy was the main character, he had no status or power. The use of
> the word "marginalized" indicates she has developed an understanding of the
> disenfranchised. Dottie used the word "frame" while referencing the author,
> implying that she has agreed that the author purposely positioned the Boy to be
> silenced. Nicholas remarked that the lack of name for the Boy was meant to show
> he was a silenced character. [FN, 2-21]

Further, dialogue journaling became a reflection of the social dialogue during

interaction and provided the students opportunities to make decisions on important

societal issues and construct alternative versions of reality. Rosenblatt (1983) posited that

not all social dialogue must be interactive and analysis of the data clearly revealed that

journal assignments provided the opportunities to consider different viewpoints. The

following excerpt from Kimberly's journal writing illustrates the positive manner in

which the journal became a communicative tool for questioning the status quo and

changing and redefining her world. Kimberly responds to the ICTA (Richards, 2006) that

required her to interrogate the text, make connections, and then take action by creating

possible constructions to the text world through the power of language.

> I question why Mao brainwashed all those young adults in *Red Scarf Girl*. I question Ji-li. She wrote the book and she saw young people rebelling against their own parents and saw how Mao influenced them at a prime age when they were most vulnerable. I connect to Ji-li when she was humiliated by the dai zaibo because once when I went to the beach, my sister hung my underpants on the flag pole. It made me feel humiliated and embarrassed. There are many ways I could have taken action about Maoism in China. If I were Jil-li I could have gotten a group together, mostly adults and their children, and we could have rebelled against Mao. I also could have made signs that said, 'No more Mao,'or 'Free the minds of the young people.' Using the posters, I would have led a campaign. I doubt Mao would have listened, but I could have written him a letter of complaint. I would have told him that what he was doing was wrong. I could have told the president of the US that his country should defend the people of China. By doing that, allies could have been created with China that has over 1 billion people. As Ji-li, I could have actually gone to the US to get help from people whose families were shamed like mine. [RJ, 5-7]

The example from Kimberly's dialogue journal illustrated that she has used her

critical literacy practices to deconstruct the text in order to improve her understanding of

unfamiliar cultures. By taking up alternative reading positions, she was able to recognize

a gap in the text, such as "brainwashing" and the humiliated voices of the people in *Red

Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997). From data analysis, the journal examples revealed how critical

literacy enabled Kimberly to look beyond the printed word to accept or reject the author's

values and interests (Bean & Moni, 2003) and write alternative texts to create a more

socially balanced world. Through the use of multicultural texts while reading a wide

source of cultural information that focused on the ideological and power relationships

that exists within and across cultures, she became more empowered and discovered her

own sense of agency. Specifically, the reading sparked her concern for social justice.

In addition, data analysis showed that the two new literature circle roles created

by the teacher-researcher (Chapter Three) provided the participation structures necessary

for the participants to become critically literate. First, the role of *Character Investigator*

required the student to consider character profiles (physical, intellectual, and socioeconomic status) and to examine characters with limited roles and positions to determine if their presence had been silenced for a reason because they were rejected by the author and to examine main characters who appeared to be favored by the author and why. The most significant aspect of this role was to position students to agree or disagree with how authors construct characters in a certain way. For example, an excerpt from one literature circle discussion indicates how the role of *Character Investigator* enabled Steve to understand the author's interest and values and to recognize the text's sociocultural influence in *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997).

Episode 6: The Role of *Character Investigator*

Steve: Okay, my role is *Character Investigator* and for the favored character, I chose Ji-li's grandmother. She [Ji-li's grandmother] is very wise and she [Ji-li's grandmother] is 70+ years old and age is supposed to make you wiser. For her [Ji-li's grandmother] cultural identity, she [Ji-li's grandmother] is Muslim living in communist China during 1966 in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. For her class, I put she [Ji-li's grandmother] is a 'bourgeois' and even higher because she [grandmother] was a 'landlord,' so that meant she [Ji-li's grandmother] was wealthy before the 'Cultural Revolution.' I put her [Ji-li's grandmother] role is to teach Ji-li the old ways and her [Ji-li] heritage and never let her [Ji-li] forget. Although the grandmother doesn't have a job, she does cook, clean, and do everyday chores, so I think she is like many grandmothers. Okay, that's character analysis and I chose the grandmother as a favored

character 'cause I looked at her [Ji-li] motives since she [Ji-li] wrote this

book and I looked at how she [Ji-li] described her grandmother. I think Ji-

li purposely used her grandmother to show how unfairly people were

treated. She [Ji-li] loved her grandmother and we only know about her

because she has a small role by what Ji-li says. It's sorta like Ji-li used her

grandmother to get her point across. Now, do you think this is fair or do

you think this is right and why? I guess what I'm saying is do you agree

that the grandmother is favored and Ji-li wants us to think that?

[T-LC, 4-13]

 This excerpt illustrates the manner in which critical literacy knowledge and

practices were appropriated by one gifted sixth-grade reader through the role of

Character Investigator. It is significant because it demonstrates how Steve explored

different subjectivities to the text world, while associating with a novel reading identity,

to understand the ways in which authors create versions of reality. Steve says, ". . . I

looked at her [Ji-li} motives since she [Ji-li] wrote this book. . ." In this instance, the role

of C*haracter Investigator* provided Steve the opportunity to talk about the text and to

share his interpretations as he delved deeper into the text's meaning. Specifically,

analysis of this excerpt shows he has developed the power to critique the text from a

critical stance. He said, "She [Ji-li] loved her grandmother and we only know about her

because she has a small role by what Ji-li says. In this reflection, Steve demonstrated his

knowledge that texts are not neutral but often serve the motives of the author and in doing

so he developed a changing self that reconstituted in order for him to reposition during

social interaction (Hagood, 2002; Rogers, 2002). Furthermore, analysis of this excerpt

sheds light on how Steve has learned to use the author's discursive background to interpret the author's view of the world that emerged through one of the characters in the story. When he refers to such words as, 'bourgeois,' 'landlord,' and 'Cultural Revolution,' he understands the author has positioned the grandmother to reflect an ideological view of the world and he challenges his circle mates to explore that reality.

The second new role was the *Critical Profiler* which required the students to challenge the author's stance, examine the sociocultural influences in the text, and provide alternative texts by offering how the text would be if told from a different point-of-view or time and place. The most significant aspect of this job was to examine the power relationships between the characters and then relate the cultural and power differentials to the real world. Analysis of the data shows that as the students became producers and consumers of critical literacy through increasing cultural awareness, the data consistently showed they engaged in four important activities involving discussion from a critical literacy stance: (1) they questioned the author's view of the world, (2) they learned to fill-in the gaps and silences that frequently occur in texts, (3) they learned to identify how characters are represented and positioned, and (4) they developed agency by acting on injustices by composing alternative viewpoints and constructing new texts.

For example, while grappling with the concepts of power and sociocultural disparity, the students learned that texts are considered social and cultural constructions and they are not reflections of reality but are selective versions of it, told from a particular view. Implicit in the students' responses to the following brief excerpts indicate the manner in which the role of *Critical Profiler* was an instrumental approach to text that allowed the participants to read with a critical eye. It was an important pathway for

the students to call into question the messages from the dominant elite versus the marginalized characters in their literature.

<div align="center">Episode 7: The Role of the *Critical Profiler* in Multiple Texts</div>

Stanza 1: Questioning the Author's View of the World

Tim: Whose view of the world is put forth in *The Devil's Arithmetic*?

Tina: I think it is Hannah's.

Bridgett: Well, I think it's Yolen's told through Hannah because her father was a survivor so she knew first-hand.

Tim: Okay, well then do you think the text is fair?

Lief: Well, I think it's fair. It's horrible for the condition that the Jews suffered. That much is backed-up by fact. It is also fair about how truly bad the Nazis were and it does show that people besides Jews were taken away to work the fields or in factories. Again, all that is backed-up by history.

Holly: I think it is pretty accurate on the history of the Holocaust but it does not show how other Germans felt. I mean it wasn't fair to people who were not Nazis. In *Escape from Warsaw*, we read that not all Germans were Nazis and that many Germans worked hard and risked their own lives to help the Jews.

[T-LC, 3-10]

Stanza 2: Filling-in Gaps and Silences

Zoe: In *The Breadwinner*, who or what is missing in the text?

Robert: Well, something I thought about is Parvana's mother and sister.

Zoe: Can you explain what you mean?

Robert: Well, it doesn't receive as much attention because there is such a focus on

            Parvana trying to help her family, but very little is mentioned about how

            the mother develops an underground newspaper. This was definitely going

            against the law so maybe other women were working hard behind-the-

            scenes. And, Parvana's sister, I've forgotten her name, well (pause) she

            was holding school for other children and girls weren't supposed to be

            educated. So that's another example of one voice, if you will, that was

            silenced, but not completely missing.

Annabelle: Oh yeah, that's good and something I've noticed in this book is that

            women can't go out in public without their burqas. Parvana hated it and

            felt oppressed, but what about the other women who actually wanted to

            wear them? I think the text leads us to believe that all women in

            Afghanistan suffered, and probably they did, but I'm thinking there were

            some who wanted to wear their burqas and refused to lose their culture.

[T-LC, 5-6]

Stanza 3: Learning How Characters Are Represented and Positioned

Dottie: Okay, in *The Devil's Arithmetic*, if you could invite one person to go

            home with you, who would it be and why?

Candice: Um, probably Rifka. She was mentally strong and smart and she had been

            in the camp a year so that proves she knew how to survive. I also liked

            how she knew how to organize things and take from the Nazis so again

            that proves she was smart.

Tomas: Well, since mostly this was about girls in the Holocaust, I'm not sure, but

I guess I would say Rifka too 'cause no matter what, she was going to support Hannah and whether she lived or died, she was going to help Hannah through the book.

Dottie: Okay, good. Now, on the other hand if there was one character you would not want to take home, who would it be and why?

Daniel: Well, I kinda feel like Tomas about the girls and taking home, but if I were a girl then I would not invite Fayge home. I mean, at first she was all happy 'cause she was getting married and the author [Yolen] described how pretty she was with her beautiful dress. But when she was taken by the Nazis, did you notice how her dress got all dirty? Well, this was like a symbol about what was happening to her on the inside. From the moment that her dress got all messed up, she cried and she couldn't talk or help anyone. All she thought about was how her wedding was ruined. I don't get her.

Dottie: Well, you're not a girl so you wouldn't understand about weddings.

Daniel: I know but it's not just about the dress, of course that's bad, but it's more about her as a person. Everybody else was trying to help and the way she acted, I wouldn't want to ever have to count on her.

[T-LC, 3-12]

Stanza 4: Developing Agency by Acting on Injustices

Guy: Okay in *The Breadwinner*, Parvana disguises herself as a boy. This gives her more freedom to enter the marketplace, but would you say she is truly free or what forms of freedom are missing?

Nicholas: Well, because of the power of the Taliban, Parvana has a false sense of freedom. I know she cut her hair and wore her brother's clothes which are symbolic acts of freedom, but it's all fake because she is not truly free. I mean, let's face it. She [Parvana] can't do what others girls not living under the Taliban can do. The Taliban have the power and use it to silence people, mostly girls because they have to stay hidden under their clothes or inside. Those who don't think like the Taliban, well they're not free.

Guy: Well, then how would you change this?

Nicholas: I would rewrite the text so that the Afghans stood up to the Taliban and took back their country.

Casey: You know that Taliban soldier who cried when she [Parvana] read the letter from his dead wife? Well, he's not totally free so maybe there are other Taliban soldiers like him and they could work underground to help others, like Parvana helped him.

Rachel: Well, maybe the United States should do more. I know we are there but I'm not sure that things are better for everyone so I would rewrite the story so that the United States freed all the oppressed people.

[T-LC, 5-12]

The excerpts from multiple literature circle discussions serve to illustrate the collaborative nature of literature circles as a useful technique in facilitating the development of critical literacy. In each stanza, the social context provided the group members the opportunity to focus on issues of power and challenge the ideal or commonplace for the purpose of relieving social injustice, rather than accepting simple

explanations or solutions. From analysis of the data, the role of *Critical Profiler* became a tangible way to encourage the students to question explicit disparities in their texts like socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, class, and gender.

For example, the conversation in Stanza 1 illustrated how the students have mastered the ability to evaluate the social construction of a text and question the factors that may have influenced the author to create the text in a specific manner. When Holly stated, "I think it is pretty accurate on the history of the Holocaust but it does not show how other Germans felt. I mean it wasn't fair to people who were not Nazis" [T-LC, 3-10], she demonstrated her ability to deconstruct the text in order to develop a better understanding that a text is both a social and cultural construction and that authors often short-change readers in order to serve their interests. In addition, as the students examined texts from a variety of viewpoints, they co-constructed knowledge that some views are privileged, while others are silenced. In Stanza 2, Robert offered that the "mother" and "sister" were both silenced in *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) [T-LC, 5-6]. In the same stanza, Annabelle stated, ". . . but I'm thinking there were some women who wanted to wear their burqas and refused to lose their culture" [T-LC, 5-6]. Within the frame of critical literacy, both students illustrated their knowledge that gaps and silences (Fairclough, 1989) do occur in texts when the author intentionally or unintentionally chooses to include some pieces of information and omit others.

In Stanza 3 when the students discussed the characters they would invite home in *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988), critical literacy can be found. The students' responses indicated they favored characters that were "supportive" and could "survive" [T-LC, 3-12], thereby demonstrating in this reading passage their agreement with how the

characters had been positioned. At the same time, Stanza 3 demonstrated how the girls in the group read the text in the way the author intended and the boys read the text somewhat differently. For example, Daniel found displeasure with Fayge for complaining about her wedding dress, while Dottie sympathized with Fayge and said, "Well, you're not a girl so you wouldn't understand about weddings" [T-LC, 3-12]. From the personal connections Daniel and Dottie shared in discussion and the opinions they expressed about the story or character, this exchange illustrated how the two students enacted certain identities in the socially situated context of literature circles.

Stanza 4 provided evidence on how critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, action, and transformation. When Nicholas referred to Parvana's "false sense of freedom" [T-LC, 5-12], he demonstrated that he had mastered the ability to read in order to understand who is privileged or not privileged based on skin color, race, or gender. Further, the students demonstrated they have developed the activist component of critical literacy, such as when Nicholas said, "I would rewrite the text so the Afghans stood up to the Taliban and took back their country" [LC, 5-12]. In conjunction, Casey's statement indicated she has critiqued the Taliban and wanted to engage them in correcting the inequalities and injustices in Afgahnistan by offering, ". . . so maybe there are other Taliban soldiers like him and they could work underground to help others, like Parvana helped him" [LC, 5-12]. These statements were significant because when students use the tools of critical literacy, they can expose, discuss, and attempt to solve social injustices in their own lives. The students' narratives were a cultural tool that served as a mediational means through which action was realized. For example, the students in Stanza 4 used strategic practices in critical literacy to act as

human agents in complex literary environments of social needs and rights. The

conversations that focused on the injustices of privileging one group over another

empowered the students to resist the biases and hidden agendas in their texts and use their

voices to speak out against the systems at work that created the disparities.

According to Gee (1996), being a critical reader is being able to recognize the

various discourses, or ways of being, doing, and acting that are communicated through

texts. In this study, analysis of the data found that the context of literature circles afforded

the participants the opportunity to use texts and the textual markers as key ways of

constructing and communicating their identities, particularly in relation to others. For

example, in Episode 6: The Role of *Character Investigator*, Steve identified with the

stereotypical grandmother when he said, "Although the grandmother doesn't have a job,

she does cook, clean, and do everyday chores, so I think she is like many grandmothers."

Further implications of identity construction were found in Episode 7: The Role of the

Critical Profiler in Multiple Texts. From analysis, the data found that as the students

engaged in the socially situated practices of literacy, the boys in the group viewed some

of the girls' comments as manifestations of feminine ideals. Daniel took issue with the

character Fayge and her wedding dress. In both scenarios, Steve and Daniel performed a

sense of self by interpreting one character's actions. From this perspective, the study

suggests that literature circles provided the mediating context in which social discourse

and interaction allowed the students to perform a sense of self by interpreting others'

action and practices (Hagood, 2002; Harre, 1987).

From data analysis, this study found that literature circles became sites for the

participants to become critically literate persons who reflected on what was wrong in

their world and use the enabling power of language to change that world. From this

perspective, reading for the students became an understanding of the real world and

comprehending involved constructing and reconstructing that world. In this study, data

analysis showed that as the students questioned power relations, discourses, and identities

in a world that was incomplete, unfair, and inhumane, the students learned to change and

redefine their world by resignifying dominant D/discourses (Gee, 1992), demonstrating

their understanding that various discourses communicate different degrees of power.

Because critical literacy is about interrogating textual practices, data analysis found that

literature circles provided a zone from which to demonstrate reading from a critical

stance and to take social action.

Zone of Critical Conversations

From data analysis, this study found that the social context of literature circles

became sites for explicit critical conversations. Additionally, the study found that

discussion that centered on multicultural issues offered a powerful vehicle for

incorporating critical literacy practices. As the students engaged in texts, heavily-laden

with issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice, critical conversations about

silenced voices and marginalized groups grew into sharper focus. From this perspective,

both the texts and the social contexts became cultural tools for establishing critical

conversations.

In this study, the collaborative nature of the social learning environment enabled

the participants to co-construct knowledge and guide further knowledge development

over time Vygotsky (1978). Additionally, the social nature of literature circles promoted

inquiry as the students continually sought to understand the personal and social

significance of texts from new perspectives by engaging in critical conversations for purposes of creating a more just world in which they live. Analysis of the transcripts showed that the seemingly tangential talk which led to these critical conversations were crucial to aiding students to use their texts as mediational tools (Wertsch, 1991) between them and the world around them. In addition, Pierce (1995) posits that learning is exploratory talk and as the students made complex connections to the reading, they achieved an enhanced sense of social responsibility. Through discussions that reflected a power differential between groups of people, the students consciously gave thought about whom was missing in the world of texts, concurrently broadened their conception of self (Harre, 1987) in their world, and voiced the actions they would take to enact social change in the world at-large.

From data analysis, this study found: (1) that student-led discussions, (2) dialogue journaling, and (3) third spaces provided the opportunity structures for students to engage in critical conversations. Further, the enactment of critical literacy practices played a substantial role in shaping students' co-construction of meaning because the literature circle context provided the problem-solving environment (McIntyre, Kyle & Moore, 2006), the context to engage in in-depth and critical discussions by scaffolding one another's responses (Villaume & Hopkins, 1995), and a context from which learners could draw upon prior experiences and their funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) to probe and challenge each other in the meaning-making process while working to improve the world around them.

Student-led discussions.

From analysis of the data, this study found that the intentionally designed,

literature circle structure created a variety of opportunities for the participants to engage in critical conversations. Through inquiry and collaboration, the students discussed the sociocultural issues presented in diverse texts by engaging in activities that included: (1) verbal exchanges as direct statements, (2) text connections, (3) thought-provoking questions, (4) and verbal challenges. Because critical conversations involved not only discussion but scrutiny by its group members, often time conflicts in the forms of disagreements occurred from the reading. However, analysis of the data found that when conflicts did arise among group members, the conversations did not break down, but rather, conversations took on new dimensions that permitted the students to become critical producers and consumers of language. For example, data analysis found that the participants explored different subjectivities in order to critique the author's interests, values, and content, talk represented a multivoicedness (Bakhtin, 1981) as participants took on literate ways of being associated with a learning community, and students demonstrated personal agency as a social function to respond to the text world. Further, as the students questioned and analyzed problems within the literature, they advanced their abilities to analyze the effectiveness of the author's word. These critical conversations relating to the reading were sometimes challenged, called to question, and evaluated based on evidence from the text. As the students became critical producers and consumers of language, they engaged in three important activities involving critical conversation: (1) they assessed the credibility of the findings of the other members of the community to decide whether or not to accept their claims, (2) they provided justification for their own claims in response to questioning by others, and (3) they persuaded the community to accept their claims by providing arguments in favor of the claims or

against competing claims. Further, the findings show that the nature of critical conversations engaged the students in higher levels of cognitive thinking and reflected critical responses whereby the students assumed different positions from which to interrogate the author, to unpack assumptions of knowledge, to investigate silenced voices, and to examine the sociocultural influences in their texts. In conjunction, the students examined other cultures set in other countries and walked in others' shoes that allowed them to consider all viewpoints, respect differences, and become more self-aware. Finally, analysis of the data found that verbal participation was significant in the context of literature circles since the social interaction put into use the literate practices associated with reading. In this process, taking up ways that were negotiated and shaped in critical conversations with others, provided the opportunities for the students to form relationships with other students and to be accepted as peers in an academic community of learners.

Dialogue journaling.

Journal writing took on many forms in the classroom in this study. For example, they may have been a response to numerous critical literacy prompts, a connection, a reflection, and a venue to explore controversial topics through different perspectives. However, analysis from the data found that these kinds of journal assignments were extensions of the critical conversations shared during literature circle activity. In forming a "conversation in print" (Staton, 1987), particular emphasis was given to higher levels of comprehension and the students were instructed that dialogue journaling should reflect literature circle discussions. Further emphasis was placed on responses and interpretations that they experienced from the voices and perspectives of others. As a

result, the journal responses provided a way to nurture this process and to be both informative and transformative for their developing sense of selves as individuals and members of society.

In this study, one of the main goals for dialogue journaling was to help the participants realize the powerful affect that literature had on their lives and for the participants to use their life experiences to do more than simply talk about the text, but rather to feel, understand the sociocultural assumptions an author makes, and to critique and take social action. By asking the readers to step out and objectify their reading experiences through dialogue journaling, the students were given the opportunity to describe multiple ways of seeing the text and extend their conversations from interaction in the classroom. In this study, analysis of the data found that dialogue journaling was a continuum of the type of talk that emerged from literature circle interactions and paralleled the developing critical literacy stance over the course of the study that permitted the students to engage in complex discussions about issues of social justice.

To understand the participants' progression in which literacy interaction grew into critical conversations, the teacher-researcher adopted a technique in which observations are framed by searching across events and time (Putney, et al. 2000). The following progression of one student's conversation in print (Staton, 1987) traces three dialogue journal entries to illustrate how journal assignments became extensions of critical conversations from literature circle discussions and how the social encounters around literature, in turn affected each student's personal response.

Episode 8: Jeremiah's Conversations in Dialogue Journaling

Entry 1: Affective Text (Expressing the Moment)

Dear An-Yi,
Nothing is going right at all. That fortune telling was wrong. If you didn't hear my family had a story about us in the paper. It said we were big landlords and owned 3,000 acres of land! Can you believe that? It also said we own many businesses and call ourselves "Half-City Jiangs." I've never even thought of that. I even make my own clothes since the Red Guards searched us. I almost got my name changed but I don't know what happened. I just ran out. Do you think I should? I'm just tired of being called "Half-City Jiangs." I don't know what to do next. I miss my old self.
Sincerely,
Ji-li [RJ, 4-30]

Entry 2: Sociocultural Assumptions (Interpretive-Inquiry Response)

I think the author makes certain sociocultural assumptions in this text especially when it comes to ethnicity, class, and even gender. For example, the Jews were all given numbers and that means they were not thought of as people. To me, it says that they lost their humanity and just because the Nazis thought they were inferior. In my circle group we also talked about how the Nazis didn't like their language and thought their race was superior and the Jews were bad for their race. I also think the author tends to favor girls. I mean we didn't learn too much about the boys probably 'cause the girls could do things for the Nazis and the boys were all sent off to work or just be put to death. [RJ, 3-21]

Entry 3: Critical Conversation (ICTA)

I wonder why the Taliban started the internal war on the Afghan people and not just that but target women in such a wrong way. I wonder why the kids and teens lost their time to be young. This was their next generation. I think that there were Taliban that knew it was wrong but didn't do anything about it. Ruining the first part of millions of kids lives is wrong. The Taliban were not just mean, but cruel. Our group asked this over and over and we could not answer. We just had to be aware that prejudice is in all cultures. The sad thing is that I know we still have groups of people around the world today who intentionally kill others because of the wrong skin color or religion. Although I have not taken part in a religious or Cultural Revolution or had something as bad happen to me like many children in Afghanistan, I do make a connection to what happened to the kids. This reminds me of what happened to the younger kids in the Holocaust in Europe. They lost all of their childhood if they were lucky and didn't get killed. This is like the children in China that participated in the Cultural Revolution and also having to join a war or a cause they didn't really understand. This is also like our own country when Blacks were forced to live differently than Whites. From discussing *Sounder*, I learned how unfairly Blacks were treated. Finally, if I was living in Afghanistan when the Taliban took over there are many ways I could help the people. I could give out fliers on the street since I am a boy and put advertisements in newspapers telling the Afghans was what really happening. I could also write other countries

to try to get them involved in what was happening. Another way I could help is to take legal action. After all we have read about and heard about, I am very glad and proud to be an American and live where I do. I know we have had our problems, but still I am proud. [RJ, 5-31]

The three journal entries illustrate the manner in which dialogue journaling provided a participation structure to further engage in critical conversations by drawing upon intertextual links (Short, 1992) between the literature circle discussion and the texts and intercontextual links (Floriani, 1994) between the context of literature circles and journaling to craft the journal entries. From analysis of Jeremiah's three journal entries, the findings show that he has developed a critical consciousness of the historical, social, and cultural ideologies through participation in literature circle discussion that further guided him to write about what is acceptable or not within a particular society. Further, he demonstrated that he is aware of multiple perspectives. In Entry 1, he chose to write a personal letter from Ji-li's perspective which indicates he has learned to view an idea, such as the Cultural Revolution, from more than just his perspective. Additionally, Jeremiah's dialogue journal demonstrated that he has developed an understanding of the context and social background in which a story takes place. For example, all three journal entries reflect a discussion that was predicated on the historical and social backdrop in which the stories occurred. The findings also show that Jeremiah understood the complexity of the conflicts that revolve around discriminatory acts based on race and ethnicity, class, gender, and religion. In Entry 3, his conversation demonstrated a form of challenge when he ponders, "The Taliban . . . target women in such a wrong way. I wonder why the kids and teens lost their time to be young" [RJ, 5-31]. This statement is significant because he shows that he is using his journal entry to formulate continued concerns that he grappled with during interaction with his peers.

Further analysis of the data shows that Jeremiah reflected on the past in order to make comparisons to the present. When he wrote about the unfair treatment of Blacks in *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969), he is legitimizing that prejudice is timeless. In other words, Jeremiah relates the unfair treatment of people in the past to present time. Finally, data analysis shows that Jeremiah's journal entries were a resource for connecting with texts and to also pose questions of the author and the textual content, consider the perspectives of others, and reify conversations in print from exchanges that occurred during literature circle interaction. Lewis (2001) refers to this action as "enacting the classroom culture" (p. 59), which highlights how Jeremiah drew upon the shared knowledge from co-constructing meaning during other reading activities.

Third spaces.

One final domain of critical conversations evolved from the many different funds of knowledge (Moll, 1990) the students tapped into when conversations occurred in other classrooms, as the students moved through the hallways, and the conversations that were generated between the home, the community, and the classroom. When conversations occur in these different spaces, researchers refer to this in-between space as a "third space" and acknowledge that students draw upon multiple resources or funds to make sense of their world (Moje, et al. 2004). For purposes of this study, these private interactions were produced when students shared conversations they had with their parents over social issues viewed from weekend movies or dinner table conversations that centered on social events in their community. Further exchanges occurred in third spaces as students revealed topics addressed in other classrooms and films they had viewed that centered on the Holocaust, women's rights, child labor laws, and poverty. The students

brought these topics to class and engaged in further discussions, pondered, asked

questions, and reflected on what they had studied or viewed.

While the nature and topics of these third spaces were not available for transcript

examination, the teacher-researcher did record them on memos and entered them into the

research log when these conversations were shared with the teacher-researcher. For

purposes of this study, these memos support the findings that the construction of third

spaces made visible the critical conversations produced when students are given the

opportunity to engage in issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice,

highlighting the fact that both the texts and the social contexts became cultural tools for

establishing critical conversations.

The zone of critical conversations can be viewed as a thread that binds together

the *zones of opportunity* that emerged from data analysis in this study, demonstrating that

the environment of literature circles provided a differentiated context and differentiated

learning opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students that included: (1)

zone of inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge formation, (2) zone of affective

development and self-awareness, (3) zone of cultural awareness and place in the world,

(4) zone of criticality and social action, and (5) zone of critical conversations. The

following section provides an account of how literature circles with the inclusion of

critical literacy provided a forum for gifted sixth-grade readers to consider multiple

viewpoints on issues of social justice. Further, the findings show the students developed

world views by reading and discussing multicultural literature in literature circles.

Result: A Forum to Consider Multiple Viewpoints

This study found through data analysis that critical literacy engaged the students

in complex discussions about social issues and allowed the readers to see the author in a larger cultural context. Findings from this study show that when students understand the identity of literary characters, explore the nature of the events in which they live, and analyze the outcomes of their living experiences, critical literacy provides a forum from which high-ability readers can consider multiple perspectives and enact worldviews.

Because critical literacy is about interrogating textual ideologies and engaging in multiple voices (Edelsky, 1999), the teacher-researcher adopted a critical realist stance (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to approach the question: *How does critical literacy help gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students understand viewpoints different from their own*? Using and inductive approach to understand the meaning of the raw data, the teacher-researcher captured a framework of four key themes. The framework can best be understood as processes the students took to develop different viewpoints other than their own and included: (1) the participants analyzed whose view of the world is told, (2) the students actively sought out silenced voices, (3) the participants considered alternate ways of seeing the text, and (4) the participants engaged in activity that foregrounds differences.

Participants Analyzed Whose View of the World Is Told

This study found that critical literacy provided the participants new ways of analyzing how authors view reality, the sociocultural assumptions authors make to shape their reality, and who benefits from this understanding. At the beginning of the study, data gathered from the pre- LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) indicated that three of the twenty-one participants circled "True" and three of the participants circled "Extremely True" on Item 1: *The challenge of literature is to comprehend the author's unique view of*

life. However, data analyzed from the post LRQ indicated that seven of the twenty-one participants circled "True" and nine of the twenty-one participants circled "Extremely True" on Item 1 in that same survey. This finding suggests that one indicator of how well students critically engage in reading can be understood in terms of their ability to evaluate the author's perspective and assumptions.

Further, analysis of the data found that critical literacy provided the twenty-one participants the strategic tools needed to critique the social world. For example, during the reading of *The View from Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1996), Candice remarked, "Julian's skill for magic suggests he's mysterious and makes him interesting, even though he was picked on. I think the author [Konigsburg] is saying there is a fine line between reality and fantasy [T-LC, 1-15]. The teacher-researcher found that other students shared this view and Tim echoed the voices of others when he said, "The author [Konigsburg] wants us to see that reality can be disguised. What appeared to be real was that Julian was a geek but he wasn't, he was cool and we learn that from his use of magic" [T-LC, 1-16]. Implicitly found in both of these student responses is the recognition that the author's view of reality is closely connected to the author's social view of the world. Further, both students acknowledged that from the author's perspective a certain meaning has been assigned to Julian and planned intentionally. In a later session, the teacher-researcher found that through continued interaction, the students questioned what motivated the author, Konigsburg, to incorporate the fantasy *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1872) in her novel and why she constructed Julian to be a social misfit in the world of the story. For instance, Sabrina commented, "Julian grew-up differently than the other main characters. I mean since he grew-up on a cruise ship, he was around many different

people and learned many different things, but I'm thinking there's a reason for that" [T-LC, 1-19]. Sabrina implied the author has a social purpose for crafting Julian to be a boy who lived very differently from the other characters by pointing out that Julian's life experiences are a likely reason for the outcomes in his life. Daniel also questioned why Julian was portrayed differently and made this known during an interview while in conference with the teacher-researcher, "I think the experiences that Julian had on the cruise ship are for a reason." When the teacher-researcher probed more about why he thought this, he elaborated,

> Julian's experiences on the cruise ship taught him a lot about life. He looked at life differently because he had met so many different people. That's also where he learned magic from Gopal. So when he moved to New York he didn't fit in but his magic intrigued the others and the magic was a good way of showing that what you think is real, may not be real. In other words, I think the author [Konigsburg] is telling us 'you can't judge a book by its cover.' I think the author [Konigsburg] purposely made Julian different to show us that in reality differences are good because Julian united the other characters in the book. [I-P15]

Analysis of this interview revealed that Daniel has adopted a world view predicated on the author's social view of reality that "differences are good" [I-P15] and made explicit through his examination of the trials of life that Julian experienced. He was able to "read" the author's social perspectives so that meaning and understanding were developed. As Daniel developed an understanding of Julian's identity, he captured in concrete terms a global perspective that Julian was a unifier of people, rather than a divider for being different.

Further, data analysis showed that as the students learned how authors paint their world in texts, they do so to serve their own interests and that reality is context-dependent. During interaction with her peers in a literature circle discussion, Holly

commented, "I am bothered that the author did not give the main character in *Sounder* a name. I know it's a story but" [T-LC, 2-12]. In conjunction, Rachel interrupted, "Well, he [the Boy] doesn't have a name because the author [Armstrong] doesn't want him to have a name to show how the Blacks were oppressed at that time" [T-LC, 2-12]. In this brief exchange, Holly and Rachel understood that the main character was not real but the author deliberately constructed the Boy to serve a purpose in the context and time for the events of the story. Rachel acknowledged that the author has intentionally developed the main character to be an underprivileged person in his social world and at the same time, she showed an understanding that the author has done so to serve his own interests by writing on behalf of the Boy. This finding suggests that the students understood that reality is often shaped for sociopolitical purposes, and in doing so, Holly and Rachel formed viewpoints that are reflective of the social mores about the world in the text and the people in it (Christie, 1986).

Students Actively Sought Out Silenced Voices

Considering different viewpoints and multiple perspectives in texts is an important aspect of critical literacy learning. In this study, data analysis found that giving students the opportunity to discuss diverse texts and issues of social justice further provided an opportunity for students to not only give their own viewpoint and listen to the viewpoint of others, but to understand that different points-of-view can be linked to the voice represented or the voice not heard. Bakhtin (1981, 1986) describes voice as dialogic, a concept that means language and the ideas represented by language are dynamic. To Bakhtin, anything said by one individual has been said before and is said in anticipation of how the words will be received. As a result, social relations are subscribed

in all language and as Bourdieu (1991) offers there is a difference between being able to produce words that are "likely to be listened to, likely to be recognized as acceptable" (p. 55).

The process of recognizing that not all voices are heard or accepted and that some voices are more privileged than others, required the students to examine the question of power in relation to voice and to critically examine their texts to understand how the language of power benefits dominant voices and points-of-view, while silencing others. For example, Nicholas shared with his group during literature circle interaction that he thought the Jews were given numbers to show they had no power. He explained, "The Jews are just numbers because they have no power. They have no voice. If it weren't for Yolen, their voices wouldn't be heard" [T-LC, 3-10]. Dottie related on a literature circle questionnaire,

> I now see the Jews' point-of-view that what happened to them in WWII in a concentration camp must be told. I realize this is Yolen's perspective but I think she wrote this book to speak for all the Jews who had been tortured and to show how power dominates [JR, 3-16].

During the course of literature circle interactions, the teacher-researcher captured other students' responses that indicated they had identified that when authors tell a story, they determine whose point-of-view is told. For instance in a student-teacher conference, Tina shared with the teacher-researcher about an independent reading book, "I realize now from the author's point-of-view that the shadow children do not exist" [I-P4]. When the teacher-researcher asked her to explain, she said,

> Well, I know the author writes the story to show the shadow children have no voice and that's why Jenny's voice is heard even though it is not supposed to. The author's voice is told through Jenny and Jenny speaks for all the shadow children. You see, the Population Police are the authority. They have the dominant voice and even though Jenny is a third child, she campaigns and makes her voice known

through the rally. I know what was so significant about the campaign for all the shadow children (pause) the campaign was their [shadow children] way of having a voice [I-P4].

Further, findings from data analysis showed the students developed an understanding that authors often leave gaps in the text for readers to fill and that some kinds of people, contexts, and experiences are devalued or ignored. For example, Jane commented,

> There is a view that society always has a group that dominate and those that get dominated because of their skin or the way they worship are thought to be inferior or they were different and not all people understand differences or accept differences. So we never get their point-of-view unless the author tells us and speaks for them, and in this case, Yolen chose to tell the Jews' perspectives [T-LC, 3-19].

Guy revealed his understanding that authors often leave gaps for students to fill when he stated, "Song Po continued to do work for Ji-li's family even though we never hear from her. She just keeps showing up in spite of the fact that the Ji-li thinks this is a Four Olds custom" [T-LC, 4-13]. Lief echoed this observation when he offered, "Yeah, it's like the bookstore owner. He does good things for Ji-li but she doesn't seem to care. To her, reading is a Four Old" [T-LC, 4-13]. Both Guy and Lief implied that Ji-li [the author] intentionally devalued the goodness that Song Po and the bookstore owner provided her during the Cultural Revolution and suggested that Ji-li was more concerned about not identifying with old customs. From analysis of the data, this exchange demonstrated how the two boys had to fill-in gaps the author created so that meaning was redesigned and understood. By recognizing the gap in the text, both boys illustrated how the author [Ji-li] ignored the fact that some people and events during the Cultural Revolution did not agree with Mao and she did so to magnify her oppression. As the two boys sought to address the silence created by Ji-Li, they injected their personal

perspectives based on their own social and cultural backgrounds in terms of basic

presuppositions about the world, themselves, and others (Christie, 1986).

Participants Considered Alternate Ways of Seeing the Text

Analysis of the data found that critical literacy provided the participants new ways

of responding through different points-of-view, to challenge and resist the preferred or

dominant voice, and to find alternative ways of seeing the text. In this study, the students

were challenged to examine the ways that texts define the world and to determine the

ways that such ideology impacts their reading. As a result of this process, data analysis

found that the students learned to see that some people do not have the same

opportunities as members of the dominant group and they learned to recognize

stereotypes of dominant and non-dominant cultures to determine how members of both

groups are situated within the text's power structure. For example, Candice illustrated her

understanding that texts represent textual constructions of reality and frequently an author

foregrounds a particular aspect to stand out for a purpose when she responded to the

question: *How does gender affect this character and how does it affect the story?*

> When I consider how gender affects Parvana in *The Breadwinner*, I really see the
> silenced voices and this is because of the imbalance of power. Even though
> Parvana does not write this book, I can accept Parvana's position and I understand
> what the author is trying to put forth, that some young girls had to act. She had to
> find freedom to support her family even though it's not like freedom that we
> know. Parvana does feel better off than the woman in the window in the
> marketplace who never comes outside. I learned that even though we are from a
> different culture we can agree or reject the author's point-of-view and since I can
> connect to wanting freedom, I can accept that freedom is important even in other
> cultures like Parvana's [RJ, 5-15]

Analysis of this response indicated that Candice has carefully considered

Parvana's role in *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) as a member of a non-dominant group,

resulting in limited opportunities because Parvana is a girl. Candice further denoted the

meaning to be made by referring to the fact that as a girl, she can agree "to wanting freedom" [RJ, 5-15], thereby collectively extending the struggle for freedom from a singular position to the plural. In doing so, her critical engagement reflected a more worldly view that was culturally validated by a belief that she holds for the world and its people (Christie, 1986).

Further findings of this study that evolved in the classroom reflected a value that membership in a cultural group or a lack thereof, privileged some, and as the students began to take up alternative ways of seeing, they realized that privilege was often given an enhanced status greater than that which it would normally have been accorded. While reflecting on a critical response form (Fairclough, 1989; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006), Robert took issue by writing,

> In this book, I believe the author wrote to wake people up throughout the world – and even in China to see what they went through. I believe this book was written in particular to show the effects of the Cultural Revolution and how Mao brought turmoil to the middle class and even the working class. In this text, we use the history from the Cultural Revolution to see the social issues and to learn how Mao pitted the working class against the middle class. The author [Ji-li] is one representative of the many thousands of bourgeois to show the world who were unjustly treated by Mao's power. I do not agree with numerous factors, including the middle class issues and I do not think I can entirely accept it as real. My reality affects my stance in the text – safe, warm, and happy [RJ, 4-30].

Analysis of Robert's response indicates he has clearly considered alternative ways of viewing the textual world. The response shows he has taken into account the historical, social, and political elements of the text to understand the issues of representation and how power worked to favor Mao's ideology and threaten the existence of others. Further, the response illustrates how Robert has considered his own assumptions of reality and chose to read the text differently than what the author intended, illustrating the nature of critical literacy to expose how the reader is positioned and who the reader is supposed to

be. Robert has appropriated reading practices that have shaped his social, cognitive, and experiential engagement with reading and broadened his awareness that texts can be understood from alternate perspectives.

Participants Engaged in Activity That Foregrounds Differences

Closely associated with the critical literacy practice of considering alternate ways of seeing is the notion that critical literacy calls upon readers to foreground differences. The findings showed that as the students learned that authors choose to highlight dominant perspectives and assume readers understand this is the "natural" way, the way things should be or that differences would be "unnatural," the students learned to foreground differences. This task was accomplished by asking readers to step out and objectify their reading experiences through interactive conversations and journal writing that required them to resist the commonplace views, to compare themes in different texts, and to highlight the strengths in different perspectives (Simpson, 1996). By doing so, the students provided surprising new insights.

Throughout the literature circle discussions, the teacher-researcher captured critical conversations in which the participants took a stand against the text and reflected on what was wrong in the textual world by de-constructing and reconstructing the world to place value on the underserved and who did not conform to the natural view of the textual world. For example, Steve commented, "If I was the boy in *Sounder*, I would have convinced the other sharecroppers to walk off the job and form a union of sharecroppers. Their work was important" [T-LC, 2-25]. Guy provided another stand when he said, "I would write the story [S*ounder*] to get the friendly whites on the side of the Blacks. I know they were there (pause) we just don't see enough of it" [T-LC, 2-26].

During the discussions that centered on *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969), other students expressed dismay that the compassionate white people did not receive more attention while fighting the prejudice during the prevailing time. Tomas wrote in his dialogue journal,

> If I could change *Sounder* I would make it so that readers could see that white people fought for the rights of Blacks like in the movie *To Kill A Mockingbird* when Atticus Finch defended Tom. That's a good thing so I would change the story [*Sounder*] so that the white woman who taught the boy to read would give other Black children an education. This would show there were people who cared. [RJ, 2-26]

These excerpts demonstrated the manner in which the students identified the prevailing ideology in the text and used their language of critical literacy to foreground the differences in perspectives. Further, the intertextual link (Short, 1992) made with *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Mulligan, 1962) illustrates that Tomas understood the codes of power and prejudice in the film and by connecting to a prior activity, he further understood the social relevance in both texts. His response indicated that when whites fought against prejudice or provided opportunities for Blacks, they were performing the unnatural order of the time and he saw this difference in perspective as a good thing.

During later sessions, the teacher-researcher captured evidence on how the students actively sought to foreground differences in perspectives and disrupt commonplace views. For example, during a discussion on *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988) most of the group members agreed that if the story had been told from the Nazis' points-of-view, then the Nazis would justify their actions and make the Jews deserving of the crimes committed against humanity. However, Tim provided an interesting insight by suggesting, "We might also consider how some members of the Nazis were pushed and didn't have a choice" [T-LC, 3-13]. This perspective triggered the following remark

when Annabelle offered, "Well, that's a good point. We do know from history there were several plots to kill Hitler from Nazis who worked for him" [T-LC, 3-13]. Both Tim's and Annabelle's remarks indicate they considered alternate ways of seeing and in doing so they brought different perspectives to the foreground that were clearly the unnatural way of seeing in this text through intertextual (Short, 1992) and intercontextual connections Floriani, (1994).

While continually searching the data to locate evidence of the manner in which the literacy activity involved foregrounding differences in viewpoints, the teacher-researcher found that when the students were given the opportunity to role play, they discovered a way to present the viewpoints differently by reversing character roles in the text. The role play activity further illustrates the intercontextual (Floriani, 1994) link to literature circle discussions, by moving the flow of discussion into a second context and refocusing the conversation as the students assumed different positions within the text. The following brief example of one role play illustrates two students' decision to provide differences in perspectives for *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997).

<div align="center">Episode 9: Role Play of Red Scarf Girl</div>

Dottie: Du Hai, just so you'll know, I have written a dai zaibo for you. {Dottie is Ji-li}

Nicholas: You're a bourgeois. Bourgeois don't write dai zaibos. {Nicholas is Du Hai}

Dottie: That's not a rule and you don't make the rules in the revolution. All you know how to do is follow.

Nicholas: Red Guards have to know how to follow our beloved leader.

Dottie: And that's what my dai zaibo says. It says you do not know how to speak

your own words. You can't talk for yourself. The only thing you can do is

talk for the revolution and not for yourself. Some leader you would make.

[T-LC, 4-13]

When Dottie positioned as the character Ji-li, she assumed a new identity. Dottie

chose to rewrite Ji-li's role to be one who stood-up and spoke out against the rules

sanctioned during the Cultural Revolution. Conversely, Nicholas chose to be Du Hai; a

character in the memoir who sided with Chariman Mao's revolution. This brief exchange

illustrates how the two students demonstrated their understanding that authors decide

reality and that what is real is sanctioned through characters' points-of-view. By

disrupting the text and reversing the roles of Ji-li and Du Hai, the two students provided

different points-of-view by giving Ji-li a more enhanced status while significantly

reducing Du- Hai's membership in the same cultural group.

Findings from data analysis show that when students understand the identity of

literary characters, explore the nature of the events in which they live, and analyze the

outcomes of their living experiences, literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy

are a forum from which high-ability readers can consider multiple perspectives and enact

worldviews. In this study, the students were challenged to examine the ways that texts

define the world and to determine the ways that such ideology impacts their reading. As a

result of this process, the students considered whose view of the world was put forth,

actively sought out the silenced voices, considered alternative ways of seeing, and

actively participated in foregrounding different perspectives. Further, the students

developed their own world views by learning that texts are socially constructed from

authors' perspectives as representations of particular ideologies, and this knowledge allowed them to form individual belief systems that combined their personal lived experiences with their social and cultural backgrounds to reject or accept authors' ideas.

While section two focused on the nature in which critical literacy engaged students in complex discussions about social issues and allowed the readers to consider multiple viewpoints, the following section addresses the types of new texts that gifted students create from participation in literature circle discussions in terms of both cultural and social expression. Section three builds upon analysis of the content in section two by examining how discourse practices and social processes shaped learning as a sociocultural activity in communities of practice.

<div align="center">Result: A Forum to Create New Texts</div>

The findings of this study show that multicultural literature and the context of literature circles became sites of explicit critical conversations in which the students used their voice and their pen to reshape the unfair privileging of dominant groups and the injustices of privileging one group over another because of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. From analysis of select focused situations (material, activity, semiotic, sociocultural) (Gee & Green, 1998), the teacher-researcher combined discourse analysis and ethnography, using each approach to build a logic-of-inquiry (Birdwhistell, 1977) to understand what the students accomplished through language that simultaneously shaped the discourse and social practices. The findings show that as the students learned to speak from marginalized groups' points-of-view, they learned to restructure their knowledge base by challenging and creating alternatives to transform issues of social injustice. Specifically, the students produced counter texts by using their voice through dialogue

and their pen through written personal narratives by becoming agents of social change.

To encourage theoretical clarification, the teacher-researcher identified specific classroom data points from the corpus of data by selecting segments of interactions to determine how gifted sixth-grader readers construct socially situated identities and what types of new texts gifted middle school (sixth grade) students create from participation in literature circle activities. Specifically, the teacher-researcher constructed a logic-of-inquiry, made visible through a telling case (Mitchell, 1984) "to show how general regularities exist precisely when specific contextual circumstances are taken account of" (p. 239). This procedure brought together the relationship between everyday activity and discourse analysis. The nature of the telling case is to trace consequential progression (Putney, et al. 2000) of literacy events historically to previous incidents in the classroom and to project and link the telling case to future events. Such perspectives reveal expanded opportunities of learning across time (Engestrom, 2001), which in the case of this study focused on the learning opportunities afforded gifted sixth-grade readers in the classroom setting of literature circles, how multiple viewpoints are obtained, and the kinds of new texts created in relation to the new identities the readers assumed to determine how they would act from what they believed.

The following description of one telling case provides evidence of the ways that the context of literature circles functioned as a mediational means for students to become critical commentators (Wertsch, 1985) who generated counter texts to displace the dominant narratives explored in their multicultural literature. It is significant because it further demonstrates how the gifted learners drew upon their funds of knowledge (Moll, 1990) from whole-group activity and the local experience of literature circle practice to

become agents for social change. Further, the telling case shows how the students

discovered the power of language to reshape their world.

<div align="center">Telling Case 1: Student Agents for Social Change</div>

The six students, Sabrina, Jeremiah, Steve, Tomas, Zoe, and Dottie, featured in

the following telling case can be classified as precocious and intense learners and who

enjoyed working on multiple levels simultaneously, such as problem solving complex

real-world problems with many parts and perspectives to study (Feldhusen, 1993). In

addition, this group provided the most culturally diverse group in the study. The excerpts

that follow were selected as key events in this telling case because the selected segments

demonstrated initial reader subjectivities its members brought to the group, while

developing social languages within a discourse community to assume the social

responsibility to counter injustices in their lives. It is significant because the telling case

reveals the nature of situated action and interaction to embrace new perspectives (Gee,

1999) that allowed the students to enact social change. Further, this participation structure

was selected because it was traceable to other events during the course of the study.

Emphasis was placed on finding the common categories in the development of grounded

theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

<div align="center">Episode 10: Involvement and Understanding in *The Devil's Arithmetic*</div>

1 Jeremiah: Why do you think Hannah wrote numbers on her arm when she was

younger?

2 Zoe: I think she [Hannah] wrote numbers on her arm because she [Hannah] had

seen them on her grandfather's arm and she [Hannah] wanted to impress

her grandfather and it was her brother's birthday and he [brother] was

getting all the attention.

3 Sabrina: I think Hannah wrote numbers on her arm maybe to show that she was a Jew not knowing how mad her grandfather would get. She [Hannah] probably did not know this was disrespect because she [Hannah] liked being with her friends more and she [Hannah] didn't want to celebrate Seder in the first place. Seder was a tradition but she [Hannah] didn't like it.

4 Jeremiah: Okay, then from her grandfather's point-of-view, why do you think he was so angry with Hannah?

5 Dottie: Well, most likely because he [grandfather] realized Hannah just didn't get it. I mean Hannah really did not understand the reality behind those numbers. They were a scar on him forever so he [grandfather] saw them everyday and that reminded him of his personal horrors from WWII. It's sad but the numbers were part of his cultural background and so Hannah was mocking his, I mean their history.

6 Jeremiah: Okay good. Why do you think the author [Yolen] chose to transport Hannah back in time to a concentration camp?

7 Steve: Oh, that's an easy one. To show how important Jewish traditions are, such as Seder. I mean she [Hannah] had studied about the Nazis in school and she knew what happened to the Jews and she [Hannah] was a Jew but she [Hannah] didn't get the importance of remembering their customs and traditions.

8 Sabrina: Yeah, even though she [Hannah] had studied the Holocaust and we have

studied the Holocaust in history class and we read about it, like in *Number the Stars*, it probably seemed to her that she [Hannah] didn't need a tradition to remember the Holocaust. I know this seems silly, but girls are that way. Sometimes other things just seem more important.

9   Tomas: Yeah, like going to the mall. That's all my sister wants to do.

10 Sabrina: Oh, shut up!

11 Jeremiah: Well then, how will Hannah's experiences in the concentration camp change her life, her feelings, her identity, and her beliefs?

12 Steve: Well maybe she'll [Hannah] learn the true meaning of power and how power in the hands of the Nazis will not be good for her.

13 Dottie: She's [Hannah] going to learn what it was like for her grandfather.

14 Sabrina: Yeah, she's [Hannah] getting a taste of what it was like to be treated badly just because she [Hannah] has a different religion and she [Hannah] is Jewish so she [Hannah] sees what it's like to be hated and what Jewish means.

15 Tomas: Well for one thing she [Hannah] is no longer happy and carefree. She is nobody there. Hannah is a number {references a prior text} and knows what's in store.

[T-LC, 3-9]

The excerpt reveals how the participation in the above segment was structured by an open-ended question and answer session, which facilitated the flow of conversation as evidenced by the students responding to each other and Jeremiah (lines 1-15). The routine of posing open-ended questions to prompt dialogue and group interaction can be traced

back to whole-class sessions involving teacher read-aloud and fishbowl discussions. Further, Jeremiah's revoicing of the teacher (lines 1, 4, 6, and 11) indicates the onset of this pattern was typically signaled by this structure. This evolving practice was appropriated in student-led discussions and adopted as a routine discourse pattern.

The exchange in this excerpt revealed how the participation structure of the literature circle provided the context for its interacting members to integrate their historical knowledge of the Holocaust with their multicultural text and engage in social, cultural, and political conversations to better recognize the cultural perspectives of a non-dominant group of people (lines 5,7,8). Specifically, the language or discourse was shaped by the social structure and was conceived as a social practice. Further significance must be given to the students' communicative competence that can be traced to the students' abilities to embrace new perspectives, having considered alternate ways of seeing, seeking the silent voices, and foregrounding differences

In line 5, Dottie reveals her sociocultural knowledge about certain sign systems when she uses "numbers" as a signifier and says, "I mean Hannah really did not understand the reality behind those numbers." This implies that Dottie understands the word's social relevance and finds Hannah to be disrespectful that she did not grasp the gravity of the event. Further, the conversation indicates an understanding about how power differentials between groups are created by such things as religion, ethnicity, and culture (lines 11-15). By analyzing the discourse among the sixth-grade participants, findings reveal a form of reflexivity that can be identified across the actions of the students as they constructed the events of the story. When Sabrina (line 8) and Tomas (line 15) connect the current content to "like in *Number the Stars*," they drew upon a

previously constructed cultural model to be used in this new context and these words

signaled the historical importance and social relevance from the previous cultural model

the members used to guide participation in the current social activity. For purposes of this

analysis, this intercontextual connection (Floriani, 1993) makes visible how a logic-of-

inquiry links cultural constructs through interactions to frame types of discourse found in

this classroom.

From the opportunity to participate as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger,

1991), the students joined in language experiences associated with critical literacy that

moved the students to recognize the effects that being a member of a nondominant

culture had on the lives of the characters. Rogoff (1990, 1994) emphasizes the role that

language plays in mediating learning and how this learning becomes internalized and is

then translated into action in other times and places. In line 12, Steve provides the

information necessary concerning what effect power has on others and while Dottie's

verbal participation is limited (line 13), Sabrina supplies more information (line 14) to

demonstrate she was clearly deconstructing the text to analyze how the author [Yolen]

positioned Hannah to see the world differently and to expose the silenced voices in the

text. Further analysis of the conversation shows that talk in this excerpt was a mechanism

for socializing the content and positioned the students as learners, thinkers, and knowers.

Gee (2001) posits that discourses are communities of practice and cultural models

within a community that define what counts as normal. While much of the free-flowing

discussion was prompted by Jeremiah, the routine of everyone getting a chance to

respond also represented practices that were acquired during initial phases of the research

study. The participation structure that allowed for sequential turn taking in which capable

peers appropriated language to inform, interpret, and co-construct meaning can be traced back to whole-class meetings in which the practitioner-researcher created a collaborative learning community by leading discussions on how students can help and learn from each other and to direct students' attentions to the notion of response, rather than the concept of correct answer. It further represents a familiar cultural model or practice that allowed students to accept that all responses are interpretations and that each student draws upon prior knowledge and has life experiences to share as contributing members of a learning community (Allen, 2002).

Exchanges in the above excerpt further reveal how the discourse structure highlights the communicative tools the students used in responding, the subjectivities that the learners used in social interactions, and how the participants were actively positioned to one another. As Jeremiah actively positioned as the role of D*iscussion Leader* (lines 1,4,6,11), the clash between Tomas and Sabrina (lines 8,9,10) illustrates how the two students positioned their identities within the reading group by actively rejecting (Tomas) and accepting (Sabrina) the social codes in their lives. One possible assumption is that Sabrina identified with Hannah in line 3 when she offered ". . . she [Hannah] liked being with her friends more" and Tomas suggested (line 9) "Yeah, like going to the mall. That's all my sister wants to do." This same exchange highlights Sabrina's initial subjectivity in the moment-to-moment literacy activity when in line 8, she appeared at first to sympathize with Hannah, but then shifted during the reading activity to describe what Hannah might learn (line 14) from her experience in the concentration camp by offering, "Yeah, she's getting a taste of what it was like to be treated badly just because she has a different religion and she is Jewish so she sees what it's like to be hated and

what Jewish means." One possible assumption for this shift is that Sabrina was repositioning as a reader who was aware and understood the cultural perspectives of a non-dominant group of people who were adversely affected by a dominant group that used power against religion, ethnicity, and culture in this text. Specifically, the discourse shaped by the social structure provided the opportunity for the group members to accept or reject the social codes and societal norms that affected Hannah's life.

As stated previously, the nature of the telling case is to trace consequential progression (Putney, et al. 2000) of literacy events historically to previous incidents in the classroom and to project and link the telling case to future events. Such perspectives reveal opportunities of learning across time, which in this telling case was to focus on the levels of social action taken along a continuum to demonstrate how the participants became agents of social change and used language as a communicative tool to produce counter texts.

What follows is an excerpt taken approximately two weeks later and highlights the nature in which the participants began to appropriate the need for social action and to reposition as social agents who created opportunities for action.

<div align="center">Episode 11: Positioning for Social Change</div>

Stanza 1: Appropriating the Need for Social Action

1 Zoe: When the German Nazi was telling Gitl about the 'Jew smoke', she [Gitl] didn't show any emotion.

2 Steve: Oh, I think she knows what 'Jew smoke' means. She [Gitl] just didn't want to scare anyone. I think her lack of emotion means she [Gitl] is trying to fully understand what is happening to her.

3 Jeremiah: Well, I'm trying to understand the same thing. I mean the author [Yolen]

doesn't hold back. Is this really what she [Yolen] wants us to understand

or (pause) is there more? I know we read about the Jews being relocated in

Number the Stars but it was nothing like this.

4 Sabrina: Well, the 'Jew smoke' is coming from the ovens 'cause the Nazis are

burning the Jews. I'm pulling for Gitl to escape and survive 'cause she

needs to get free and tell the world what was happening.

Stanza 2: Creating Opportunities for Social Change

9 Steve: Okay then, (pause) how could Yolen's version of reality be different?

10 Zoe: Well, she [Yolen] could have left Hannah alone in New York and never

sent her back in time

11 Steve: That's not changing reality. It's changing the story, but the reality of what

happened to the Jews is still there.

12 Tomas: Mainly the only way to change this reality is for it to never have happened

and since we can't do that then all we can do is change things so it won't

happen again.

13 Sabrina: Well, I agree. I think reality can be changed by focusing on the positives

in all cultures and maybe we just need to remember the 'Jew smoke' and

that's why Hannah went back in time to learn. So, I guess we need to do

the same thing. If we could rewrite history, then we would change the

reality of what happened in the Holocaust but since we can't rewrite

history then we need to advocate for a reality that's fair to everyone.

14 Tomas: Yeah, 'cause if the story was told by a Nazi then that would probably just

validate what happened and if the story were told from a German who

wasn't a Nazi then it still could not change what really happened.

[T-LC, 3-21]

From participation in this small group, the interaction illustrates how the students

joined in language experiences that required them to reflect on and examine their

responses to interpretations in order to co-construct meaning (lines 1-4). This

participation structure can first be traced back to whole-class meanings in which

interpretations were encouraged in order to build a community of learners who

collaborated in meaning-making activities. Jeremiah's referencing (line 3) of an earlier

text, *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989), illustrates the power of intertextual ties (Short,

1992) to connect previously constructed cultural models to current interaction in order to

understand the socially situated meanings (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

In Stanza 1, Zoe begins in a position as a thinker with respect to one of the

characters (line 1) and the participation structure that follows is the intellectual

positioning of the other group members in relation to the content (lines 2,3,4). In this

instance, the patterning of moment-to-moment interaction illustrates the nature of

discourse to align the members with each other in building a shared view that the author's

interest in *The Devils Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988) is paramount and the author has

positioned them to question everyday ways of seeing and what the author is trying to do

to them as readers. In addition, the discourse practices demonstrate how knowledge is

distributed across contexts. As the students considered whose view of the world was put

forth, considered alternative ways of seeing, and actively participated in foregrounding

different perspectives, they drew upon their knowledge of multiple perspectives. Luke

(2000) asserts that when students question the social practices of dominant cultures and appraise the ideological stance of the author, they are appropriating the skills needed to understand how particular systems of power affect people. As a result, appropriating the need for social action was accomplished and made evident when Jeremiah (line 3) questions, "Is this really what the author [Yolen] wants us to understand or is there more?" In addition, Sabrina contributes by adding (line 4), "I'm pulling for Gitl to escape and survive 'cause she needs to get free and tell the world what is happening."

In Stanza 2, the group members created opportunities for social change (lines 12-13) by recognizing that reality outside the textual world must be changed for members of non-dominant cultural groups who have suffered at the hands of power abuse. Hanks (1991) said, that learning happens "in the process of coparticipation, not in the heads of individuals" (p. 13). From this stance, the participatory framework of the group interaction allowed the students to engage in a productive discourse that called into question the author's assumption of social reality (line 9) and through this collective endeavor, the students agreed to reorganize the social world (lines12-13). This excerpt is an example of what Faircough (2000) calls discourse practice which is that discourse does not merely reflect reality, but it also has effects on social structures and plays an active role in social change.

Further analysis of the conversation shows the situated practice of free-flowing discussion which became a hallmark of student-led literature circles. The talk in this excerpt can be traced throughout the course of the study as literature circles became a medium for communication. While much of the free-flowing discussion was prompted by Steve (line 9), the routine of everyone making their voices known does show that the

participatory structure can produce clashes between its social members (lines 10-11). As Zoe takes up the topic that the author "could have left Hannah in New York and never sent her back in time" (line 10), she positioned herself to be challenged. The following line 11 demonstrates how Steve deflected this argument by taking the turn to make known what he believed to be obvious when he said, "That's not changing reality. It's changing the story."

By comparing the nature of discussion across time and drawing upon the cultural resources that were significant signifiers of conversational competence, discourse analysis shows that the participatory structure of literature circles became a site for students to assume a position for social change, vis-à-vis involvement and understanding. This finding was revealed through student dialogue journals when the teacher-researcher captured further evidence on how the students discovered that language can be a powerful tool by thinking in opposition to the author and determining how else the author could have presented the information. For example, Zoe writes, "I would rewrite *The Devil's Arithmetic* so that the Germans claimed their country away from Hilter" [RJ, 3-22]. In the same writing session, Tim offered his way of rewriting the story, "We know Fayge was strong so I would rewrite the part where she led an escape to leading a rebellion" [RJ, 3-22].

To further understand the progression that the students took to use their voices to produce counter texts, the teacher-researcher ground the observations across events and time (Putney et al. 2000). The following episode is an excerpt from a Reader's Theater presentation of *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988), which was a culminating activity for the group of students featured in this telling case. The participatory structure in this

episode refocuses the critical conversations that evolved in the classroom and can be traced back to an understanding that texts can be viewed from multiple perspectives, demonstrating that dialogue invites students to take part in a larger community discourse that attempts to solve problems and create alternatives to oppressive situations. Further, the new genre unites the text and the context that prompted the students to examine the sociocultural factors in *The Devil's Arithmetic*. The presentation illustrates the continual manner in which the students became agents of social change as the activity moved the students from spectators to actors, created opportunities for marginalized groups, and involved taking new positions while writing counter narratives (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

Episode 12: Reader's Theater for *The Devil's Arithmetic*

Dottie: Wait! There's something going on out there. Who are those men?

Steve: Well, I see soldiers but there are men with them. They are asking questions.

Dottie: Who do you think they are?

Zoe: They are coming this way. What should I do?

Dottie: Don't worry. I'll stand with you.

Tomas: I'm Mr. Schmuel. I'm with a German newspaper and I want to ask you questions.

Zoe: What kind of questions?

Jeremiah: I'm a reporter also and we hear that the Jews are getting good treatment. We want to know more and we have German soldiers here who will protect you so you can tell us.

Zoe: What will happen to us if we tell you?

Dottie: I'm not afraid to speak. The world needs to know and besides they plan to

                kill us anyway. The Nazis never planned to give us new homes but instead

                took everything we had. They have killed thousands.

Steve: Tell your readers we are ready to fight. Get us help so we can change

                what's happening here and we can take it to other camps and fight there.

[T-LC, 3-30]

The Reader's Theater presentation demonstrates the dialectical relationship

between the discourse practices and the social structure within the culture of literature

circle discussions. In this study, the social structure allowed for recurrent discursive

practices that set the stage for the group members to engage in disrupting power relations

in the text, try new subjectivities, and create a counter text from the standpoint of the

marginalized Jews. Analysis of the conversation shows that talk in this excerpt was a

mechanism for socializing the content and positioned the students as actors to reshape

Yolen's reality of the social world. Specifically, the social structure provided the

opportunity for the group members to reject and reinvent the social codes and societal

norms that had created the oppressive social injustices and silenced the Jews in *The

Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988). One possible assumption is that the group members

drew upon their meaning-making activity in Episode 11, Stanza 2: Creating Opportunities

for Social Change, when they positioned to change reality and reached the shared

decision "since we can't rewrite history then we need to advocate for a reality that's fair

to everyone" (line 13). As the students constructed the counter text, they reshaped reality

to give voice to the Jews. In this context, the counter narrative was a cultural tool that

served as a mediational tool to resignify the dominant D/discourses (Gee, 1992) in the text that were sustained by the Nazi political decisions, policies, and practices that positioned the students as agents of social change. Subsequently, the students applied their understanding of strategic critical literacy practices to reshape the social lives of the characters.

When left to their own practice, the reader's theater presentation demonstrates what was accomplished through discourse that simultaneously shaped the discourse and the social practice that evolved through several steps as the members interacted to restructure ideological systems. Subsequently, the counter text served to function as a record of all their social practices that were shaped by discourse and the social structure. Discourse patterns further show that agency was characterized as a dynamic action among and between the student agents within a context of social needs and rights. When Jeremiah positioned as a reporter, he demonstrated a more personal agency by posing as a reporter to attempt to solve a social problem. Further, Dottie positioned first as a nurturer to give support to Zoe and then as a leader to give voice to those who had been silenced when she said, "I'm not afraid to speak. The world needs to know."

The significance found in the reader's theater presentation is an illustration of how learning is a social process, which is best achieved in structured learning events where language is a facilitating agent (Moll, 1990). Further, the participatory structure of literature circles underscored the primary role of dialogue in learning, as the students drew upon previously constructed cultural models to function as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in this building activity.

In order to examine learning across time, the teacher-researcher selected data

from written narratives to link previous incidents to this activity (Putney et al., 2000).

Analysis of the discourse found that the students transformed the discourse and the

situated meanings from the communities of practice into counter articulations as the

students positioned as agents of social change. In other words, as the students assimilated

through dialogic communication, they created a new genre.

 With this piece of writing, the students developed a sociocultural narrative

around a main character who had been oppressed or who had been discriminated because

of race, ethnicity, class, or gender differences and then allowed the main character to

discover his or her voice, confront the social problem, plan a social action, and finally put

the action into effect to change his or her world for the better. What follows is the

introduction from Dottie's sociocultural narrative, a paraphrased portion by the teacher-

researcher for space constraints, and Dottie's own conclusion.

<div align="center">Episode 13: Dottie's Story of Jack and Hannah</div>

Episode 1: Introduction

> I have no family, no friends, no home . . . just Jack. Jack is not my family or my friend; he is just Jack. We live in the dark alley across the bakery. That's where we get our food. Every morning at 7:15, the baker comes out and sets out his bagels for display, then goes back in to get another load. That's when I walk by and grab two bagels. Jack says only take what you need because he hates stealing but I tell him we have no other choice.

> Jack takes care of me. He is 33 and he is really smart. He graduated from high school and applied to Harvard, but he didn't get accepted. Jack was smart enough and had the grades to get in but they said they didn't want any Blacks at their school. Then Jack moved to New York and bought a house. He had it all until he lost his job. Now he lives with me in the back if the dark alley.

> He calls me Kid and it gets on my nerves. I tell him my name is Hannah but he just smiles and says, "Whatever Kid." Hannah means Grace of God in Hebrew. I am not Hebrew or African-American like Jack. I really don't know what I am, but I like my name that means Grace of God.

Episode 2: Paraphrased Narrative

> Hannah collects newspapers that people leave behind on the subways and benches and then she goes out and resells them. One day she encounters a man who was in too big of a hurry to buy a newspaper and spouts off that he does not have time to buy a newspaper because he must get to his office to hire a new sales manager. Having interviewed over twenty people, he has not found any 'mathematical geniuses.' Hannah refuses to keep quiet and pesters the man to listen about Jack. She thinks to herself that an opportunity like this wouldn't knock on her door everyday. 'I know a mathematical genius.'

Episode 3: Dottie's Conclusion

> Jack and I started the Grace of God foundation. It is a foster home for children where we help them find families. But unlike other foster care facilities, we let the children help find families for them to live with instead of us choosing for them. That way we know that they will have a happy ending just like Jack and me. Our story isn't over though. Jack and I have over 112 Grace of God homes all over the United States. We have helped over 100,000 children in the past seven years and we are still reaching out to many others, pulling them out of the dark alleys in to the light of family.

Through the exchanges that occurred during interaction among students, the telling case reveals how the gifted sixth-grade readers constructed counter texts to validate the points-of-view of those voices silenced by others. The students developed counter texts to make the silenced voices stronger and to be heard. Based on the assumption that social worlds are discursively constructed (Gee, 1996, 1999) and discourses often communicate various degrees of power, the findings of this study show that multicultural literature and the context of literature circles became sites of explicit critical conversations in which the students used their voice and their pen to reshape the unfair privileging of dominant groups and the effects of privileging one group over another because of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. It is significant because it demonstrates how the students explored subjectivities to the text world, demonstrated personal agency, and took on critically literate ways associated with novel reading

identities. From this stance, the participatory structure of literature circles became an agent of socialization as counter texts were constructed.

While section three focused on the types of new texts that gifted students create from participation in literature circle discussions in terms of both cultural and social expressions, the final section addresses the fourth research question: *How does the environment of literature circles with the inclusion of a critical literacy perspective provide opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills*?

Result: An Environment for Analytical Reasoning and Critical Thinking Skills

The nature of literature circles is to group students together to discuss a book or books in-depth (Daniels, 1994). A plethora of research has shown (Almasi, 1995; Daniels, 1994, 2002a; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Maloch, 2002; Villaume & Hopkins, 1995) that the use of literature circles promote social interaction and discussion as students learn to comprehend text and encourages students to read with a focus and report on what they have read. While literature circles guide readers to a deeper understanding of what they have read through structured discussion, the linchpin to the success of the program in this study was the collaborative effort on the part of the students as they read and responded as critical thinkers in a student-centered context that focused on dialogue. Dialogue was crucial to the success of this study for it was the vehicle by which students discovered their voices and engaged in critical interactions. Based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Spradley, 1980; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996, 1999; Gee & Green, 1998) from transcripts of classroom conversations, dialogue journals, and insights from the researcher's own log, this study

found that literature circles provided a venue for students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills that included: (1) taking a critical stance during interaction, (2) relating intertextual ties during and after reading (Short, 1992), and (3) resymbolizing the text through interpretation (Sumara, 1998).

Taking a Critical Stance During Interaction

Because critical literacy promotes high-level reading, this study found that literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy enabled the participants to demonstrate their knowledge of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills by reading and responding from a critical stance. This area of understanding was accomplished from knowing how an author's point-of- view, values, ethics, and beliefs influence what the author has to say, to constructing a different side to the text's position. Consequently, data analysis found the students learned to consider the text objectively in order to evaluate the quality and appropriateness. To achieve this, the students learned to criticize and judge how well the author crafted his or her work by considering how well the parts of the text were made to fit and how reasonable were the inherent assumptions made. For example, while reading *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997) Casey criticized the author for not fully addressing the teachers' roles in the Cultural Revolution. She remarked, "I am puzzled about Ji-li's teacher. In fact, have you noticed that the teachers just seem to disappear? There's no teachers in the classrooms when the Red Guards come to school" [T-LC, 4-5].

Upon review of the transcripts, the teacher-researcher found that other students were bothered by this textual void, such as Jane who offered, "I think it's rather strange the day they made all those dai zaibos that the teachers didn't stop the students. The kids

had the run of the school" [T-LC, 4-5].

Further evidence in learning critical stance was exhibited as the students stepped back from simply reporting on the text to talking about and back at the text. For example, the students talked about the literary elements, made comparisons and contrasts within the text and between texts, and challenged the author's ideas. Evidence on how the students challenged the author showed the students questioned the author's position, the source of his or her information, the author's context, and what to expect from the context. In addition, the students questioned what position would be taken by persons coming from other contexts. For example, as the students continued to grapple with the Cultural Revolution in *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), one conversation occurred that focused on American business owners who would be proud of their hard work and take pride in their ownership, implying that some of the events that occurred in th*e Red Scarf Girl* were context-specific. Lief offered, "My dad has a sign out front of his business. He's proud of what he does and he's not ashamed to advertise" [T-LC, 4-7]. Explicitly found in the remarks is the recognition of American business ownership and this statement reflects that Lief has considered a different context from that of the author's in which business ownership is not forbidden.

Often times the students constructed a different position from the author's by focusing on alternative view points, correcting the injustices of privileging one group over another, and speaking for the silenced. For example, Bridgett commented, "Ji-li's father was taken to jail and she was humiliated and wanted to change her name. If I were the father I would tell her that she does well in school because I stood for education."

Tina added, "Yeah, the father needs to give her a good dose of reality and tell her

that at one time she was proud of her family's education. Since Ji-li is the author, I think she has forgotten that."

Surprisingly, Tim offered, "Ji-li is humiliated because of her family. Maybe she [Ji-li] could be removed of all guilt if her family disowned her" [T-LC, 4-12].

The brief exchange illustrated the manner in which literature circles are a powerful mechanism for furthering critical stance. The students' diversity in terms of knowledge and experiences provoked numerous and varied interpretations and the group support system allowed the students to critically analyze and problem-solve through critical discussions. Further, the informal setting facilitated opportunities for the students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the multicultural literature in group interactions that required the students to provide justification for their own claims in response to questioning by others and further persuade the community to accept their claims by providing arguments against competing claims.

From data analysis, literature circle conversation served a broad social function as the students strived through dialogue to work out cooperative understanding and negotiate meaning through analysis and reasoning. In other words, the students were able to extend their understanding by hearing other voices and alternative perspectives, which in turn benefited other group members from hearing them. At times, the students were called upon to state their opinions and provide support for their opinions on how the text was presented and through the dialogic interaction, the multivoicedness (Bakhtin, 1986) captured during the activity proved to both enhance and frustrate the process of learning to take a stance. For example, on the one hand, the multivoicedness became defensive when students drew upon personal experiences to challenge the author and disrupt the

text. Conversely, the power of multivoicedness to introduce critical perspectives for appreciating and valuing cultural differences, to compare and contrast power relations, and to disrupt commonplace views (Flint, Van Sluys, & Lewison, 2003), permitted the students to try on new subjectivities while revoicing the issues of others and reifying the social codes between their world and the world of the text. This process allowed the students to construct and revise their intersubjective (Au, 1998) perceptions from their mutual interaction and to assume new positions within the social interactions to resist the textual biases and hidden agendas while responding from a critical stance.

Relating Intertextual Ties During and After Reading

As an activity, there are many associations made with the text during and after reading. During the reading process, the reader is reminded of other experiences and at the same time, the reader begins to interpret the new reading in relation to what is remembered and associated with his or her memory, thus creating an inner text (Lenski, 2001; Pearson & Tierney, 1984). Vygotsky (1978) posits that learning results from the use of language and the social interactions of language. In addition, Bloome (1985) explicates that meaning is shaped by the social and cultural contexts. For purposes of this study, analysis of the data found that as the participants engaged in interpretive activities centered on questions during discussions about literature, they constructed meaning by drawing on the inner text, interacting with the new texts, and from the contextual experience of literature circles. As a result, the environment of literature circles with the inclusion of a critical literacy perspective allowed the gifted sixth-grade students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills that were manifested through the process of making intertextual (Short, 1992) connections during

and after reading.

From data analysis, the teacher-researcher discovered that the students' ability to construct meaning through intertextual connections (Short, 1992) was related to the questions asked during literature discussions whereby intertextual links were explored. These initiating questions used to guide discussions were routinely adopted from whole-class sessions that involved teacher read-aloud and fishbowl discussions and became the conversation structure for the participants in the context of literature circles. As the students responded to questions and discussed the texts, individual connections were made as the readers reflected on personal knowledge and then applied their lives to the text. For example, while discussing *The View from Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1996), Tina asked, "Which of the Four Souls do you think you are most alike and why?"

"I can connect to Nadia because when my dad married again, I didn't really like my step-mom because I thought she would take my dad away."

"I said I connect to Ethan the most 'cause I know what it's like to follow a big brother that everyone loves," Robert said.

Nicholas responded, "Yeah, I said Ethan for one because I have an older brother who is smart and I also said because I am quiet and don't always talk that much" [T-LC, 1-25].

The comments in this exchange illustrate how the students drew from inner texts (Lenski, 2001; Pearson & Tierney, 1984) or reminders of previous experiences to connect their lives to the literature while discussing *The View from Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1996). In addition, the teacher-researcher found that as students shared connections, other group members would add to, ignore, adapt, or confirm their initial thinking and this further

shaped the construction of meaning. For example, while discussing *The Breadwinner*

(Ellis, 2000), Bridgett commented, "I connect Parvana to Hannah in *The Devil's*

Arithmetic because both girls lost their freedom. They were dominated for having the

wrong religion or the wrong gender."

Jeremiah responded, "Yeah, I agree with your connections but I see them almost

as slaves, like the boy in *Sounder*. They had their freedom taken away from them, um and

the boy isn't really free 'cause his family is controlled by the white people with the

power" [T-LC, 5-20].

Analysis of this interaction shows that Jeremiah confirmed Bridgett's intertextual

connection (Short, 1992) but altered her connection to include an additional text,

illustrating how Jeremiah entered the situation with a text he had read, created and inner

text (Lenski, 2001), participated in a discussion which was its own text, and then

modified the discussion to form a different text. Additionally, this brief exchange

illustrates how both students made knowledge-based links to the main text by referencing

other texts.

Correspondingly, the findings showed the students enacted their lives as texts by

making intertextual connections (Short, 1992) and used these connections to make sense

of their world and how they fit into that world. While reviewing field notes, the teacher-

researcher noted,

> At times it appeared that through engagement with texts, the students entered the
> text world and the text moved into their world [FN, 5-21].

In addition, data analysis found the students frequently took on the characters'

experiences and feelings such that empathy was endorsed and the diversity in the text was

neither sacrificed nor diminished. While discussing *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), a

heartfelt discussion occurred that embodied concern for the character's life and validated the dignity for the human experience. The discussion highlights the students' concerns for those who have been victimized by corruption within text.

Episode 14: Students Enacting their Lives as Text

Tim: If you were Ji-li, how would you feel if you watched a man's business sign being torn down?

Kimberly: I don't think I could have watched or I would have just thrown the sign away and walked away from the mob.

Robert: I totally disagree. I bet the man took a long time to get that sign right. He probably sanded it and primed it for painting to make a clean surface for the gold letters. He probably did a lot of nice things by getting it perfectly even and make it beautiful. I would try to give it back to the owner because it might be a treasure for him.

Tim: Would you be excited to see a tearing down of the old ways that you have been so used to just to have new ones replace it and why?

Zoe: I say definitely no because something old and dear to me taken down would be like taking away all of my memories. There's no memories left when I forget.

Holly: I am the most old young person you can find so I would absolutely hate it with every fiber of my being. I can relate to Ji-li watching the antique furniture and clothes being thrown away because when my grandmother died, all my aunts and uncles came in and just tore through her house and took what they wanted. I felt then and I think Ji-li may have felt the same

> way that she was losing something precious that belonged to someone she
> loved.

Robert: I agree with Zoe and Holly because it's sorta like taking away your personality or who you are and what you know. I can connect to Ji-li because I would be confused if things that were important to my family were thrown away and I know I would be angry like she was.

Jeremiah: Well, I would disagree because whatever our ancestry was that's not who we are now. People can change. We don't have to be down right shunned out of the community because of our ancestors. That's Ji-li's ancient past and she should let it go and pay attention more now. I mean, think of my ancestors. They would not be able to attend this school so I say let it go and make a new life. I do feel for her [Ji-li] but she's [Ji-li] making a mess of the situation.

[T-LC, 4-18]

Analysis of this episode illustrates that during a literature circle discussion that centered on discussions involving a multicultural text prompted by questions to engage dialogue, the students made connections about some aspect of the text from personal experiences while relating to the main character, different events, and perspectives presented in the text world. Implicit in the students' responses is the premise that intertextual connections (Short, 1992) were personally constructed but textual resources can influence which connections are present for students to use. When Holly said, ". . . all my aunts and uncles came in and just tore through her house and took what they wanted," illustrates she has connected to Ji-li's pain through her own personal experience and the

text served as a resource to elicit her response. Additionally, the excerpt shows that as the

students connected to the text, they enacted their own lives in the text, revealing their

identities, their own sociocultural assumptions, and their own realities. Jeremiah

exemplifies this form of connection when he states, "We don't have to be down right

shunned out of the community because of our ancestors." This statement exemplifies how

Jeremiah has drawn upon his cultural heritage as an African-American to merge the text,

the reader, and the culture. Finally, analysis of this episode reveals how the nature of

literature circles provided a setting through which intertextual connections were made as

a collective forum for analysis and critical reasoning.

Resymbolizing Text Through Interpretation

Because multicultural literature often positioned the students in unfamiliar worlds,

the students had to establish meaningful relationships with the texts. In other words, the

students had to familiarize the unfamiliar. This study found that as the students were

called upon to make new perceptions and new interpretations of unfamiliar worlds, they

did so by connecting two symbolic worlds, that of the text and that of the reader, where

the readers used their own cultural system as a symbol that was built up through an

ongoing process of learning to approach the text. In short, the students were involved in a

continual process of analyzing assumptions, revising judgments, and comparing and

contrasting cultural worlds to arrive at meaning. According to Sumara (1998), students'

responses to literary texts must become resymbolized into a form that functions as

understandable when confronted with unfamiliar contexts. In this study, this task

was accomplished as the students applied their analytical reasoning and critical thinking

skills during literature circle discussions.

Rosenblatt (1978) ascertained that texts act as stimuli to which students respond in their own personal ways through feelings, associations, or memories. Yet, Fish (1980) argued that responses are not fully created until readers assimilate or actualize the text in light of their own knowledge and experience. In this study, the teacher-researcher discovered that the participants became actively involved as interpreters of meaning by integrating their past literary experiences and using their creative abilities. For example, while reading the unfamiliar world in *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), several students morally wrestled with the manner in which Chairman Mao enacted the Cultural Revolution, in which words such as unfair, immoral, and ugly were voiced. Implicit in the students' responses were the negative affects on the main character's life that were perceived to be "out of bounds" for the participants. As the students grappled to navigate the cultural world in the text with their own, they frequently relied on their own lives to make sense of Ji-li's world in order to appreciate the work. In doing so, they reorganized the text in light of their own knowledge. For example, Daniel commented, "The bourgeois were threatened by the Red Guards 'cause at one time they owned land. That would be like the Native Americans getting even here if they got mad 'cause of land. I guess they [Red Guards] felt cheated" [T-LC, 4-19]

From this response, Daniel illustrates how he actualized Ji-li's unfamiliar world by integrating his knowledge of a Native American issue and in turn he widened his insights about events in the text. Further, Daniel's response indicates how meaning emerges in the interaction between the text, the reader, and the culture. This finding was further evidenced while reviewing field notes in which the teacher-researcher recorded,

> From observations of Table 4 today, tension appeared between several students (Jane, Steve, Nicholas) and the text. The students appeared to be working through

moral aspects of the text and tried to determine what if anything in their own lives could help them understand. Note: This is significant. The students are trying to interpret Ji-li's world by negotiating the two cultures. From the questions they are asking, they seem to be reorganizing the text in order to come to terms with the Ji-li's culture. [FN, 4-19]

Further evidence of how the students applied analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills to resymbolize (Sumara, 1998) the text into an understandable form were found in dialogue journals. The following excerpt from one student's journal writing illustrates the manner in which the student used critical interpretation to approach the text and come to grips with an unfamiliar context in *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000). While responding to the question *What particular aspects of my life may help me understand and appreciate the work?* Sabrina wrote,

> I have the impression that Parvana is just as confused about what is happening to her just like I am. I'm not sure if I can understand the whole text, but I can relate to her [Parvana] confusion. I know when I don't understand things I get confused. When my parents tell me I can't do something I want to do I don't like it so when they [Parvana's parents] tell her she can't go outside or she can't go to school I think I would be just as confused. As long as I understand something, I can handle it [JR, 5-16].

Analysis of Sabrina's journal entry reveals that while she may not be able to resymbolize the whole text, she has critically analyzed certain events to make sense of the text. Through reasoning, she reorganized an unfamiliar culture into a culture she understood, thereby assimilating the text in light of her own knowledge and experiences.

The study found through data analysis that the use of literature circles promoted social interaction and discussion as students learned to comprehend text and encouraged students to read with a focus and report on what they read. The collaborative nature of literature circles fostered a deeper understanding of the multicultural texts through student-centered discussions that allowed the participants to read and respond as a

community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Dialogue was crucial to the success of this study for it allowed the readers to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills that included: (1) taking a critical stance, (2) creating intertextual connections (Short, 1992), and (3) resymbolizing the text through interpretation (Sumara, 1998).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers. More specifically, this study investigated how strategic practices in critical literacy influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye, address tough issues of cultural dominance, cultural privilege, and power differentials between cultural groups, and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read by engaging in dialogic discourse that centers on discussions of diverse literature and multiple perspectives. Subsequently, the focus of this study recognized the cognitive processes associated with constructing meaning from print, but expanded this view of reading to also include sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy, highlighting that interaction between the learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors for differentiating learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers. This study required the social world to be studied as much as possible in its natural state.

To accomplish this, the teacher-researcher utilized a hybrid of qualitative research approaches to analyze the data. Specifically, ethnographic coding and analysis (Gee & Green, 1998; Leininger, 1985; Schensul et al., 1999), grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin,

1997), and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996, 1999; Gee & Green, 1998) were applied to the literacy activities and the social languages used to promote the literacy activities within the context of literature circle discussion.

While analyzing patterns of activities, the contributions of every participant were considered to be mutually dependent, as well as on the context in which they appeared. The aim was to describe human behavior and interactions in a holistic, natural environment in order to answer the four research questions. As a result, the teacher-researcher made meaning of the data, interpreted the data, and discovered the following four themes: (1) literature circles were sites in which the twenty-one participants enacted critical literacies, (2) multicultural texts became sites to use critical literacy and build multiple views (3) classroom language and literature promoted acting for justice, and (4) social action occurred in the classroom.

Supported by the research findings from the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the four themes provided a comprehensible framework for this study to understand the nature in which the high-ability sixth-grade readers responded and participated in literature circle discussions, emphasizing that the interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context with the infusion of critical literacy practices were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers. As a result, findings from the four research questions discovered that the environment of literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy provided differentiated learning opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students that included: (1) active participation in the construction of knowledge, cultural awareness, social action, and critical conversations, (2) development

of multiple perspective and world views, (3) creation of new reading identities and counter texts, and (4) the demonstration of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS,
CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a climate of educational reform, the role of exemplary curricula for gifted

education is at a difficult crossroads. The field is assailed for grouping practices seen as

counter to the current interest in inclusion (VanTassel-Baska, 1992). Furthermore, gifted

education is considered irrelevant by some critics because reform initiatives promote

critical thinking, interdisciplinary curriculum, and project work for all students, thereby

the assumption is made that a more challenging curriculum is provided for gifted students

in the regular classroom (VanTassel-Baska, 1998).

Currently, many regular classroom teachers are faced with the dilemma of how to

meet the needs of their diverse learners. Given time restraints and working in an era of

high-stakes accountability, it has been reported that many classroom teachers now focus

their attention on low-performing students (Davis & Rimm, 1994). As a result, many

students who are identified as gifted and talented are not challenged in classrooms today.

Consequently, gifted and talented students are instructed in a vast array of settings. Some

gifted students are educated in regular education classes, while other gifted students

receive pull-out services or set-aside programs (VanTassel-Baska, 1991). As concerns

continue to mount on the status of today's gifted education programs coupled with

questions about meaningful settings for delivery, the nature and extent of student learning

becomes the central concern.

Recognizing the strong influence that differentiated instruction provides for the

gifted learner and that literacy development for high-ability students is best achieved in

literature-rich environments with opportunities for students to participate extensively in

discussions, activate their consciousness, connect to prior experiences and knowledge,

and elicit high-level cognitive responses (Matthews, 1992), this study investigated how

literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-

grade) readers. More specifically, this study investigated the connection between critical

pedagogy and collaborative reading of sociocultural issues for gifted students.

Subsequently, the focus of this study recognized the cognitive processes associated with

constructing meaning from print, but expanded this view of reading to also include

sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy, highlighting that interaction between

the learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors

for differentiating learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers.

In this chapter, the teacher-researcher provides a brief overview of the findings

from this research study beginning with the themes that emerged from principles of

grounded theory development (Leininger, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) while analyzing

the findings of the four research questions. The teacher-researcher then revisits the four

research questions that guided the study. A discussion of the findings relative to each of

the four research questions are presented in detail. Further, the teacher-researcher

addresses other key findings that relate to the topic of literature circles as a differentiated

learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers. From this discussion, the teacher-

researcher addresses the implications for practice, for teacher education and professional

development, for research, and for policy. The chapter then addresses the research

conclusions ascertained from the study and the chapter ends with brief remarks and

recommendations for further study from the teacher-researcher.

Findings

The fact that the twenty-one participants came into this study as advanced readers who grasped new concepts more rapidly than others and were capable of high performance required a different approach to reading instruction. From this stance, the teacher-researcher pursued a collaborative and interactive environment for learning by using the sociocultural and critical approach to text. Emphasis was placed on dialogue to promote active learning.

First, literature circles were found to be *zones of opportunity* for gifted middle school students where each reader became an active participant in the construction of meaning by drawing on both textual and contextual information as well as his or her own prior knowledge and experiences. Secondly, the study found that literature circles provided a forum for gifted readers to consider different points-of-view in regards to texts, issues, and situational contexts. In addition, the teacher-researcher discovered that gifted students create counter texts to reshape the unfair privileging of dominant groups and the injustices of privileging one group over another because of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Finally, the teacher-researcher discovered that literature circles are forums in which gifted readers can apply their analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills by taking a critical stance, creating intertextual connections (Short, 1992), and resymbolizing (Sumara, 1998) the unfamiliar worlds in texts into understandable worlds through lived experiences.

Thematic Support

From the development of an ethnographic theme analysis (Leininger, 1985)

informed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) to understand how the interaction between learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context with the infusion of critical literacy practices were critical factors when considering differentiated learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers, the following four themes emerged: (1) literature circles were sites from which the twenty-one participants enacted critical literacies, (2) multicultural texts became sites to use critical literacy and build multiple views, (3) classroom language and literature promoted acting for justice, and (4) social action occurred in the classroom. The four themes account for the ways that the sixth-grade readers negotiated critical literacies, as well as the practices of connecting to larger contexts and creating texts to reshape their world. Supported by the findings of this study and classroom accounts of critical literacy practices (Christensen, 2000; Edelsky, 1999; O'Brien, 2001; Vasquez, 2000), the four themes provided a comprehensible framework for this study. As a result, it is necessary to revisit the four research questions that guided this study.

Addressing the Research Questions

Because this study sought to examine and explain the cultural practices that emerged in the classroom and the manner in which these practices translated into learning opportunities for high-ability readers, the four research questions that guided this study were: (1) How does the environment of literature circles provide differentiated learning opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students?; (2) How does critical literacy help gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students understand viewpoints different from their own?, (3) What types of new texts and identities do gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students create from participation in literature circles? and (4) How does

the environment of literature circles with the inclusion of a critical literacy perspective provide opportunities for gifted middle school (sixth-grade) students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills? In the following sections, the findings are discussed in relation to each research question.

Discussion of Findings

In order to investigate how the use of critical pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles function as a differentiated learning context for high-ability sixth-grade learners and to investigate if strategic practices in critical literacy can influence high-ability students to read with a more critical eye and develop a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what they read, both textual and contextual factors were vital to this study. These assumptions facilitated the development of critical literacy, including the responses of readers and contextual practices that facilitated it, and the influence of the multicultural text that evoked the responses from a sociocultural perspective. While the focus of this study was on student interaction during literature circle discussions, in terms of what the students said, what they did, and what they wrote, the teacher-researcher found that literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy provided the gifted readers a differentiated reading program and was formed during day-to-day classroom reading activities.

How Does the Environment of Literature Circles Provide Differentiate Learning Opportunities for Gifted Middle School (Sixth-Grade) Students?

In response to the first research question, the teacher-researcher found that literature circles provided the gifted sixth-grade readers five zones of opportunity to differentiate learning. The five zones were: (1) zone of inquiry, critical thinking, and

knowledge formation, (2) zone of affective development and self awareness, (3) zone of cultural awareness and place in the world, (4) zone of criticality and social action, and (5) zone of critical conversations. Significant to this finding was the management of the classroom space, the time, and the organization of the three-block reading program that provided the participants the opportunity to practice and develop their literacy skills and learn about texts, the author's interests, and learn to understand themselves, others, and the world around them. This finding is in keeping with other studies of different student populations that have shown that all children, when given the opportunity and appropriate guidance and support, are capable of participating in conversations about texts and co-constructing meaning by interacting with others and making connections from their own lived experiences (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Galda, 1998; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Purves, 1993). In addition, this study found that the teacher-researcher's willingness to enact a "gradual release of responsibility" (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) prepared the students for literature circle discussions and is consistent with Kong and Pearson's (2003) research involving a diverse group of fourth and fifth-graders who found that by creating opportunities for students to interact with literature and through modeling and scaffolding techniques for participation, the students appropriated language and literacy skills to become competent contributing members in book discussions. The following five sections explain the findings for each zone of opportunity.

Zone of Inquiry, Critical Thinking, and Knowledge Formation

The zone for inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge formation emerged through analysis of data as three domains or categories based on transcripts, field notes, interviews, and dialogue journal entries. The three domains that comprised the zone of

inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge formation were: (1) inferential modes of thinking, (2) reflective modes of thinking, and (3) creative modes of thinking.

First, this study found that the students learned to evaluate the truth of knowledge statements, such as when the students engaged with the author's words to determine what was "true" from the author's point-of-view. This process called for critical thinking that involved the use of inferential modes of thinking in order to make an evaluation. As the students investigated the topics of prejudice and cultural privilege while reading and responding to different multicultural texts, the students used information from the text as a reference, and in doing so inferences in the form of conclusions were derived from the author's references. For example, the students reported through interviews, literature circle discussions, and dialogue writing that social and cultural prejudice separated people. By evaluating the author's words, the participants inferred knowledge about the negative effects of stereotyping for those who are viewed as other or different (Giroux, 1993) from the mainstream norm. This finding is consistent with Brabham and Vilaume (2000) who found that literature circles can gradually enable students to take responsibility for reading, comprehending, interpreting, drawing conclusions from text, and engaging in increasingly more complex levels of reading and thinking.

In addition to inferential modes of thinking, a second domain that determined literature circles were zones of inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge formation was the use of reflective modes of thinking. The teacher-researcher found the students' use of reflective thinking included perceiving patterns, relations, similarities, and differences, such as when the students analyzed the content in their texts and made connections as it applied to their own lives (text-to-self), real-world issues (text-to-world), and other texts

(text-to-text). First, the students reported through dialogue journaling their personal

reflections on how the multicultural texts related to their personal knowledge. This

finding is in agreement with Calkins (1994) who described the merits of peer discussion

in her classroom when she offered that literature circle discussions are an impetus for

student writing because the context provides the opportunity for more reflective writing

on students' reactions to the story. Additionally, the teacher-researcher found evidence

that the use of collaborative groups was an effective method of social interaction because

the collective thinking of the group helped each individual group member's thinking

(Vygotsky, 1978). Gee (2000) explains that central to the concept of a community of

practice is "the common endeavor is organized around a whole process involving

multiple but integrated functions, not single, discrete, or decontextualized tasks" (p. 3).

As the students created connections between the texts and their personal experiences,

they were able to monitor and take ownership of their own learning. Through

questionnaires and student interviews, the students time and again informed the teacher-

researcher that participating in literature circles motivated them to be prepared for the

daily discussions and the ability to discuss with each other and draw from each others'

experiences improved their ability to form conclusions and clarify understanding by

examining similarities and differences within texts and across texts. This finding is

supported by the sociocultural perspective of reading that acknowledges literacy is not an

isolated cognitive skill (Vygotsky, 1978), but rather is influenced by the social, cultural,

historical, and linguistic processes that relate to students' literacy development and life

experiences. Further, effective learning takes place when learners recognize their own

needs and are in charge of their own learning through collaboration with more competent

peers and adults.

In addition, this study consistently found that as the students made connections, the process required them to think beyond the text and apply their knowledge to different situations in the form of intertextual connections. This finding is in agreement with the fundamental construct of intertextuality (Short, 1992) which highlights the social and cultural processes involved in how students act, react, and respond to each other during literature discussions. At the same time, meaning in this case was a function of what occurred among the participants and texts rather than a process between readers and text. At other times through literature circle discussions, the students analyzed the content as it applied to real-world issues and then linked the discussion to other contexts, illustrating the power of intercontextuality (Floriani, 1994) to make meaning. These connections were often communicated through discussion and sharing with each other as comparisons or the synthesis of ideas. The teacher-researcher found evidence of what Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen (2000) describe as transactional zones of meaning construction. As the readers read, discussed, and reflected, the transaction produced further texts, thereby developing further knowledge

Critical thinking in the context of inquiry involved a third domain, the creative modes of thinking. The findings consistently showed that the participants relied on creative modes of thinking to invent ideas, predict, provide interpretations, as well as conceptualize, imagine, and synthesize. From analysis of transcripts, journal entries, and questionnaires, this study found that as the students participated in literature circles, they had opportunities to listen to various interpretations presented by others and through the process of interpretation, the readers were able to extend their initial impressions of the

text and to develop a more complete understanding of what was read by linking information across parts of a text, as well as focusing on specific information. As previously stated, this finding is in agreement with the fundamental construct of intertextuality (Short, 1992).

Additionally, the collaborative nature of literature circles was found to be a useful technique in facilitating learning because discussion forced reflection of existing beliefs and values, raised questions, and initiated inquiry as members worked together to formulate meaning from the text. The teacher-researcher found evidence of what Vygotsky (1978) posed that learning takes place in an authentic and real-world environment where the participants can actively construct their own knowledge and meaning from their experiences and what Wertsch (1991) posited that learning involves social negotiation and mediation by tools or signs, such as print, writing, and language itself. The students reported through interviews and dialogue journals that literature circle discussion was helpful because the context allowed them to be creative in their thinking and take risks with their interpretations. This finding echoes Fish (1980) who discovered that shared discussions build an interpretive community. Further, this finding parallels the research conducted by Galda and Beach (2001) who reported that shared discussions about texts lead to new interpretations and new meanings.

The significant impact from the collaborative nature of literature circles was the sense of belonging as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As the students discussed the literature with each other, they were motivated by the social interaction that occurred while creatively thinking with their peers. This finding parallels other research which found that literature circles encourage students to become more engaged in reading

because students are situated in a context that promotes response and challenge to one another's interpretations, share opinions about texts, and question the meaning of texts (Evans, 2002; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Lloyd, 2004). Subsequently, the findings are in further agreement with research that has specifically targeted the gifted that determined reading programs for gifted students should include critical, creative, and inquiry reading because gifted readers' strong reading abilities require modifications in their reading program if they are to achieve their potential (Maker, 1982; VanTassel-Baska, 1993).

Finally, the findings that inferential, reflective, and creative modes of thinking were significant to literature circle interactions is supported by the social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and the transactional lens of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1978; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). Both perspectives provided insight into how the participants in the literature circles co-constructed meaning by connecting prior experiences and knowledge and by offering personal responses. As the readers interacted personally with the words on the page, multiple meanings were constructed, and each participant took away a different but personal meaning from the text (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Zone of Affective Development and Self-Awareness

Consistent patterns in the data revealed that literature circles were zones of affective development and self-awareness for the twenty-one student participants. Through observations, recorded transcripts, and the students' dialogue journals, two domains or categories emerged that encompassed a range of emotions that were voiced and displayed. The two domains were: (1) student self-awareness and discernment for others' emotions and (2) the ability to connect, prioritize, internalize, and regulate their

own emotions in support of democratic ideals.

The purpose for using multicultural literature in literacy programs is to expose students to differing viewpoints and life experiences. Zitlow and Stover (1998) articulate that providing young adolescents with the opportunity and ability to see how others experience life is paramount for young adolescents who are in the stage of becoming self-determining actors in their community. From data analysis, consistent findings highlighted the collaborative nature of literature circles as a useful technique in facilitating development of affective behaviors. This study found that the social structure of literature circles provided a context in which the participants developed both self-awareness and discernment for others' emotions through a willingness to listen to others with respect and actively participate in discussion. In other words, the feeling dimension of learning became evident. Further analysis found the students demonstrated their beliefs, attitudes, and emotions needed to confront social issues in their community and broadened their conception of self within their world (Harre, 1987).

Significant to this finding was the decision to engage the students in the reading and writing of diverse literature that provided the opportunity for the students to relate their own experiences and emotions. Further, research supports this finding by suggesting that human beings are inherently emotional beings and that emotion and affective development impact students' development and behavior in a wide variety of important ways (Bloom, 1985; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). This finding is further supported by Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) who contend that student discussion provides the opportunity to "communicate one's ideas in a clear, detailed manner through conversation, writing, or an aesthetic response" (p. 108). The authors found that as

students engage in discussion, the act of studying, questioning, and thinking carefully leads students to be more thoughtful and evaluative of their own responses.

Consistent patterns in the data found that literature circles provided the participants the ability to connect, prioritize, internalize, and regulate their own emotions in support of democratic ideals. In other words, literature circles were a context from which the participants were able to connect their own emotions to those of others, a venue to display their emotions by demonstrating a belief in the democratic process, and a forum to manage their emotions by establishing a value system that controlled their behavior and organize their values into priorities.

From analysis of transcripts, field notes, and dialogue entries, the teacher-researcher found that the nature of literature circles provided the participatory structure for the students to internalize cognitive structures, such as power domination and silenced voices, as well as the feelings and identities that were relevant to the interaction. Further, literature circles engaged the high-ability learners in reflection and response through discussions about multicultural themes that provided experiences to promote cultural empathy. Through strategic practices in critical literacy that enabled them to move beyond their own society's parameters and engage in conversations between the textual themes and their own existing value system, the gifted readers had opportunities to appropriate the feeling dimensions of learning. Just as Freire (1970) refers to reading the world, reading in this study involved questioning the dominant forces and institutionalized practices that make the world unjust for many in school and to live in a democratic world. Transcripts from literature circle discussions that centered on *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969), *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988), *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997),

and *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) show the findings time and again that as the students'

sensitivity towards discriminatory practices sharpened, they were able to recognize

responsible behavior on the one hand and human indecency on the other. By comparing,

relating, and synthesizing the author's values with their own, the students organized a set

of beliefs that provided them a value system to uncover the dynamics of power and

ideology in their texts. The significance in this finding underscores the premise that by

reading multicultural literature that reflected a power differential between groups of

people, the students were presented with diverse perspectives and engaged in socially

mediated experiences that involved both cognitive and affective abilities, such as

listening to key ideas and discerning core emotions in stories. This finding corresponds

with other research findings (Comber & Nixon, 1999; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Luke &

Freebody, 1997; Vasquez, 2004) that have reported on the role critical literacy plays in

fostering collaborative learning and promoting responsible democratic action.

Finally, the findings are supported by the social constructivist perspective

(Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and the transactional theory of reader response

(Rosenblatt, 1978; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). Both perspectives allowed

the teacher-researcher to understand and explain how the readers engaged in socially

mediated experiences while responding to texts that involved both cognitive and affective

abilities such as experiencing compatible perceptions and emotions of characters in

stories. In conjunction, the findings are supported by cognitive-affective interaction

models for gifted students (Williams, 1986, 1995) that have examined enrichment options

and advocated that gifted students should opportunities to blend creative thinking, risk-

taking, and complexity.

Zone of Cultural Awareness and Place in the World

This study found through the reading of diverse texts with an emphasis on critical literacy practices, that literature circles provided a zone for the students to become culturally aware. At the same time, the participants developed a sense of their own place in the world. From data analysis, three domains or categories emerged: (1) the students developed the skills to recognize that people are not the same, (2) similarities and differences are both important, and (3) the students learned to celebrate diversity by looking beyond the differences by taking a closer look at the cultural connectedness among mankind.

The first domain that emerged in building cultural awareness was the students' ability to recognize people are not the same. This required the readers to suspend initial judgments before evaluating other cultures. However, the teacher-researcher discovered this process was problematic for the twenty-one participants because initially the students lacked knowledge of different cultures and as a result, misassumptions and misinterpretations primarily guided discussions. This finding is consistent with Tobin (1989) (as cited in Dressel, 2005) who recognized that privileged readers are unable to recognize the "invisible" cultures when they meet text if they are never given opportunities to challenge their ideals, values, and perspectives. Further, Luke, Comber, and O'Brien (1994) assert that students need to realize that their own individual viewpoints are culturally determined by their own attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotions, and variables such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic, religion, and age all work together to form an endless number of ways of being in the world. Therefore, the teacher-researcher found the readers had to learn to assume differences as well as similarities

among cultures.

The findings of this study suggest that intentionally designing a participation structure whereby the teacher-researcher played multiple roles with the students by moving from teacher-centered discussions, to shared stances, to student-centered stances was both relevant and significant for student learning. This participation structure was in keeping with what Kong and Pearson (2003) discovered and referred to as "the gradual release of responsibility." Based on this premise, the teacher-researcher implemented interactive read-aloud throughout the study in whole-class meetings to allow students to experience quality multicultural literature and to engage in critical literacy practices. The teacher-researcher found through observation, field notes, and recorded transcripts the interactive read-aloud practice proved to be crucial to the success of connecting the concepts of critical literacy and democracy when the students were engaged in critical conversations with difficult social justice issues presented in their multicultural texts. By modeling for the student participants critical questions to be asked, the teacher-researcher was able to scaffold student learning such that students began to view the classroom as a society in which critical conversations about the literature allowed the participants to examine the cultural differences around the world and to understand how cultural differences impact their lives. This practice parallels what other researchers have determined that in order to meet the needs of diverse students, teachers create culturally responsive classrooms whereby students understand and negotiate differences across cultures and students learn to be pluralistic in their thought, behavior, and affect (Ford, et al. 1999; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 1992; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997) while reading literature that represents multiple ethnic perspectives.

Consistent patterns from data analysis found a second domain to support that literature circles were a zone for increasing cultural awareness and provided the students a sense of place in the world. This domain reflected how the participants learned that similarities and differences are both important. Significant to this finding was the continued practices in critical literacy through a participation structure that actively engaged the students in cultural discussions. Analysis of transcripts consistently showed that as the participants learned to analyze, challenge, and reflect on important societal issues by raising questions that promote high-level thinking about multicultural issues and themes, the students developed an awareness that similarities and differences exist among cultures. In other words, from the competing ideologies, the students developed a stronger awareness of their own way of doing things and how they fit into their world, but they began to see others' ways of doing things as well. This finding was an important realization. As the students increased their cultural awareness, they were able to see both the positive and negative aspects of cultural differences. Consequently, this finding is in keeping with Encisco (1994) who discovered that when students are engaged in the co-construction of meaning, they are confronted with the differences they see in others which in turn helped them to see their cultural and social identities. Further, this finding is supported by the findings of Landt (2006) who determined that reading high-quality diverse literature provides opportunities for gifted students to create a community of discerning readers who discover differences within their own culture, the commonalities across cultures, and look beyond any cultural differences to perceive a wider view of the world.

A third domain that contributed to the finding that literature circles were a zone of

cultural awareness and a place for students to understand their place in the world was the manner in which the participants learned to celebrate diversity by looking beyond the differences and by taking a closer look at the cultural connectedness among mankind. Through the use of multicultural texts, the students were able to read a wide source of cultural information that ranged from the symbolic to the ideological and the sorts of power relationships that exists within and across cultures. Luke (2003) posits that teachers need to engage students with diverse "texts, images, information, data, signs, and symbols" (p. 21) in order to dislodge their limited ideologies so they are free to connect to other worlds and cultures. By developing insights about the construction of culture and about their own cultural frameworks, the students were able to reach deeper understandings about their own personal identity, value, and about the multiple ways of being in the world. Further, this study found through analysis of transcripts, field notes, and interviews that as the students came into contact with different cultures through multicultural literacy, these cultures interacted with the individual readers, resulting in a transformation of cultural identity that allowed each reader to view themselves as a participant in a multicultural world and to view the world from different perspectives. In addition, it must be noted that the significance in this finding was the teacher-researcher's decision to engage the students in controversial issues that could be read through multicultural literature. This decision parallels other studies that point to multicultural literature as a means to offer students the opportunity to look beyond the differences and take a closer look at the cultural connectedness among mankind (Cai, 1992, 2002; Stover, 2000). Banks (1994) supports transforming the mainstream curriculum, Cochran-Smith (2004) advocates teaching in support of social justice, and Edelsky (1999) argues that

teachers must make issues of social justice a core practice.

Subsequently, this finding is also in agreement with program requirements for gifted reading programs. Welte (1996) explains that when teachers enable their high-end students to experience novel activities that are specifically matched to their students' needs, they are engaging their students in a qualitative learning experience that consists of core knowledge about the world and an opportunity for their students to think at higher levels.

Finally, the findings are supported by the critical perspective paradigm (Comer & Simpson, 2001). As the students developed cultural awareness, they were motivated to question, uncover the dynamics of power within cultures, and strive to understand who they are and how they fit in their world. In addition, the social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and the transactional theory of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1978; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000) gave meaning to the manner in which the readers engaged in socially mediated experiences while interacting with diverse texts to develop the skills to recognize that people are not the same, that similarities and differences are both important, and to celebrate diversity by looking beyond the differences by taking a closer look at the cultural connectedness among mankind.

Zone of Criticality and Social Action

As the students learned to question issues of power and explicit disparities within social contexts, such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, and ethnicity, the fourth zone of opportunity became apparent. The zone of criticality and social action emerged through consistent patterns of development. First, the students developed the capacities to

read and critique messages in their texts in order to better understand how to evaluate whose knowledge is privileged. When critically evaluating the author's interests and values, this study found that the students developed the knowledge to question and pose problems relating to how texts can influence ideas and how texts represent particular views. Secondly, the study found that as the participants began to read in a reflective manner, they became more receptive to the idea that written language has the potential to be a tool to transform discriminatory structures. Further, the teacher-researcher found that as the participants became more familiar with the transformative potential of written language, they became more receptive to the activist component of critical literacy. The significant impact of critical literacy, operationalized as a literature-based instructional strategy while reading diverse texts, was the manner in which the students began to use their tools to expose, discuss, and attempt to solve social injustices within their own lives. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) suggest that critical literacy is about challenging the status quo. Therefore, the findings from this study are consistent with research that has shown that through discursive practices and challenging mainstream society, critical literacy equips students with the language and knowledge they need to make personal responses and to assume the social responsibility to resist injustices in their lives (Christensen, 2000).

Significant to this finding was the teacher-researcher's decision to create a classroom culture that allowed the students to appropriate the skills necessary to read from a critical stance. Through teacher read-aloud that modeled how to pose questions that engaged the roles of a text critic and analyst (Luke & Freebody, 1997), through carefully guided fishbowl discussions to scaffold learning, and ultimately through the

independent practice in literature circle discussions, the participants developed the skills to examine false assumptions, inconsistencies, and illogical conclusions by reading from a critical stance.

In addition to the teacher-researcher's decision to create a classroom culture that allowed the students to appropriate the skills necessary to read from a critical stance, data analysis found that dialogue journaling became a reflection of the social dialogue during interaction and provided the students opportunities to make decisions on important societal issues and construct alternative versions of reality. The students' dialogue journals became sites of critical literacy practices as the students assumed alternative reading positions to look beyond the printed word to accept or reject the author's values and interests and write alternative texts to create a more socially balanced world.

Further, the two literature circle roles developed for this study provided the participation structures necessary for the participants to become critically literate. Consistent patterns in the data revealed the role of *Character Investigator* provided the students the opportunity to: (1) accept or reject how the author positions characters, (2) explore different subjectivities, and (3) appropriate novel reading identities. This finding is consistent with Alford's (2001) position that reading from a resistant perspective introduces students to the idea that texts can be interpreted from multiple positions. The author reports that students are encouraged to unpack different layers of meaning and to examine how the same reader can approach a text from different identities, such as race, class, and gender. Subsequently, the findings in this study underscore that reading from a resistant perspective teaches students to see how their values, coupled with the author's stance, can position them to form certain interpretations (Beach, 1993).

In addition, consistent patterns in the data found the role of *Critical Profiler* promoted reading from a critical stance. Through participation, the critical literacy skills that evolved over time were: (1) the ability to question the author and to interrogate the texts, (2) the ability to understand that texts are social constructions to serve ideologies, values, and author's interests, (3) the ability to fill-in gaps and silences intentionally created by the author, and (4) to the ability to create alternative versions of reality. Through transcripts, dialogue entries, and questionnaires, the teacher-researcher found that these appropriated skills empowered the readers to become change agents through social action. The findings are consistent with researchers who found that when students focus on controversial issues (Cervetti, Pardeles & Damico, 2001) such as race, gender, and class, literacy is then viewed as a social issue and students learn to negotiate real-world experiences through response, inquiry, and social action (Ciardiello, 2004). In other words, literacy is more than just reading and writing, it is political and social practice as well.

Zone of Critical Conversations

From data analysis, this study found that the social context of literature circles became sites for explicit critical conversations. Additionally, the study found that discussion that centered on multicultural issues offered a powerful vehicle for incorporating critical literacy practices. As the students engaged in texts, heavily-laden with issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice, critical conversations about silenced voices and marginalized groups grew into sharper focus. From this perspective, both the texts and the social contexts were found to be cultural tools for establishing critical conversations. As a result, this study found that three opportunity structures

emerged as core domains or major categories to support this finding. The teacher-researcher found: (1) that student-led discussion, (2) dialogue journaling, and (3) third spaces provided the opportunity structures for students to engage in private critical conversations.

The first domain that emerged to support the finding that literature circles were zones of critical conversations was the structural opportunity provided by student-led discussions. Vygotsky (1978) posed that learning occurs through interactions with others. In this study, the collaborative nature of the social learning environment enabled the participants to co-construct knowledge and guided further knowledge development over time. Additionally, the social nature of literature circles promoted inquiry as the students continually sought to understand the personal and social significance of texts from new perspectives by engaging in critical conversations for purposes of creating a more just world in which they live. Analysis of the transcripts consistently found that the seemingly tangential talk which led to these critical conversations was crucial to aiding students to use their texts as mediational tools (Wertsch, 1991) between them and the world around them. The teacher-researcher learned that through discussions that reflected a power differential between groups of people, the students consciously gave thought about whom was missing in the world of texts, concurrently broadened their conception of self (Harre, 1987) in their world, and voiced the actions they would take to enact social change in the world at-large.

Significant to this finding was the manner in which literature circles created a variety of opportunities for the participants to engage in critical conversations. Through inquiry and collaboration, the students discussed the sociocultural issues presented in

diverse texts by engaging in activities that included: (1) verbal exchanges as direct statements, (2) text connections, (3) thought-provoking questions, (4) and verbal challenges. This finding is supported by Mercer (1993) who asserts that learning is talk; learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to talk about the ideas and to respond to the ideas of others.

Because critical conversations involved not only discussion but intense scrutiny by its group members, the teacher-researcher observed that often time disagreements occurred during interaction. However, analysis of the data found that when conflicts did arise among group members, the conversations did not break down, but rather, conversations took on new dimensions that permitted the students to become critical producers and consumers of language. For example, data analysis found that the participants explored different subjectivities in order to critique the author's interests, values, and content, talk became a multivoicedness (Bakhtin, 1981) as participants took on literate ways of being associated with a learning community, and students demonstrated personal agency as a social function to respond to the text world. Further, as the students questioned and analyzed problems within the literature, they advanced their abilities to analyze the effectiveness of the author's word. These critical conversations that related to the text were often challenged, questioned, and evaluated based on evidence from the text. Further, the enactment of critical literacy practices played a substantial role in shaping students' co-construction of meaning because the literature circle context provided the problem-solving environment in which learners could draw upon prior experiences and their funds of knowledge (Moll, 1990) to probe and challenge each other in the meaning-making process to improve the world around

them. This findings parallels research that has shown that small-group dialogue plays a pivotal role in shaping students' co-construction of meaning because the literature circle context provides the problem-solving environment in which the learners draw from prior experiences and then probe, challenge, and collaboratively work together in the meaning-making process (McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006).

Consistent patterns of student-led discussion found that as the students became critical producers and consumers of language, they engaged in three important activities involving critical conversation: (1) they assessed the credibility of the findings of the other members of the community to decide whether or not to accept their claims, (2) they provided justification for their own claims in response to questioning by others, and (3) they persuaded the community to accept their claims by providing arguments in favor of the claims or against competing claims. Eeds and Wells (1989) assert that provocative texts have the potential for creating rich discussions. This study found that the nature of critical conversations engaged the students in higher levels of cognitive thinking and reflected critical responses whereby the students assumed different positions in which to interrogate the author, to unpack assumptions of knowledge, to investigate silenced voices, and to examine the sociocultural influences in their texts.

Analysis of the data consistently found that verbal participation was significant in the context of literature circles because the social interaction put into use the literate practices associated with reading. In this process, taking up ways that were negotiated and shaped in critical conversations with others, provided the opportunities for the students to form relationships with other students and to be accepted as peers in an academic community of learners. This finding is consistent with research on Book Clubs

(Kong & Fitch, 2002, 2003; McMahon & Raphael, 1997) which found discussions that centered on books provided students the time, space, and opportunities to share developing thoughts, pose questions to each other, and to collaborate while making meaning of the texts and their own life experiences.

A second domain that supported the finding that literature circles were zones of critical conversations was the practice of dialogue journaling which provided an opportunity structure for students to engage in critical conversations. The teacher-researcher found the many uses of journal writing in the classroom were extensions of the critical conversations shared during literature circle activity. By asking the readers to step out and objectify their reading experiences through dialogue journaling, the students were given the opportunity to describe multiple ways of seeing the text and extend their conversations from interaction in the classroom across texts and contexts. For example, the teacher researcher found that dialogue journaling provided a participation structure for the students to further engage in critical conversations as representations of what Short (1992) refers to as intertextual links between the literature circle discussion and the texts and what Floriani (1994) refers to as intercontextual links between the context of literature circles and journaling to craft the journal entries.

In addition, this study found the students developed a critical consciousness of the historical, social, and cultural ideologies through participation in literature circle discussion that further guided them to write about what was acceptable or not within a particular society. Significant to this finding is the agreement with Lankshear and McLaren (1993) who offer that the type of engagement in reading and writing that critical literacy demands enables humans to both understand and engage in the politics of life that

leads to a more democratic society. As a result, the findings consistently show that dialogue journaling was a continuum of the type of talk that emerged from literature circle interactions and paralleled the developing critical literacy stance over the course of the study that permitted the students to engage in complex discussions about issues of social justice. Further, this finding is in agreement with Staton (1987) who found that dialogue writing is a conversation in print of the critical conversations shared during literature circle activity.

A third domain that supported the finding that literature circles were zones of critical conversations was the establishment of third spaces which provided an opportunity structure for students to engage in critical conversations. Researchers refer to in-between spaces in which conversations often occur as a third space and acknowledge that students draw upon multiple resources or funds to make sense of their world (Moje, et al. 2004). In this study, the findings show that the critical conversations that occurred in these third spaces evolved from the many different funds of knowledge (Moll, 1990) the students tapped into from conversations that occurred in other classrooms, as the students moved through the hallways, and the conversations that were generated between the home, the community, and the classroom. Specifically, these types of interactions were produced when students shared conversations they had with their parents over social issues viewed from weekend movies or dinner table conversations that centered on social events in their community. Further, exchanges occurred in third spaces as students revealed topics addressed in other classrooms and films they had watched in social studies that centered on the Holocaust, women's rights, child labor laws, and poverty. These spontaneous conversations (Guitierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999) that

represented the third spaces were brought to class by the participants in order to ask questions and discuss the issues further. The teacher-researcher captured the critical conversations on memos and entered them into the research log when these conversations were shared with the teacher-researcher. For purposes of this study, the construction of third spaces made visible the critical conversations produced when students were given the opportunity to engage in issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice, highlighting the fact that both the texts and the social contexts became cultural tools for establishing critical conversations.

While examining the participation structures that provided opportunities for the students to engage in critical conversations, the teacher-researcher found evidence of a network of three theoretical assumptions that gave meaning to the significance of the events. First, the findings are supported by the critical perspective paradigm (Berlin, 1993; Freire, 1991; Giroux, 1993; McLaren, 2003). Through the examination of sociocultural issues presented in diverse texts utilizing strategic practices in critical literacy, the students learned to discover their voice through discussion and begin to ask why things are the way they are, to analyze what is going on in their world, to question who benefits from the way things are, and to act on the belief of making things more equitable (Bean & Moni, 2003; Ciardiello, 2004; Comer & Simpson, 2001). In addition, the social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and the transactional theory of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1978; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000) give meaning to the significance between student-led discussions and the co-construction of meaning when the readers engaged in socially mediated experiences while interacting and responding with diverse texts.

How Does Critical Literacy Help Gifted Middle School (Sixth-Grade) Students

Understand Viewpoints Different from Their Own?

The second research question addressed the influence of critical literacy on the development of sixth-grade gifted readers to understand different points-of-view in terms of texts, issues, and situational contexts. This study consistently found that when students understood the identity of literary characters, explored the nature of the events in which they lived, and analyze the outcomes of their living experiences, critical literacy provided a forum from which high-ability readers considered multiple perspectives and enacted worldviews. This finding underscores that by enacting strategic critical literacy practices, the students engaged in literacy activities that involved complex discussions about social issues and allowed the readers to see the author in a larger cultural context.

Because critical literacy is about interrogating textual ideologies and engaging in multiple voices (Edelsky, 1999), the significance to the finding was the teacher-researcher's decision to adopt a critical realist stance (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to approach the second research question. Using an inductive approach to compare and contrast data across sources, the analysis found a framework of four key themes that signify the processes the participants took to develop different viewpoints other than their own. The framework includes: (1) the participants analyzed whose view is told, (2) the students actively sought out silenced voices, (3) the participants considered alternative ways of seeing the text, and (4) the participants engaged in activity that foregrounds differences. The four themes account for the ways that the sixth-grade readers negotiated critical literacies, as well as the practices of connecting to larger contexts and creating texts to reshape their world. As a result, the following sections are summary accounts of

the findings in relation to each process the students enacted to develop different viewpoints other than their own.

Participants Analyzed Whose View of the World Is Told

By focusing on reading activities that required the students to analyze whose view of the world is told, the findings consistently showed that critical literacy provided the strategic tools for the students to understand that reality was closely connected to the author's social view of the world. Significant to this finding was the impact of a print-rich environment which engaged the students in the reading and writing of diverse literature and the appropriation of critical literacy practices. Harste (2003) says that "to be truly literate, children need to understand how texts act on them and to consciously position themselves accordingly. . ." (p. 8). The teacher-researcher's decision to provide opportunities for the students to discuss multiple texts and issues which created an environment for them to give their own viewpoints and listen to the viewpoints of others, proved to be crucial to the success of hearing multiple viewpoints so that meaning was developed. As a result, the findings further showed that critical literacy provided the participants new ways of responding through different points-of-view and to find alternative ways of understanding the text.

Analysis of the data consistently found that as the students learned to consider the author's perspectives, which perspectives were included and excluded, and who benefits from such perspectives, the students learned that texts consists of multiple views and that no one view tells the story. The findings further revealed that as the students became critically literate, they interrogated how authors view reality, the sociocultural assumptions authors make to shape their reality, and whose interests are served. This was

a significant finding as the students learned that authors' viewpoints often consist of hidden agendas and that what is being said, may or may not represent reality. For example, instances from literature discussions time and again showed the students learned to "read" how authors' social perspectives influence how they paint their world and frequently do so to serve their own interests. From analysis of recorded transcripts, the students reported that authors sometimes would give privilege to a certain character, give one ideology greater worth than others, or that authors would give greater attention to particular events in relation to others so that the events stood out.

Further analysis of what the students reported on questionnaires and what the students discussed in interviews and dialogue journals found that critical literacy engaged the students to question the author and to interrogate the text in order to determine how authors deliberately construct characters to serve a purpose in the context and time for the events of the story. The teacher-researcher found that as the students learned to interrogate the text, they frequently positioned to accept or reject how authors deliberately construct the identity of main characters and the outcomes of their living experiences to serve their views of the social world. Further, evidence was found of what Comber (2001) advocates that critical literacy provides opportunities for students to use their language to get things done in their world. In this study, the students often repositioned themselves to consider the different perspectives included in the text, to whom the voices belonged, and to consider the textual influences, then used their words as a powerful tool to voice new points-of-view. This finding parallels the findings of Luke (2000) who asserts that students must develop the critical abilities necessary to evaluate the ideological stance of a variety of texts. He maintains that readers must

develop the skills to determine what kinds of authors write what kinds of texts and whose interests are served. In addition, this finding is in keeping with Christie (1986) who discovered that when students understood that reality is often shaped for sociopolitical purposes, then they can begin to understand that authors frequently form viewpoints that are reflective of the social mores about the world in the text and the people in it. Subsequently, the findings are supported by scholars who have described the multiple viewpoints' dimension of critical literacy and have found that critical literacy enables students to reflect on multiple and contradictory perspectives (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000; Nieto, 1999).

Students Actively Sought Out Silenced Voices

Focusing on activity that seeks out silenced voices to understand how critical literacy influenced the gifted sixth-grade readers to understand different points-of-view, this study found that giving students the opportunity to discuss diverse texts and issues of social justice further provided an opportunity for students to not only understand multiple points-of-view, but that different points-of-view can be linked to the voice represented or the voice not heard. Edelsky (1999) argues a critical pedagogy examines "systems of domination and frontloads the concepts and issues for students to interrogate" (p. 14). Further, the findings consistently showed that as the students examined questions of power in relation to voice and critically examined their texts to understand how the language of power benefits dominant voices and points-of-view, the students learned that not all voices are heard or accepted and that some voices are missing and some are more privileged than others.

The significant impact to this finding was the role critical literacy played in

teaching students to recognize that literacy often works by opposition in a system that defines some members as inferior to others and puts them into positions of silence. During student interviews, the students told the teacher-researcher that from participating in critical discussions, they had gained new perspectives and new understandings in regards to "missing voices" and what "messages might be missing" when voices are silenced. In addition, the teacher-researcher found from transcripts captured during literature circle interactions that the students developed an understanding that authors intentionally leave gaps in the text for readers to fill and that some kinds of people, contexts, and experiences are devalued or ignored. The findings showed that as the students learned to fill the gaps and silences by consulting additional resources and gathering more information, they captured new meanings and acquired new subjectivities while reading and discussing the literature. Further findings from data analysis revealed that when students detected voices silenced altogether or pushed aside because of the dominant culture, they learned to determine if they had been pushed aside by voices of corruption and they acted to make those voices stronger and louder. As a result of this process, the students used their agency. This finding parallels other research studies that have found that critical literacy allowed students to use multiple voices to interrogate texts and determine whose voices are heard and whose are missing or marginalized (Harste et al., 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1997).

This study consistently found connections between critical pedagogy, collaborative reading, the chosen texts, and the learning environment played a significant role in the students' learning by empowering the readers to interrogate the text, to understand that texts contain biases, and that texts can be told from multiple perspectives

while silencing some points-of-view. This finding parallels other research studies that discovered the significant role of critical literacy in the classroom. Comer (2001) posits that teachers of critical literacy offer a student-centered classroom that focuses on dialogue because dialogue is crucial for students to discover their voice and begin to question who has power and who benefits from the power. In addition, O'Neill (1992) contends that critical literacy assumes that texts are perceived to contain author biases that serve their own interests, and therefore should be interrogated to discover those purposes. Luke and Freebody (1997) also suggest that critical literacy is necessary for the classroom because the practice stresses that texts have multiple meanings told from multiple perspectives, while silencing others' points-of-view.

Participants Considered Alternate Ways of Seeing the Text

In this study, the students were challenged to examine the ways that texts define the world and to determine the ways that such ideology impacts their reading. Analysis of the data consistently found that as the students were challenged to use reading and writing as a means of questioning the texts, to know the author's intent, to understand the soicocultural influences, and to comprehend with a critical edge, they gained the competence to envision alternative ways of viewing the author's topic. This finding is supported by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) who articulate that critical readers should understand the text's purpose to avoid being manipulated by it. The researchers contend that when readers read in this manner, they meaningfully question the text's origin and purpose and take action by representing alternative perspectives.

Significant to this process was the teacher-researcher's knowledge in modeling and guiding strategic practices in critical literacy. The teacher-researcher taught the

students to be open-minded, active, and strategic readers who became capable of viewing texts from critical perspectives. The students learned that information presented in texts was written from particular views and for particular purposes. Further, the students understood that meaning was grounded in the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts of their reading events. As a result, the teacher-researcher found the students became critical consumers who expanded their reasoning skills, sought out multiple viewpoints, and actively sought additional ways of understanding. This finding parallels research conducted by Farrell (1998) who found that critical literacy allows students to examine competing narratives to dominant discourses.

While analyzing journal entries, the teacher-researcher discovered that many students determined it was necessary to view the text differently in order to understand why characters behaved the way they did, the nature of their living conditions, and the outcomes of their actions. The students communicated through journal writing that books represented authors' construction of reality and frequently authors foreground a particular aspect to stand out for a purpose. They implied that authors only present one view and neglect to give readers the whole story. In doing so, the findings consistently showed the students restructured the texts in order to give meaning from a new perspective. At times, the students reflected how the characters' experiences related to their own and at times, the students questioned the power structure, evaluated, and chose to offer different views. As a result, the teacher found evidence of what Luke and Freebody (1999) refer to as critical literacy practices. The readers used their background knowledge to think critically and make choices about their thinking. In this process, the readers played the role not only of code breakers, meaning makers, and text users, but also the role of text critics

who actively sought alternative views to the texts.

Consistent patterns from data analysis found the students learned to see that some people do not have the same opportunities as members of the dominant group and they learned to recognize stereotypes of dominant and non-dominant cultures to determine how members of both groups are situated within the text's power structure. Further findings of this study that evolved in the classroom reflected a value that membership in a cultural group or a lack thereof, privileged some, and as the students began to take up alternative ways of seeing and searching for the silenced voices, they realized that privilege was often given an enhanced status greater than which it would normally have been accorded.

Analysis from observations, field notes, and transcripts, found that many students took issue with how the author positioned them to accept his or her view. As a result, the students formed their own assumptions by taking into account the historical, social, and political elements of the text to understand the issues of representation and how power worked to favor a few. The significance in this finding was the manner in which the students employed strategic practices in critical literacy to read the text differently than what the author intended, thereby demonstrating their knowledge that alternative ways of understanding adds new meaning. This finding is consistent with researchers who found critical literacy encourages students to question rather than passively accepting the information they encounter (Gee, 2001) and develop a language of critique to disrupt and oppose the ordinary, everyday way to view the world as well as understand how particular social practices are more privileged than others. (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006).

Participants Engaged in Activity That Foregrounds Differences

Closely associated with the critical literacy practice of considering alternate ways of seeing is the notion that critical literacy calls upon readers to foreground differences. In this study, this task was accomplished by asking readers to step out and objectify their reading experiences through interactive conversations and journal writing that required them to resist the commonplace views, to compare themes in different texts, and to highlight the strengths in different perspectives (Simpson, 1996). The findings consistently showed that as the students learned that authors choose to highlight dominant perspectives and assume readers understand this is the natural way, the way things should be and that differences would be unnatural, the students learned to foreground differences.

Additionally, the study found that discussion that centered on multicultural issues offered a powerful vehicle for incorporating critical literacy practices. By raising questions that promote high-level thinking about multicultural issues and themes and by providing experiences that promote cultural empathy, the study found the students became critically literate. From this perspective, the texts, the social context, and the literacy activities were found to be cultural tools for establishing critical literacy.

Throughout the literature circle discussions, the teacher-researcher found critical conversations in which the participants took a stand against the text and reflected on what was wrong in the textual world by de-constructing and reconstructing the world to place value on the underserved and who did not conform to the natural view of the textual world. For example, the students found value in sharecroppers for the work they performed and the compassionate whites in *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969) who went against

the order of the time by educating Blacks. As the students interacted, they used their knowledge of critical literacy to give preferential treatment to characters in *Sounder* who worked in opposition to prejudice by rewriting the dialogue or retelling sections of the text from silenced characters' points-of-view. The findings showed that as the students focused on characters that performed the unnatural order of the time, the students were foregrounding different perspectives.

The teacher-researcher found similar practices while analyzing the data from *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988). The findings showed the students actively worked to foreground differences in perspectives by disrupting commonplace views. For example, analysis of transcripts found discussions that focused on the Nazis' actions in the text. As the students discussed what the text would have been like had the story been told from the Nazis' points-of-view, the students emphasized that some members of the Nazis were pushed and did not have a choice. Other students' remarks indicated their prior knowledge that several plots were planned to kill Hitler. The significance to this finding is how the students considered alternate ways of seeing and in doing so, they brought different perspectives to the foreground that were clearly the unnatural way of seeing in this text. The findings parallel other research (Janks, 2002; Nieto, 1996) that found foregrounding learner identity and the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class are central to critical pedagogies that attempt to give learners access to dominant ways of knowing, while at the same time validating learners' own knowledge and providing creative opportunities to make meaning.

Consistent patterns of data analysis found that when the students were given the opportunity to role play, they discovered a way to present different viewpoints by

reversing characters' positions in the text. The findings showed the students developed the knowledge that authors decide reality and that what is real is sanctioned through characters' points-of-view. By disrupting the text and reversing the roles of characters, the students provided different points-of-view by foregrounding the characters who were different (Giroux, 1983, 1993) or considered unnatural by the author.

The finding that strategic practices in critical literacy promote critical dialogue and processes that allowed the gifted sixth-grade students to understand different viewpoints from their own consistently showed that when students understood the identity of literary characters, explored the nature of the events in which they lived, and analyzed the outcomes of their living experiences, literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy were a forum from which high-ability readers considered multiple perspectives and enacted worldviews. In this study, the students were challenged to examine the ways that texts define the world and to determine the ways that such ideology impacts their reading. As a result of this process, the students considered whose view of the world was put forth, actively sought out the silenced voices, considered alternative ways of seeing, and actively participated in foregrounding different perspectives. Further, the students developed their own world views by learning that texts are socially constructed from authors' perspectives as representations of particular ideologies, and this knowledge allowed them to form individual belief systems that combined their personal lived experiences with their social and cultural backgrounds to reject or accept authors' ideas. These findings are consistent with a growing body of evidence that revealed how texts make visible selective versions of the world for students to decide what conditions to accept (Harste et al., 2000; Luke, 1994), critical literacy is

analytical reading, writing, and speaking (Shor, 1992), critical literacy content should

stem from participants' lives as a catalyst for dialogue, and students need to be conscious

of how texts act upon them (Simpson, 1996). Further, critical literacy practices allow

students to disrupt the everyday or normal way of seeing the world (Van Sluys,

Lewison, & Flint, 2006).

The significant impact of critical literacy practices on students' ability to

understand different viewpoints from their own is supported by social constructivism and

the critical perspective paradigm. Social constructivism acknowledges that literacy is a

social and cultural practice (Au, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 1992) and what

matters is not literacy as an isolated skill, but the social practices into which students are

enculturated as members of a specific social group (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Accordingly,

this assumption supports the findings to the second research question because the study

found that learning was understood with reference to the contextual, historical, and

cultural factors associated with the students who entered and participated as a community

of learners (Baker & Luke, 1991; Greene & Ackerman, 1995; Meek, 1991; Street, 1993).

Further, a critical perspective paradigm assumes that reality and knowledge is constructed

but driven by power and power relations, and the inquirer attempts to uncover the

dynamics of the ideology and power (Paul, 2005). By reading diverse texts, the students

interacted to unpack different layers of meaning from texts, specifically texts that

represented the language of power, and the students negotiated real-world experiences

that engaged them in response, inquiry, and social action (Banks, 1994).

Subsequently, this finding is also in agreement with program requirements for

gifted reading programs. The findings illuminated that literature circles provided a space

for student participation as a collaborative community of learners who worked together to make meaning (Gee, 2000; Moll, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991), a forum that connected the students' life experiences with the text (Broughton, 2002; Encisco, 1994; Lewis, 2001), a context of diverse and differentiated learning experiences (Au & Raphael, 2000; Bartelo & Cornette, 1982; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), and a site that promoted the development of novel reading identities (Wells, 1999; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1998). These findings are all requisites that fulfill the literary needs of high-ability learners.

What Types of New Texts and Identities Do Gifted Middle School (Sixth-Grade) Students Create from Participation in Literature Circles?

The third research question addressed the types of new texts that the gifted sixth-grade readers created from participation in literature circles. The findings consistently showed that literature circles supported inquiry and provided opportunities for the students to become thinking readers who looked beyond the printed word as they interacted and made meaning and for becoming critical readers who challenged the author's values and interests (Bean & Moni, 2003) and wrote alternative texts to create a more socially balanced world. Further, the study found that literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy provided the students the opportunity to understand that different points-of-view can be linked to the voice represented or the voice not heard. As a result, this study found that multicultural literature and the context of literature circles became sites of explicit critical conversations. The findings consistently showed that as the students learned to speak from marginalized groups' points-of-view, they learned to restructure their knowledge base by challenging and creating alternatives to transform issues of social injustice. Specifically, the students produced counter texts by using their

voice through dialogue and their pen through written personal narratives by becoming

agents of social change. This finding parallels other research which found that critical

literacy is about interrogating textual ideologies and assuming alternative reading

positions (Luke & Freebody, 1997), engaging in multiple voices (Edelsky, 1999), and

moving towards a criticism of social issues (Green, 2001), as well as creating texts to

make the world better for people (Farrell, 1998; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Significant to this finding was that student participation in literature circle

discussions was structured by an open-ended question and answer session that facilitated

the flow of conversation. Gee (2001) posits that discourses are communities of practice

and cultural models within a community that define what counts as normal. This practice

was significant for the gifted learners because it provided opportunities for what Lave

and Wenger (1991) refer to as a community of learners. The participation structure that

allowed for sequential turn taking in which capable peers appropriated language to

inform, interpret, and co-construct meaning were traced back to whole-class meetings in

which the practitioner-researcher created a collaborative learning community by leading

discussions on how students can help and learn from each other and to direct students'

attentions to the notion of response, rather than the concept of correct answer. It further

represented a familiar cultural model or practice that allowed students to accept that all

responses are interpretations and that each student draws upon prior knowledge and has

life experiences to share as contributing members of a learning community.

This finding highlighted how the language or discourse was shaped by the social

structure and was conceived as a social practice. The finding conforms to Vygotsky's

(1978) sociocultural theory of learning which posits that students' conceptual learning

reaches a stage of generalization from the social activity within the learning structure. Further, the finding relates to research reported by Rogoff (1990) who emphasized the role that language plays in mediating learning and how this learning becomes internalized and is then translated into action in other times and places. From analysis of transcripts, dialogue journals, and field notes, the teacher-researcher found the social language experiences associated with critical literacy provided opportunities for the students to integrate their prior knowledge with their multicultural texts and engage in social, cultural, and political conversations that focused on the cultural perspectives of non-dominant groups of people and develop an understanding about how power differentials between groups are created by such things as religion, ethnicity, and culture. The significance in this finding related to the students' communicative competence that was traced back to the students' acquisition of abilities to embrace new perspectives, consider alternate ways of seeing, seek the silent voices, and foreground sociocultural differences. According to Luke (2000), when students question the social practices of dominant cultures and appraise the ideological stance of the author, they are appropriating the skills needed to understand how particular systems of power affect people.

Further analysis of conversations showed talk was a mechanism for socializing the content and positioned the students as learners, thinkers, and actors. The teacher-researcher found evidence of what Rogoff (1994) refers to as transformation of participation, whereby all participants played active roles in the process of learning, both as individuals as well as to the community in which this learning is important. Discourse patterns highlighted the communicative tools the students used in responding, the subjectivities the learners used in social interactions, and how the participants were

actively positioned to the author and one another. As students assumed different literature circle roles, analysis showed the students positioned to actively reject or accept the author's ideas based on their own identities within the reading group and the social codes in their lives. By comparing the nature of discussion across time and drawing upon the cultural resources that were significant signifiers of conversational competence, discourse analysis showed that the participatory structure of literature circles became a site for students to assume a position for social change. The participatory framework of the group interaction allowed the students to engage in a productive discourse that called into question the author's assumption of social reality and through this collective endeavor, the students agreed to reorganize the social world. This finding is aligned with Farrell (1998) who found that individuals write counter narratives to dominant discourses in an attempt to improve their surroundings. Further, the findings of this study align to research conducted by Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint (2006) whose research demonstrated that multiple identities and social discourses are appropriated by students when the focus is on critical issues.

The teacher-researcher found that dialogue invited the students to take part in a larger community discourse that attempted to solve problems and created alternatives to oppressive situations. Through transcripts and dialogue journals, the teacher-researcher captured how the students discovered that language can be a powerful tool to think in opposition to the author and to determine how else the author could have presented the information. The significant impact to this finding was that recurrent discursive practices set the stage for the students to transform the discourse and the situated meanings from the communities of practice into counter articulations as the students discovered their

agency to enact social change. Subsequently, the findings are in agreement with what Faircough (2000) calls discourse practice and suggests that discourse does not merely reflect reality but discourse affects social structures and plays an active role in social change. From this stance, the counter narratives were a cultural tool that resignified the dominant D/discourses (Gee, 1992) in the text that were sustained by dominant ideological and political decisions, policies, and practices.

Finally, the counter texts demonstrated what was accomplished through discourse that simultaneously shaped the discourse and the social practice. Vasquez (2004) assumes the social world of children is the critical context for literacy usage, acquiring knowledge, and understanding. From this stance, critical literacies deal with core issues in children's lives and permit them to see and use literacies as tools of empowerment. In this study, the students applied their understanding of strategic practices in critical literacy to reshape reality and to give voice to the silenced and marginalized lives of the characters in their texts. As such, the findings are supported by critical theorists who interrogate discourses across culture, gender, race, and class lines and look closely at issues of power (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Street, 1995; Vasquez, 2004).

How Does the Environment of Literature Circles with the Inclusion of a Critical Literacy Perspective Provide Opportunities for Gifted Middle School (Sixth-Grade) Students to Demonstrate the Use of Analytical Reasoning and Critical Thinking skills?

The manner in which the environment of literature circles with the inclusion of critical literacy provided opportunities for gifted middle school students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills emerged as three core domains. From transcripts of classroom conversations, dialogue journal entries, interviews, and

insights from the researcher's own log, the three domains were: (1) a venue to take a critical stance during interactions, (2) a forum for relating intertextual ties (Short, 1992) during and after reading, and (3) a context for resymbolizing the text through interpretation (Sumara, 1998). The findings showed the success of this program was the collaborative effort on the part of the students as they read and responded as critical thinkers in a student-centered context that focused on dialogue.

Significant to this finding was the organization of the three-block reading program that provided the participants the opportunity to practice and develop their literacy skills and learn about texts, the author's interests, and learn to understand themselves, others, and the world around them. Literature circles provided a collaborative forum for students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the multicultural literature in group interactions that required the students to evaluate the author's point-of-view, try out new subjectivities while interrogating the text, and relate the textual context to their world. Further, literature circles provided a social setting in which the students used dialogue to negotiate meaning by criticizing and judging how well the author crafted his or her work.

Taking a Critical Stance During Interaction

Because critical literacy promotes high-level reading, this study found that literature circles with the infusion of critical literacy enabled the participants to demonstrate their knowledge of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills by reading and responding from a critical stance. This area of understanding was accomplished from knowing how an author's point-of- view, values, ethics, and beliefs influence what the author has to say, to constructing a different side to the text's position.

From data analysis, the teacher-researcher consistently found the students learned to consider the text objectively in order to evaluate the quality and appropriateness. Further, the findings showed the students learned to criticize and judge how well the author crafted his or her work by considering how well the parts of the text were made to fit and how reasonable were the inherent assumptions made. Evidence in learning critical stance was exhibited as the students stepped back from simply reporting on the text to talking about and back at the text. For example, the students talked about the literary elements, made comparisons and contrasts within the text and between texts, and challenged the author's ideas. The findings showed the students challenged and questioned the author's position, the source of his or her information, the author's context, and what to expect from the context. At times, the students analyzed what positions in the story would be taken by persons coming from other contexts and then applied their reasoning skills to provide possible outcomes. Analysis of transcript recordings, dialogue journals, and field notes consistently found evidence of what Comber (2001) describes critical literacy as literacy that allows students to take an analytical stance and "involve people using their language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice" (p. 2).

In this study, the students used their knowledge of critical literacy to construct different positions from the author's by focusing on alternative view points, correcting the injustices from privileging one group over another, and speaking for the silenced. Further, the findings of this study are in agreement with research reported by Rush (2004) who found that critical pedagogy increased students reading competencies when students were able to understand, analyze, apply, and evaluate information and concepts from

visual, written, spoken, and mass-mediated texts in a literature discussion context.

Vygotsky (1978) contends that students perform at higher intellectual levels when asked to work in collaborative settings. In conjunction, Bruner (1985) ascertains that cooperative group methods improve problem-solving and critical thinking. This study found that literature circles were a powerful mechanism for furthering critical stance. The students' diversity in terms of knowledge and experiences provoked numerous and varied interpretations and the group support system allowed the students to critically analyze and problem-solve through critical discussions. Further, the informal setting facilitated opportunities for the students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the multicultural literature in group interactions that required the students to provide justification for their own claims in response to questioning by others and further persuade the community to accept their claims by providing arguments against competing claims.

From data analysis, this study found that literature circle conversation served a broad social function as the students strived through dialogue to work out cooperative understanding and negotiate meaning through analysis and reasoning. This finding parallels what Bakhtin (1986) refers to as multivoicedness that relates how the students were able to extend their understanding by hearing other voices and alternative perspectives, which in turn benefited other group members from hearing them. The teacher-researcher found that at times when the students stated opinions, the multivoicedness took on defensive positions as students tapped into personal experiences to position and challenge the author and disrupt the text. Other times during interaction, the power of multivoicedness to introduce critical perspectives for appreciating and valuing cultural differences, to compare and contrast power relations, and to disrupt

the commonplace views (Flint, Van Sluys, & Lewison, 2003), permitted the students to

try on new subjectivities while revoicing the issues of others and reifying the social codes

between their world and the world of the text.

Relating Intertextual Ties During and After Reading

Vygotsky (1978) posits that learning results from the use of language and the

social interactions of language. This study found the environment of literature circles

with the inclusion of a critical literacy perspective allowed the gifted middle school

(sixth-grade) students to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking

skills manifested through the process of making intertextual (Short, 1992) connections

during and after reading. From analysis of the data, this study consistently found that as

the participants engaged in interpretive activities centered on questions during

discussions about literature, they constructed meaning by drawing on the inner text

(Lenski, 2001; Pearson & Tierney, 1984), interacting with the new texts, and from the

contextual experience of literature circles. This finding parallels what Bloome (1985)

reports that meaning is shaped by the social and cultural contexts. In other words,

interpretations are grounded in children's social and cultural worlds.

From data analysis, the teacher-researcher discovered the students' ability to

construct meaning through intertextual connections (Short, 1992) was related to the

questions asked during literature discussions whereby intertextual links were explored.

These initiating questions used to guide discussions were routinely adopted from whole-

class sessions that involved teacher read-aloud and fishbowl discussions and became the

conversation structure for the participants in the context of literature circles. As the

students responded to questions and discussed the texts, individual connections were

made as the readers reflected on personal knowledge, created inner texts, and then

applied their lives to the text.

Correspondingly, as the students interacted through discussion of diverse

literature, the rich interpretations and multiple perspectives enhanced further connections

that frequently linked to previously constructed cultural models. For example, the

teacher-researcher observed time and again discussions were interwoven among the texts

selected for this study, i.e., discussion about characters and issues in *The Devil's*

Arithmetic (Yolen, 1988) were brought to bear on discussions during *Red Scarf Girl*

(Jiang, 1997) and *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000). The teacher-researcher found that as

students shared connections, other group members added to, ignored, adapted, or

confirmed their initial thinking and this further shaped the construction of meaning. The

findings consistently showed that during and after reading, the students entered the

literature circle activity with a text they had read, created inner texts, participated in

discussions which were their own texts, and then modified the discussions to form

different texts (Lenski, 2001). The exchanges demonstrated the reader and text

(intertextual) relationship (Short, 1992) and the reader and the context (intercontextual)

relationship (Floriani, 1994). Specifically, as the group participants worked to interpret

textual passages, knowledge was often shaped by connecting to previously constructed

cultural models in order to understand the socially situated meanings in new texts and by

borrowing and transforming a prior text (Bloome, & Egan-Robetson, 1993) such that new

texts were created. This finding is consistent with research that has explored the types of

intertextual connections that individual readers make between texts and their life

experiences (Short, 1992; Sipe, 1998) and determined that intertextual connections can

be defined in terms of links to topics, themes, or stances that are connected to the social

and cultural practices that students have.

Further, the findings showed the students enacted their lives as texts by making

intertextual connections (Short, 1992) and used these connections to make sense of their

world and how they fit into that world. From field notes, the teacher-researcher found that

when the students engaged with texts, they frequently entered the text world and the text

moved into their world. Further, data analysis found that as the students frequently took

on the characters' experiences and feelings, empathy for the characters was endorsed and

the diversity in the text was neither sacrificed nor diminished. The teacher-researcher

found that student discussions occurred that embodied concern for characters' lives and

validated the dignity for the human experience. Responses to survey questions on the

LQR (Miall & Kuken, 1995) indicated the students felt strongly that the multicultural

texts enabled them to understand people that they would probably disregard in normal

life and from reading multicultural literature, the students wanted to change the way

others live due to oppressive forces. This finding is in agreement with research that points

out that when students engage the lived experiences with characters they read, they learn

to critically examine the world around them and this often leads to acts of social justice,

affecting change through deep conversations (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, &

Vasquez, 1999).

Finally, analysis of the data consistently found that literature circles with the

infusion of critically literacy provided a context (Bloome, 1985) from which intertextual

connections were made (Short, 1992), emphasizing that literature circles became a

collective forum for analysis and critical reasoning. These findings are consistent with

other research studies that found texts support activities that act as a springboard for dialogue (Shannon, 2002; Vasquez, 2004) and allow students to become socially aware, not only how they act upon texts (Rosenblatt, 1983), but also how texts act upon them (Simpson, 1996).

A Context for Resymbolizing the Text Through Interpretation

Because multicultural literature often positioned the students in unfamiliar worlds, the students had to establish meaningful relationships with the texts. In other words, the students had to familiarize the unfamiliar. This study consistently found that as the students were called upon to make new perceptions and new interpretations of unfamiliar worlds, they did so by connecting two symbolic worlds, that of the text and that of the reader where the readers used their own cultural system as a symbol, built up through an ongoing process of learning, to approach the text. This finding is consistent with Wertsch's (1991) assumptions that learning involves social negotiation and mediation by tools or signs, such as print, writing, and language itself. In short, the students were involved in a continual process of analyzing assumptions, revising judgments, and comparing and contrasting cultural worlds to arrive at meaning. According to Sumara (1998), students' responses to literary texts must become resymbolized into a form that functions as understandable when confronted with unfamiliar contexts. From analysis of the data, the findings showed this task was accomplished as the students applied their analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills during literature circle discussions. This finding is supported by Fish (1980) who posits that responses are not fully created until readers assimilate or actualize the text in light of their own knowledge and experience.

Rosenblatt (1978) ascertained that texts act as stimuli to which students respond

in their own personal ways through feelings, associations, or memories. In this study, the teacher-researcher discovered through transcripts how the participants became actively involved as interpreters of meaning by integrating their past literary experiences with their creative abilities. For example, while reading the unfamiliar world in *Red Scarf Girl* (Jiang, 1997), several students morally wrestled with the manner in which Chairman Mao enacted the Cultural Revolution. Implicit in the students' responses were the negative affects on the main character's life that were perceived to be "out of bounds" for the participants. As the students grappled to navigate the cultural world in the text with their own, they frequently relied on their own lives to make sense of Ji-li's world in order to appreciate the work. In doing so, they reorganized the text in light of their own knowledge which indicated how meaning emerged in the interaction between the text, the reader, and the culture. This finding was further evidenced through observations recorded in field notes whereby the teacher-researcher noted the tension that existed between several students and *Red Scarf Girl*. The notations captured the students' efforts to understand the main character's world by negotiating the two cultures and the text to provide meaning in their own lives. This finding parallels research reported by Kucan and Beck (1997) that collaborative conversations represent reciprocal and dialogic efforts at thinking aloud with the intentions of constructing meaning.

Further evidence of how the students applied analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills to resymbolize (Sumara, 1998) the text into an understandable form were found in dialogue journals. The teacher-researcher found that dialogue journals provided a context in which the students used critical interpretation to approach texts and to come to grips with the unfamiliar. Galda and Beach (2001) suggest that students' responses to

literature are both broadened and organized by opportunities to write about what they read. As the students critically analyzed events and characters' actions, they frequently reorganized unfamiliar cultures into cultures they could understand by assimilating texts in light of their own knowledge and lived experiences.

The study found through data analysis that the use of literature circles promoted social interaction and discussion as students learned to comprehend text and encouraged students to read with a focus and report on what they read. The collaborative nature of literature circles fostered a deeper understanding of the multicultural texts through student-centered discussions that allowed the participants to read and respond as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Dialogue was crucial to the success of this study for it allowed the readers to demonstrate the use of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills that included: (1) taking a critical stance during interaction, (2) relating intertextual ties during and after reading (Short, 1992), and (3) resymbolizing the text through interpretation (Sumara, 1998).

<div align="center">Additional Significant Findings</div>

While reviewing the data that directly related to the research questions, the teacher-researcher found other key findings that provided significant insights into literature circles as a context for differentiated learning opportunities for high-ability sixth-grade readers. The following sections are an account of those findings.

Multicultural Literature

The important impact of multicultural literature for the gifted readers was the increased, complex reading that had significant influence with the gifted sixth-grade readers and the inducement of a culturally responsive classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1990).

The teacher-researcher found the diverse literature provided fitting challenges for gifted readers. The diverse literature provided the texts, the stories that provided the connections, and the examinations of life's experiences from a sociocultural and critical stance. The reading required the students to interact with complex and unfamiliar cultures and tackle ideologies that challenged them to make new meanings, consider new possibilities, and to make sense of how they see the world. By reading multicultural literature, opportunities were presented for communicating about culture that evoked students' emotions, reflect on life's experiences, value cultural differences, and respond through the characters' lives. The teacher-researcher found that quality multicultural literature provided significant opportunities for students to develop cultural awareness, appreciation and understanding for multiple cultures, and develop a greater sense of connectedness. This finding is supported by Galda (1998) who explicates that multicultural literature, combined with dialogic instruction, can provide students with a view of the world, its cultures, and an opportunity to be reflective. In addition, Ford, et al. (1999) advocate using multicultural literature in gifted educational classrooms to open students' eyes and minds to discern the similarities across cultures, while seeing the commonalities.

Literature Circle Strengths

The teacher-researcher found the environment of literature circles was both motivating and contagious. The collaborative context of literature circles in this study endorsed an attitude that was conducive for the gifted readers to work together and support one another throughout the reading process. The teacher-researcher found that through collaboration with competent peers, the students made connections between texts

and personal experiences, listened to interpretations presented by others through discussion and sharing with each other, and took responsibility and ownership for their learning. Further, the teacher-researcher found that collaborative learning groups fostered democracy, community, and shared-knowledge in the classroom. As the students worked cooperatively, they learned to be respectful of multiple perspectives on topics and issues and they became better listeners and more open with their peers. This finding is supported by Slavin (1995) who posits that cooperative learning is an important human activity because of such features as promotive interaction and equal opportunities for success. Further, collaborative learning has been identified as one of the key methods for "best educational practice" (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998).

Because literature circles advocated student-centered learning in this study, the teach-researcher became a facilitator and this role allowed for additional findings. The teacher-researcher discovered that the students enjoyed the freedom to learn and the ownership of their literacy activities because they were provided the opportunity to manage and direct their own group's work. In this context, the teacher-researcher further found that the students became more self-determined and self-confident (Coleman, 1999) as contributing members during literature circle discussions and this sense of self-actualization fostered stronger purposes for reading and strong feelings of self-accomplishment. In addition, the teacher-researcher found that higher self-determination promoted empowerment as the students became active participants in the reading process and found greater value in knowing their abilities. This finding parallels seminal work by Rogers (1969) who advocated that instruction must take the form of facilitation in order for students to realize their own type of self-learning.

In addition to the students' feelings of greater self-accomplishment, the teacher-researcher found that literature circles provided a venue for the learners to make use of their multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). This additional finding can be traced to the literature circle roles that allowed the students to tap into their logical, linguistic, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. The teacher-researcher also found that the social nature of literature circles provided a context in which the students could scaffold the roles until they were able to perform each competently on their own. Capable students who were secure in particular roles provided guidance by assisting other group members until gradually all students were able to perform the final role objectives. This scaffolding procedure was interchangeable as students rotated the roles. The finding is supported by Vygotsky (1978) who determined that learning occurs with the assistance of others. Accordingly, the structure of the literature circle provided the participatory structure for the attainment of literature circle roles which supported the intellectual engagement with text through higher levels of discussion.

Cultural Practices of Gifted Readers

Because this study sought to examine and explain the cultural practices that emerged in the classroom and the manner in which these practices translated into learning opportunities for high-ability readers, it was important to understand what the gifted readers needed to know, understand, and produce so that they could participate in culturally and socially acceptable ways within a certain social group. This study found that the nature of participation and interaction among gifted readers' activities of reader response within literature circles were closely tied to the cultural practices established in

the classroom. Student participation in literature circle discussions was structured by an open-ended question and answer session that facilitated the flow of conversation. Gee (2001) posits that discourses are communities of practice and cultural models within a community that define what counts as normal. This practice was significant for the gifted learners because it provided opportunities for what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as a community of learners. It further represented a familiar cultural model or practice that allowed students to accept that all responses are interpretations and that each student draws upon prior knowledge and has life experiences to share as contributing members of a learning community. By crafting questions that enabled the students to move beyond their own society's social parameters, the nature of literature circles provided the participatory structure to permit the gifted readers to weave their own connections between the textual themes discussed and their own prior knowledge (language, culture, and social practice) (Beach & Phinney, 1998).

Nagel (1994) asserts that because culture is based on social construction, culture is interchangeable and can be "borrowed, blended, rediscovered, and reinterpreted" (p. 162). Therefore, when the participants came into contact with different cultures through multicultural literacy, the different cultures interacted and permitted the gifted students to view themselves as participants in a multicultural world and view the world from different perspectives. Further, as the students rediscovered and reinterpreted their identities in a multicultural world, the teacher-researcher found that culture influences behavioral responses in terms of cultural practices across reading activities and cognitive attributions. Form this stance, this study found the cultural practices that developed across reading activities were closely tied to the students' cognitive and sociocultural

development.

The significance to this finding was the teacher-researcher's decision to use literature circles in order to affect the learning content, process, and student-made products for the gifted sixth-grade readers as a significant adaptation. These changes increased the complexity of thought that included the highest levels of thinking, the structure that included inquiry and problem solving, and the products that included creative student presentations and artifacts. The students engaged in critical reading through multicultural texts that provided opportunities for students to solve whose values were promoted and to disrupt the notion that textual meaning is fixed. Further, the teacher-researcher found the types of materials used in the reading program helped to instantiate the critical reading program as the students engaged in meaningful, sense-making activities while exploring topics based on different identities such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, and religion. Finally, the teacher-researcher found the reading program provided opportunities for the students to integrate their higher-level thinking skills and experiences with text into productive applications of their knowledge through role play, Reader's Theater, and sociocultural narratives. These findings are supported by Tomlinson (2005) who details that content, process, and product differentiation are key features that are specific to a differentiated gifted program and because the curricular level for gifted learners should be adapted to the gifted students' need for advancement, depth, and complexity (Van-Tassel-Baska, 2003),.

Implications

In this investigation, the connection between critical pedagogy and collaborative reading of sociocultural issues for gifted students was highlighted to examine how

participation in literature circles provided differentiated learning opportunities for gifted sixth-grade readers. From data analysis, the study found that literature circles provide participation structures and opportunities that support multiple perspectives, the development of new texts and identities, and a context to increase analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills.

The results of this study have implications in public middle school classrooms that are now facing difficult decisions regarding the program delivery model for educating the gifted. While the focus of this study centered on twenty-one gifted readers in one middle school classroom, the findings are significant for all gifted learners in both elementary and middle school classrooms that may be marginalized when schools do not offer a specifically designed gifted reading program.

Implications for Practice

Literature circles are a widely accepted approach to reading instruction in American schools. Because literature circles permit teachers to play multiple roles with their students, moving from teacher-centered discussions, to shared stances, to more student-centered stances, it is necessary to provide insights gained from this teacher-researcher study that can inform other classroom educators who hope to improve learning opportunities for gifted readers.

Importance of the Learning Community

To support learning opportunities for gifted readers, teachers need to recognize and understand the importance of building a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Attention must be paid to the learning environment because the local context of learning, or classroom, and the literacy lesson is considered a site of literacy information.

Accordingly, the use of collaborative groups is an effective method of social interaction because the collective thinking of the group helps each individual group member's thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative learning programs stress small groups of four to six students who work together for a common objective is a sufficient number. However, for purposes of gifted programs, scholars in the field stress that homogeneous grouping, rather than the traditional method of heterogeneous grouping, is of special concern and is a grouping strategy to employ (Gallagher, 1991; Renzulli & Reis, 1991; Robinson, 1990).

Further, teachers should know that literature circles incorporate features that can change the classroom climate to be more cooperative, responsible, and enjoyable while encouraging the growth of reading (Burns, 1998). As students interact, they learn they have a responsibility to others and as they seek agreement and solutions during discussions of literature, they develop negotiation skills, receptive attitudes, and consensus-forming abilities. In addition, students develop effective communication skills, tolerance and respect for other group members, and learn how to handle criticism during times of conflict. Further, they gain ownership for the direction and content of the discussions. When teachers emphasize a community of learners, they understand that by providing a safe environment for groups' social and emotional needs, they are giving their students a sense of belonging and enabling them to feel connected to others. In addition, learners realize their prior knowledge, the knowledge they are acquiring, and the skills they are learning in order to acquire future knowledge are all tied together.

Importance of Student-Centered Learning

When using literature circles, teachers should enable their students to make their

own decisions about the material they read, when it will be read, and what will be discussed in their groups. As a result, teachers should know that the power of choice gives students a feeling of control over a part of their learning. Further, research has shown that literature circles have been linked to positive motivation because students become more engaged in reading through interaction (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). In addition, teachers need to recognize that the interaction that takes place in student-centered literature discussions is crucial to its success. The process requires students to listen to other modes of thinking, verbalize content, and hear other perspectives that can be more effective in small-group student-centered learning. Student-centered learning is important because the focus is student learning. Students become actively engaged in learning rather than as passive recipients.

The Importance of Curriculum Differentiation

One implication from this study is that teachers must recognize that not all students are alike and because all students are not alike, differentiated instructional approaches are necessary so that students have multiple options for obtaining information and making meaning (Tomlinson, 1994). This process requires teachers to recognize students varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, interests, and to react responsively (Tomlinson, 1999) based on the intent that maximizing each student's academic growth and individual educational success will in turn meet each student's needs in the learning process. It is respect for the unique characteristics of each learner; therefore, this study implies that adaptation and modification of advanced learning expectations should be front and center when planning differentiation for high-ability learners. When teachers enable their high-end students to

experience novel activities that are specifically matched to their students' needs, they are

engaging their students in a qualitative learning experience that consists of core

knowledge about the world and opportunities for their students to think at higher levels

(Welte, 1996). Further, teachers who differentiate instruction view their roles as

organizers and creators of learning opportunities rather than controllers of knowledge

(Torrence, 1965; Winebrenner, 2000). They craft learning opportunities that involve their

students in meaningful, sense-making activities while acquiring new knowledge. In

addition, teachers who differentiate instruction perceive their role as a coach or facilitator

and gradually release the responsibility for learning to their students.

Construction of Knowledge and Learning Competencies

Another implication for practice is that small-group dialogue plays a pivotal role

in shaping gifted students' co-construction of meaning because the literature circle

context provides the problem-solving environment in which learners can draw from prior

experiences and then probe, challenge, and collaboratively work together in the meaning-

making process. Teachers must recognize that literature circles provide a context in

which students develop new understandings as readers by sharing meanings and listening

to multiple perspectives. In addition, teachers should know that literature-based

instruction supports teaching students to read from a critical stance and expands multiple

comprehension strategies, such as making inferences, summarizing, synthesizing,

analyzing, and critiquing. Further, teachers should build on response to literature by

giving students opportunities to make connections as it applies to their own lives (text-to-

self), real-world issues (text-to-world), and other texts (text-to-text). Therefore, teachers

should know the important role that texts play in evoking students' experiences which are

afforded by the literature circle context. As Daniels, (1994, 2002a) reminds classroom

teachers, literature circles are a literature-based instructional strategy employed in

literacy classrooms today as a way to encourage students to talk about literature. The

essential purpose is to bring students together to talk about a book they have read.

The Importance of Talk

Because literature circles group students together and encourage social interaction

and discussion, teachers must recognize the value of talk for gifted learners in the

classroom. In addition, literature circles function as a strategy to help students generate

their own ideas about what they read and provide conversational structures that help

students and teachers break away from typical discourse patterns. Mercer (1993) asserts

that learning is talk; learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to talk about

the ideas and to respond to the ideas of others. In addition, Kucan and Beck (2003) posit

that small-group discussion supports intellectual engagement with text. The authors find

that in order for students to learn how to think at higher levels about text, they need

participation in conversations with others. It is important for teachers to recognize that for

students to gradually take responsibility for reading and comprehending at higher

complex levels of thought, then students must be involved in the exchange and

exploration of ideas which are central elements to the understanding and creation of

competent readers. Further, teachers need to provide students with opportunities to share

developing thoughts, pose questions to each other, and to collaborate while making

meaning of the texts and their own life's experiences.

Teachers should build literature circle discussion for their gifted learners by

modeling and scaffolding how to ask open-ended questions and to add to or challenge the

comments of others. This type of exchange further provides students with scaffolding for higher-level thinking skills because they hear the comments of their peers and it enables them to make similar points. Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) contend that student discussion provides the opportunity to "communicate one's ideas in a clear, detailed manner through conversation, writing, or an aesthetic response" (p. 108). The authors further argue that as students engage in discussion, the act of studying, pondering, and thinking carefully leads students to be more thoughtful and evaluative of their own responses. Finally, the value of discussing literature has also been shown to enhance thoughtful and critical writing (Calkins (1994).

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development

From research findings, a number of suggestions can be made for teacher education. The implications from this study suggest that teacher preparation programs and professional growth opportunities in gifted and talented education need to develop teachers who have knowledge of classroom management, learning, teaching, and curriculum to make provisions for the special needs of gifted and talented learners.

Classroom Management

Research indicates that of all the variables that affect student achievement, the teacher is the most critical to student success. Research further suggests that of all the variables that affect a teacher's ability to affect student performance, classroom management is a key (Marzano & Pickering, 2003). Because classroom management is critical to increasing student achievement, pre-service teachers should know how to set-up and manage their classrooms effectively to meet the needs of their gifted learners. Like teachers, pre-service teachers need to understand that gifted students need the

challenge of participation with their mental peers and employ strategies to meet that need by providing a collaborative learning environment. In addition, the curricula demands for gifted learners should be adapted to gifted students' needs for advancement, depth, and complexity (VanTassel-Baska (2003). Specifically, it requires the teacher to adapt or modify material according to the students' learning traits and the focus is on key concepts, generalizations, and principles rather than mere facts. Pre-service teachers should know that inductive, rather than deductive instruction should be provided and instruction should facilitate critical and creative thinking (Bartelo & Cornette, 1982). Further, teachers should manage the classroom to permit high-ability readers to work on multiple levels simultaneously, such as problem solving complex, real-world problems that have many parts and perspectives to study (Feldhusen, 1993). Lively discussions must be expected as gifted students are both active and verbal participants.

Social Cognitive Needs

Pre-service teachers need to understand that when designing curriculum for students with exceptional abilities, it is important to understand how learning occurs. Bandura (1986) posits that students who are academically gifted possess stronger cognitive abilities in relation to their peers at the same age, and therefore, Bandura emphasizes the central role of cognition. Further, Bandura asserted that learning is closely associated with students' self-efficacy or what they believe they can accomplish. As a result, pre-service teachers should understand the significance of planning curricula that is cognitively challenging and enhances gifted students self-beliefs, academic skills, and self-regulation to facilitate positive educational outcomes.

Gifted readers read voraciously, perform well above their grade levels, and

possess advanced vocabularies (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991). They usually have advanced language abilities in comparison with children of the same age and they speak in semantically complex and syntactically complicated sentences. Because their cognitive abilities reflect their language abilities, pre-service teachers need to know the cognitive needs that differentiate gifted children from others. It is important for pre-service teachers to know that gifted children should be exposed to new and challenging information about their world, their culture, and other cultures. In addition, gifted learners should be permitted to investigate, think critically, and pursue ideas as far as their interests take them. Subsequently, pre-service teachers and veteran teachers need to recognize gifted readers' abilities to analyze the power of language in contemporary society, allow students to take a stance on issues, and provide opportunities for gifted students to consider and clarify their own attitudes and values.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

One implication from this study suggests that the linkage between higher-order conceptual development, reading comprehension, and culturally diverse connections is of considerable importance for gifted readers. Literature circles offer a culturally diverse context in which intercultural connections can be emphasized and provide the beneficial activity structure for the development of higher-order thought processes. When teachers create culturally responsive classrooms, students understand and negotiate differences across cultures and students learn to be pluralistic in their thought, behavior, and affect (Ladson-Billings, 1990; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997). In this regard, pre-service teachers need to provide opportunities for their gifted students to examine how their lives are profoundly shaped by their life experiences and give thought to how race/ethnicity,

social class, and gender are mediating factors. Pre-service educators need to know that multicultural literature instruction can provide students with a view of the world, its cultures, and an opportunity to be reflective. Further, using multicultural literature in gifted educational classrooms can open students' eyes and minds to discern the similarities across cultures, while seeing the commonalities. Like teachers, pre-service teachers must understand that for multicultural literature to be an effective tool for helping gifted readers learn about cultural diversity and act upon improving intercultural understanding, teachers must use it proficiently. Classroom practices that involve students reading and writing as "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1992) are not merely communicative acts but need to be part of the habits, customs, and behaviors that shape classroom practices. Ford, et al. (1999) stress culturally responsive classrooms provide a framework for gifted readers because they challenge and promote critical thinking, meet the needs of minority students, and expose white children to important multicultural issues.

The Importance of Dialogue

Literacy for high-ability learners involves the opportunity to question and search as adolescents who strive to understand who they are and how they fit in their world. As a result, students' voices are central to social learning interaction and students' voices build dialogue. Pre-service teachers need to understand that gifted learners need a forum to express their thoughts and their diverse opinions. Good classroom discussions lay the groundwork for democratic participation throughout life by giving students a sense of power within their learning community and the community at-large and conveying to them the importance of their role in the classroom and their future role as participants in

society (Erickson, 1982). Further, pre-service teachers need to understand that thoughtful classroom dialogue helps gifted students develop critical thinking and to be active listeners who hold other students' ideas up to critical analysis. Students come to see that there are always alternative ways of looking at a difficult problem or solution. Further, teachers and pre-service educators should know that dialogue results in experiences for gifted students that can impact their personal and social identities. Student-led discussion allows gifted readers to try on new subjectivities while responding to text and reify their place in the immediate dialogue and community at-large. From this stance, teacher educators should stress the importance of classroom management to allow the physical opportunities for gifted students to interact with their peers and engage in meaningful dialogue with their pre-service teachers (Phelps & Weaver, 1999).

Readers' Stance

Teacher educators need to emphasize with their pre-service teachers that when students are given opportunities to participate in literature discussions, students are more likely to be more thoughtful and critical readers (Allington, 2001). They move to higher levels of thinking and deeper understandings of literature. It is important for pre-service teachers to know that the open-ended nature of literature discussions and the emphasis that the reader is the maker of meaning with the text facilitates readers' stance. Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that readers transact with text and the context in order to comprehend, and readers' stances taken during reading shift between the efferent or factual and the aesthetic or emotional perspectives as students respond to literature. At the same time, literature-based instruction supports a continuum in the development of reading stances and McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) assert that a critical reading stance

must be viewed as another part of that continuum.

The Importance of a Sociocultural Curriculum

Another implication from this study suggests that pre-service teachers should know the importance that the social context of the classroom affects the way gifted students interact with the teacher, the text, and with each other. Further, pre-service teachers, as well as veteran teachers, should know that students have much to contribute to their own learning as they draw on prior experiences to negotiate meaning and socially construct knowledge through learning situations that require discussion and writing. When teachers adopt a sociocultural perspective of reading, they know that the focus is on mutual understanding and replaces the focus on individualistic learning; the learner is a member of a learning community. Finally, it is important for pre-service teachers to know that literacy is influenced by the social, cultural, historical, and linguistic processes that relate to students' literacy development and life's experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

The Importance of a Critical Literacy Curriculum

A significant implication from this study is that teachers need to know the power of critical literacy which helps gifted readers comprehend at levels that requires them to think beyond the information on the printed page and critically analyze the author's message. Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text to understand issues such as why the author wrote about a particular topic, why the author wrote from a particular perspective, and why the author chose to include some ideas and exclude others (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Like teachers, pre-service teachers should know that critical literacy invites gifted readers to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors and promotes reflection,

transformation, and action (Freire, 1970). When readers read in this manner, they analyze and evaluate text to determine who has the power and whose interests are served (Bean & Moni, 2003). Subsequently, pre-service and seasoned teachers need to know that critical literacy provides opportunities for gifted students to engage in differentiated literacy experiences, including the making of meaning and voicing of reflections while reading culturally and diverse literature. In addition, gifted students need opportunities to examine the power relationships in videos, films, and illustrations, to seek multiple perspectives, to become critical thinkers about the values conveyed in visual messages, and to comprehend from a critical stance (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). It is through these experiences that students can transact with and reflect on stories that can transform their reality.

Implications for Research

The learning experiences for high-ability students have predominantly focused on extra-cognitive aspects of development, achieved through higher-order thinking processes with further attention given to gifted students' affective development. Few research studies have specifically explored the affect of sociocultural influences on learning for gifted readers. The findings of this research study suggest that the connection between critical pedagogy and collaborative reading of sociocultural issues for gifted students is a significant topic that should be further explored. The following sections address the implications for research.

Participation Over Time

This study focused on the twenty-one participants in one gifted reading program. As a result, a future possibility would be to explore the participation of gifted learners in

a study that involves the connection between critical pedagogy and sociocultural issues in reading across time as students matriculate from year to year. For example, a study should be conducted to investigate what happens to one cohort of gifted learners who have participated in a study of this nature, but then change participations structures and social groups as they advance through school. The focus of the investigation would be to investigate what type of discourse community would be shaped by different cultural, social, and situational contexts.

Additional Contexts

This research focused on one cohort of participants specific to one classroom and demonstrated that reading curricula for high-ability readers can engage students in holistic, constructivist, and transformative learning. Further research is needed to compare the influences of instructional strategies that center on diverse literature, the stories that provide the connections, and the examinations of life's experiences from a sociocultural and critical stance across multiple research sites for gifted readers.

Students' Perceptions

This study focused on using literature circles to provide differentiated learning opportunities for gifted sixth grade readers. Further, the study found that from participation in literature circle discussions, the participants learned to analyze, challenge, and reflect on important societal issues by raising questions that promote high-level thinking about multicultural issues and themes and through literacy experiences that promoted cultural empathy. One aspect of learning that permeated throughout the study was that different perspectives on social issues were valuable. The students recognized that hearing different perspectives and reading diverse social realities enriched their

conversations about books and provided insights about their beliefs that generated

additional ways to respond to controversial issues. As a result, further research could

investigate that if the students truly believed and valued different perspectives, how

would these new perspectives and knowledge support their future learning about

important societal issues and be actualized through agentive behavior for social change.

Skill Development Versus the Sociocultural Critical Perspective of Literacy

Language-arts is primarily a skills-development area focusing on reading, writing,

speaking, and listening. To be literate, students must master these skills to be independent

learners. The standard of skills training is to communicate awareness of the rules

governing the skill, practice of the skill under supervision, and the generation of a

product through the use of the skill. This study emphasized that reading comprehension is

a functionally organized process developed through socially mediated experiences.

Further research could investigate the principle of skills training versus the use of critical

pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of literature circles to broaden researchers'

knowledge about appropriate modifications for gifted students' cognitive and affective

development, as well as the limitations.

Peer Interactions

In this study, peer interactions were central to cooperative learning. To build upon

the findings of this study, further research is needed to examine the effectiveness of using

a sociocultural critical approach to reading when grouping gifted students with their peers

versus cooperative learning for gifted students who are grouped heterogeneously by

mixed-ability in literature circle contexts. Scholars in the field stress that homogeneous

grouping, rather than the traditional method of heterogeneous grouping, is a necessary

modification in the learning environment for gifted students (Gallagher, 1991; Renzulli & Reis, 1991; Robinson, 1990). The basic goal is to bring gifted learners into contact with one another so they can profit from each others' ideas.

Implications for Policy

This study expands the responsibilities in the field of gifted education in terms of meeting the needs of the gifted by adding to the argument that a greater understanding of diverse people and cultures is critical for establishing social justice awareness. As a result, it is necessary that policy-makers ensure that high-ability learners in American schools are educated in curricula that utilizes relevant theory, research, and pedagogy to understand and appreciate a diverse society. The following sections address implications for policy-makers.

Expanding the Possibilities

According to Freire (1973), the critical transformative stance of literacy consists of utilizing an "active, dialogical, critical method" that involves "changing the program content of education" (p. 45). From this perspective, policy-makers should consider the sociocultural and critical dimensions of literature-based instruction when planning appropriate, research-based curricular models for gifted reading programs. Such planning would take into account the need for a liberal arts curriculum with a concentration in humanities to assist in developing gifted individuals who could construct a better world and further expand the field of gifted education. In conjunction, a proposed curriculum in the humanities would increase the content sophistication and content novelty that can have special appeal and value to gifted students (Gallagher & Galagher, 1994) by providing opportunities for gifted students to address who they are, their personal values,

and how they can interact and live with others from opposing cultures.

Special Training

Education for new teachers and veteran teachers should receive special training in literacy appropriation that is supported by sociocultural and critical theories. One implication from this study is that policy-planners should provide specific guidance for those who teach gifted readers. Specifically, policy should mandate that a course of study in gifted education should address the importance of divergent thinking, the explorations of and respect for different cultures, and the need to make connections to real-life experiences through positive discussions that focus on social issues of race and ethnicity, gender, religion, class, and politics. Further, practicing teachers who avoid controversial topics for fear the ideas are too abstract for many students would feel freer to discuss controversial issues and to teach the nature of values held by social systems different from American values if policy-makers backed such an idea.

In addition, teachers who have been taught to understand the sociocultural and critical dimensions of literacy are in a better position to identify and plan for the talented children from diverse cultural backgrounds, in part, because they have been given the tools to adopt a pluralistic approach (Kitano, 1992) for serving culturally diverse gifted learners. When teachers have been specifically trained, they know to focus on democratic structures and modify literacy curricula to make the material more relevant for the culturally diverse learner.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how literature circles provide an optimal differentiated learning context for high-ability (sixth-grade) readers. More

specifically, this study investigated the connection between critical pedagogy and collaborative reading of sociocultural issues for gifted students, highlighting that interaction between the learners, the use of multicultural texts, and the literacy context were critical factors for differentiating learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers. Consistent patterns of analysis found that literature circles were *zones of opportunity* for expanding previously developed comprehension skills where the twenty-one gifted sixth-grade readers became active participants in the construction of meaning by drawing on both textual and contextual information as well as their prior knowledge and experiences. In addition, the study found that the implementation of strategic practices in critical literacy within the context of literature circles provided the learners a forum to consider multiple viewpoints on issues of social justice, construct new reading identities and new texts while reading controversial social issues, and demonstrate numerous types of analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills. Several factors contributed to transforming literature circles into a differentiated learning context for the gifted sixth-grade readers in this study.

Because this study was a natural inquiry, the teacher-researcher was an active investigator who observed and made informed decisions about what was happening and what was being produced in the context of literature circles (Agar, 1996; Goodenough, 1981; Gee & Green, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1980). In addition, the teacher-researcher's knowledge of the participants and knowledge in the field of reading allowed engagement with data in a reflexive manner, ask questions of the data, analyze, and raise new questions in a responsive process. Mohr et al., (2004) explain that when a teacher assumes the role of researcher, the teacher is "paying attention in a different way"

(p. 49). In this study, the role of teacher-researcher provided a unique perspective in which to examine classroom events and to pose questions that could not be asked by anyone else because of the interconnectedness of the shared experiences.

A second factor that contributed to the gifted readers' differentiated learning opportunities was the collaborative and interactive environment for learning. Dialogue was crucial to collaborative interaction. Trezise (1976) ascertained that gifted readers respond to less-tightly structured reading approaches and prefer to explore complex ideas and theories and to delve into controversial topics in which to talk at-length and in-depth. In this study, learning took place in an authentic and real-world environment where the participants actively constructed their own knowledge and meaning from their experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, the cultural practices that emerged in the classroom were manifestations of the social negotiation while reading and responding to multicultural literature that were implemented by the social-verbal interaction (Bakthin, 1981) through peer mediation (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). The free-flowing discussion in which everyone had a chance to respond provided the gifted readers the opportunity to probe, interpret, and co-construct meaning as a collaborative learning community.

A third factor that contributed to the differentiated learning opportunities afforded the gifted readers in this study was the implementation of strategic critical literacy practices. By developing discussions centered on multicultural literature, the students were able to take part in a larger community discourse about issues of power and explicit disparities, such as race and ethnicity, class, gender, and religion among different cultural groups. Further, as the students became critically literate, they developed the conceptual

tools and discovered their voices to rewrite texts to acknowledge groups who were victims of unfair privileging by the dominant groups in power. Most significantly, the gifted sixth-grade readers restructured their knowledge base and challenged the status quo (Giroux, 1993) to envision their society.

Concluding Remarks

When the students engaged diverse literature, they were given the opportunity to examine other people's life experiences from a sociocultural and critical stance and develop a view of the world, its cultures, and an opportunity to be reflective. When the gifted readers were given the opportunity to talk about text and were able to share opinions and interpretations, they were able to delve deeper into the text's meaning. When the students were also given the opportunity to understand the power to critique a text from a critical stance, the meaning derived was enhanced as the students examined the authors' views, the authors' motives for writing, and the silenced points-of-view. When the students took a stance on social issues, they organized and took social action. As part of a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the students engaged in reading experiences, differentiated by content, process, and product. The significant impact for the twenty-one gifted readers is that these differentiated literacy opportunities all occurred in the context of literature circles. A logical conclusion for this teacher-researcher study is that literature circles provide a differentiated learning context for high-ability students and offer a fresh alternative to literacy appropriation for gifted readers.

Recommendations

This research study was a natural inquiry in the tradition of teacher-researcher that

found the connection between critical pedagogy and the collaborative interaction from reading about sociocultural issues were critical factors for differentiating learning opportunities for high-end sixth-grade readers. As a result, further teacher-researcher projects are needed to develop new ways of teaching gifted learners using literature circles and critical literacy while focusing on social justice issues.

Teachers of the gifted must be committed to changing the classroom landscape. This entails the learning environment, instructional content, processes, and student expectations. Most importantly, teaching in a culturally relevant way requires teachers to push their students to challenge the status quo (Giroux, 1993) and provide gifted learners with opportunities to clarify their own values and attitudes and to take a stance against racism, poverty, class warfare, and gender warfare. In addition, Cazden (2001) emphasizes that literacy is a significant factor today due to the changing work force. Within this context, future studies are recommended to explore opportunities for students to discover their voices through classroom conversations and develop critical responses.

Because literacy is an ever-changing process and because today's society has witnessed an explosion of multimedia and information technologies, literacy is now framed within a plurality of text and a phenomenological shaping of communication has been transformed (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001). As a result, teachers must assist students in becoming critical consumers of the information they encounter (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Muspratt, Freebody, & Luke, 1997; New London Group, 1996).

While literacy has always been a social phenomenon, the new literacies (New London Group, 1996) contain even more of a social component. Much of the new information that becomes available on the Internet resides in the people who use it, not in

isolated texts. Teachers who engage their classes in collaborative projects with

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) are preparing

them in important ways for their future. In addition, the new literacies will broaden a

deeper understanding about the many ways of knowing that exists in different cultural

contexts and this factor will enable students to develop richer and stronger

understandings of the global society (Kamil, 2003; Leu & Leu, 1997).

This active process of learning supports the notion that in the 21st century, literacy

is more than just reading words on the printed page, but is increasingly multimodal

through the use of new communication technologies, and these new technologies

generate new text forms that current literary pedagogies are often ill-equipped to handle

and do not prescribe (New London Group, 1996). In other words, literacy is changing and

changing fast. Based upon the changing aspects of literacy in the 21st century, research

that investigates how computer-mediated discussions provide differentiated learning

opportunities for gifted students while engaged in online discussions about sociocultural

issues with gifted students from other schools is an acceptable progression of this study.

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONS FOR PROMOTING CRITICAL LITERACY
(Adapted from Bean & Moni, 2003; Fairclough, 1989; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004)

1. What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed this text?

2. Whose view of the world is put forth?

3. What kinds of social realities does the text portray?

4. How far do you accept the text's/author's position?

5. What other positions might there be?

6. Who has a voice in the text?

7. What are the gaps and silences in the text?

8. Who benefits from the text?

9. How many interpretations of the text are possible?

10. How else could the text have been written?

APPENDIX B: ROLE AND PAGE ASSIGNMENT

Novel Title: _____

Literature Circle Meeting #: _____   Date: _____

Read Pages: _____

Discussion Director: _____

Literary Illuminator: _____

Wordsmith: _____

Connector: _____

Character Investigator: _____

Critical Profiler: _____

APPENDIX C: DISCUSSION DIRECTOR

Name: _____Book: _____

Prepare a brief summary of the day's reading. As you prepare, think of the following topics:

1. The most important events

2. The effect from these events on the plot and characters

Then, lead your group in the discussion by preparing a group of questions based on the pages that your group has chosen to read. Prepare your questions **to provoke thought and meaningful discussion**. Do not ask questions that can be answered with a simple **"yes"** or **"no."** Focus on the big ideas. You may also refer to Questions to Promote Critical Literacy and the Open-Ended Questions. Possible questions for you to ask:

- What is this text about?

- What are the structures and features of this text?

- What sort of genre is this text?

- What do the images suggest?

- What kind of language is used in the text?

The following guidelines may be used:

- Pose each one of your questions to your group for discussion.

- Ask for each member of your group to state their comments/questions about this section of the novel.

- Lead your group in response to what each person says.

- After discussion is completed, assign roles for your next reading and make sure everyone gets a new role sheet. Plan the pages to be read next.

APPENDIX D1: LITERARY ILLUMINATOR

Name: _____Book: _____

Your job is to locate **three or more passages** within the pages you read that your group should reread, discuss, and think about. Passages should be significant enough for everyone to notice, reflect upon, and remember.

The following guidelines may be followed:

- Choose passages that are surprising, important, informative, funny, well-written, thought-provoking, inspiring, or provocative.

- Choose passages that are confusing; something that puzzles you and you wonder if members of your group can clarify.

- Choose passages that are descriptive, creates imagery, uses figurative language, and contains literary devices.

- Choose passages that are controversial or create dilemmas among the characters.

- Choose passages that illustrate the author's bias or that serve the author's views on society, character behavior, and what type of group seems to be favored.

- Choose passages that show cultural conflicts or societal conflicts.

- Include quotations for your group to discuss and model a possible response.

APPENDIX D2: LITERARY ILLUMINATOR WORKSHEET

Tasks for group meeting:

1. Make sure everyone opens to the right page and point out where the passage
    begins.

2. Either read aloud, have your group members read silently, or ask someone to read
    each passage.

3. Give justification for selecting each passage and ask for comments, thoughts, and
    opinions.

4. Always write the page number and the first line of each passage. Then provide
    your written analysis for the passage.

On page_____ paragraph(s)_____, the first three words

are_____. This passage is interesting or is revealing

because:_____.

When you have finished rereading a passage, you may choose to ask and discuss these
questions or pose questions of your own.

1. What were you thinking about as you read and what does the text/passage
    make you think about?

2. What is this text/passage about?

3. How might other people from a different background think about this
    passage?

4. What are the most important ideas in this passage and how do you feel about
    them?

5. If you could speak to a character, what would you ask him/her?

APPENDIX E1: CREATIVE CONNECTOR

Name _____ Book_____

      Your role is to connect what you are reading to something that might happen or has happened in real life. Specifically, the Creative Connector finds a way to link the reading to his/her own life, world knowledge, and/or other texts.

Try to connect to:

- Your own life

- Similar events at other times and places

- Other people's problems that you are reminded of

- Other parts in this book

- Other books you have read

- Something in the news or seen on television and film

APPENDIX E2: CREATIVE CONNECTION FORM

Write your connections. Then ask each group member to make their own connections.

Name	Connections

APPENDIX F1: WORDSMITH

The role of Wordsmith requires you to prepare your group for a deeper understanding of words you select from the reading selection. After you have chosen your words to discuss with your group, plan an effective strategy to employ to help teach the new vocabulary. Then develop ways to assist your group members on learning the new words and using the words in reading, writing, and speaking. Make sure that you know what each word means and if you can, find the history of each word for this can help explain the meaning of the word and its use. You also want to know from what language did each word derive, the dictionary's pronunciation for each word, and the classification of each word according to its part-of-speech.

Word Categories:
- Unfamiliar
- Familiar but used in a new way
- Critical to the story
- Foreign
- Related to an interesting occupation
- Examples of colloquialisms or dialects

Teaching Strategies:
- Create a matching game of words and definitions
- Create a concept map
- Design a game focused on the words you chose.
- Devise a pneumatic strategy to remember new words
- Challenge partners to write a short paragraph with the new words
- Challenge members to create a song or poem using the new words
- Convert words to pictures

APPENDIX F2: WORDSMITH WORKSHEET

Use the following format for each word you choose in your dialogue journal.

1. Word and page _____

2. Meaning(s)_____

   _____

   _____

3. History of the word _____

4. Derivation_____

5. Forms of the word_____

6. Dictionary pronunciation_____

7. Part(s)-of-speech_____

APPENDIX G1: CHARACTER INVESTIGATOR

Name _____Book _____

       In this role, you will consider the characters and their character traits the author leads you to like or dislike. You will select **one character** that seems to have the most authority or power. Evaluate their physical, intellectual, cultural, political, and emotional attributes that tend to support their positions in the text. Write down the textual clues that give you this impression. You are also responsible for identifying the character's point-of-view and invite your group members to debate if you have the correct perspective. You will repeat this process for **one character** who is not as powerful or who is not as favorably viewed by the author. Investigate the character who receives unfavorable attention from the author and provide your analysis on why the author has positioned the character in such an unfavorable way. Describe an aspect from the story from that character's point-of-view and invite your group members to determine if this perspective is right. In both character investigations, justify your conclusions and provide the textual evidence. Then use the following questions for discussion with your group:

<div align="center">Questions for Discussion</div>

- What is meant by role?   What is position?
- What is the role of the character?   What position does a character hold?
- What role has the power?   How are other characters positioned?
- How does the role affect others?   What are their views?
- Are the roles the same/different?   What influences the roles?
- How does the role influence others?   Explain your reasons.
- Who is missing from the text?   Who is allowed to speak?
- Whose views are excluded or privileged?   Who is quoted?

APPENDIX G2: CHARACTER INVESTIGATOR
"VALUED CHARACTER"

Name	Physical/Intellectual	Cultural Identity	Socioeconomic	Role	Position

Write down the textual clues that give you this impression. Write the page

numbers and paragraph numbers. Begin your identification with a few words from the

text in a quote. As a character investigator, you are also responsible for identifying the

character's point-of-view and invite your group members to analyze if you have correctly

identified the perspective.

APPENDIX G3: CHARACTER INVESTIGATOR
"REJECTED CHARACTER"

Name	Physical/Intellectual	Cultural Identity	Socioeconomic	Role	Position

Write down the textual clues that give you this impression. As a character investigator, you are also responsible for identifying the character's point-of-view and invite your group members to analyze if you have the correct perspective. Write the page numbers and paragraph numbers. Begin your identification with a few words from the text in a quote.

APPENDIX H: CRITICAL PROFILER

Name _____Book _____

          Your job is to evaluate the text and challenge the author's stance, examine the sociocultural influences in the text, and provide alternative texts. To do this, you will first interrogate the text and question the author's motives for writing and then consider how the text would be different if told from another point-of-view or in another time and place. The most significant aspect of this job is to examine the power relationships between the characters and then relate the cultural and power differentials to the real world and your world.

Questions for Your Group:

- How are teenagers, young adults, or children constructed in this text?

- Which positions, voices, and interests are at play in the text?

- How does the text construct a version of reality? Whose reality?

- What view of the world is the text presenting?

- Can you identify any stereotypes in this text? What do the stereotypes represent?

- How is power used in the text? What effect does power have on others?

- What do the characters do about the balance of power in this text?

- What have you learned about the aspects of culture in this text?

- What are the values held in this text?

- What values do the characters have or show in the text?

- Do the values held have an influence on the outcomes, events, or situations?

- How else could the text have been written?

APPENDIX I: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS
(Adapted from Sloan, 1984; Vandergrift, 1990)

1. What problem, event, or conflict have you identified in this story? Explain.

2. What clues can you identify that helped you predict or anticipate the outcome?

3. How does the author make you feel a certain way and how does the author make you think you should feel a certain way?

4. In what ways do you stop and think about an event? Do you question why this happened?

5. What would this story be like if it took place in a different setting?

6. From reading this book, how have you changed?

7. What do you know now that you did not know from reading this story?

8. What unanswered questions about this book would you like answered?

9. If you could rewrite this book or change the ending, what would you do?

10. Did any characters change in the story and if so, how and why? Do you accept them?

11. Are there other characters that seem to be overlooked? Are they important to the story?

12. What particular advice would you give one of the characters and why?

13. If you could introduce one of the characters to your family, who would it be and why?

14. Do you think the author is asking you to judge one of the characters and why?

15. What character would you like to be and why? Is there a particular character trait or personality trait that you would like to acquire and what is it?

APPENDIX J: INTERROGATE – CONNECT – TAKE ACTION (ICTA)
(Adapted from Richards, 2006)

Name_____ Book_____ Date_____

The purpose of this strategy is to **critically engage with text** by evaluating the problems of characters who are confronted with issues that are racial, religious, and gender-biased. Think about segregation, disenfranchisement, homelessness, pollution, war, oppression, and poverty. This strategy requires you to **interrogate the human indecencies** presented in the text, to **connect to the events described in the text with your own life**, and then to **consider how you will work to act on the unfair injustices** that you read and are current in your world today.

Interrogate	Connect	Take Action

APPENDIX K: CRITICAL TEXT ANALYST
(Adapted from Simpson, 1996)

Name_____Book_____ Date_____

Ideas for critical text analysis to be written in your spirals.

Setting:

How unique is this setting and where else could this story occur?

Disrupting Questions:

How would changing sections of this text affect this story?

Juxtapose Texts:

Compare different accounts of the same event.

Supply Alternative Endings:

Write different outcomes.

Role Play/Role Reversal:

How would reversing the characters' roles affect this story?

Insertions and Additions:

How would adding different information to this story affect the outcome?

Deletions:

How would deleting or withholding information affect the outcome?

APPENDIX L: CRITICAL RESPONSE FORM
(Adapted from Fairclough, 1989; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006)

Name_____Book_____Date_____

Discussion Group Members_____

Author's Presumed Intent:

Authorial Audience:

Historical and Social Context:

Positioning:

Gaps and Silences:

Agency and Power Relations:

Reader's Self:

Meaning/Interpretation:

Text Support:

APPENDIX M: INTERPRETIVE - INQUIRY RESPONSE

Name_____ Book_____ Date_____

These open-ended questions require you to respond in two ways. Please respond in your spiral.

1. What did the character really want?

    What did she/he learn along the way?

2. What do the story images and symbols mean?

    What do the story images and symbols mean in your own life?

3. How are the main characters alike and different?

    How are the main characters alike and different from you?

4. How does the author make social assumptions about ethnicity, gender, class, and language?

    What social assumptions do you make about ethnicity, gender, class, and language?

5. Was the main character right to do what she/he did?

    Would it be right to do this in real life? Why?

6. What do we mean when we say that someone is brave?

    Is it brave to face practical danger for no reason? Why?

7. With whom did you think the author wanted you to sympathize?

    Do you feel it hard to go along with this point-of-view? Why?

APPENDIX N: EXPRESSING THE MOMENT

Choose a scene or moment from a chapter. It might be a sad moment, a frightening moment, or a joyful moment. Then, write a poem, a letter to a friend, or a diary entry that expresses that feeling from the main character's point-of-view or another character's point-of-view.

_____

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APPENDIX O: CULTURAL SENSITIVITY RESPONSE

Name_____   Book_____   Date_____

Response:

This response is in the form of a letter. You are to take on the point-of-view of one of the characters in the book to try to see the world from a different cultural perspective other than your own. As you write the letter, use the voice of the character in the story. Write this letter to a classmate.

Example:

Dear Classmate,

My classmates are horrible. I had a really big fight with two of them who have now set out to make my life miserable. They think I am the teacher's pet and that my family practices the old ways. They have humiliated me and now I question my family and my teachers. My parents are very quiet and have been for several days ever since I asked to audition for the Red Guard Dance group. You know I have always worked hard in school and earned my grades. They weren't given to me. For the first time, I am beginning to get scared and question everyone, even my beloved Mao. What has happened to my world?

Your friend still,

Ji Li

APPENDIX P: EVALUATION FORM FOR WRITTEN RESPONSES
(Adapted from Bloom, 1956; Marzano, 1993; Vandergrift, 1990)

Name_____ Book Title_____ Date_____

Level of student response participation: (1) developing (2) focused (3) exemplary

1. Knowledge			
2. Personal			
3. Comprehension			
4. Connection			
5. Application			
6. Analysis			
7. Interpretation			
8. Synthesis			
9. Evaluation			
10. Appreciation			
11. Critical			

APPENDIX Q: TEACHER'S ANECDOTAL RECORD
(Adapted from Luke & Freebody, 1997)

Name of Student_____ Book Title _____

Record of social practices.

Date	Code Breakers	Meaning Makers	Text Users	Texts Analysts

Observation comments:

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX R: QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT - TEACHER CONFERENCES

Name: _____ Book Title: _____ Date: _____

1. What did the character really want?

2. What did he/she learn along the way?

3. What does the (image) or (symbol) mean in the story?

4. What can you tell me about this (image) or (symbol) in your life?

5. How is _____ (character x) and alike and different from you?

6. How does gender, race, class, culture, or ethnicity affect this character and how does it affect the story?

7. Can you explain how _____ (character x) was right to do what he/she did?

8. What are some of the social assumptions about class, race, gender, ethnic differences, and cultural differences that the author makes in the story and do you agree with them?

9. With whom do you think the author wanted you to sympathize and can you accept this position?

10. What do you think would be the right thing to do in real life?

11. Why as an American would you be concerned about the issues that you have read?

12. What have you learned about "the voice" to make change and what role can you play?

APPENDIX S: STUDENT READING SURVEY
(Adapted from Fountas & Pinnell, 2001)

1. Why do you read?

2. How often do you read when you are not in school?

3. What kinds of topics do you especially like to read about?

4. What kind of reading do you like?

    _____ historical fiction   _____ poetry   _____ fairy tales

    _____ realistic fiction   _____ mysteries   _____ science fiction

    _____ fantasy   _____ adventure   _____ informational books

    _____ short stories   _____ comics   _____ myths and legends

    _____ newspapers   _____ humor   _____ biography and autobiography

5. Who are your favorite authors?

6. How would you describe yourself as a reader?

7. Have you ever participated in a literature circle discussion with your classmates?

8. What have you learned from reading?

APPENDIX T: LITERATURE CIRCLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____ Book Title: _____ Date: _____

1. After spending time in a literature circle discussion, what did you learn?

2. How was the literature circle discussion helpful to your critical reading?

3. How did the story affect you?

4. What have you learned in regards to reading about another culture other than your own?

5. What have you learned about yourself while reading about another culture?

6. What other points-of-view have you developed from reading about the world?

APPENDIX U: LITERARY RESPONSE QUESTIONNAIRE
(*Adapted and Selected Items from Miall & Kuiken, 1995)

Read each statement below carefully. Then rate your response to the corresponding scale.

1. Reading literature makes me sensitive to aspects of my life that I usually ignore.

   not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

2. In literature, I sometimes recognize feelings that I have overlooked during my

   daily life.

   not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

3. I often find my shortcomings explored through characters in literary texts.

   not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

4. Literature enables me to understand people that I would probably disregard in

   normal life.

   not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

5. I find that literature helps me to understand the lives of people that differ from

   myself.

   not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

6. Reading literature often gives me insights into the nature of people and events in

   my world.

   not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

7. I sometimes find that reading a literary text makes me feel like changing the way I

   live.

   not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

8. I often see similarities between events in literature and events in my own life.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

9. I often find my own motives being explored through characters in literary texts.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

10. *I sometimes find that reading a literary text makes me feel like changing the way *others* live.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

11. *In my reading, I can see certain types of people more clearly.*

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

12. When I begin to understand a literary text, it's because I've been able to relate it to my own concerns about life.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

13. Sometimes while reading literature, my feelings draw me toward a distinctly unsettling view of life.

not at al true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

14. Sometimes I feel like I've almost "become" a character I've read about in a text.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

15. I actively try to project myself into the role of fictional characters, almost as if I were preparing to act in a play.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

16. I don't believe that literature is socially relevant.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

17. I read literature to appreciate the author's understanding of society and culture.

not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

18. I often hear dialogue in a novel as though I were listening to an actual conversation.

    Not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

19. I usually hear the tone of speech in a dialogue from a story or novel.

    not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true

20. The challenge of literature is to comprehend the author's unique view of life.

    not at all true   somewhat true   true   extremely true