Creating Critical Conscious Classrooms: How Racially and Culturally Representative Literature Builds Students' Critical Literacies

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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Acknowledgments

This thesis has been my pride and joy for the past 18 months. Anyone who knows me has had to sit through many iterations of my theories, data analysis, and findings. I have had such an incredible support system that has given me space to process through dialogue, which has led me to completing this thesis with passion.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. Mahoney, Victoria, Willson, AJ, Jamal, Maria, Bella, Taylor, Jessalyn, Jaylen, Rose Marie, Lamar, Taquisha, MK, Shelly, Amaree, Millie, and Chuck. Of course, this project could not have happened without participants, but this class was more than just participants; they were the very soul of this project and became dear friends of mine. I want to thank them for their engagement with this work. I could not have imagined a more accepting, welcoming, and active classroom. It made my work infinitely more exciting because not only did I care, but I had 16 others who also cared and were rooting for me.

In addition to Room 308, I am forever indebted to Ezra Schwerner for the unconditional support. From late night to early morning, Ezra was willing to help me through it all. Not once did he let me think less of myself or the project; he encouraged me day in and day out. His wisdom and patience were crucial to my academic and personal growth over the past 18 months, and I am forever thankful to have him in my corner.

My heartfelt thanks go to my friends, teammates, and family. It can not be easy to be around someone who, for 18 months, spends most of their days thinking and talking about their thesis, but my friends made it feel normal. Emma, Ellie, and Eliza were willing to let me talk out any ideas I had, even contributing to my knowledge production. Maile validated my stress and offered insightful tips from her own work as Atle generously edited my paper for hours. The

Joans kept me active and silly when I needed it the most and my mom continually sent me helpful resources for both my mental health and literature review, while my father was happy to offer words of affirmation any time.

This project genuinely would not have been possible without the generous support from I’m Your Neighbor Books and friends. Thank you Kim, for all the connections, advice, and generosity. Thank you to the donor who contributed the materials at the core of this project: the books, and a sincere thank you to IYNB's for the encouragement and support, both tangible and intangible, that helped me complete this work.

Lastly, I wish to extend my most profound appreciation to my advisor, Jie Park. Her guidance, expertise, and unwavering support throughout this project have been unmatched. She challenged me when necessary and encouraged me when I needed it the most. She believed in me and was willing to talk out any struggles I had. I am honored to call Jie Park my undergraduate advisor.

Abstract

Fostering critical consciousness through reading racially and culturally representative literature positively impacts literacy development in students. This research took place in a 6th-grade class of multicultural and multilingual learners who, for a semester, in addition to reading their standard curriculum-based books also read, discussed, and worked with culturally and racially representative books. Students independently used these texts to deepen their understanding of the world. I found a plethora of evidence to suggest that the students gained a deeper critical awareness of social inequalities, while also improving their literacy skills during the time this research was conducted. Lastly, I observed that students, even at a young age, are well aware that reading representative literature benefited them academically. Therefore, I advocate for more racially and culturally representative books and pedagogical practices such as storytelling to be used in classrooms in order to educate the next generation as both literate and critically conscious agents of change.

Keywords: Racially and culturally representative literature, critical consciousness, literacy skills.

Introduction

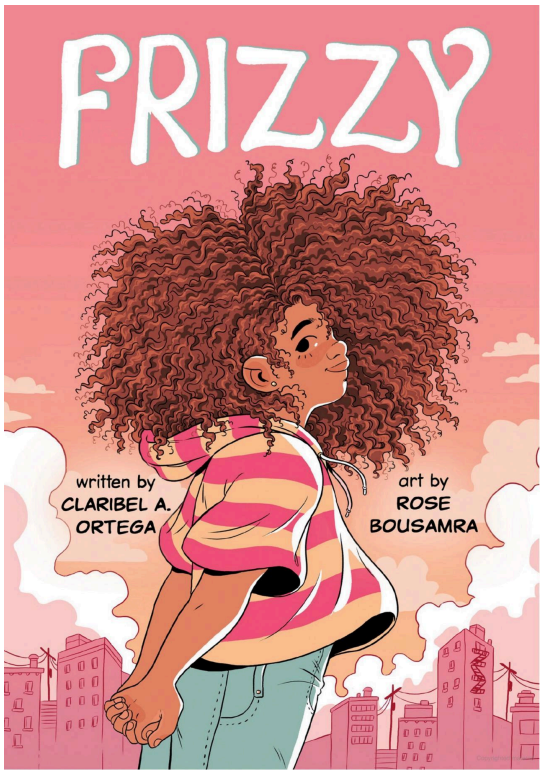
Human beings grow up on narratives, on stories. We come to know our own parents by hearing their stories of growing up. We make friendships by sharing the stories of our lives. We get jobs and scholarships by telling the stories of our studies and careers. We stay in touch by debriefing our recent interactions through narratives. We plan, daydream, work, and worry in the narrative.

Narratives are central to how we see, navigate, and relate to the world around us. Narratives through media and books are often ways for youth to break through egocentrism and become more empathetic members of society. Narratives can build awareness, hold a sense of belonging and contribute significantly to society. Because our lives revolve around stories, we must be intentional with the narratives and literature we share with youth. Since narratives are central to this work, I see it fitting that I begin my thesis with my own story.

Vignette

Growing up, I always wanted the reality of Nim Rusoe from the book *Nim's Island*. Her adventurous lifestyle, her pet seal, her secluded island - all of it was captivating to me. I wanted her rope swing, survivalist lifestyle and her ability to break gender norms. I devoured her story because I could see myself in her shoes; I could picture myself being just like her. While I was not much of a reader, I would return to this book continuously. It simultaneously led me to practice reading, while also dreaming of running up a volcano as Nim did; Nim to me was countering the feminine gender norms that were so often reinforced in books like the *Babysitter Club* and *Rainbow Magic Fairy* series. I had the privilege of seeing my racial identity in

countless other stories, in characters who shared my appearance, my experiences, my world, so I eagerly read books that attempted to break the socialized norms of white girlhood, as *Nim's Island* did. Many people who share my identity as a middle-class, cisgender, white woman can relate to being surrounded by books that look like them. Of course, racial representation does not encapsulate a full identity, which is why I sought out books with characters like Nim. People of marginalized identities are not granted the same benefit of being overrepresented in literature, which makes it that much harder to find a book that holistically represents someone's identity.



So when I brought a box labeled "Heavy" into room 308 at Lucy Stone School,[1] full of 20 graphic novels, I was moved when Taquisha said "This is my heaven, this is heaven to me!" as she helped me tear the box open. I could see the joy in her eyes as she was staring at a box, filled to the brim with brand new copies of *Frizzy,* by Claribel A. Ortega. She pulled out one of the books, beautifully bound in pink, and ran it over to show her friends. Taquisha was carrying a piece of literature, but it might as well have been a mirror reflecting her physical identity, something she later told me had never happened with a book before. *Frizzy* wasn't just a book for Taquisha, it was recognition. The way Taquisha looked at *Frizzy* was much different then the way I looked at *Nim's Island*. Where I saw possibility in Nim's adventures, Taquisha saw herself, finally visible on the cover of a book. This kind of representation is not just meaningful, it is necessary.

[1] Lucy Stone School is a pseudonym, as are all names of participants.

Context

"*Knowledge is not universal; it is culturally bound and context-specific.*"

— Geneva Gay, 2010, p. 22

Project Rationale

Before the idea of researching how fostering critical consciousness with racially and culturally representative literature impacts literacy came about, this project started with a visit to Lucy Stone School for a Black History Month event. My childhood babysitter, and at the time a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) student at Stone School, organized this event. During my visit, she gave me a tour of the school, showing me all of the posters she made, the hair braiding station for the students, and a large stack of books she had found that highlighted Black joy. Out of curiosity, I asked her if the librarian ordered these books for her, or if she bought them herself, and her response shocked me. She looked at me funny and said, "Well, we don't have a librarian or library, so obviously I bought them." What took me by surprise was not that she paid for the books herself, as this is standard practice for teachers and she is incredibly generous, but that Stone School did not have a library. At this point, I did not know it was even legal for public elementary schools to not have a library. This immediately got me thinking about the importance of libraries and access to books in general.

Libraries were always a given in my childhood. I had a local library I would frequent, and my elementary and middle school's libraries were almost the biggest room in the schools, second only to the gym. Because of the volume of these libraries, I believed they had every book and some, but I was certainly wrong. These libraries were the kinds that only displayed books centering Black people in February and had "diversity"' sections in the corner of each genre. As

a result of this normalized and not-so-subtle display of white supremacy, my peers and I were almost exclusively reading books that were about white people or animals, which continued to instill in us the dominance of whiteness.

The same phenomenon was happening in Stone School. After my shock at the lack of a library at Stone School, I met with the principal to discuss this more. We spoke for a while and eventually she brought me to the third floor, where we walked into a dark, musty library. I was confused because previously I was told that there was no library, but here I was looking at hundreds of books. Although, as I started walking around, I noticed it did not look like the library had been updated in decades. Some examples of books include *Dick and Jane*, *Treasure Island*, and *Frindle*. These are not innately bad books, but to kids, mostly of color, born in the 2010s, these books were relatively irrelevant.

During the tour, when I asked about why there was no librarian, I was given that old chestnut about the reality plaguing American public schools: budget cuts. I could understand not having a librarian because that is one more person to employ, but I was curious why the books and space were not used. The principal explained to me that these books were very out of date and no longer matched the curriculum since they moved to the Science of Reading.[2] She also said that since they did not have a librarian, it made a space like this hard to maintain. I understood this comment more after completing an internship working as a library assistant in an elementary school in the spring of 2025, where every day there were an overwhelming amount of books to restack.

I had mentioned the fact that Stone School does not have a library to one of my good family friends, Kim Simmons, and she was outraged. Her mother-in-law, who is from the same city Stone School is in, heard about the lack of quality books showcasing diversity and was

[2] More information on Science of reading will be given in the social context section.

financially motivated to make a change. With the help of my family friend and her mother in law, I was able to get ninety children's books and graphic novels that center on “Immigrant & New Generation”[3] stories donated to Stone School to begin to build a new library. The books came with a three-tiered rolling cart to function as a traveling library, and each picture book came equipped with discussion questions in the back of the book to guide teachers through conversations about the text.

While setting up this project I started to make connections with many teachers, one in particular who ran an antiracist book club and invited me to visit one of the sessions. While I was unable to attend the book club, I did continue to talk to this teacher, Ms. Mahoney, about the importance of authentic representation in literature, and one day while sitting in the principal's office looking through the ninety donated books we quickly came up with interesting research questions surrounding the books in this new library and the students reading them. What started as a trip to Stone School to support a friend's project evolved into a curation of a new traveling library, a deepened curiosity into representative literature, and ultimately my praxis project.

Setting

My project is situated in a mid-sized city in New England. This city has transformed significantly over the past few centuries. The land was formerly, and currently, occupied by the Nipmuc Tribe and then became an industrial city in the 19th century (CTH, 2024). However, after World War II and advancements in technology, many of the mills shut down (Galvin, N.D.). Since 1980 the population has grown 28 percent, and today 23.1 percent of its residents were born outside of the United States (Data USA). The city is known for its immigrant population, specifically Vietnamese, Brazilians, Puerto Ricans, Ghanaians, and Dominicans, although there

[3] As labeled by I’m Your Neighbor Books - more on IYNB in the materials section.

are many other communities as well. There is also a community of 9 colleges, 6 of which are predominantly white institutions, making up a subset community of college students for nine months of the year (Schneider, 2015).

This project is situated in one of 34 public elementary schools in the city. As described above, Stone School serves 381 students from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds. 46.2 percent of students identify as "Hispanic," 31.5 percent identify as "African American,"' 4.5 percent identify as "Asian," and 13. 9 percent identify as "white" (Massachusetts School and District Profiles). I put these markers in quotations because while the website uses these categories, I wish to acknowledge that these racial categories are not representative of the complexity and heterogeneity within any given racial group. Stone is ranked in the top five elementary schools in the city, but it is unclear what that number is based on; one can assume it is related to standardized test scores (Allen 2015). The school employs twenty-five full-time teachers and one school counselor, with many student teachers in and out of the building.

This research was conducted in a 6th-grade classroom at Stone School. This grade is split into two groups of students, Lions and Tigers, for both math and English Language Arts (ELA). Based on my school schedule, I could only attend class and take field notes on the Lions, who happen to be the "higher-level" group. It was never specified to me what the level was based on, but I am operating under the assumption that this was also related to standardized tests from 5th grade. I disagree with this classification and tracking of students, but I understand the complexity of split classrooms and the need for grouping. While I would have loved to include the Tigers in this research, due to the limitation of time the Lions were my primary focus.

The Lions' ELA class was the first block of the day, from 8:55 to 10:10. As the students came into class, they found their assigned seats, which switched daily. The class always started

with a 15-minute block of "word study" which started as a structured vocabulary lesson but transitioned into independent word study on an online learning platform called Amplify during my time in the class. Independent study time was often followed by a guided lesson. These lessons took many forms, ranging from independent essay writing to whole class discussion. This time was sanctioned by the Science of Reading (SoR) curriculum so it was fairly dictated to my understanding. The last 20 minutes of class were designated as "book club" time. Because of the gaps in representation within the SoR curriculum, Ms. Anderson felt the need to build in additional lessons and readings. During the first two months I visited the class we read *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander, then for six weeks they read and engaged with the donated book club texts.[4] During these 20 minutes, Ms. Mahoney and I would meet with one group per day to check in about their understanding of the book and facilitate dialogue. When the groups were not meeting with us, they were independently reading.

Participants and Collaborators

In 6th grade at Stone School, most of the students have been through the seven years in the same class with their fellow students. That means they are quite comfortable with each other and have built relationships over half a dozen years. That also means there are years' worth of built-up animosity between certain students; from my observations, they navigate this quite well due to learned practices of restorative justice during their 5th grade year. Of course there was the usual bickering and frustration with each other, but otherwise, the classroom community was quite positive.

The consenting participants were three-fourths of the 6th graders, the teacher, and the student teacher. Due to my scheduling and availability, my focus group was four students who

[4] More about each of these texts can be found in the materials section

opted to read the book *Frizzy* by Claribel A. Ortega. To briefly contextualize and humanize the names you will read frequently in this paper, Rose Marie is a brilliant but reserved student who often needs to be prompted to speak. Bella is quite the opposite: she is passionate about reading and will make her opinions, summaries, and analysis known. Willson is a fantastic writer whose friendships with other kids in the class sometimes distract him from the task at hand, but he always gets the work done. Victoria is a hard worker who loves to read and is often seen smiling or giggling. These four students had been at the same school since kindergarten, so they know each other and their tendencies quite well. From what I observed, none of the four students in this book club gravitated towards each other during free time, but they all got along during book club time. I think this was beneficial, as it eliminated any exclusion or friendship tension.

Of course, the students are not the only contributors to classroom environments; there are also the teachers. In Room 308, they have a regular, experienced classroom teacher and a student teacher who was pursuing his Master's in Teaching. Ms. Mahoney, the classroom teacher, has been teaching for years at this school. She is a confident teacher who seems to be well respected by the students. From what I witnessed, she gracefully walked a very fine line between a rigid and a relaxed classroom. She mentioned, on multiple occasions, that she is of Italian descent and grew up in the area she now teaches in. I truly admire Ms. Mahoney and I hope to take some of her teaching practices into my own work someday. Because she is a skilled teacher, she is also a mentor teacher to the student teacher (MAT). Her MAT is one of few males in the program and is very well liked by the students. Ms. Mahoney spoke very highly of him, as did the students. This does not surprise me because I watched many of his lessons where he very effectively communicated while making the content relatable and engaging.

The last essential contributor to this project is an organization called I'm Your Neighbor Books (IYNB). IYNB is a nonprofit that "strives to build a stronger America, one where immigrants are welcomed and where first, second, and third generation Americans truly belong." through providing access to representative and diverse literature (I'm Your Neighbor, Welcome New Arrivals).

My personal connection with them stems back to high school, when I casually became a part of their moving crew. I became connected through a mentor and friend of mine, Kim Simmons. Kim has done everything from feeding to housing me, all while instilling radical love and heightening my critical consciousness. Kim, along with the rest of my mother's book club, has shaped my political mindset to critique and counter systems of oppression, but most importantly, they have taught me to be in community. I have seen firsthand the power in numbers within a trusted community, and have been taught by them how to be an ally for causes I care about. So when Kim asked me to paint a few walls and move a few boxes for IYNB, I figured I owed it to her in exchange for all she has taught and done for me. They had recently expanded and needed more space to hold all of the amazing books they house, and I find manual labor satisfying, so it was a perfect fit to help them out.

I have since stayed connected to IYNB, and am forever grateful for the opportunities and learning they have provided me. For this project specifically, IYNB helped me find an anonymous donor who donated all the books for a cart collection. The cart collection is a resource that IYNB puts together. As they state on their website, "Innovated to move a collection and conversation within a school, library, or other building, this beautiful wooden cart holds 90 acclaimed Immigrant and New Generation picture books, novels and graphic novels" (Welcoming Library, Cart Collection). My favorite part of this cart was the careful consideration

they put into compiling the books. I met with the principal and many teachers to curate a list of all the immigrant populations represented within Stone School to ensure that every new student would see at least a glimmer of their culture on this shelf. From there, IYNB used their knowledge and resources to curate an authentically representative cart with 90 books. Some of the books that were selected for the cart were *Grounded* by Ali Aisha Saeed, *Luli and the Language of Tea* by Andrea Wang and *Sonadores (Dreamers)* by Yuyi Morales. Not only were there 90 books, but each of the picture books has discussion questions pasted in the back, written by IYNB, which help guide teachers through meaningful age-appropriate discussion regarding the topics in the book. Most essentially, IYNB provided 6 copies of 5 different graphic novels for our book club groups. These were selected using the same process as the traveling cart and were specifically intended to represent the students in 6th grade.

Positionality

"Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation."

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 89

Walking into Lucy Stone School I would head straight to the office to log in as a volunteer, reinforcing my identity as an outsider. During the first week of research many of the students in the 6th grade had never met me before. Despite that, as I walked the halls to get to class, I was frequently approached by kids I know personally from my employment at their afterschool program and my visits to the school through University classes. Three of the students in Ms. Mahoney's class attend the program I work at, making me a constant in their lives. While this does not change my positionality as an outsider, it complicates how the students see me.

WhileI am in a position of authority at work as a lead staff member, in their classroom I wanted to be seen as more of just a classroom participant, observer, and facilitator.

Unfortunately, due to standard practices in public schools, Ms. Mahoney introduced me as Ms. Fontaine on the first day. This directly contradicted what the youth call me at the after-school program, which is simply Miss Ella. While I know I would have needed to gain the students' trust no matter how the students were expected to address me, this formal distinction made it feel harder to relate to the students because they automatically saw me as a teacher with my name and identity, rather than an equal. I could tell there was immediate hesitation to open up to me, because for all they knew, I was just another form of boring literacy intervention.

While I do not believe that being a person of color would innately warrant trust in a situation like this, my lack of racial similarity to most students positioned me as even more of an outsider. In the classroom I shared racial identity with three people, two of them being teachers. Being a white person I have many social privileges different than that of my students, potentially making it hard to discuss microaggressions or relatability of the text we were reading because I do not share the experiences of my students or the characters in the book.

I spent many hours deliberating the dilemma of whether my racial identity would significantly impact the research, and I, with the support of many friends and classmates, came to the conclusion that with enough time and effort, I could build trust that transcended racial relatability. I built trust in this group in many ways by emphasizing listening to my students, relating to their interests, and putting a priority on our relationship rather than my research. In hindsight, I think the racial diversity that I added to the group allowed for some rich conversations, but I cannot help but think the students, particularly towards the beginning of the

four months, might have held back thoughts or contributions to conversations regarding race due to our differences.

And yet, we had many conversations about female beauty standards and what it is like to be the eldest daughter which I was able to relate and contribute to. Of course, my students held intersectional identities regarding gender, but I think being able to relate about gender with three out of four members of the focus group gave the students a sense of ease which helped build trust, and complicated my insider-outsider identity.

Positionality is not just based on physical identity, though. There is much of a person's past that directly affects their non-physical positionalities. For me, one of my most guiding experiences that shifted my positionality and understanding of the world was challenging my identity as someone who exists due to and benefits from colonization while living in Namibia for five months. This experience came as a study abroad opportunity where I went to school, taught pre-K, played frisbee and most importantly *lived* in Windhoek, Namibia. Namibia is the second least densely populated country in the world and has a rich history of colonization, resistance and liberation. During my time in Namibia, I experienced living as a racial minority for the first time in my life. I do not equate my experience to that of BIPOC people in the United States because the social implications of my whiteness, while in the minority, were still prevalent and beneficial. Living through and grappling with my white fragility confirmed in me my commitment to continuing to educate myself about the world's inequalities, and specifically about historical events that influenced the social hierarchies that exist today. I gained a deeper understanding of the nuances of identity and systemic racism, specifically in the context of southern Africa, but what I learned during my time abroad is applicable to all aspects of my life.

Another shift in my positionality recently came with the influence of radical love. To best sum up radical love, I leave it to bell hooks, who said “To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility” (hooks, 2000. p. 13). What hooks means is that love is not just a feeling but a practice, a constant commitment to the struggle for justice. It is about transforming the world and ourselves through radical care and solidarity. To me, I have learned that radical love is not just an emotion, but a political stance against oppression. I see this influencing my praxis, and the way I live my life, because radical love motivates me to engage in struggles that may not directly affect me, with the goal of love for others and the greater good. I envision a future where all people can live with dignity and freedom, and radical love is a powerful force working to achieve this goal. An example of a time I experienced love as a form of resistance was during the summer of 2024 when I worked at a camp for youth with physical disabilities. The philosophy of the camp was to use radical love and treat our campers as we would any other child. While on the surface this may not seem aligned with radical love, I see treating people who are physically disabled as you do able bodied people as a form of resistance against the status quo being as this is not a practice everyone follows. It is normalized that people act differently around those with different abilities, but we combated that notion at camp. That summer I experienced the most amount of concentrated joy I ever have in five weeks which was proof to me that our world would be a happier place if everyone used radical love to support and spread joy that resists systems of oppression.

I see the addition of radical love to my daily routines and my ability to resist my white fragility as being crucial to my positionality within this research because it makes me more equipped to teach using critical literacy. Being an undergraduate without a degree in teaching or

specific training in critical literacy to build critical consciousness is certainly a limitation on this research, but based on my new found life philosophies I feel better prepared to take on this work while continuing to build my critical consciousness along with the students.

Materials

The 5 books that IYNB and the anonymous donor generously gifted Ms. Mahoney were *Frizzy* by Claribel A. Ortega, *Invisible* by Christina Diaz Gonzalez, *Mabuhay* by Zackary Sterling, *Parachute Kids* by Betty Tang, and *When Stars are Scattered* by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamad. Firstly, I think it is important to highlight why we chose graphic novels. Often, graphic novels are seen as juvenile or simplistic, but I fundamentally disagree. Themes in graphic novels can be just as profound, with the added component of visual analysis. Graphic novels use images to enhance the development of the story, and specifically when the characters are of a marginalized, underrepresented community, it is meaningful to, for example, visually see a Dominican girl on *every* single page. There is significant nuance in graphic novels which can be beneficial when you have a wide ability of readers. “Reading between the lines” becomes examining the pictures, which is something every seeing student can do, no matter the language they speak (Moller, 2017). The value of graphic novels was proven the first day we used them when Bella pointed out the Dominican flag in one of the first scenes, allowing her to understand what community the main character was from without it being stated in text.

This reckoning happened while a group of us were reading *Frizzy* by Claribel A. Ortega. Frizzy is the story of a Dominican girl in middle school who is struggling with the tension between her mother’s expectations and her desire for self-expression. Her mother is persistent, bringing her to the salon every weekend to get her hair straightened. However, Marline desires to wear her hair naturally, which would display her short, beautiful, frizzy curls. Marlene takes

matters into her own hands one day and styles her own hair. She gets teased at school and receives many negative comments about her curls, reinforcing the idea that curly hair is messy and undesirable. This makes her feel insecure and frustrated, because she wants to embrace her natural beauty but feels trapped by cultural and familial expectations. Luckily, her Tia Ruby, Marlene's idol, takes her in for a weekend of fun and learning. Tia Ruby teaches Marline how to care for her curls and about the history of westernized beauty standards. They work in the garden, eat pizza, and discuss topics like anti-blackness. When Marline goes home with her natural hair, she confronts her disappointed mother. Marlene's mother explains the rationale behind her desire to straighten Marlene's hair: when she was a child, she was made fun of immensely and was called "unprofessional" and "unruly." During this conversation both Marlene and her mother come to understand each other's perspectives and ultimately agree that Marlene can do as she pleases with her hair.

Another one of the books that were donated for the book club was *Invisible* by Christina Diaz Gonzalez. This book centers on five middle school students who speak Spanish. They are grouped together for community service due to generalizations about their identity. They quickly realize that just because they all speak Spanish, does not mean they are the same. In fact, they all have very unique, different experiences, which are told throughout the book. While doing their community service of working in the cafeteria, they find a woman and her daughter living out of her car in the back of the school yard. They begin to work together, taking food from the cafeteria to give to Dona and her daughter, who struggle with being unhoused. The friendships grow between the students while they reveal just how different each of them are. Unfortunately, they get caught by the principal. After explaining their actions, these students prove to be agents

of change,and their school ends up helping Dona to find housing through social services. This story grapples with themes of stereotyping, empathy, social justice, friendship, and belonging.

The third book in the group of texts provided by IYNB is a true story titled *When Stars are Scattered,* by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamad. This story follows Omar and his younger brother Hassan through years of living in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. Omar has many daily tasks, among which are getting the food, taking care of his nonverbal brother Hassan, and making efforts to get resettled. Omar is offered a chance to go to school, which takes away his time for all his responsibilities, as well as his time to play football, but he understands that an education could be the key to resettlement. With the help of Fatuma, an auntie who looks after the boys, and years of studying hard, Omar and Hassan finally receive the news that they have been selected for resettlement. While the boys are relieved, it also means they must give up the friends and life they know in Dadaab. This story explores nuanced emotions tied to resettlement, including themes of responsibility, hope, and the power of education.

The three books highlighted above are the texts that the Lions in Ms. Mahoney's class chose to read. However, there were two more options:. *Mabuhay* by Zackary Sterling and *Parachute Kids* by Betty Tang. Unlike *When Stars are Scattered*, which is a true story, Mabuhay is fantasy. Mabuhay centers on two Filipino siblings who have to navigate working in their parents' food truck as the mascot pig that hands out samples, and their struggling social lives at school. One day, the Filipino folklore their mother frequently tells starts manifesting in real life. They see witches and ogres in their school and in the streets, and they realize the legends are true. JJ and Athena use their knowledge of Filipino culture to save the world from the witches; they do so by trusting each other and their family. *Parachute Kids* is about 3 siblings who are resettled to California from Taiwan, alone, to go to school. The main character, Feng-Li, is the

youngest and navigates many social struggles related to language and cultural barriers at her new school. The oldest sibling, Jia-Xi, balances studying hard for her SATs with taking care of her younger siblings. The middle child, Ke-Gāng, does not like his older sister's strict rules and begins to rebel. After months of bickering, the kids realize they are stronger when they work together, and that the support of family is a key to survival.

To the surprise of Ms. Mahoney and I, none of the Lions chose either of these books for their individual book club selection. Students had the autonomy to pick a book they were interested in, with the intention of relating to the story. *Indivisible* and *Frizzy* have to do with Latinxidentity, which most of the students in Ms. Mahoney's class can relate to, which explains why these were the most popular choices. The students choose just one book for book club, but in early January, Ms. Mahoney noted that "most of them have made their way through the whole collection". Just because some of the books were not used for educational instruction, does not mean they were collecting dust on the shelves; the students were reading them in their freetime.

Social context

Something else that is important to note about the context of this project is the political state of the country, specifically with regards to education. During the fall of 2024 when the bulk of this research was happening, the U.S. held a highly divisive election, heightened by debates about immigration, identity, civil rights and geopolitics. These students made it clear that they were also aware of happenings outside of their own community, including wildfires, wars, and unsafe conditions around the world. While Ms. Mahoney and SoR were asking students to turn in argumentative essays about their favorite candy, the students were simultaneously asking if they would be deported because Donald Trump was elected. Simply put, students and teachers alike were distracted by decisions made by politicians that directly affected their lives in

significant ways. Threats and chronic fear make it hard to focus on school, and as a result stories directly addressing student fears and prompting conversation were particularly important in this time frame.

Following the election, new educational policies were enacted in Massachusetts. Lucy Stone School's district switched from a curriculum called Balanced Literacy to Science of Reading. Do not be fooled by the name Science of Reading: it can be tempting to believe in something that claims to be science, especially after the chaos of the pandemic, but by following science in this case, you leave out the rest of what goes into learning: personal experiences. As Rick Ayers, a professor of Education at University of California, San Francisco said in his blog, "The problem [with science of reading] is its focus on the failure to learn being in the student (grit and growth mindset) results in one-sided instruction, with poor kids least likely to get opportunities for critical and complex thinking, reading, and writing. Billing itself as the equity engine, the Science of Reading reinforces the racist practices of schooling — top down, disempowering, and encouraging passive learners" (Ayers, 2023).

In addition to the new curriculum, which threatens to increase social inequality the U.S. has seen an increase in book bans (PEN America, 2025). These bans reflect transphobia and racism, among other things. Although the city has yet to officially ban any books, as Jason Homer, the director of the city's public library, said, "Currently, there are no challenges to specific materials, but there's certainly a unified effort to limit the access to voices of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities and that feels like it's part of something bigger," (Mudambi, 2022). The idea that BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ voices are being silenced through book bans is something the students and I grappled with in our book club conversations.

Lastly, across the nation, there have been many proposals to monitor classes and teachers. For example, Florida's Parental Rights in Education law, often labeled the "Don't Say Gay Bill," restricts teachers from talking about sexual orientation or gender identity in the classroom. In March, the same state proposed a bill to restrict teacher training programs from mentioning institutionalized racism, oppression, and identity politics (Goldberg, 2023). Since 2021, 18 states have adopted legislation restricting the teaching of "race" (Schwartz, 2025). Effectively, these restrictions prevent students from formally learning about the systems of oppression that exist in our society. While these bills might not directly affect the Lucy Stone School, the influence of restricting marginalized voices has been spreading. Massachusetts has historically opposed these types of bills, but that does not mean the pedagogy behind the bills has not been adopted by some local teachers, politicians and peers. To me, this is even more reason that critical literacy should be used in schools to promote critical consciousness.

Guiding Theories

"What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say?… Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while we wait for the perfect moment to begin. The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But in the transformation itself is the possibility of power."

— Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (1984), p. 4

Conceptual frameworks

Praxis[5]

I reference the idea of praxis frequently in this paper, but what is praxis? The definition I subscribe to is as follows: "Reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1972, p. 52.) To me, praxis is adaptable research in which someone gains a deeper understanding and critical consciousness, therefore adjusting their actions in the world. With experience comes learning, and one must accept, acknowledge, and adjust their life accordingly. Praxis is critically thinking, methodically making, and carefully doing action in the world which is rooted in understanding theory and personal reflections.

Racially and culturally representative literature

My understanding and definition of racially and culturally representative literature comes from Rachael Elrod, a library scientist who explains that to be truly representative means representing holistically, not just on the surface. Racially representative literature, in my understanding, is when a student can not only relate to the race of the character, but also the way that the social construct of race and racism affect the plot and the character's actions in relatable ways (Elrod & Kester, 2022). Of course, every individual is unique, so just because a book is racially representative does not mean it is automatically reflective of someone's life.

What makes a text culturally representative is the inability to change the character's race without changing the story. As defined by DiverseBookFinder, a book that is not genuinely representative is "where BIPOC elements may be present, but they are not essential to the plot and could be changed without changing the story." For example, *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack

[5] Praxis is also the title of the course that guided this research so sometimes in this paper, it is referred to as the proper noun, meaning the course title.

Keats is about a Black boy adventuring in the snow (Keats, 1962). While this may be racially representative for students, I argue it is not culturally representative because the plot would not need to change if they made the character Hispanic (Elrod, 2022). Culturally representative books engage with complex social issues and represent cultural identities accurately.

I want to make a clear distinction between diverse or multicultural literature and representative literature. Representative literature centers the student and their identities, rather than trying to broaden a student's horizon of cultures. When I say diverse or multicultural, I mean books that represent a plethora of underrepresented groups in literature (Read Your World, 2023). When I say culturally and racially representative literature, I am referring to texts that the reader can directly relate to. To me, racially and culturally representative literature go hand in hand, and it is essential that we read books that are simultaneously culturally and racially representative, that way a book is not just performatively diverse for the characters, but truly authentic in its plot and the characters' actions.

Literacy Skills

There is a deep misconception that literacy skills refer to just being able to read and write. Being able to read and write are crucial to literacy, but I believe inference making, character analysis, predictions, extracting data, and, most importantly, meaning making are at the core of literacy skills (Muter, 2021). These literacy skills apply to everyday life and conversations, helping someone formulate an argument, process their own thoughts, and interpret others.

When I refer to the students developing their literacy skills, then, I do not necessarily mean practicing their vocabulary or acing their standardized testing. I mean the skills that allow one to read a text and accurately analyze. To analyze literacy skills, I used the Common Core

State Standards and Massachusetts frameworks to show specific concepts, to conceptualize where the American public school system believes students should be in 6th grade, and for validity within my work.[6]

The idea that literacy skills are important has roots in capitalistic and eurocentric mindsets. Expecting students to be able to formulate a three-point essay in APA style correctly, for example, prioritizes Western expectations over traditional oral storytelling. That being said, it would be to the student's disadvantage, not to mention illegal, not to engage with the standards and teach students these specific tools that will benefit them in the society we live in. I understand that standardized assessments and school-based literacy expectations only measure literacy in efficiency and economic ability, but changing that broader societal issue is unfortunately beyond the scope of this research. I am looking at ways in which fostering critical consciousness can help students develop literacy skills, which will hopefully guide students to make change in the world.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness (CC) is the capacity to understand oppression in conjunction with the will to be an agent of change against it (Freire, 1972). There are three main components to critical consciousness. The first is social analysis, which is when someone can name and analyze inequitable systems that contribute to oppression. This aspect of critical consciousness was my main focus because developing this skill is particularly critical for6th graders who have been generally socialized into not critiquing the world around them. The second component is the belief that you are a catalyst of change; that you can see injustice in the world, and do something about it. This sense of political agency is unnatural in the oppressive systems we live in;

[6] For more on how I used standards to assess literacy skills, view my methodology.

therefore, when someone comes to this understanding, they are much more likely to enact social action, which is the last component of critical consciousness. Social action can be shown in a wide array of avenues, including education, which deepens your critical consciousness, bringing you back to the first component. As you can see, the points of critical consciousness are not linear, but rather cyclical. I believe one can never fully get to a point of enlightenment with critical consciousness because you are always understanding systems more deeply, and changing methods of social action. Because of this belief, I do not think it is fair to rank or quantify someone's level of critical consciousness, because it is impossible to quantify something which is an ongoing process. I see critical consciousness as a *commitment* to critiquing systems of oppression, a lens of life, rather than a method.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is rooted in Paul Freire's concept of critical literacy. In this framework, Freire explains how students can gain critical consciousness through literacy, questioning socio-political context and power dynamics to advocate for social change (Freire, 1972). He believes that students can become critically conscious thinkers through dialogue, reflection, and action by interrogating texts and creating new ones. Freire's concept of critical literacy "does not reside in the efficiency of his literacy methods, but above all the originality of its content designed to develop our consciousness," (Jemal, 2017). As stated above, critical consciousness is how I see individuals beginning their journey to social justice work, and one of the building blocks of critical consciousness is critical literacy.

This framework is not necessarily a way of teaching, but instead a constant commitment to analyzing systems of oppression. As stated by Freire, "The effectiveness and validity of the method lie in having the learner's reality as the starting point, in starting from what they already

know, from the pragmatic value of the things and the facts of their daily life, that is their essential situations." (Freire, 1998 p. 15). A component of critical literacy is grounding learning in personal experience. Critical literacy emphasizes prior knowledge and learning through interactions with others and one's environment. By engaging in discussions that draw from their own experiences, students not only construct meaning but also challenge and refine their ideas through peer interactions. However, the risk in this lies in having conversations in the "feel-good comfort zone" for the educator or facilitator. A key point of critical literacy is the need for a supportive educator who attempts to cut the chains of oppressive educational practices by encouraging difficult dialogues.[7]

Critical literacy not only heightens students' engagement but also gives them the tools to navigate challenges in the real world through examples and discussions based on text and underlying messages. Critical literacy encourages students to challenge power dynamics that they observe in literature, preparing them to challenge power dynamics in the real world. This framework uses text as a representative of current socio-political or oppressive powers and helps students unpack said dilemmas both in context to the real world and the text.

By fostering analytical awareness through critical literacy, learners can be agents of change in their communities and beyond. Freire believed that knowledge should be liberating and the community should be empowered through learning, discussing, and critiquing literacy, and therefore the world, students begin to question circumstances and potentially challenge them. To do this, students must read beyond the text, connecting words to worlds. Not only does the act of using critical literacy generate a deeper understanding of texts, but it also makes literacy more relevant and helps students understand the world around them. I approach literacy using this

[7] You can find more on the implications of facilitating critically conscious thinkers in the Switching to Facilitation page.

framework because I believe all texts can generate relatable discussions about the word-world connection. By using this framework, students are centered in learning and empowered as the carriers of knowledge.

By emphasizing critical literacy, educators can foster a richer learning environment where students not only reflect on their experiences but also critically engage with the societal contexts that influence those experiences, which are essential for a holistic understanding of the text and how it applies to the world. Ultimately, I believe using critical literacy generates a more empathetic and engaged reader whose ideas are valued and supported, or challenged, by social context, which improves their comprehension skills and motivates them for social justice work.

So, how do we use a framework of critical literacy to encourage critical thinking? By using the Four Resources Model by Freebody and Luke, which works as a guide to critical literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Although it was originally written to be applied across disciplines, I see it as fitting to use it in relation to critical literacy because it encourages a reader and teacher to look at the roles of the text itself (Firkins, A.S. 2021). The goal of this work was to shift "focus from trying to find the right method to determining whether the range of methods to determine whether the range of practices emphasized in a reading program were indeed covering and integrating the broad repertoire of textual practices required in today's economies and societies" (Luke & Freebody; 1999). To do this, they break up the analysis of a text into four sections: Code-Breaker, Text Participant, Text User, and Text Analyst. These are the roles they want students and educators to assume as they are reading. Code breaking focuses on basic phonics and grammar. This is important to critical literacy because it supports learning to read the words, which leads to making sense of them, which is the second role: Text Participant. This role is about comprehending the text in relation to yourself, widely known as text-to-self

connections. It is important to note that, in this framework, connecting your identity and self to your comprehension is not a secondary task; it is embedded and essential to comprehension and treated as equal. The third role teachers and students should assume as they are reading using critical literacy is Text User, which is to understand the social purpose of the text. This encourages students to understand that texts are not neutral. Readers should make connections between the word and the world to see how they can use the text to deepen their understanding of both. Lastly, the Four Resource Model encourages students and teachers to assume the role of Text Analyst. This is where a reader should question what ideologies and values the text is promoting. Most importantly, "Luke (2000) points out that the model does not propose a developmental hierarchy whereby one moves from coding practices to analytical practices. He is careful to point out the need to simultaneously address all four levels from the beginnings of literacy" (Firkins, A. S. 2021) The idea that literacy development to understand phonics, and text analysis to understand what voices are missing from the text, are at the same level of importance and should be taught with the same value is central to how I see critical literacy being taught.

Theory of Social Change

In the face of persistent social inequality, the quest for meaningful and impactful change is obligatory; however, one can not embark on this journey without a theory of social change. I believe that youth empowerment, liberatory education, and individual expressions of radical love all culminate in heightened critical consciousness, leading to a more caring society where more people feel a true sense of belonging and a commitment to justice. In my opinion, true social justice work should be led by the people most affected by marginalization, but that does not pardon others from being a part of the fight to dismantle the insidious patterns of oppression. In

fact, allyship is central to my theory of social change, as shown by my understanding of radical love to fight for causes seemingly unrelated to oneself.

It is important to engage in the dismantling of oppression because, as Alexis Jemal stated in their piece about critical consciousness, "Social injustice [creates] a self-perpetuating phenomenon; like a virus, social injustice infects the host system from individuals to families to institutions" (Jemal, 2017). This virus of social injustice is a danger to all and requires constant dismantling. With a lack of social change, the virus will continue to spread, causing oppression and dehumanization to run rampant, which will continue to disadvantage some members of society. In order to challenge these norms of social inequality and liberate the oppressed, Freire claims people must think critically and act accordingly about the reality of the systems we are a part of, to which I agree (Freire, 1972).

The question is, *how* do we enact this kind of change? One way I believe change is enacted is through raising a generation of critically conscious thinkers through literacy education by means of the public school system. That being said, our public school system in America has never been an equitable place. While some people might believe that school segregation ended with *Brown v. Board of Education*, racial segregation, funding disparities and inequitable punishment, are just some of the forms that racial oppression takes today. Oppressive systems happen in large-scale policies and social ideas, but also on the micro level in schools through individual acts of hate and bias. The education system can be used as a tool for oppression to conserve the dominant culture and sustain inequalities that are beneficial for the oppressors, and there are many policies, practices, and procedures in public school education that replicate the injustices in the world and reinforce stereotypes. Nonetheless, there is space to make a change, and it must start with the influence of teachers.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire explains how educators can foster critical consciousness to encourage social transformation. As Freire saw it, critical consciousness is the process of becoming aware of an oppressive system, and the ability to challenge the system, questioning the status quo, and reflecting on one's position within the system (Freire, 1972). I see educators as the generative force that will raise a generation of critically conscious citizens by teaching students to carefully evaluate systems of oppression through dialogue and problem-solving skills.

Education is fundamental to democracy because questioning and interrogating the policies and bills proposed for our nation requires civic literacy. Critical consciousness encourages us to imagine different futures and build skills for creating change.

Outside of education for liberation, I see individuals participating in praxis as a means of enacting social change. Praxis is theory, action, and reflection in constant circulation. Praxis is not a mindless action. It is, as Freire saw it, praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1972, p. 36). Embarking on praxis is challenging your own thinking in conjunction with social change work that reflects how you see change in the world.

Youth always seem to challenge my thinking and change how I see the world. Social justice work that involves engaging with youth at an individual level can be difficult to track, but very meaningful. I anchor my theory of change in a belief that we affect systems through our daily interventions and interactions. In reference to social justice work, adrienne maree browne envisions society as a fractal, or an "infinitely complex [pattern] [...]created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop Brown uses this model to demonstrate that what you do on a small scale will be replicated enough times that it ends up having a large-scale impact. Not every action in praxis can, or should, be shocking to the system; instead,

we must trust momentum and power in numbers that, with enough faith in fractal theory, change will commence (Brown, A. M. 2017).

My social justice work is grounded in a foundation of community, coalition, and trust, as brown teaches us. Educators, as change makers, need to trust our fellow activists to also be putting in the work for social change to avoid burnout. I trust my friend Maeve will take on environmental equality, and my teammate Eleanor will continue to advocate for reproductive justice, while I work to decolonize education. We need to lean on our community to hold each other accountable while also making space for personal well-being to consistently organize to make change.

Literature Review

When you Google “what boosts literacy skills”, there are hundreds of results like music training, intense repetition, familial participation (specifically blaming poor reading skills on the mother's ability), creating cozy reading corners, and direct phonics instruction (Shea, 2024). Much of the current literature about boosting literacy skills revolves around the new collection of research called the Science of Reading, which promotes evidence-based practices on how to improve phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NWEA, 2022).

Among the many pieces of research regarding literacy skills is the highly respected and frequently referenced report, National Reading Panel - Teaching Children to Read (NRP, 2000). The findings of this study were validated by the U.S. government in 1997, when Congress directed the “Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), in consultation with the Secretary of Education, to convene a national panel to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read” (USDHHS n.d.). To date, this was the most comprehensive look into

previous research about literacy development, referencing over 100,000 reports. In its 449 pages, this report claims there are five essential components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension strategies. The report listed using decodable texts, gamifying literacy activities, repeated reading, graphic organizers, and giving choices for which texts to read as effective strategies. Not once did the report make any claims that reading culturally and racially representative literature could boost literacy skills. An interesting note about the NRP report is that none of the research it referenced was small-scale classroom research. Considering this report was what broadly informed policy in the 2000s, there was a significant body of work that included important knowledge and evidence from practitioners that was excluded and implicitly deemed less important.

NRP looked into more than one hundred thousand reports. It is fair to assume that racially and culturally representative literature boosting literacy skills was either not reported on before the year 2000, or that researchers did not find it relevant or important enough to mention in research that would inform policy. Either way, this report suggests to the common teacher who is wondering how to boost literacy skills that the identity of characters does not matter, and this ideology has been reflected in the curriculum around the country. This subtly reinforces the idea that texts are neutral, and not a significantly influential aspect of education that reproduces social inequality and potentially white supremacy. While the NRP report remains helpful in suggesting many ways to boost literacy skills, the omission of the significance of diverse books as a contributing factor speaks volumes and has certainly had a substantial impact on literacy teaching in the 21st century.

After reading this report, I was feeling a bit defeated in finding any mention of how representative literature would support literacy development, but it was not until I hit the stacks at Goddard Library that I had some hope I would find research regarding my area of interest: how fostering critical consciousness through reading racial representation in books can contribute to improved literacy skills.

As I walked down the daunting shelves of books on topics ranging from political philosophy to analytical perspectives on the budget of the United States government on the fourth floor of Goddard Library at Clark, I came to the small section about literacy development. Phone flashlight in hand, and not a peer in sight, I began browsing the books. Among the books I opened out of my own curiosity were *Even Hockey Players Can Read (*Booth, 2014*)*, *The Science of Reading, a Handbook* (Snowling et. al., 2022), and *Why Kids Can't Read* (Riccards et. al., 2015). I lost track of time because I was flipping through books like the main character in a library montage scene.

Of the books that stood out to me enough to lug through the snow to read, and thus far the only book that had referenced racial representation as a contributing factor to improved literacy skills, was *Making Race Visible: Literacy Research for Cultural Understanding* (Greene and Abt-Perkins, 2003). With a foreword by Gloria Ladson-Billings, a favorite scholar of mine, I was eager to dive in. Validating what I was finding to be true, Ladson-Billings wrote, "Few studies have confronted race in significant ways, despite the urgency expressed" ("Preface", Ladson-Billings, 2014). The idea that I could be either contributing to this injustice or breaking this cycle put a pit in my stomach.

This book, in many ways, was directly aligned with my work, but not entirely. For example, the researchers and editors seemed to be fixated on the achievement gap between Black

and white students, whereas I am focusing on improving literacy skills, but I was happy to see race and culture even mentioned.In response to the question about what schools should do to raise the achievement gap of Black students, the authors encourage schools “to facilitate learning by building on students' language and culture as a bridge to school achievement” (Greene and Abt-Perkins 2003, pg. 7). This idea of using students' knowledge, language, and culture as a starting point is directly related to my theoretical framework of critical literacy.

There is a plethora of literature regarding critical literacy. Many researchers cite critical literacy as beneficial to students' literacy. In *Cultivating Genius*, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad proposes a framework called the Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (HRL), designed to elevate students’ literacy development by centering identity, skills, intellect, and criticality. Muhammad draws on historical models of Black literary societies from the 1900s which would meet in secret to practice their literacy skills and engage in rich, critically conscious conversations to argue that literacy instruction should not only teach reading and writing skills but also build students’ critical consciousness to help them recognize and challenge injustice, demonstrating how literacy can be a powerful tool for self-empowerment and social change.Muhammad’s work highlights developing criticality alongside traditional literacy skills, through the use of dialogue, similar to my research.

To understand the implications of HRL better, I looked for examples of it in action and found a captivating piece using a math and science class (Muhammad, G. E., Ortiz, N. A., & Neville, M. L., 2021). In their research, the authors did exactly as I hope to do as an educator, which is to center students' identities in all parts of the classroom. In a lesson about earthquakes, the educators used the five aspects of HRL, namely identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy, to bring in students' background knowledge and foster their critical consciousness. The class

analyzed the 2010 Haitian earthquake and its impact using graphs and data to work on the "skills" portion of HRL. To engage identity, the educators made space for the students to make familial connections if applicable. In the part of the lesson, they emphasized the resilience of the community and the importance of their Haitian culture during the recovery. Throughout the lesson, they were asking the students to use their critical consciousness and academic standards, and I appreciate that they valued both equally.

Jennifer Gonzalez has reflected on Muhammad's concept of HDL, writing that "sometimes we think that when we add identity or when we add voice and freedom of expression, that somehow we don't focus on skills at all. But that's just simply not true. You can have it all. You can have voice and fun and engagement and skills" (Gonzalez, 2020, p. 10). Gonzalez describes skill as equally important to identity, intellect and criticality, rather than more important. I appreciate this angle because it does not dismiss the value of literacy skills, but instead shows there are other aspects to a student's development that are equally as valuable, despite being left out of the curriculum. In addition to literature about critical consciousness and literacy skills, I came across three studies that found a quantitative correlation between racial and cultural representation in literature and literacy skills. The first was a piece published in *The World Journal of Advanced Research* in July of 2024, called "Impact of Racial Representation in Curriculum Content on Student Identity and Performance" (Iweuno et al., 2024). This study focused on the lack of representation in the curriculum and literature as a reason for poor academic achievement. According to Iweuno et al., the achievement gap should be blamed on students not being engaged in the material because they can not relate to it, therefore causing them to have low testing scores. While this could be partly true, this neglects the many other reasons for the achievement gap, like systemically racist barriers and the implicit bias of

educators. While ultimately claiming that racial and cultural representation in literature will certainly promote literacy skills, the deficit view of this research is one that I hope to stay away from.

The second piece that attempts to prove the idea that racial and cultural representation in literature benefits literacy skills was by Tanya Christ in 2018 (Christ, 2018). Her study included fifty children of color who read twelve different books, rated each for cultural relevance, and were assessed on their comprehension after reading each book. Christ says, "We found several statistically significant differences in children's reading performance related to their own and the researchers' ratings of how culturally relevant each text was" (Oakland Edu, 2020). While the specifics of "statistical significance" are unclear, the results are explicit: students' literacy skills, specifically comprehension, are heightened when students read books that racially and culturally represent them. This is important because there is evidence here that book selection is more important than just being able to see yourself; it is directly positively affecting how and what students learn. Christ points out the inequality that results from giving children from cultural backgrounds outside of the dominant culture, observing that they "have fewer opportunities to use their cultural knowledge and experiences to have that advantage if they are not adequately represented in books used as part of the curriculum." (2020). Conversely, white, US-born students have more opportunities to relate to literature and therefore receive an advantage when it comes to gaining literacy.

The final, and in my opinion, least reputable but most compelling study was conducted by a nonprofit called First Book in 2023 (First Book Research & Insights, 2023). Before beginning this research, Zimmer conducted a literature review. In an interview with Baltimore's CHILD, she observed of culturally and racially representative books that "there was no

comprehensive study about their impact in the classroom" (Holt, 2024). I have come to the same conclusion, so this was reassuring to read from a professional in the field. In summary, FirstBook found that the "reading scores" (it is unclear what this consists of) rose by three percent when educators added diverse literature to their bookshelves. They observed that this was connected to students' interests. They said that during free reading time, many of the students were "fake reading," which resulted in significantly less reading practice than their reading peers; however, when presented with representative literature, students became more invested and there was a significant increase in participation. This three percent rise in the score is no little achievement; that is a significant amount that should be taken seriously.

Overall, there is much literature about the importance of representative literature, building critical consciousness in youth, and how representative literature impacts test scores, but not much connecting all of it. Understanding the intersection of these points is critical for learning and should be leveraged in schools more often, but in order to do this, we must learn more about it, which is what this project aims to do.

Methodology and Methods

"What we commonly accept as objective or obviously true is only so because of negotiated agreement among people."

– (Gee, 2011)

Data Collection

My data collection consists of many methods, including surveys, field notes, written documents, and interviews. I chose these methods to have a holistic overview of the impacts of the project. I regret not getting approval for audio recordings because I am sure I missed valuable

data in my field notes while trying to participate in class activities, and audio recordings would have allowed me to collect data while also honoring my personal commitment to participating fully.

The first set of data I gathered was through the beginning-of-the-year reading survey that the teacher sent to the students through a Google Form. This was a standard educational practice, so the students were very comfortable pulling out their Chromebooks and filling it out. On this form, we asked students questions like “what genres interest you?”, “Do you feel like there are stories at school that represent what your life and family are actually like?”, and “Do you think a book you've read has ever changed you or the way you see others?” These were open-response questions, with the students mostly typing full sentences. For some of the questions, for example “How much do you enjoy writing?” and “Do you like to read to others?”, the students were asked to respond on a scale from one to ten.

After this survey, I visited the classroom twice a week for an hour and a half each time, for a total of about 48 classroom observation hours. Throughout my time in the classroom, these observation hours looked quite different as I gained the trust and respect of the students. At the beginning, I sat at the back table, having small interactions with the students, but mostly observing. Quickly, as the students became acclimated to me, we chatted more, which took away from my observations. That being said, I would rather have trusted relationships with the students than in-depth field notes from all 48 hours of observations. There were times I participated in classroom games like “Night at the Museum” and others where I acted as Ms. Pratchett from Roald Dahl's autobiography, *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, during roleplaying activities. I talked to my students about topics ranging from nerves about trumpet solos, fears of deportation, and how smelly their dog's poop was that morning. Because of this, what started as

genuine fieldnotes with observations of facial expressions and body language quickly turned into one-off quotes or scribbling to get a full conversation, sometimes neglecting other important information.

As we moved into book clubs and I was facilitating a discussion with four students once a week, my trusty orange notebook was packed almost exclusively with quotes. At times, I would write without looking at the page to the point where only I would be able to read my nearly incomprehensible scribbles. Often, when I walked back to my car, I frantically wrote words I heard the students saying or interactions I witnessed. I would sit in the driver's seat for up to 20 minutes, filling in the blanks or attempting to jog my memory about what the students had just said. While certainly not the most efficient way to make observations and quote the students, I was also very committed to making sure the students knew I was there to participate and that I was not just there to extract quotes from them.

Method of enacting critical literacy

As for my facilitation methods, my philosophy was centered around active listening. This included not only strong listening from me, but also encouraging the students to really listen to each other. Before facilitating, I observed the four students I would be working with, which gave me a good understanding of their social dynamics and general comfort level with each other. This made facilitating easier because I knew, for example, that Rose Marie needed frequent prompting, whereas Bella sometimes needed to be reminded to stay on topic. I attempted to lead the active listening by example by ensuring I followed up on statements that students made and guiding students to follow their critical train of thought rather than interrupting them with my own.

In facilitating, I wanted to make sure the students knew what the expectations were and what I was up to with my notebook. Before we met to read, we met as a group of five to talk about being the focus group for my research. Here, I presented them with printed paper that defined a few concepts, including critical literacy, critical consciousness, and mirrors[8] as representative literature. I wanted to make sure the students knew what I was doing, so they did not feel misled. Because this was the first time we were all alone, I think the students were a little hesitant to ask questions. However, when I asked if they needed any of the concepts clarified and they all said no, I trusted them and moved on. I moved on to explaining my method of field notes, and what I intended to do with the data. Towards the end of this initial meeting, I was concerned that the students were still confused or concerned about my work, but as I was leaving the class, I overheard Bella explaining to Amaree that she was going to be included in "cool" research by Ms. Fontaine, to which she followed up by explaining some of my theoretical frameworks quite accurately. This ensured to me that at least Bella understood what and why I was researching; having fully informed participants was important to the integrity of this work.

Another method of data collection I used was collecting writing samples from the students. All of these writing samples were assignments they were given by their classroom teacher, meaning it was a standard educational practice and my collection did not affect the students. They were mostly typed assignments and turned in for a grade. Examples of writing samples from the student consist of essays about Edgar Allan Poe's perspective on death and character feelings charts from Alexander Kwame's book *The Crossover* (Kwame, 2022). While these did not make it into my paper, I found them helpful because they gave me insight into the students' writing ability, which allowed me to better assist in the classroom in general.

[8] By mirrors, I am referring to Dr. Bishop's concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors where a mirror text is one that reflects a reader's life, opposed to a window which lets you see into another person's life, or a sliding glass door which invites you to participate in another person's experiences.

For example, one day, Ms. Mahoney asked me to sit down with Maria to help her finish the essay they had all been assigned. Days earlier, I had been poking around the essays the teacher had sent me from the month before and I was able to read both Maria's work and Ms. Mahoney's response. With this knowledge, I assumed she was on accommodations, due to the differences in her essay compared to her peers. I say this because as I sat down with Maria, I was able to better assist, knowing what work she had produced the month before. Rather than asking the theoretical leading questions that I might have asked Willson to support him with his essay, I focused more on transition words and getting her thoughts onto the page. While many of the students' writing samples might not have ended up in my thesis, that does not mean they were not meaningful to the project as a whole. I think having access to the bits and pieces that I did allowed me to be a better support in the classroom, rather than just a mere observer.

Lastly, I interviewed the teacher. The intention of the interview was to gain insight into past classes and compare how the new access to books has been beneficial for the students. Of course, students change from year to year, so it is not fair to compare past students to new students, but I was looking for a general sense. Although we had many other conversations that were question and answer, the formal interview took place before school on a Friday at 7:45 am.

As I walked into the building, there was no symphony of children talking; instead, the mood was calm and slow. I happened to beat Ms. Mahoney to her classroom, so I read some of the students' work that was hanging up outside the 5th-grade classroom. Moments later, Ms. Mahoney walked in, and we made our way into the class. At this point, I was no longer visiting the class twice a week. The students knew I was spending my time writing, but sometimes I would go in during advisory to spend time in the class. Most recently, I had been in to have the

students pick their pseudonyms, which turned into a game of who can come up with the most brain rot[9] name. We had many giggles that day.

Ms. Mahoney and I sat down at her desk and chatted for the 20-minute interview. We talked about the books, students, and the implications of the project. I was able to ask specific questions that pertained to the students that felt inappropriate to ask while the whole class was there. I had a list of questions prepared, which I supplemented with follow-up questions as they arose based on the direction of our conversation. As we were wrapping up, Shelly and Willson walked in, which was surprising to me because often they were tardy. Shelly was shocked to see me, but she made her way over for a hug. I unfortunately had to leave to get to my own class, but I saw a few more of the students as I made my way down the three flights of stairs. The implications of this interview were minimal, but I am happy we did it.

Overall, my most significant data came from my interactions with the students. They were the producers of knowledge, and our conversations were my most significant contributions. There are dozens of pages of notes, hours of classroom experiences, plenty of written work, and an uncountable number of meaningful quotes that did not make it into this paper. This project produced enough data for many more theses, but that means much of the rich data did not make it into this paper.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I used two lenses and two methods. One of my lenses focused on literacy skills, and the other on critical consciousness. In terms of methods, I spend months analyzing my data using coding, and another month or so looking at the data using discourse

[9] The students used the word *brain rot* to describe the silly names they were coming up with. Brainrot refers to a deteriorating mental state / capacity due to excessive internet use. Many of the references in the case were trends from Tik Tok.

analysis. I chose all of these methods and lenses because they directly relate to my research questions and helped keep my research specific to what I was investigating while allowing space for deepening unexpected findings. These methods and lenses also align with my theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Lenses

For my critical consciousness lens, I adapted language from Arman Abednia and Mahsa Izadinia's research about critical consciousness in classroom settings (2014). They used the categories: 1) drawing on their own experience, 2) contextualizing issues, 3) problem posing, 4) defining and redefining key concepts, and 5) offering solutions as their themes. I used these categories to show where students are making sense and building critical consciousness.

"Drawing on one's own experience" is the foundation of using critical literacy to build critical consciousness, which is also why using books that the students can relate to is so essential to this work. This lens focuses on students making sense of the text in relation to their own lives and experiences. This category is one that can show critical consciousness because it is the beginning of understanding broader social inequalities or systems of oppression as it relates to their own experiences.

To me, "contextualizing issues" means to draw analogies between the problems from the text and real-life people, places, and understandings. Looking at the data through this lens, I picked out examples of the foundations of students building critical consciousness because this is where they understand a character's problem and relate it to the real world. Contextualizing issues involves bringing in evidence from the world through the students' perspective, which gives a deeper understanding of the issue in the text.

The category “problem posing” is where students bring up topics like power struggles, microaggressions, or assumptions from the text and question them. By questioning where these pieces of the text are coming from, the students not only acknowledge systems of oppression but also question why they exist, which is a key component of critical literacy and therefore critical consciousness. When looking at the data through this lens, I picked out moments where students, either explicitly or not, were questioning the world around them.

While “defining and redefining concepts” seem to be very different things, I used them together to recognise growth. Defining concepts like justice, race, and culture were in this category. By redefining them, the students show a change in understanding that has come from dialogue with peers, which is the purpose of critical consciousness.

The last category for understanding how students are using critical literacy to build critical consciousness is how they are “suggesting solutions”. A key component of critical literacy is going beyond the analysis of the word and becoming agents of change in the world. This category was sparse in data, but rich in content. Students are not taught to be agents of change, or that their ideas are powerful enough to change the world. Instead, they are socialized into not offering the solutions they may think of; they are taught to be obedient to the status quo. That being said, there were several examples of students suggesting solutions, and certainly more when I was not there to observe them.

These five categories are how I assessed that students are using critical literacy to build on their critical consciousness. I am specifically interested in how these interactions support their overall literacy development. To do that, I coded within these themes to look for evidence of meeting or exceeding literacy standards from both Massachusetts Massachusetts Educational

Standard and the Common Core, as well as general coding for understanding their critical consciousness.

To assess where students are in their literacy development, I first needed to read the 6th Grade Massachusetts Educational Standards for ELA and the Common Core to pick out applicable standards.[10] To do this, I copied and pasted all of the ELA-related standards into a document and highlighted the standards that related to my research. I made this distinction because had I kept all of them, I would have been looking at evidence. For example, for students meeting Standard W.6.6, which says "Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing" (Pg. 62). Instead, I kept only the standards I cared to assess, for example, Standard W.6.1 that reads "Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence."

I then went through my data and categorized evidence for each standard. I had previously made titles for each story/situation so that I did not have to write out the entire interaction, I could just put the title. As I began to write, I then referenced the document daily to ensure that if I was using some of the examples, I would cite which standard the student was showing evidence of meeting. The standards document is shown in my appendix.

Discourse analysis

My main methodology was discourse analysis, which I used because it is more nuanced and flexible as opposed to coding, although I did that too. Discourse analysis has to do with individual words and how they relate to the context, rather than looking at the data from the level of a word or words as codes. Discourse analysis has five underlying principles: Situated, social, cultural model/figured worlds, intertextuality, and big D discourse (Gee, 2014). James Gee noted

[10]This document can be found in Appendix B.

that “Paulo Freire (1995, org. 1968) long ago pointed out that understanding language (in any useful way) requires understanding the world. Reading the word requires reading the world. To understand what is being said in any deep way, we need to know what speakers or writers are trying to do. This requires us to know about social practices and genres of activity in the world” (Gee, 2015, p. 1). As Gee points out, it would be a disservice to my students if I did not attempt to understand the social practices and intentions behind their words by analyzing them at face value.

The first principle of discourse analysis is understanding the situated meaning of a statement. Situated meaning is the idea that the words we use are not directly tied to one meaning, but instead sewn together by the context in which we say them, and who we say them to. An example from my research is the use of the word *cooked*. One day, Jamal received a bad grade, to which he started to panic, saying, “Yo bro, I am so cooked. I am *so* cooked!” In this context, Jamal was conveying to Chuck that his dad would be very disappointed and that he is going to get in a lot of trouble for his bad grade, not that he was going to cook something up. My positionality, specifically my age, made seeing modern uses of words easier, but I can guarantee I did not understand it all. Essentially, situated meaning is understanding that language is not static, but rather that it and the meanings and motives it conveys are in flux, as shown in this example.

The second principle of discourse analysis is social meaning, or in other words, what social or identity-based “work” the speaker is trying to do. Are they establishing authority, or are they attempting to connect to others? Perhaps they are trying to convey values or emotion. Language is inherently a social practice, where we all attempt to convey information, take a stance, or assert dominance while in dialogue. Within social meaning, it is important to pay

attention to pronoun use, specifically in relation to power. An example from my research is that at the beginning of our book club group chats, the students would say *we*, relating to just themselves as students, and therefore positioning me separately from them, but as time passed, this *we* became *us*. One day, Bella was talking about her struggle with the family dog. She was discussing how her family dynamics make it so she must walk the dogs before school in the cold. After her statement, she said, "You all get it," as she gestured to all of us, myself included. By saying "you all," she was including me in her assumption that we all understood how nuanced family dynamics can make it so that younger kids have to take on more responsibilities. This look into pronoun usage as a way of affirming community is an example of analyzing through a social meaning lens.

Another lens that supports discourse analysis would be to see how the speaker is attempting to build figured worlds. One word, one statement, can carry a full worldview, and it is important to pay attention to that. An example from my work is when Rose Marie said, "Kids should be able to express themselves." The use of the word *should* implies that in her world, kids are not yet able to fully express themselves, but that she believes they should be able to. This is Rose Marie's view of the world—her figured world—which would be different than if *I* were asked to make a similar statement.This example demonstrates why it is essential that one pays attention to the implications of speech as it relates to the speaker's world view, not just the words at face value.

Another essential aspect of discourse analysis is intertextuality. Intertextuality heavily relies on social and cultural knowledge and identity groups. As you speak or write, you use language and meaning from other bits of the world and from social groups to attempt to put yourself in or out of social groups. An example of this was when my students were talking about

having a family that lives abroad, and I said, “My brother lives in Korea.” I was not just stating a fact, but attempting to relate to the students in an effort to have them trust me as more of a peer. With this statement, I was positioning myself to a certain identity groups, namely those who have close family living far away. If I were not understanding this statement from an intertextual lens, I would not have picked up on the motives of identity claiming that came with this statement.

The last essential principle of discourse analysis is Big D discourse, which “stresses how 'discourse' (language in use among people) is always also a 'conversation' among different historically formed Discourses (that is, a 'conversation' among different socially and historically significant kinds of people or social groups).” I understand this as the concepts that go beyond the spoken word, but that hold deep value and meaning.

As I was analyzing quotes from the students, I was paying close attention to social identities mentioned, the use of English words as reflections of power, and how they perceived their positionality. The intention here was to unpack the underlying meaning of the student's words while acknowledging that I am making assumptions regarding the meaning of what they are saying. By using discourse analysis, I attempted to break down students' words while keeping the context of class and their lives in check.

Coding

I started my data analysis using coding, but was underwhelmed by the results. I felt that as I was picking out words in their statements, I was missing essential context. I also felt as though coding did not require me to critique my own understanding of the students' words as much. That being said, I did use coding specifically for the survey data. When I coded, I used the technique of a code book with the goal of picking out themes from the data. I did initially

complete these steps; however, I was unhappy with the results and ultimately chose not to use the themes in my findings.

Participant verification

To ensure that my data was honest, I utilized participant verification. Participant verification is when participants in research are able to provide feedback regarding one's findings in qualitative research. I was hesitant to do this, but then I asked myself , what am I nervous about? All of the data is truthful, and I put hard work into analyzing, but not generalizing, what they were saying, and I had nothing to be nervous about. So with that, I headed to Stone School with a summary of my findings in hand.

The last time my book club met to focus solely on my research was at the beginning of the year, when I was showing them the theory and lens I would be using to conduct my research. The students were relatively engaged, but not overly curious. This time, the response was quite different. We sat at a table this time as I described to the students what I had been up to for the past month or so: writing. They were curious to know how many pages I had written and how much I was expected to write, but I was more focused on telling them what my findings were and hearing their thoughts about it. I told them that I found dialogue, specifically storytelling, to be central to building critical literacy. I explained how I noticed they were much more likely to start a conversation about social inequalities when they could relate to the book, as opposed to when Ms. Mahoney started these conversations. Additionally, I said that I found that they are quite confident that they know how they learn best, which is through representative literature. I was hoping for a dialogue like those we had in our book club, but instead, Bella said, "You ate[11] that up," and we all giggled. I asked what they all thought of it, and Bella and Victoria said they

[11] Ate in this context is a modern term for success. Bella is trying to convey that I did well with my findings.

really wanted to read the *whole* thing. I took this to mean that they were happy with the work, and Willson confirmed this by saying, “Yeah, that’s good,” when I asked what he thought of it all. As I explained the process to them, Bella and Victoria said that they wanted to attend my thesis defense. I unfortunately had to disappoint them and say it was during MCAS testing and there was no way of getting out of it, but that I would come tell them all about it once I was done. As we were transitioning from talking about my thesis to our usual life updates chat, Mr. Spencer came in to tell us there would be a fire drill commencing, and we had to head back to class to prepare. This is when, as we were walking down the hall, Bella confided her interest in becoming a researcher. This brief comment was overwhelming to me, because it was at this moment where I realized this work was not only affecting their literacy and critical consciousness, but also their perceptions of self and their future plans. I hope to continue to instill in Bella her abilities in research and as a critical examiner of the world.

Learning from Uncertainty

“We do not always know where we are going, when we embark on the intellectual journey. We might begin with a hunch, a gut feeling, a question that nags. We write our way into clarity. Sometimes we write ourselves out of it again. The path is not straight, and it should not be.”

— Sara Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life (2017), p. 13

Switching to facilitation

This project changed drastically from its beginning in January of 2024 to its culmination in May of 2025. I went through multiple theoretical frameworks, had a plethora of changes to my research questions, and spent many hours deleting more from my paper than adding. However,

what never changed was my passion for the students. I adore the youth and aim to make them proud. As I wrote, they followed along, always wanting to know how many pages I had written. The students have been the most consistent aspect of this project, even as my own trust and understanding were wavering.

One of my major reframing moments was my first turn in praxis class. It was my first turn to pose a dilemma to my peers, and I honestly did not know what to expect. What I did know was that I certainly had many dilemmas and was looking forward to some help unpacking them. Before my turn, I had been to 308 six times, and the expectations for the future book clubs were not set. The beginning of my dilemma reflection paper was as follows:

> "My dilemma is that my research goals and expectations do not align with the teacher's plans. I was hoping to just observe the classroom and hang out with the students, however, the teacher expects that I will lead a small group through discussion and activities related to the books I have introduced. While I would be interested in doing this, I don't feel qualified, and it seems unfair to have one group have a teacher that is not trained or a part of underrepresented groups in literature, which is what the research is about."

On the surface, I wanted advice about whether I should lead the small group discussions; however, I was really looking for advice about my positionality in the class. I was nervous that I would be overstepping and that my identity as an outsider, both in reference to the school and their racial identities, would make for significant disruption to their learning.

As we sat in a swelteringly hot classroom, my praxis peers asked probing questions, summarized my problem, and helped clarify the assumptions I might have been making. My peers offered project-changing insight about how I was looking at my research. My biggest takeaway was to center my students. I was humbled by the point made by my peers that students were not the center of my dilemma. This made me concerned that I was just talking the talk, not

walking the walk. If my research is about representation and I want to promote social equality, then I need to reflect that in my actions surrounding this project. To do this, I needed to make the adjustment of centering the students in all my decisions and actions. In the past, I thought that pretending I was in the classroom to just hang out with the students was the best way to approach my observations, but after this conversation, I realized that was not being truthful. From there, I decided I would directly inform the students and encourage them to ask questions and be involved in the decision-making. Some tangible steps to involve the students more as authentic participants was to give them autonomy. I made sure to ask if they wanted me to lead a small group, ask for their feedback, and keep them informed on my findings. I was proud of my ability to walk the line between research, facilitator, mentor, and general supporter. As I was developing my findings, I told my book club group about them. They were particularly interested in my findings about storytelling. Bella even said that she wanted to be a researcher because she liked how *easy* it was to come up with the findings. She said, "All you have to do is listen," which is what I worked hard to do.

Another point that was mentioned during my turn-taking was how I see my research and my identity as a burden. This development changed how I was framing my work. In praxis class, I had said that my research was a burden to the 6th-grade class, and I believed this until my peers helped me reframe it. To me, load and burden are different, and I now rescind my use of burden in my dilemma statement. Burden holds guilt, whereas load just holds additional action or work. I see my research as an extra load because the teacher has more work to do to incorporate me and the research into the class. For example, she reminded her students day in and day out to return the parent consent forms I had given out, spending class time to help me get what I needed. That being said, her excitement and acceptance of this work made it very clear that she is willing and

able to support me in this research, and I need to remind myself of this to relieve the feeling of guilt. As for my racial identity as a burden in the classroom, I think my peers raised some good points. First, I was reminded that most teachers in this public school system are white women, so the students might not think anything of it. Someone also mentioned that being aware and understanding of my whiteness is as much as I can do. While I disagree with this a little bit, it is a good point that many of the white women these students are learning from do not address their identity, so it could be beneficial for all to have me participate as a small group facilitator who is conscious of my whiteness. That being said, I believe it is essential to go beyond awareness, and I, of course, have more learning to do as well.

In my findings, you will see that I heavily relied on the conversations that were a product of my small group facilitation. Without the advice from my peers to center these conversations and to lead a small group, I would have stuck to my strictly outsider positionality, and this paper would have been drastically different. Leading the small groups has led me to hear rich conversations and get to know the students more personally. I pride myself on my connection to Bella, Willson, Rose Marie, and Victoria, and this is because I was confident enough to lean into uncertainty.

Understanding Genuine Quantitative Work

On the surface, I have always understood the difference between qualitative and quantitative research; quantitative research being numbers and qualitative research being an emphasis on words. But in reality, I went into what was supposed to be a qualitative praxis project with my heart set on “proving” something, a distinctly quantitative quality. I was convinced I would change how people would perceive representative literature through hard

facts and statistics. I originally wanted to compare test scores and use grades as a metric of literacy development, and focus mainly on numbers.

Over many car rides with my friend Ezra, late nights with a journal, and early chats over breakfast with Emma, I came to discover that I was approaching it all wrong. A distinct switch in my understanding of the purpose of my work was during a trip to Philadelphia to speak and attend the Ethnography in Education Research Forum. This trip came as an opportunity from Praxis class with the intention of receiving feedback on our work, while also learning from others. The advice we got from our presentation was certainly helpful, but attending the other presentations from quality, trusted researchers was significantly more valuable. I watched people who had been doing research for up to ten years grapple with research questions. I witnessed true collaboration as I sat in on data analysis workshops. I saw practitioners' gears turning as they learned in real time from each other. Sitting in UPenn's Graduate School of education building, next to world-renowned researchers, I scribbled furiously in my little orange notebook.

What I took away mostly from this experience was not about their research: in fact, I am not sure I could describe any of the findings I heard. However, their methodologies stuck with me. I began to understand that qualitative research is just as much about what you learn from the process then your final research findings. Watching PhD candidates be honest about their struggles through research validated my concerns about my own research and taught me to lean on my communities for help. I also really began to solidify the idea that all qualitative research is rooted in context, and it is impossible to make generalizable statements when you are working with data that comes from individual people as opposed to just numbers.

Ultimately, I have worked hard to get to the place I am with my research. There are certainly other methods I could have used, scenarios I could have changed, and theories I could have read to prepare for this work, but that is all part of the praxis journey anyway.

Limitations

Along with changes to my own understanding of research and the project as a whole, there were also other limitations to this research, with one of the most prominent being time. Time I could have spent in the classroom, time I could have spent analysing, time I could have spent unpacking the data—I wish I had more of all of it. Unfortunately, I was only able to attend two out of five of the class periods of the Lions during the time of my research, but ideally, I would have been there all the time.

Furthermore, there was certainly a limit to my knowledge of how to conduct research, more specifically, praxis research. As you just read, I went into this project treating it almost as quantitative work. I initially wanted to compare test scores of students, in an unfair hierarchical competition of literacy development, "Proof." I have since reckoned with and changed my perspective on all things research, and am drawn to learn more about qualitative methodologies.

Findings

[Our responsibility is to] "scrutinize the often very subtle messages about identity and difference that float between the lines of the curriculum and consciously work to construct opportunities, in which all of the members of the community are able to interrogate their construction of self and other."

— Marilyn Chochran-Smith, 2000, p. 31

Storytelling as Meaning-Making

My key finding, and the biggest takeaway from this research for me as a discussion facilitator for students reading representative literature, was to make space for storytelling, specifically when a reading related to someone's culture that is not often represented in text. After months of looking at my data and becoming increasingly frustrated at staring at all these "one-off" stories and seeming tangents, I then realized that these stories held deepimportance; most of my data came from students telling personal stories. What follows are a few of the many examples of students making sense of a text through personal storytelling, with an analysis of what academic standards the students were showing evidence of.

One of my favorite examples of a student deepening their comprehension and building literacy skills while making personal connections to a culturally relevant book is when I was independently reading with Victoria. We were reading *The Crossover*, which is not in the curriculum, but Ms. Mahoney uses it as additional reading in an effort to present more relatable material. The story follows middle school twins who play basketball while navigating love interests, family health problems, and personal disputes. It was independent reading time, and I could see that Victoria was obviously trying to read but was getting visibly frustrated. I watched her mindlessly fiddling with her braids while reading the same passage over and over again. After a few minutes, I decided to intervene to see if something substantial was distracting her to the point where she could not focus, in which case I would offer a listening ear, or if she needed gentle motivation to begin actually reading. I slowly made my way across the room in an effort not to disturb the other students, most of whom were reading on their Chromebooks, using headphones to listen to an audiobook version of their text. As I knelt down, I asked her if she

wanted to go out into the hall to talk or read. She eagerly took me up on this offer, quickly pushing her chair and leading me out the door.

It was a Tuesday, so naturally, my first question when we closed the door and were able to speak at a normal volume, was "How was your weekend?" She looked a bit timid, and she responded with a "good" and a slight giggle. I then asked if she wanted to partner with me because I remembered that she enjoys reading with other people over reading alone. She delightedly opened the book and faced it towards me, gesturing for me to begin reading. As I read the first few lines, I realized I was terribly lost and we would both benefit from a quick refresher of what had happened in the book, so I asked her to give me a recap. She began by telling me that the cops had just pulled over the dad in the story, but very quickly she was telling me about a time a cop pulled her and her mom over.

She described the scene as midday, she and her mom were going grocery shopping after just having bought Dunkin Donuts. Victoria was in the front seat with her seat unbuckled and was shocked, confused, and scared when she realized that her mom was being pulled over. She was used to the lights flashing *past* the car, not stopping *behind* her. Her mother told her to put down her donut, which is when Victoria realized this was a serious situation. I was curious what the traffic violation was, but before getting to that point, Victoria said she was feeling nervous about being pulled over "in the same way JB was."

This connection could have very easily just been in reference to the fact that both Victoria and JB (the main character in *The Crossover*) were witnessing their parents getting pulled over. However, I think because both Victoria and JB are Black kids in America, this feeling of nerves was specific to racialized police brutality that both Victoria and JB could understand and feel the rational fear of. As I was gearing up to respond, Victoria related her story seamlessly back to the

text, saying “Nothing really happened to my mom or JB’s dad, but then he didn’t do well in his game,” implying that he was still mentally distracted from the traffic stop, which made him perform poorly in basketball. The phrase “nothing *really* happened” leads me to believe that Victoria was expecting something more, presumably negative, to happen when both her mom and JB’s dad were pulled over, and she was surprised when “nothing really happened.”

The connection that Victoria made here would not have been possible if she had not been racially related to the character. This connection allowed her to empathize with JB and make inferences as to why his game was off. In addition to that, if I had not let her tell the story of her mom being pulled over, she might not have deepened her character analysis. To me, Victoria gained confidence in her understanding of the story; she was reading the world and the word, and although she did not directly name this, I believe she was thinking critically about race relations in the US. Here, using storytelling, Victoria contextualized issues by validating the characters' experiences using her own to deepen her understanding of the text.

Victoria also met many specific education standards through her storytelling, with the most prominent being “Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.” (RL 6.1) Victoria was making inferences about how JB’s nervousness about being pulled over as a Black person in America might have affected his basketball game using not only textual evidence, but also evidence from her own life.

Another example of a student making a personal connection to text through storytelling in which they were directly practicing literacy skills, was when Bella helped us understand Quinceañeras better. It was our first time meeting as a book club, so Bella, Willson, Rose Marie, and Victoria eagerly led me down the hall to the STEAM lab where they had requested that we meet. Walking down the hall, we passed a 2nd-grade class that had two students from the

after-school program I worked at. My 6th graders watched as some of the 2nd graders disobeyed their teacher to come to hug me. I could faintly hear Willson say, “How does she know them?” To which Bella confidently responded, “Don’t you listen? She literally told us she works at [name of program].” I note this interaction because I think seeing that other students in the building liked and trusted me subtly built trust in my book club group. The morning after this interaction, Rose Marie, Victoria, and Bella all hugged me when I walked in.

Once we made it to the STEAM lab, the students stood around looking between the lab tables and the deep blue couch. Not knowing the expectations, the students hesitantly made their way to the table, but before they could sit, I said, “Can we sit on the couches?” All four students' eyes widened at the idea that I was asking them to decide, because often in school, students are not acknowledged as decision-makers. I believe these two interactions solidified for the students my identity as more of a facilitator rather than a teacher, which impacted the following interaction.

We began reading the book, but the students were making frequent interruptions, and I was not stopping them from doing so. For example, on one of the first pages, Bella blurted out, “I think they are Hispanic because I see the Dominican flag at the salon.” Shortly after, when we read about Marline (the main character in *Frizzy*) getting her hair done at the salon and having neck pain as a result, Rose Marie, whom I had heard speak only a handful of times in class, said, “OMG, that happens to me too!”Rose Marie then proceeded to explain that she is now too big to wash her hair in the sink at home, so she has to wash it leaning over the tub. Here, she was empathizing with Marline, once again making a connection that she would not have been able to if she did not racially relate to the character.

While these examples certainly support my claim that racially and culturally representative literature supports critical consciousness and literacy skills through storytelling, the most prominent example from this first book club day was when Bella taught us about Quinceañeras.

What prompted this story was Willson asking Bella how to pronounce the word Quinceañera. She not only helped pronounce the word, but also went into a long explanation and personal connection to the main character attending her cousin's Quinceañera. Bella told us about how she wore blue when she went to her aunt's Quinceañera. Bella told us that she couldn't wait to pick out a dress for her own Quinceañera and that she wanted gold and purple as her colors. She told us that her aunt got *so* many presents, and that they danced all night. The story that really helped with meaning-making for all of us was how Bella contextualized Marline hiding in the closet during the Quinceañera. Bella said, "It's a huge party, but that would be so weird if you left like Marline. Like, I would be in trouble. You are not supposed to leave like that." She then went into a story about a time her cousin went missing at a waterpark, and as she said, because her family is loud and Latino, they found him quickly. She used her own experience to make the connection that if you go missing at a Quinceañera, you will be quickly found, as was Marline, and people would not be very happy with your behavior. These bits of information allowed everyone to understand the context of the story and have a better analysis of the plot.

Through allowing Bella to tell her story, we all gained a deeper understanding of the text itself and the world it created. The space and time that Bella had to share gave the rest of us greater context. It also helped me understand the complexities of their identities. Two of the students in the book club classified themselves as Latino; the other two did not say, but all of them seemed to feel racially represented in the text. However, only Bella had the cultural

experience of having been to a Quinceañera, which added to my understanding of identity as nuanced.

In summary, the use of storytelling as dialogic processing when making connections to racially and culturally representative books was always met with students exemplifying literacy skills. Making space for storytelling is not a standard educational practice in many classrooms because it is often seen as a tangent, or off-topic, but as the examples outlined above reveal, the students were making meaningful connections between their world and the world, which is a core principle in literacy development.

Representation Fosters Independent Critical Literacy

I will give four examples of the class using critical consciousness to critique a text. However, two of the instances were prompted by the students and two by the teacher. The main difference between the two interactions was the text they were in reference to; the students were making critical claims when reading racially and culturally representative literature, but they struggled to do so with literature on which they could not relate as easily. In those instances, the teacher was often the first to make the connection, resulting in my finding that representation fosters independent critical literacy.

One of the examples where the teacher led the class through a critique of the word and the world was in the midst of their discussions around *Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe. This is the story of a person in the 1800s who murders someone, and as the police attempt to get to the bottom of it, the character confuses their anxiously rapid heartbeat with their victim's to the point of confession (Poe, 1843). It was early November when our class was reading *Tell-Tale Heart* over the span of a few days. It took longer than average because of the old-fashioned language and nuance in the story. After finally finishing it, the class was sitting at their tables in groups,

having a class discussion about the title of the book. Ms. Mahoney was asking and prompting questions, and the class was coming to the conclusion that the character's *heartbeat* was *telling* the *tale* of the murder. The students were analyzing the character's motives, saying things like, "What if he is just trying to help out the old man because he can't do anything anymore?" and "He pities the old man because he is just an old man. Sometimes they are confused and alone." In all of the statements made about the main character, the students were consistently saying *he*, which Ms. Mahoney pointed out by saying, "You all interpreted that very well, but I did notice everyone calling the main character *he*." She let that statement sink in for a while as I watched the gears in Jesslyn's mind turning. The students seemed not to have considered the gender identity of the character, nor how that affected their perception of the story. From here, a beautiful, full-class discussion broke out.

This discussion started the way many of our full-class discussions did, which was with Chuck stating his opinion, "Okay, but he literally killed someone, and mostly men do that. And he was hanging out with the cops, and the cops were men, so it makes sense that he is a man." To which Willson quickly chimed in to say, "Yeah, and a woman would not have been so scared of her own heart, like my mom is never scared." Willson's perceptions of feminine traits clearly were not aligned with Jaylen's, who responded "Bro, your mom could not have killed someone. Only men do that, and they are not scared when they do it. My mom definitely would not have done that." Willson, in defense of his mom, retorted "Yo, I didn't say my mom would kill someone, just that she could handle it." To this, Amaree raised her hand and said, "Yeah, women go through a lot and can do a lot, so the speaker could be a girl." The conversation continued, and eventually, Rose Marie said, "When Mr. Spencer was reading, I thought it was a boy, and when you [Ms. Mahoney] was reading, I thought it was a girl." Chuck was now standing out of

his chair as he frequently did, but he began backtracking from his statements earlier in the discussion, saying, “I saw a girl murder someone one time in a show,” leading me to believe that he might be convinced that women can commit murder. Lastly, he claimed, “I just don’t think this story was about a girl,” to which Amaree responded, “It literally doesn’t matter.”

A few things are noteworthy about this interaction: before this day, I had noticed Amaree spoke only a handful of times, meaning her significant contributions in this dialogue showed a deep desire to speak. Additionally, Ms. Mahoney prompted the first comment, and when the discussion died down, she followed up again, meaning she doubled down on her commitment to having the students engage in this conversation. While they generated a very interesting class discussion, they were guided to the topic.

As I observed the students discussing the qualities of men and women, I watched many of them problematize their classmates' thinking and redefine their expectations of gender, both of which are examples from my methodology of how people boost critical consciousness. Amaree's comment claiming it does not matter was significant because many of her classmates, who were convinced the speaker was a man, were at least getting a perspective different from their own.

This discussion contributed to their literacy development by considering the perspectives of authors, which is highlighted in standard RL.6.6: “Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.” The students were exploring the author's decision not to use pronouns in this text, which changed how they perceived the situation. Overall, this example shows the students engaging with social norms, gender stereotypes, and masculine expectations.

Another example of the teacher guiding students to critically examine the world around them using an unrepresentative text was during our reading of *The Secret of the Yellow Death* by

Suzanne Jurmain. In short, *The Secret of the Yellow Death* is about the four white American doctors, with mentions of one Cuban doctor, who saved the world by working tirelessly to find the source of yellow fever, and look for a cure.While I was not present for most of the reading of this text, I came to realize that it was essential that the students understood it because there was a full MCAS (standardized test) dedicated to analyzing it.

In late November, as the air began to hit a consistent chill, causing the obnoxiously loud heating system at Stone School to kick into full force, we finished reading *The Secret of the Yellow Death* as a class. Quickly after reading the concluding sentence, Ms. Mahoney stood at the front of the class with the students in their respective seats, and posed the question, "Does the yellow fever virus remind you of any viruses you have experienced recently?" From my perspective, from the corner of the room, I saw a few figurative light bulbs go off, specifically Chuck, who blurted out, "It's like COVID!" Ms. Mahoney followed up this realization with an explanation of how vaccines were distributed worldwide, emphasizing that poor countries were the last to receive the vaccine, causing significantly more deaths among people of color worldwide due to the inequitable distribution of the vaccine, a result of classist healthcare systems.

Following this explanation, Ms. Mahoney then asked, "So who is the most likely to now get yellow fever?" to which Maria declared, "Africa!" "And who is going to get the yellow fever vaccine first?" said Ms. Mahoney, to which Maria said again, "Africa!" Willson quickly responded, with some judgment in his voice, "No, it's the rich countries." "Well, that's not fair," said Maria. Here, she was problematizing a real-world inequity that she could contextualize through the reading of *The Secret* of the *Yellow Death*, subsequently building her critical consciousness.

Chuck, who had been quiet for an abnormally long time, a minute or two, then chimed in saying, “It’s because of money, bro.” He followed this up by saying, “It’s like how we don't take care of homeless people and we put things in their face like ‘Ehhh you want this.’” Chuck's comment offers a powerful glimpse into his developing critical consciousness and literacy skills, specifically through his understanding of issues of public health, inequality, and systemic injustice in our society.

In this moment, Chuck's comment about money and its relation to public health shows an emerging awareness of how societal structures, particularly economic forces, shape the distribution of care. When he links this to the treatment of homeless people, Chuck is describing a parallel between how marginalized groups, in this case, both homeless individuals and people in parts of Africa, are often ignored or treated unfairly in the context of vaccine distribution. His comment reflects an understanding of structural inequities, a key component of critical consciousness. Chuck was not just passively absorbing facts; he was beginning to analyze and critique the world around him through the lens of power dynamics, highlighting how money drives the allocation of resources and how this creates disparities.

Chuck's ability to draw this connection is also a sign of growing literacy skills, specifically Standard 6.W.1: "Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence." While he was not writing a claim, he was certainly supporting it with relevant evidence that connected the word to the world. In this case, Chuck was recognizing how issues like race, money, and public health intersect, and was making a claim about vaccines by making a connection to an issue he understands more. By linking the delayed distribution of vaccines in Africa to broader patterns of exclusion, like how homeless people are treated in society, Chuck was engaging in an analytical process that moves beyond surface-level understanding. He was

starting to see the bigger picture and articulate it in a way that reflects both his comprehension of the material and his emerging ability to think critically about it. This connection happened because his teacher made the initial connection between vaccines and identities.

Both of these examples show Ms. Mahoney's strong commitment to fostering critical consciousness, particularly when reading text that reinforces social inequalities, as the examples above did. The times when students were making the initial world connection were times when they could racially or culturally relate to the book. An example of this is when my book club students began a conversation about the racist motivation behind banning books.

This conversation started with our normal walk down the hall to the STEAM lab for book clubs. This walk, while only a couple of hundred feet, is often when we share updates on our lives with each other. The previous week, we were discussing our Halloween costumes, and this week, the students were asking what I was planning on doing this weekend. To that, I responded, "I have an MTEL, which is a Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure, so I have to study and take the exam." Bella, presumably only half listening, said, "I thought they were banning MCAS." I think Bella thought I was taking an MCAS, because that does sound quite like MTEL, and while they are both standardized tests, they are a bit different. I took this opportunity to explain to the students that they were not being banned, but instead, we passed a bill saying they are no longer required for graduation.

At this point, we had made it to the STEAM lab, and we settled into our normal spots on the blue couch. Rose Marie, who had not offered any verbal contributions yet, chimed in, saying in her usual low-toned voice, "Well, they are banning books." This transition from banning tests to banning books was a little shocking to me, but it was clear this was important to Rose Marie

because if just the word “banning” reminded her of this, then seemingly this topic was on her mind.

In response, Willson said, “Honestly, I don’t think books, especially teaching about stereotypes and race, should be banned because it is teaching others to be respectful to those stereotypes and race, so I don’t think they should be banned.” This comment is rich with critical consciousness and literacy skills. First of all, Willson was demonstrating an understanding of social issues, specifically those that relate to racial discrepancies of banned books. With little time to think, Willson clearly communicated his opinions on the matter, so one could assume he had spent time thinking or talking about banning books before. This comment proves that not only was Willson thinking about what books were being banned, but he was also evaluating the makeup of said books and their impact. I find it interesting that Willson, in his defense of not banning books, commented that they are teaching others. The fact that he chose “other” students’ learning, presumably white students, as the reason books should not be banned shows that he had been potentially socialized into valuing those students' learning. Alternatively, he could be claiming here that while he needs mirrors in texts, other students need windows to see into other worlds.

I appreciate that Willson, in making this comment, seemed to be claiming that by reading and discussing such books, “other” students can develop a sense of social responsibility. They can begin to understand how their actions and beliefs contribute to societal structures and how they might work toward positive change. Here, Willson is promoting “other” students gaining critical consciousness through reading banned books, which are often representative of marginalized communities. This shows that he sees value in critical consciousness, and he thinks

that reading banned books, many of which are racially and culturally diverse, is a means of developing critical consciousness.

Wilson's comment, specifically with the use of the word “stereotypes”, was a direct nod to his literacy development, as stereotypes had been a vocabulary word the week before. Not only did he use the word appropriately, but he also constructed a concrete argument using the word. This shows a deep, nuanced understanding of his vocabulary, which meets the Common Core expectation that students “understand and interpret connotations and word relationships.”

After we all nodded in agreement and affirmed Wilson's statement, Bella posed the theoretical question, “So what books are gonna be good then? The ones about unicorns and fairies?” Not only did the comment confirm that Bella understands the nuance behind banned books, but exemplified a core concept of critical consciousness, which is questioning and problematizing the world we live in. By comparing books that address issues of stereotypes and racism to those of unicorns and fairies, Bella was addressing reality vs. fantasy worlds. She was saying that literacy about reality is essential to read in school, questioning what the reality of conversations and learning would be if we only read books about unicorns and fairies. She is implying that she thinks reading books and having discussions rooted in life experience are central to meaningful learning.

Another example of students making critical literacy connections by themselves is from mid-November, when our book club had an amazing conversation about modern beauty standards of hair. It was a particularly nice day right before Thanksgiving break. We had spent the morning discussing *The Secret Death of Yellow Fever*, but for the last twenty minutes, it was time for book clubs. As usual, my group gathered by the door, books in hand, and headed down the hall to our discussion space. Because of the presidential election that had just concluded, the

last two times I had visited the class, we spent time talking about voting logistics and the realities of the new elected administration. Students raised concerns about deportation and war, with comments like “Does this mean I will get deported?” and “I really just don’t want to go to war.”

Because we had spent my past few visits in full class discussions, I had not had much time to ask the students how they were feeling about our book, *Frizzy*. So as we walked down the hall, I asked, “Have y’all read our book recently?” Bella said very quickly, “I have already read it twice,” and Victoria stated, “I would read the whole book right now if I could.” As the girls and I were chatting about their love for the book, Willson was behind us, actively reading while walking.

When we got to the STEAM lab, I asked the students to catch me up to speed about where they were in the book, and the conversation quickly began to flow. Victoria started by explaining a bit of the plot and then saying, “Her mom would like to straighten her hair, but her aunt calls her hair beautiful.” To that, I asked, “How does Marline feel about that?” Bella, cutting Victoria off, said, “She just wants to wear her natural hair, so she likes her aunt. Like her aunt is her role model.” Here, Victoria and Bella are pointing out how Marlene’s mother tells her to straighten her hair while her aunt affirms its natural beauty. Victoria is identifying the societal pressures and internalized biases that shape Marlene’s experience, and her comment demonstrates an understanding of the broader social forces at play, particularly in relation to Eurocentric beauty standards. This is a connection that, had Victoria not grappled with this complexity herself, she might not have been able to make.

As the conversation continued, Rose Marie said, “Straight hair is more proper, tamed.” By making this claim, Rose Marie was demonstrating that she had been socialized into believing that straight hair is more tame. The use of the word “more” showed that she was comparing

straight hair to something else, likely curlier hair, and by describing it as “proper” and “tamed”, she was alluding to the idea that anything that is not straight hair is unconventional. In response to this comment, Willson showed a deep understanding of recently taught vocabulary words by saying, “Okay, but that comes from misconceptions and stereotypes.” At this point, I nearly jumped out of my seat in excitement that not only was Willson appropriately using two vocabulary words from a previous week, but he was also using them to make a claim about the social realities of our world. In an effort not to take over this incredibly interesting and meaningful conversation, I said lightly, “Okay, vocab!” to acknowledge to Willson that I noticed he was using vocabulary words.

The conversation continued as Bella flipped through the pages of *Frizzy*, and Victoria played with her fingernails. Not long after Rose Marie’s first comment about her understanding of people with straight hair, she said, “People with straight hair are richer.” Once again, Victoria used a comparative adverb, demonstrating that she was directly comparing people with straight hair to those without straight hair and making a connection between hair texture and economic status. In this statement, she was not giving a systemic reason as to why people with straight hair are richer, but she was stating an observation. Once again, Rose Marie demonstrated that she has been socialized into believing there is a hair texture hierarchy, therefore implying racial supremacy order.

When Victoria heard this comment, she chimed in to say, “Yeah, every time I see a photo of a king and queen, they have straight hair.” In this statement, Victoria was meeting Standard SL.6.1, which is to “engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.” Victoria was giving a concrete example to support Rose Marie's statements, in other

words, “building on others’ ideas.” This statement was problematizing media and royalty by saying there is no representation of people with curly hair in either.

What started as a normal conversation began shifting into a debate with Bella saying, “People might believe that still, but just because someone doesn't have straight hair, that doesn't mean they can’t be a king and queen.” Bella not only problematized Victoria’s statement, but also countered the idea that power can only come from people with straight hair.

Bella acknowledged that “people might still believe that.” This shows that she is convinced the majority of the world thinks as she does; that people with curly hair, the majority of Black and Brown people, can and should be in power. She also used the word “believe”, implying this is not something that someone can know; it is an ideology that one subscribes to. With this statement, Bella was gracefully countering Rose Marie and Victoria’s thinking, and quickly after, Willson gave an example.

In an effort to support Bella, Willson said, “Yeah, that is just a stereotype. Like stereotypes, some people might say that Italians only like pizza and pasta, but they can like burgers too.” Once again, Willson was using his new vocabulary words to emphasize his point. When Willson speaks, specifically during class, he makes an effort to sound academic, which to me was what he is doing here. I find this example fascinating because Willson is not Italian. Months earlier, the students were making posters about themselves, and he wrote that he was Puerto Rican. His use of a dominantly white culture as an example of a stereotype leads me to believe that he wanted to play it “safe”, and use an example that I would understand. To me, this shows that he thinks it is more appropriate and accessible to give an example of white culture, meaning he thinks common stereotypes like Italians making pizza are more widely known.

While this was the end of the conversation about stereotypes of beauty standards, it certainly was not the end of my thinking about it. This conversation, which was almost entirely amongst the students, was deeply meaningful and says a lot about the socialization and critical consciousness of each child. This conversation showed incredible examples of literacy development with the students using their argumentative skills to form opinions, they also showed great strength in critiquing the world around them.

In this finding, the most essential part of the conversations was that they were prompted and led by the students. They made multiple connections and discoveries about themselves and their peers' thinking. The students situated the examples, with vocabulary words, and supported each other to a deeper understanding. To me, this example of students enhancing their critical consciousness and literacy skills was made easier because the conversation stemmed from a piece of representative literature.

The four examples presented in these pages show just how rich every contribution from the students was. That being said, critically conscious conversations surrounding text that are less representative of the students were frequently led by the teacher. Alternatively, the students were leading and starting critical conversations when they were relating to the text. The students showed great interest in discussing social issues, specifically when the characters in their books were experiencing similar situations to them.

It is essential that teachers help guide their students to analysis through a critical lens, as Ms. Mahoney beautifully did in the first two examples; however, from this research I have noticed that students are much quicker to do it themselves if they can relate. To me, this is a clear call for more representative literature in our schools in an effort to lead the students to make

independent, critical observations. If school is not to foster *independent* thinking and learning, then what is it for?

Complexity of Critical Consciousness Growth

Examples of critical consciousness do not show up in a linear fashion. As people develop critical consciousness, they begin to question systems and acknowledge inequalities. Ignorance slowly dwindles, and people become more confident in pointing out their critiques of the world. I found that as students were building their critical consciousness throughout the year, they were also becoming more likely to notice misrepresentation and the social implications of that.

A concrete example of students becoming more critical, and therefore feeling progression as complex, is from the pre- and post-intervention survey. The first survey was given in the early days of September with the intention of the classroom teacher figuring out their opinions on reading and writing. A few sample questions specifically for the classroom teacher are “On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you enjoy ELA at school?” and “Do you like to ‘buddy read,’ meaning read with another person?” Some of the questions that I was most interested in were “Do you feel like there are stories at school (in classroom libraries or on Libby) that represent what your life and family are actually like?”, "Do you think a book you've read has ever changed you or the way you see others?" and “Has a book ever had an impact on your life?” In the first survey responses, two-thirds of students gave an answer fewer than 5 out of 10 to the question “Do you feel like there are stories at school (in classroom libraries or on Libby) that represent what your life and family are actually like?”, showing the students do not feel represented in the literature they are reading. When we took the survey again, the results were even lower, with almost one-third of students responding less than 5 out of 10 to the question above. When I first looked at these results, I was taken aback. Many of the students had told me they felt represented

by the book club books, so when the survey results showed that the students felt less represented, I began to question the impact of my work.

In the question, “Tell us a little more about your response to the question above. If you do see yourself and your family in the books you read, in what ways do you see yourself represented? If not, how do you feel about that?” there were a lot of rich responses. It was important that we included family in this question because we wanted to solicit responses related to their culture and heritage rather than their current interests, although these were also valuable to read about.

One response from the first survey read: “I don't [see myself represented] because people don't act like my family or me.” This response holds a complex combination of identity, representation, and their perception of social norms. Due to the lack of literature that reflected this student's family, they believed that their family was different or “others”. By sixth grade, this student had internalized that their family was not normal or important enough to read about because they never get to read stories of families that look like theirs. By saying “people”, I think it is fair to assume this student means white people, since that is mostly who they read about. By not naming race, or a dominant culture, the word “people” leads me to believe that students sometimes consider themselves other. If they were to describe their family, I do not think they would just say “people”, because in this response, “people” means the dominant, white American people.

Another similar response was “I don't really find books that relate to me and my family.” When coding this response, the word “find” stuck out to me. The act of finding, or lack thereof, implies that one must be searching. This leads me to believe that this student looks for books that represent their family and themselves, but is unsuccessful. Because the question asked about

“you or your” family being represented, this student included family in their response, so I do not feel like the fact that they included their family as a part of their representation is significant, but it is interesting to note because it was mentioned many times in these responses.

The response “I don't know if any of the books here are related to my family or me, and I feel like there's only a little chance that there will be” was most intriguing to me. By including the word “here”, this student is alluding to the idea that there might be books that represent them out in the world, but this school does not value those books, and therefore they are not here. This student seems to have had enough experience in school, presumably seven years, to know that they are not represented in books at Stone School. The student understands that the school is not willing to invest in books that represent their family, which leads to distrust and frustration with the system. Additionally, by using the word “here”, the student could be indicating a form of rebellion or general curiosity because they might look for books where they feel represented outside of the institution of school. In addition to that, this student has internalized a belief that their identity and family are unlikely to be represented by saying, “I feel like there is only little chance there will be.” The sense of marginalization reflects a broader issue that schools have. Schools and curriculum curate book lists that highlight dominant culture and leave some students, like this one, to feel unrepresented consistently. The last bit of the response that reads “only a little chance” leads me to believe that students have a lack of hope to be represented in the curriculum. This statement presents a pessimistic figured world for the students. Due to disappointment in this area for the past seven years, this student does not expect this to change.

The survey response, “The books don't really relate to my family and me, most of the books are just their own books,” had me wondering who the student was referring to when they used the word“their”. By saying “their”, this student showed that they have internalized the

white dominant culture and consider themselves othered. This response is similar to the student who said “people”, and based on the context of what these students are saying, “their” and “people” refer to the white dominant culture. “The books are just their own books” shows that the writers, publishers, and teachers are all considered parts of the same group, leading me to assume that students do not feel represented in any of these categories.

Another piece of evidence I gathered based on this survey question during the first sampling was a student saying, “I only see myself and my family's state in a few books, and when I do see it, it's only for a split second.” I regret this was not a conversation or interview, because if it were, I would have asked what they meant by “state”. The student could have meant state as in territory or state as in condition. Either way, this student is claiming that they and their family are not represented in books in general. This student commented that when they are represented, “it’s only for a split second,” once again implying that they are aware their cultures are less valued by society and schools. The use of “split second” is intriguing because it has a connotation of urgency or being rushed. The student seems to be grappling with the idea of the check mark, token, and marginalized characters. These characters are usually without depth, being included only for the purpose of making a claim to diversity. By saying “split second”, this student is describing the feeling of being used as a token character, therefore lacking real relatability because of the lack of truth and depth.

To emphasize a point made prior, there was another response that said, “Some books are alike, like me and my family, because some people have the same story.” While this response seems to be evidence of the student feeling represented in the classroom, it is just the opposite. If the student had said, “books are like me…”, I would be convinced they feel represented in literature. However, the use of the word “some” is important to focus on because it implies, once

again, that the student sees themselves and their family as others, and only specified books represent them, not books in general.

All of these responses to the survey question, “Do you feel like there are stories at school (in classroom libraries or on Libby) that represent what your life and family are actually like?” is strong evidence that the students do not feel represented and they have seemed to either have internalized, or are grappling with the idea of, otherness. Many of the responses acknowledged that their identity, family, and culture are not centered in the classroom. However, after being presented with many attempts at representative literature, the students claimed they were even less represented.

This shift in acknowledgment of representation was alarming to me because I was convinced I was doing harm, but after analyzing it, I realized it was because the students are becoming more aware of what representation in literature means to them. They are becoming more critical of the world around them, which makes their relationship with representation complex.

Over the semester, I had many conversations with students regarding their excitement to see people that look like them in books and how validated they felt that they saw families similar to theirs. However, when asked in the survey if they feel like books represent them in school, the answers were even lower than the first survey, with 15 out of 22 saying less than 5 on a scale of 1-10 about representation. The link between these responses and the students’ developing critical consciousness becomes clear from their explanations.

One of the explanations in the post-intervention survey from the question “Do you feel like there are stories at school (in classroom libraries or on Libby) that represent what your life and family are actually like?” read “I am not really sure, to me it's like a 50% and 50%.” This is

interesting because compared to this student's first response, she seems to have switched her perspective. Originally, this student said, “Have the same kind of personality or similarities.” I think this student has essentially added the other 50 percent of her identity, being her race, culture, and family, and now she recognizes there is a lack of representation there. Her shift to saying it is “50% and 50%” suggests that she now distinguishes between different dimensions of identity, perhaps realizing that while she might see characters who share her experiences in some ways, deeper cultural and racial representation is still lacking.

This pattern aligns with the development of critical consciousness, being that individuals move from a general sense of dissatisfaction with systems to a more articulate understanding of systemic exclusion. Rather than feeling more represented after exposure to these books, this student instead sharpened her ability to see what was still missing, ultimately feeling less represented.

Another response that on the surface seems to counteract my claims was “I don't really see how my life is represented in most books, but I don't really feel bad about that. I know some books are like me.” In saying “I don’t really feel bad about it,” I believe this student was attempting not to seem critical of the teacher or the curriculum. I know this student quite well, and I am not surprised that in making a claim, she then followed it up by essentially saying that the lack of representation is okay. She is often caring for friends and puts others before herself. In saying that she does not feel bad, I think she was showing her social worldview that it is more important that her teacher does not feel guilty about the lack of representation, than how she genuinely feels about it. This statement shows whose emotions she values, and is a glimpse into her self-perception in this world.

Interestingly, this student responded “I don't really feel anything” to the same question at the beginning of the year. The adjustment in response could have to do with how she was feeling each day, how much time she had for the survey, or many other factors. However, looking at her words at face value leads one to notice a change in how she feels regarding representative literature. First off, in the second response, she is making a statement about the visibility of her life in books. By saying “I don't see how my life is represented in most books,” she is showing a development in her critical consciousness because now she can recognize and acknowledge the lack of representation in her classroom. However, she did acknowledge that “I know some books look like me,” which could be a nod to the recent uptick in representative literature in her classroom.

Both of these responses were paired with a lower rating on the scale for the second round of the survey. If I were conducting quantitative research, this would lead me to believe that her students were less represented by the middle of the year than at the beginning. However, because of my discourse analysis and awareness of critical consciousness progression, I can see that these students were just learning to critique the systems they live in. On paper, this development makes it look like the students have been presented with even less representative literature. However, in reality, these responses show that the students were building their critical consciousness and ability to problematize the racial hierarchy of books in schools.

In thinking about the complexity of critical consciousness, I think about my own rollercoaster of critical consciousness development. I have been through many iterations of understanding in the world, and I certainly have not grown in a linear fashion, so it only makes sense that the same applies to my students. My own experience and this finding goes to show that research on critical consciousness can be difficult to track. As a young researcher, this

finding is essential to the rest of the work because it helps me frame the rest of my findings by not looking for linear progression in acknowledgment of representation, but instead appreciating the complexity of student development.

Students are the Experts on how to Learn About the Wor(l)d

The culmination of book clubs and my time in the classroom concluded with small group presentations and discussions. It was December 10th, and as I usually did, I rolled into class around 8:40 while the students were sitting quietly at the table groups listening to the morning announcements. I walked in, put my jacket on top of the cubbies, and sat at my unofficial seat just behind AJ. I glanced around the classroom, and as I made eye contact with Taquisha and stuck my tongue out at her, our usual routine. She giggled and did it back, as she turned to Amaree to show her I was in the classroom.

After the announcements, which consisted of the Pledge of Allegiance, events for the week, and joke of the day, Ms. Mahoney announced it was presentation time. They had been preparing for two class periods, making very elaborate Canvas presentations. Days before, I watched Willson spend most of the class period deciding on a presentation theme, rather than working on the content. Ms. Mahoney announced that we had ten minutes to finish up our presentations, and then we would commence. There was a mix between serious editing and silly graphics being added, but at the end of the ten minutes, they all said they were ready.

The initial plan was to have each student present to the class for seven minutes, but due to time constraints, they broke into four groups of about four students each. I was disappointed because this meant I could not watch every student's presentations, but it also fostered better discussion environments. I was torn as to who to sit with, but I decided since I had spent a lot of time with Rose Marie, Willson, Victoria, and Bella, I would branch out and sit with other

students. I ended up in the middle of the classroom with Jaylen, Chuck, Amaree, and AJ. Ms. Mahoney went over the expectations of presenting, and they began. Chuck was to present first, and Jaylen offered him a supportive dap as he turned his laptop towards all of us and began his presentation.

One of the prompts for the presentation was to show characters you relate to. Chuck began with a brief explanation of the book, *Invisible* by Christina Diaz Gonzalez, but quickly transitioned into discussing how he relates to the main character Nico. Nico isa Venezuelan boy who comes off rich, but in reality, he lives with his aunt, on the verge of being unhoused while he waits for his parents to join him in the U.S. Nico is very strong-willed, often not doing what the group asks of him. I did not spend much time with Chuck over the course of the four months, but I get the sense he is quite similar to Nico, frequently speaking his mind. Chuck said he "enjoyed" this book because he liked Nico and it was "easy to read."

Part of his statement that it was "easy to read" was probably related to the fact that it was a graphic novel; I imagine that the pictures were helpful for comprehension. That being said, his sequential order of saying he relates to Nico, he enjoyed the book, and it was easy to read, could point to the idea that it was easy to read *because* he enjoyed relating to Nico.

Amaree presented next. She gave a very comprehensive explanation of refugee camps in reference to her book *When Stars are Scattered,* and explained how she "looks up to Fatuma." I appreciate how Amaree decided to skip the prompt "Who do you relate to?", and instead reframed the question to still fit the standard of analysis characters in a way that was more meaningful to her. Amaree's decision to reframe the "relate to" prompt into "looks up to" demonstrates critical thinking. She was not simply following instructions but finding a more meaningful way to engage with the text. This shows an ability to move beyond a superficial

understanding of a question and have autonomy over her learning. She is showing here that she knows how she learns best, and made a decision that supported her learning.

Amaree, in her explanation of why she looks up to Fatuma, said, “She is just like my aunt, and I want to be nice and helpful like her.” Amaree went into an explanation of how the community in a refugee camp is really “nice” and how her community here is “sometimes” like that. By relating her aunt to Fatuma and her community to that in Dadaab, she made personal connections that directly deepened her understanding of the text and demonstrated her relation to the text.

Next it was AJ’s turn. He also read *When Stars are Scattered*, but rather than being able to relate to Fatuma, he said he related to Omar, the main character. AJ flipped through his slides, coming to a picture of Omar, who is both the main character and the author. AJ, in a joking manner, said, “See? It’s me!” as he glanced down at the photo he had presented on his computer, and gave a similar smile as Omar. AJ explained that he relates to Omar because Omar has to take care of his brother, and so does AJ. Although AJ said this in a joking manner, I think this statement held grave importance. He related to this character, both in familial expectations and race, and was excited to share. As he began describing Omar’s hard-working personality, he said, “Omar lost his dad in war, and so did my cousin.” Watching him make multiple connections to the story and share pride in that made me feel as though these books were making a significant impact on the students.

As we wrapped up, I was left thinking about how not one of the students in my group explicitly addressed the racial makeup of the characters they related to, but all of them picked a character in the book with a similar racial identity to their own. The lack of naming race made it clear to me that the students are socialized into not naming racial identity or the social construct

of race itself, but still yearn to discuss race because it is relevant to them, so they find ways to do so without specifically naming it.

As the rest of the class finished their presentations, Ms. Mahoney gathered the class together and began a group discussion. Her first question was, "How are these books different?" Chuck, in his usual fashion, blurted out, "Well, one is about hair," to which Bella said, "It's not even just about hair. She (Marline) is also changing how she is around people." In saying this, she was connecting the word to the world and demonstrating her deeper understanding of the book. While *Frizzy* is, on the surface, about hair, it is also, as Bella stated, about personal growth and recognition of self. Bella pointed out that a major theme is that Marlene was code-switching based on her location; in Bella's words she was "changing how she is around people." This idea was never mentioned in our small groups, and it shows Bella had a significant understanding of the societal pressures Marlene was under and came to this thematic conclusion herself.

At the end of the conversation, Ms. Mahoney asked, "If you were a teacher, would these books be on your list?" To which MK responded, "Yes, because they all go through something hard and because their culture is different." MK highlights two important reasons that she thinks reading the book club books is a good instructional practice. For one, she says, because they all go through something hard. From conversations I have had with MK, I know she lost her dad a few years ago; she was also reading the book where the main character loses his dad. While she does not explicitly cite this as the "something hard," I think MK is saying here that the book was good because it was directly applicable to the hard things she has lived through. MK also felt that these books are beneficial to learning "because their culture is different." MK claiming this as a reason for the book to be good to teach shows that students know how they learn best: one of which is learning through relatability.

Jamal spoke next. He said, “People come from different places, which is important to see.” Once again, Jamal claimed that it is important for all readers to see the diverse makeup of life in this world. It is interesting that he finds learning about other cultures and places as the reason to use these books. This statement by Jamal showed the cultural model of why he chose to read a book that, to my knowledge, did not culturally represent him.

Taylor then said, “It teaches them not to judge you because you never know what people are going through until they tell their stories.” The use of pronouns in this claim is immensely interesting to me. Taylor says, “it teaches *them*,” which shows an us versus them ideology. Taylor here is agreeing with Jamal that other people need to deepen their empathy and understanding of cultures. Taylor is showing deep emotional maturity by saying that we all must become more empathetic, and the way to do that is by reading stories about other cultures and people different from you.

As the conversation continued, AJ said, “These books are about real problems, and *Boy* is just about that jar.” By these books, he means the book club selections, and by *Boy*, he means *Boy: Tales of a Childhood* by Roald Dahl. AJ, in agreement with the rest of his peers, said that the book club books are good for teachers to use and claimed that the book club books are “real.” The use of the word “real” here creates the sense that AJ thinks that Marlene and Omar’s lives are reality, unlike Dahl’s story. Using the word “just” shows that AJ does not think the issues that arose from the jar incident in *Boy* are relatable or authentic.

Chuck replied to AJ, saying, “Dahl’s life is kinda a fantasy.” Chuck is directly making a statement about his figured worlds, saying that his own world is reality, and that of a white, wealthy boy from the early 1900s is “fantasy.” Chuck is positioning his reality as normal in this statement while othering Dahl's white male identity, which is the most prominent in literature.

Chuck is claiming that the life story of Dahl portrays historical elites as living in a world detached from the struggles of ordinary people. Chuck was making this statement in reaction to a conversation about whether or not books like *Frizzy* and *Invisible* should be taught. In bringing up *Boy: Tales of a Childhood*, Chuck met Standard W.6.1: "Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence," and Standard RL.6: "Cite textual evidence to support analysis." Chuck was demonstrating his ability to compare and drastically contrast two texts in both their relatability and the effectiveness of their teaching. While Chuck did not directly make a claim supporting the idea that reading the book club books is good educational practice, he said this as a piece of evidence supporting others' claims that these books are good for students. Here, you can see that Chuck knows how he learns best, and is giving evidence as to why the book club books are beneficial to read.

The students' unanimous agreement that these books should be used in the classroom signifies their recognition of the books' educational value. They are essentially advocating for their own learning needs, saying that the books have value because they are learning from them. To me, any finding that comes directly from the advice of the students is of the utmost importance. Throughout this entire discussion, students are making it clear they understand what makes learning effective for them—racially and culturally representative and diverse books. Taylor's comment about empathy shows that the students are learning social and emotional skills from the books. Chuck's observation that *Invisible* was "easy to read" indicates that he is aware of how different formats impact his learning. This highlights the importance of providing diverse, meaningful materials in styles like graphic novel vs. picture book, and materials to cater to various learning styles. AJ's distinction between "real problems" and the "jar" incident in *Boy* demonstrates that students value authentic and relatable narratives. He recognizes that stories

reflecting real-life challenges are more impactful than those that seem detached from their experiences. Lastly, the students' unanimous agreement that these books should be used in future classrooms signifies their recognition of the books' educational and social value. Some of them made claims relating to deepening their learning, while others were referencing the importance of mirrors in text. All throughout this conversation, they were essentially advocating for their own learning needs by saying that the books that racially and culturally represented them have value.

More evidence that students know how they learn came from the day I let the students pick their pseudonyms. This day also happened to be the last time I would see them before I headed to Philadelphia for the Ethnography conference. Rather than going in the morning during ELA, I went during the advisory period at the end of the day. I stood in front of the class and explained the concept of pseudonyms using Bad Bunny, Juice Wrld, and Eminem as examples. I gave them all a piece of paper and set them off on their task. Since I could hear some of them discussing unrealistic “silly” names, I suggested that the students could write down what their rapper/silly name would be, and then a serious one. This turned the classroom into a symphony of giggles as the students workshopped some very clever names. As I was sitting with a group of students, laughing about Bella wanting to be referred to as “Slayyy Baddie Skibidi Demure,” Rose Marie asked how I was feeling about my conference. I told her I was honestly a bit nervous. To follow up, I asked her what she would say to a room full of people about these books. She said, “I think that the books we read are about people who have the same problem.”

In a scramble, I asked her to write that down because I did not think to bring in my observation notebook that day, and because I saw her comment as profoundly insightful. This sparked a conversation at the table about how they would present my research, and what they

would want “adults” to know. Looking back at this, I wish I had brought my notebook that day because even though I had the students write their thoughts down, there were certainly parts of the conversation that I missed. (This writing can be found in Appendix A.)

Rose Marie emphasizes that the students in class can relate to the character's problem, as the thing she would wish to share with others about this research shows that she believes the representative nature of the books is the most important aspect of my research. Similarly, Taquisha said and wrote, “I think that reading in school is good, and some students can reflect on the book with their life. It can help them have background knowledge on the book.” In Taquisha’s response, I see two essential parts, one being her focus on reading in school, and how background knowledge can be helpful. Here, Taquisha is saying that she wishes others knew that having this background knowledge, most of it cultural, is helpful; Taquisha is directly telling us how she learns best in this statement, and I would be a failed educator to not listen to this.

Millie was also sitting at the table with us. After chatting about what they would present (and what they would wear at the presentation) I had them write down just one of the many brilliant thoughts they shared. Millie wrote the following, “I just get it more because I can relate, so I learn more.” Millie is explicitly saying her learning was enhanced because of her ability to relate to the story. She explicitly links her ability to relate to the stories with increased comprehension and learning.

Lastly, I want to share what Shelly wrote, but first, I must contextualize Shelly. Shelly is a deep thinker. She thinks before she speaks, and when she does, she uses vocabulary that is not frequently used by a 6th grader. So when Shelly realized she could share with “adults” what she thought of all this, she said, “Books can be relatable to the real world; books can help a human mentally and physically with the human mind, helping a possible human being with physical and

mental skills and goals." Shelly's deeply insightful comment regarding mental skills and goals could be its own thesis, but nonetheless, my analysis is that she was exemplifying strong critical consciousness and literacy development skills in this statement. Noting that books can impact one's physical and mental well-being goes beyond academic learning and delves into the holistic impact of literature. This very mature statement shows that Shelly understands that books can have an impact on the entire person, not just their academic life. To me, helping a human mentally is by liberating someone of personal blame, and instead, understanding the oppressive nature of systematic struggles that are at play. This thoughtful comment validates my research finding that students are experts on their own learning. She articulates a sophisticated understanding of how books impact the well-being and development of human beings, and finds this point essential to share with others.

The finding that the students know how they learn best was probably the easiest to formulate, because it was so explicitly said. The students made the point of connection between relatability and learning and claimed time and time again that being able to relate to the books they were reading was specifically improving their learning. While this finding does not directly answer my research question of *how* fostering critical consciousness through culturally relevant literature boosts students' literacies*,* it certainly can support the question of whether racially and culturally relevant literature boosts students' literacies, which validates the assumption that I went into the project with.

Conclusions

"A humanizing education is the path through which men and women [and people] can become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, taking into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others."

—Ana Marie Freire, 1998. Introduction to The Paulo Freire Reader

Summary

In summary, this research about how fostering critical consciousness through representative literature builds students' literacies had many unique findings, all of which supported the importance of utilizing representative literature in schools. First off, this research found there to be correlations between dialectic storytelling and critical literacy. By making space for students to relate their lives to the text, they create a deeper understanding of the world and the word, which encourages them to critique the systems of society. As students built their critical consciousness through dialogic storytelling, they became more aware of the lack of representation in literature. This led to understanding that because critical consciousness fosters deeper awareness of the world, evidence of critical consciousness development begins to show itself in complex, nonlinear ways. On this surface, gaining access to representative literature can appear to negatively impact students' feelings about representation, when in reality they are just becoming more aware of their previous lack of inclusion and access. In addition, this research found that in a classroom that works to build critical literacy, when students could racially and culturally relate to a text, they were more likely to make independent critical and connections.

When they were less represented, they struggled to see, or at least outwardly process, the real world connections, meaning the teacher had to lead the students to these critiques. As students independently deepened their critical consciousness through representative literature, they were also making the claim that representative literature boosts their literacy skills. On many occasions, students sourced their own knowledge and learning as a reason to read representative literature. Because students' perspectives should be prioritized in their own learning, this finding beautifully contributes to the claim that fostering critical literacy through reading racially and culturally representative literature is necessary for literacy development. In conclusion, this research supports the use of representative literature as a means of boosting literacy and critical consciousness, both of which should be nurtured in schools.

Theoretical implications

Literacy as relational

The most consistent aspect of my findings was that each of the pieces of evidence could not have happened in a vacuum; they were all relational. Students were posing theoretical questions to each other, which were building their literacy. They were telling stories to peers that were fostering critical consciousness, and they were helping me understand nuance through dialogue. Because all of the evidence in my findings was relational, I believe an implication of this work is to encourage educators to view literacy as a communal effort, rather than an individual task. Often, we see education as an individual feat, there is only one name on a diploma after all. But there is much evidence, from this and other work, that we must be in community when learning and that relationships benefit literacy development. Relations also benefit critical consciousness because they allow for dialogic processing space, which is important in both literacy and personal development.

Critical listening is essential to strong teaching

At the center of all of these findings was what creates relations: active, critical listening from all parties. I have found that when we, as educators, listen with the intent to understand our students' lives, we foster deeper relationships that lead to learning. Positive relationships are essential to promoting a productive learning environment, but to build on those relationships, you must first listen. Listen to what a student is saying, and not saying. Listen to their stories of life, and listen to how they make sense of the world. I found that I had to not only do the initial listening, but also spend time thinking and reflecting on what the students were saying. I was often picking apart what the students said hours and weeks after, but I found that I was able to understand, relate to, and reference what they said more powerfully after I spent time analyzing it. Of course, it is impractical to pick apart everything every student says, but I believe educators need to critically listen and reflect on puzzling, challenging, or critical comments their students make to be a strong teacher who fosters critical consciousness.

Changing our framing: Facilitator vs. teacher

As mentioned above, very early on in the book clubs, the way I saw my role changed from teacher to facilitator, and I believe this had a large impact on the results. Rather than thinking I was going to teach the students about the racist society we live in, for example, I attempted to make space for the students to tap into their own knowledge and be the educators to each other, themselves, and me. There are certainly times when an educator needs to explicitly teach in school, but I believe that when fostering critical literacy, the students need space to process and critique, which requires more of a facilitator, rather than a teacher. By facilitator, I mean someone who is asking leading questions, encouraging dialogue, or internal processing,

and offering students resources to support their development. By having a facilitator, rather than a teacher, students begin to see themselves as powerful knowledge holders, and they guide themselves to critical awareness of the word and the world using their own powerful knowledge and relations they have built.

6th graders can, and want to, be talking about race

The comments made by these 6th graders demonstrate that they can and want to be talking about race. That being said, there are many limiting factors to 6th graders feeling comfortable and able to talk about race, racism, and their personal experience with their racial identity. First and foremost, the students I was working with did not feel comfortable addressing, or even bringing up, race at the beginning of our relationship. However, after building trust, the students quickly became comfortable talking about race and found our discussion group to be a processing space for examining their complex racial identities, in relation to the text, each other, and the world we live in. Not only were the students eager and willing to discuss topics like anti-blackness when it came up in the text (*Frizzy,* p. 64), but they were also fully capable of a meaningful, respectful, and productive conversation. Often, adults believe young people can not handle discussing topics that challenge social norms, but my book club group not only disproved that, we showed that students should be having these conversations to build their literacies.

There is hope in guidance

In a world where bills nicknamed “Don’t Say Gay” are proposed and enacted, there is an increasing number of teachers who are feeling forced to not educate about inequity. I, too, am nervous to educate in a country where I could get stripped of my license because I teach U.S. history by talking about the 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones, N. 2019); however, since doing this research, I now have a glimmer of hope. The hope is not in policy changing or politicians

agreeing with my views on what should be taught, but in my belief that young people can, and will, teach themselves. I watched as students began to pick apart the systems we live in, questioning and problematizing inequitable hierarchies. While I was facilitating some of these conversations, I knew the students were capable of critiquing the world themselves and became increasingly productive at it. Even if teachers become gradually more monitored, I see a world where we are guiding our students to critique the systems; we will not need to directly teach youth about the injustice. I watched students question oppression without prompting, and they had the skills and encouragement to do so because we had fostered an environment where questioning and storytelling were encouraged. From here, even if we can never say the word "racism" in school again, that does not mean the students cannot come to deepen their understanding of the implications of systemic racism by themselves, because they have been encouraged to build their critical consciousness. Of course, this will take a generation of teachers who are committed to fostering critical consciousness, but if done correctly, rather than teaching directly about the societal issues in the world, we can educate our students to think critically so they can come to these conclusions, and hopefully solutions, themselves. The young people can liberate themselves from oppression when we foster critical consciousness.

Practical implications

Advocate for culturally and racially representative literature

This paper is a call for many things, one of which is ensuring that our students have access to quality literature that racially and culturally represents them. As shown by many examples in this paper, students enjoy when texts in school are representative of their lives, i.e., a mirror book. There is much evidence to say that seeing yourself in a book is important for your perception of identity and literacy skills, but how do we make this happen? We put pressure on

our schools to purchase books that represent our students, we follow Ms. Mahoney's lead, and make time to read, at a minimum, diverse books. We continue countering the racist policy that bans books that represent so many of our students, and lastly, we ask our students who and what they want to read about, and we make it happen.

Allow students to be in trusted dialogue

Another way that we can continue to support students in their critical consciousness and literacy journey is by making space for students to be in trusted dialogue. As educators, we should give our students trust, time, and appropriate text to make sense of the world in a safe and caring space: trusted dialogue. It can be very important to have students answer specific questions, but when it comes to representative literature, especially for underrepresented communities, a space to talk about the text can be crucial to learning. In my experience, the students were becoming the facilitators of their own conversations, they were respectfully challenging each other, and they were having honest, flowing conversations that were the product of being trusted in the dialogue space. Much of a school day is planned to the minute, so having a space where students do not feel rushed to come up with an answer, because there ultimately is none, was critical for building critical consciousness in conversations about text.

Build our own critical consciousness as educators

We should build our own critical consciousness as educators so we can better support and understand our students. Critical consciousness is not black and white: it is a forever-growing scale that we must continually make progress on to better support our students. By educating ourselves on power, bias, and inequity, we can support our students and ask genuine guiding questions of our students to foster their critical consciousness. We can also learn a lot, as I did, from our students, but we must be open and accepting of this learning. We also must be

practicing critical literacy ourselves. When we read the news or read for leisure, we should be looking for whose voices are left out, asking ourselves what systems the text is upholding or dismantling and what implicit bias the author might have. Reading the word and the world with these questions will help us better support our students to do the same.

Stay engaged with the work

To me, staying engaged and committed to the work of empowering youth through critical consciousness is a powerful way to enact this change. A tangible way to do this is to actively seek out new information regarding both representative text and critical consciousness, staying updated in order to continually update our pedagogy.

I firmly believe that despite laws limiting educators' autonomy, there are ways to indirectly teach to raise critical consciousness. I see asking critical questions, giving students time to be in affinity groups and in dialogue, and engaging in deep listening as an educator, as ways to promote critical consciousness. These practices do not take up much time or money, which is often the limiting factor for educators; they require only commitment, patience, and respect for our students—qualities which all good educators should possess.

Personal implications

Holding myself to a higher standard

This process has taught me that when I challenge my own thinking and push myself to continue learning and growing, I am directly benefiting myself and my students. From this realization, I am committing to holding myself to a higher standard as an educator; to always be analyzing myself and the world around me for the best practices in teaching. I will continue to learn new content to teach students, but more importantly, build my teaching philosophy based on the practice I have had and theory I encounter. Previous to this project, I was more committed

to physical action than understanding and contributing to theory, but I now see theory as essential to social change work because it informs what we do with a *why* and *how*. This was a meaningful start to my journey of teaching, specifically using theory, that will continue for the rest of my life.

Improving my instruction and philosophy of teaching

Based on this research, I have come to the conclusion that as an educator, I need to make time for students to make their own connections to work, not just in literacy class, but in all aspects of school. I see the power of personal knowledge, and I think it plays a central role in a student's development. I hope to take my practices from the book club and continue to make my teaching philosophy better by listening to my students and attending to their wants and needs. I have come to find that critical listening is essential to productive teaching, so I plan to continue building this skill to the best of my ability.

I no longer see literacy as just a skill, but as a tool for liberation, which I hope to foster through meaningful choices of text and conversation in my future classrooms. I see literacy as central to building critical consciousness, which I plan to foster in the young people I interact with in the future. I hope to take this firm belief in critical literacy and teach effectively using Freire's and others' guidance.

Another aspect of my philosophy that has changed from this project is my understanding of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). I now see centering underrepresented identities, for example Black students and Black culture, as a manifestation of UDL . UDL is a best practice in education that aims to make education accessible to all students to improve learning for everyone. Previously, I thought UDL was about adding visuals to student-facing work, and while this is part of it, I now understand that another form of UDL is centering identities because it

directly improves students' academics. My process of planning lessons always starts with how the lesson can be accessible to all students, how we can all succeed, and in what ways I can incorporate UDL. Now, during that process, before every single one of my lessons, I will think about how to make sure my instruction is culturally responsive, even before planning out the minute details. Muhammad explains this as saying, “if we start with Blackness (which we have not traditionally done in schooling) or the group of people who have uniquely survived the harshest oppressions in this country, then we begin to understand ways to get literacy education right for all” (p. 22), to which, I agree.

Understanding representation is not binary

My book club was focused on *Frizzy*, but I spent a beautiful weekend in early September tearing through all five of the book club choices, with my own favorite being *Invisible*. The story was at times confusing to follow, but what the students and I appreciated the most was the diversity of Latinx identities that were represented. The story was complicating identity by showing the wildly different backgrounds of students who were grouped together because they all spoke Spanish. Many of the students at Stone School related to bits and pieces of each of the identities, proving that even five nuanced identities in a story might not represent a person.

However, as I reflect on my experience, I am aware that I did just as the principal in *Invisible* did: I made assumptions and grouped together students based on my perception of their identities. The students gracefully showed and told me that one book, one story, can never holistically represent a student, which is why a wide array of representative, and multicultural literature is essential. Although I know Bella’s home dynamic was much different than that of Marline, meaning the scenes at home might not have been relatable, she still found representation in the character.

I now see representation as a spectrum, rather than a box to check. I focused heavily on racially and culturally representative literature, but even within those two categories, someone might need to see dozens of stories to even begin to scratch the surface of feeling represented. Therefore, it is not enough to have one diverse book in a curriculum, because no one can ever be told in just one story.

Believing in the power of praxis

Lastly, an implication of this research that will stick with me for the rest of my life is the power of praxis. As exemplified by this work, action should be rooted in reflection. I have learned that I wish I had done even more reflecting during this process, because in my moments of deep consideration about this project came its most meaningful insights. I truly believe that doing important social justice work means critically analyzing the world, which includes yourself and your actions. I now understand praxis as the ongoing cycle of intentional reflection and genuine actions, where my beliefs about equity and literacy are now not just theoretical, but lived out in my daily teaching and living practices.

Final thoughts

After conducting this research, I am left thinking about the story written at the beginning of this paper when Taquisha said, “This is my heaven, this is heaven to me!” in reference to seeing the cover of *Frizzy*. When she initially said this, I was so thrilled; I was convinced she had proven my whole point. As I expand my critical consciousness, I now realize the devastating reality behind this comment. I went from thinking how amazing it was that she now sees herself in literature, to recognizing that it was the first time she had ever seen herself in literature at all. Her exclamation was not just about joy, it was about scarcity. What felt like a celebration was actually a spotlight on the painful absence of representation she had experienced up until that

moment. To come to this conclusion, I had to build my own critical consciousness along with deepening my relationship with Taquisha to unpack the nuance in her comment, which was at the core of this research. I see her words now as both powerful and heartbreaking, but I am committed to creating a world where racial and cultural representation in literature is not that of a dreamland or heaven, but instead a consistent reality for Taquisha. I hope for, and am working toward, a world where education cultivates critically conscious individuals, using racially and culturally representative literature as the catalyst for meaningful change.

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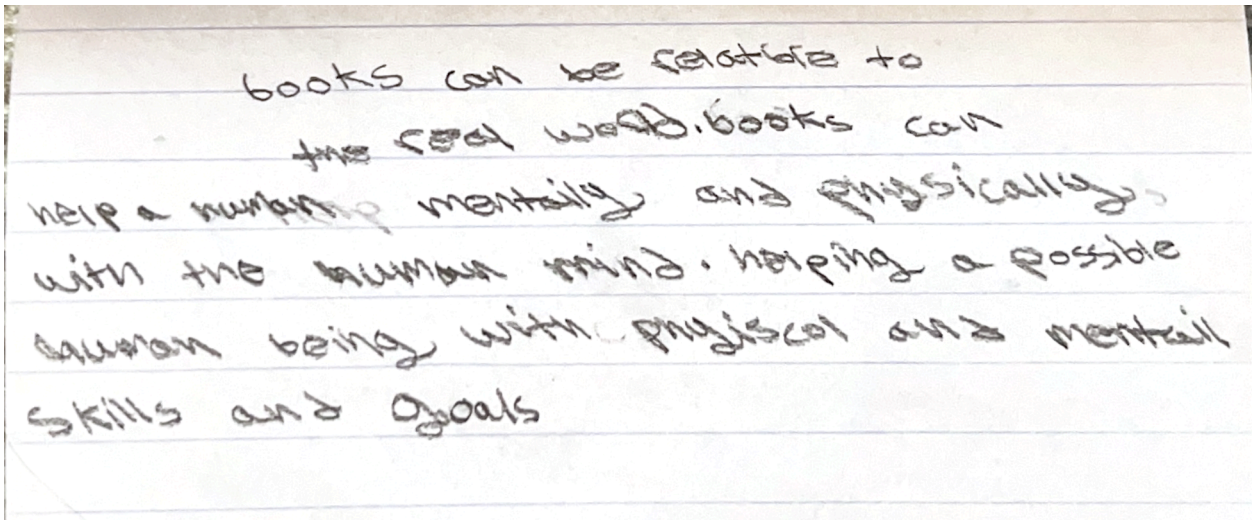
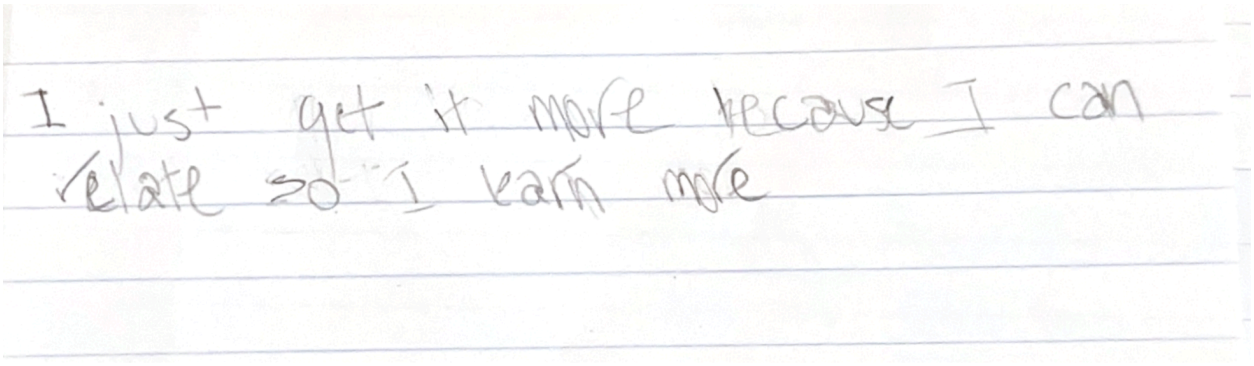
Appendix A



Shelly's writing on the pseudonym paper.



Millie's writing on the pseudonym paper.

Appendix B

Massachusetts Educational Standards (6th grade ELA)

1. Reading Standards for Literature (RL):

- **Key Ideas and Details:**
    - *Standard RL.6.1:* Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
    - *Standard RL.6.2:* Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary distinct from personal opinions or judgments.
    - *Standard RL.6.3:* Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes and how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
- **Craft and Structure:**
    - *Standard RL.6.4:* Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.
    - *Standard RL.6.5:* Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

- *Standard RL.6.6:* Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

- **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:**
  - *Standard RL.6.7:* Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what is "seen" and "heard" when reading the text to what is perceived when listening or watching.
  - *Standard RL.6.9:* Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

2. Reading Standards for Informational Text (RI):

- **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:**
  - *H*
  - *Standard RI.6.8:* Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.
  - *Standard RI.6.9:* Compare and contrast one author's presentation of events with that of another (e.g., a memoir written by and a biography on the same person).

3. Writing Standards (W):

- **Text Types and Purposes:**
  - *Standard W.6.1:* Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

- *Standard W.6.2:* Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
- *Standard W.6.3:* Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

4.4. Speaking and Listening Standards (SL):

- **Comprehension and Collaboration:**
  - *Standard SL.6.1:* Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
  - *Standard SL.6.2:* Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.
  - *Standard SL.6.3:* Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

Literacy Skills Expected in 5th and 6th Grade Based on Common Core

1. Reading Skills

- **Comprehension & Analysis of Texts:**
    - Cite textual evidence to support inferences and conclusions.
    - Determine themes or central ideas and summarize without personal opinions.
    - Analyze characters, events, and ideas, including how they interact and develop.
- **Vocabulary Development:**
    - Determine the meaning of words and phrases, including figurative and technical meanings.
    - Use context clues, affixes, and root words to define unknown words.
    - Understand and interpret connotations and word relationships.
- **Comparing & Evaluating Texts:**
    - Analyze how different authors approach similar themes or topics.
    - Compare different forms of text (e.g., literature vs. informational text, print vs. multimedia).
    - Evaluate arguments, distinguishing supported claims from unsupported claims.

2. Writing Skills

- **Argumentative & Explanatory Writing:**
    - Write opinion pieces with clear claims, reasons, and supporting evidence.
    - Develop informative/explanatory texts with organized ideas and relevant details.
- **Narrative Writing:**
    - Write well-structured narratives with descriptive details, character development, and logical sequences.
    - Use dialogue, pacing, and transitions to enhance storytelling.
- **Research & Evidence-Based Writing:**

- Conduct short research projects using multiple sources.
- Summarize, paraphrase, and cite sources to avoid plagiarism.
- Use digital tools to draft, revise, and publish writing.

3. Speaking & Listening Skills

- **Discussion & Collaboration:**
  - Engage in discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing personal viewpoints clearly.
  - Ask and answer questions to deepen understanding.
  - Use formal and informal speech appropriately in different situations

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Critical Consciousness "scale" by Arman Abednia & Mahsa Izadinia

Drawing on Their Own Experience:

- Definition: Students make sense of the text in relation to their own lives.
- Significance: This is the foundation of using critical literacy to build critical consciousness.
- Connection to Critical Consciousness: It helps students recognize broader social inequalities or systems of oppression as they relate to their own experiences.

Contextualizing Issues:

- Definition: Situating the problems from the text within real-life people, places, and understandings.

- Significance: This category provides "proof" of students building critical consciousness.
- Connection to Critical Consciousness: Students connect a character's problem to a real-world issue, bringing in evidence from their own perspectives to deepen their understanding.

Problem-Posing:

- Definition: Students bring up topics such as power struggles, microaggressions, or assumptions from the text and question them.
- Significance: Acknowledging systems of oppression and questioning their existence is a key component of critical literacy.
- Connection to Critical Consciousness: Students critically engage with the text by interrogating the structures that uphold injustice.

Defining and Redefining Key Concepts:

- Definition: Students define concepts like justice, race, and culture, and later redefine them to reflect their growing understanding.
- Significance: Redefining concepts indicates a transformation in students' critical thinking.
- Connection to Critical Consciousness: This category demonstrates intellectual growth and a deeper engagement with issues of power and equity.

Offering Solutions:

- Definition: Students suggest ways to address the problems they analyze in the text.
- Significance: A key component of critical literacy is moving beyond analysis to action.

- Connection to Critical Consciousness: While students may not naturally offer solutions due to traditional schooling norms, recognizing their potential as change-makers is an essential step toward critical consciousness.