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Developing critical literacy with seventh graders.

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DEVELOPING CRITICAL LITERACY WITH SEVENTH GRADERS

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The purpose of this study was to encourage and examine seventh grade students' aesthetic responses to literature that focus on issues of power and oppression. Transactional theory and critical literacy combined in the forms of written response and literature discussions. Data were students' response log entries, transcripts of literature circle discussions, and notes from debriefing sessions. Results revealed 1) the majority of students' response log entries were written from the aesthetic stance; 2) students responded to oppressed characters' situations by supporting or encouraging acceptance, passive resistance, active resistance, or adult assistance; 3) students described oppressed characters as subjects (as opposed to objects) more frequently at the end of stories, once the characters began to resist their oppression; 3) students criticized oppressive institutions more than oppressive people; and 4) students' written responses after participating in literature circle discussions did not include reflection or extension of what was discussed in the group.

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> Democracy requires citizens who can think, challenge, and exhibit long-term thought. This means that public schools need to become places that provide the opportunities for literate occasions, that is, opportunities to share their experiences, work in social relations that emphasize care and concern for others, and be introduced to forms of knowledge that provide them with the opportunity to take risks and fight for a quality of life in which all human beings benefit (Giroux, 1992, p. 20).

Thomas Jefferson envisioned schools as tools of democracy[1] (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). American citizens would use reason to deliberate between competing ideas presented in a free press. They must be able to read in order to be able to do so. Horace Mann agreed with Jefferson's vision. He believed the main purpose of education was to advance liberty and democracy. He "intended common [public] schools to teach the knowledge and habits, as well as the basic literacy, that citizens needed to function in society" (p. 5). In addition, he set a goal for all public schools to be equal. Schools would iron out inequalities and foster wealth and prosperity.

Over two centuries later, we are still struggling to reach these goals. The Goals 2000 Act (King, 1994) cites the need to prepare students to be responsible citizens. Yet rather than empowering citizens to assume influence through democracy, secondary

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[1] Jefferson proposed public education for white males in literacy, arithmetic, and history (Shannon, 1989).

teacher William Bigelow (1990) claims that public education continually reproduces the existing class system that disenfranchises a large portion of society. In Teaching to Change the World, Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton (1999) explore "ideologies...that characterize American culture and schooling and prevent society and schools from realizing their democratic possibilities" (p. 15).

Bigelow (1990) does his best to change that for the students in his Literature in U.S. History class. "As a teacher I want to be an agent of transformation, with my classroom as a center of equality and democracy—an ongoing, if small, critique of the repressive social relations of the larger society" (p. 72). Rather than perpetuate the inequalities that exist in students' lives, Bigelow believes schools should confront them.

Bigelow is a critical pedagogist. Joan Wink (1997) calls critical pedagogy "a process that enables teachers and learners to join together in asking fundamental questions about knowledge, justice, and equity in their own classroom, school, family, and community" (p. 68). While Bigelow teaches the specific skills his students need in order to function in society, he focuses on real world issues—power and oppression. His teaching encourages students to ask critical questions such as: Who has power and how do they use it? Do they even know they are using their power to silence and marginalize others? What can the oppressed do to change things? Do they even know or care that they are oppressed?

Through such critical questioning, both students and adults take on the role of subject rather than object (Freire, 1993) as they examine their own place in oppressive structures. Rather than denying the political nature of public schools, critical pedagogy

points it out, studies it, and encourages students to make changes. By encouraging critical thinking in students, critical pedagogy can create empowered citizens. In contrast, uncritical citizens are the easiest to control, and relinquishing control to others means giving up power over oneself (Shor, 1993).

Critical literacy examines how we can use literacy to get students to think critically about their world. It allows us to read social practices, or, as Paulo Freire explained, to read the world as well as the word (Freire & Macedo, 1987). First of all, students need to realize that literacy is power. With the abilities and opportunities to read, write, listen, and speak, students can learn, understand, discuss, disagree, and influence others. Critical literacy also uses critical texts, texts that confront issues of power and oppression. Real–world problems are neither sugarcoated nor omitted. They are presented for students to think about, respond to, discuss, and reflect upon. Critical books (Leland et al., 1999) pose problems by confronting students with past or current injustices. Christine Leland and her colleagues describe critical books as meeting one of the following criteria:

1. They don't make difference invisible, but rather explore what differences *make a difference.*
2. They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who traditionally have been silenced or marginalized.
3. They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues.
4. They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people.

5. They don't provide "happily ever after" endings for complex social problems (p. 70).

Critical books question the dominant discourse, for example, the ways of thinking and talking about topics such as migrant workers, slavery, the Holocaust, child labor, economic disparities, or students with disabilities. Presenting these books within a problem posing context is central to critical teaching and learning (Wink, 1997). When students examine injustices through literature, they may become more socially conscious of the injustices around them and take actions that attempt to address oppression. Freire (1993) describes this process as conscientization.

One of my goals as a teacher is to encourage students to critically examine issues of power and oppression so that they become socially conscious of the world around them. One way to accomplish this goal is through literature. Louise M. Rosenblatt (1993) claims literature has the potential for "aiding us to understand ourselves and others, for widening our horizons to include temperaments and cultures different from our own, for helping us to clarify our conflicts in values, for illuminating our world" (p. 21). Such critiques of self and world are much more likely to develop critical consciousness than the banking model Freire (1993) describes, in which the teacher deposits information in the students, who then file and store it. Rather than transferring knowledge, teachers need to "create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge" (Freire, 1998, p. 30.)

Of course, no one book interests and motivates all readers, but critical texts that students can identify with have the potential to evoke critical responses. These texts

present readers with opportunities to help characters discover their roles as oppressed or oppressor and weigh possible options for action. When those characters are similar to themselves in some way, students are more likely to empathize and share their opinions about the characters' oppressive situations and subsequent actions. Such books are one way to battle ignorance of oppression.

Rosenblatt's transactional model of reading has revolutionized reading theory over the past several decades. While her seminal work, Literature as Exploration, was first published in 1938, it did not gain much attention or acceptance until the Colloquium on Reader Response to Literature at the University of Buffalo in 1977 (Church, 1997). Her theory challenges the New Criticism approach that previously dominated, in which the text contains all meaning, and the teacher is the expert who helps the student discover it through close reading. Rosenblatt's theory is called the transactional model because she believes the author, text, and reader transact to create new meaning with each reading. She calls the product of this transaction the "poem."

Another aspect of Rosenblatt's theory is what she calls the reader's stance. She describes a continuum to illustrate the stances, or purposes, with which a reader can read and respond. At one end of the continuum is the aesthetic stance, which deals with the reader's personal experiences and the emotions involved in the transaction. At the other end of the continuum, the efferent stance is based more on the facts and knowledge gained from a reading. Each transaction falls somewhere on this continuum between aesthetic and efferent.

Aesthetic reading is another way to encourage critical reading with an awareness of power relationships. Students need to be able to react with emotion to situations and actions that concern them. Writing and talking about their feelings in response to critical literature increases the likelihood that students will learn about and critique the oppressive situations presented in the text. I encourage aesthetic reading of and response to literature so my students can focus on the real-world implications of the power relationships in the texts.

Aesthetic reading is encouraged and reinforced by reader response. While some critics may fear that comprehension decreases when students focus on feeling and emotion, Bernice Cullinan and Kathy Harwood (1983) suggest, "Comprehending and responding to literature have been viewed separately by some researchers. These authors argue that they need to be viewed as complementary processes" (p. 29). Rather than a test or an extended retelling of the text, students share thoughts from their reading transaction in various ways. Written response, discussions, and visual and performing arts are examples of reader response. Such open-ended tasks encourage an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1991).

Written response is one way to reflect on the impact a text has on the reader. A response log is a place to form opinions about issues in literature and back those opinions up with life experiences and the text itself. This is one way to implement the critical thinking Karen Miller (1994) strives for in her middle school social studies classes. She stresses that battling ignorance of these issues involves forming opinions, and that students need to understand that it is okay to disagree with those in authority. This begins

in the classroom, where teachers need to share their opinions, so students have the opportunity to disagree. Fifth grade teacher Bob Peterson (1994a) believes that teachers who do not share their opinions perpetuate student apathy. Critical teachers also repeatedly call for the integration of students' lives into the curriculum (Bigelow, 1990; Ellwood, 1994; Giroux, 1992; Miller, 1994; Peterson, 1994b; Wink, 1997). The use of a response log is one practice a teacher may use to encourage critical thinking and a personal connection with literature.

Literature circles are another. For Peterson (1994b), reflective dialogue is the "litmus test" (p. 30) of whether or not a teacher is a critical teacher. He cites that in America, "less than 1% of instructional time in high school is devoted to discussion that requires some kind of response involving reasoning or an opinion from students" (p. 30). Literature circles may combat this lack of discussion. Literature circles feed on students' inherent desire to talk, and the small-group format allows for more involvement than a whole class discussion. While the teacher may sit in on a group meeting, the teacher does not lead the group; it is the students' thoughts that are discussed. They verbalize their own ideas and hear different perspectives. The dialogue and communication students engage in are preparation for their participation in a democracy where the same critical thinking and sharing of various perspectives and ideas are necessary.

The ability to see the various perspectives of an issue, and the concept of banding together with other concerned peers to discuss problems and promote change are two qualities of social consciousness that Peterson (1994b) strives to instill in his fifth grade students. Like the students in Elizabeth Noll's (1994) seventh grade reading classes who

work with their literature circle groups to discuss and act on their concerns, I want my students to bond with their groups to discuss and develop possible solutions for the societal problems reflected in the novels they read.

Purpose

While there are many studies on middle school students' responses to literature, this study will contribute to the limited body of research about the use of critical literacy in the middle school classroom. Many journal articles describe and support the use of critical literacy, yet the published research involves upper elementary and high school students.

The purpose of this study was to encourage and then examine students' aesthetic responses to literature that focus on issues of power and oppression. The study was conducted with seventh grade language arts students in a racially homogeneous, small school district. Through analyses of students' written responses and literature circle discussions, I explored how students related to the oppressed characters and what they had to say about the social factors that affected characters' choices in the critical literature. I gathered detailed data from one class composed of students with a variety of achievement levels.

To address my purpose, I sought the answers to the following questions: 1) What types of responses do students write in reaction to critical literature? 2) How do students relate to oppressed characters? 3) What do students say about the social factors that affect characters' choices? 4) What is the nature of students' written responses after participating in literature circle discussions?

My findings should be of interest to those teachers striving to incorporate reader response and critical literacy into their curriculum in order to foster more socially conscious students.

CHAPTER TWO:
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter is divided into two major sections. The first reviews literature related to transactional theory, focusing on written response and literature discussions. The second section reviews critical literacy and the use of literature to empower students and foster an understanding of and commitment to social justice.

Transactional Theory

Louise Rosenblatt (1994) developed transactional theory from the work of Dewey and Bentley. She explains that the author, text, and reader come together to create meaning. Every reader constructs his or her own understanding, what Rosenblatt metaphorically describes as a "poem." Not only will the text have a different meaning for different people, it will have different meanings for the same person at different times. Each reading, or transaction, incorporates the reader's thoughts and emotions at the time of the reading, so each transaction is unique (Rosenblatt, 1991). Transactional theory is a contrast to the transmission theory or modernism, which views reading as the process of determining what the author meant. Students of teachers who implement this latter theory are often expected to memorize what the teacher says the text means, proving their knowledge through a test or longer restatement of the text. In these classrooms, teachers often lead what Maryann Eeds and Deborah Wells (1989) call inquisitions—whole class rapid-fire questioning sessions. If students in these classrooms have any thoughts, feelings, or reactions from their reading, they tend to keep them to themselves.

Rosenblatt (1991) describes the two stances that a reader can adopt. A stance is a purpose for reading. She explains, "There are two primary ways of looking at the world. We may experience it, feel it, sense it, hear it, and have emotions about it in all its immediacy. Or we may abstract generalizations about it, analyze it, manipulate it, and theorize about it" (p. 445). The first stance she describes here is the aesthetic stance. This is a reading based on private associations, where the main focus is the thoughts and emotions the text evokes in the reader while reading. Past reading and life experiences are major factors in the aesthetic stance. The second stance she describes is the efferent stance. This is considered a public reading, because the focus is on the dictionary meaning of the words, which are similar for most readers. The purpose of an efferent reading is for a reader to gain information that he or she can carry away from the text.

But Rosenblatt (1991) stresses that rather than two contradicting stances, these two are at the opposite ends of a continuum. She says, "In any reading, at any point in the continuum, there are both cognitive and affective, publicly referential and private associational, and abstract and concrete elements" (p. 446). Certain texts are written to be read predominantly one way or another, but it is the *reader's stance* that determines how a text will be read. In turn, stance affects a reader's understanding (Many, 1990). Rosenblatt stresses the need for a reader to know his or her purpose before reading.

Joyce Many (1990) claims that stance also appears in students' responses. "The stance in the reported response may or may not be consistent with the stance taken during the actual reading event" (p. 56). Students who respond with an aesthetic stance are more

likely to interpret story events, apply those events to their own lives, and draw generalizations about the world.

Carole Cox and Many (1992) describe how they applied transactional theory to fifth graders' written responses to nine works of realistic literature and film. The classification system they developed to categorize the responses describes five points along the efferent to aesthetic continuum. They include two degrees of efferent responses, one point reflecting no predominant stance, and two degrees of aesthetic responses. When students were given the open-ended prompt, "Write anything you want about the book (film) you just read (saw)", 62% of the responses they wrote were categorized as aesthetic, while only 20% were efferent and 18% were equally efferent and aesthetic. Students responded more aesthetically to books than to films, and the types of responses they wrote also differed according to which of the four books they read. The researchers also classified the responses according to four levels of understanding, and found that the most aesthetic responses were associated with the highest level of understanding.

In addition to teaching students about the reading stance continuum, teachers need to reinforce it by the way they assess student reading. If students know from experience that they will get an objective, fact-based test on a text they are otherwise likely to read with a predominantly aesthetic stance, they will change their stance and read efferently. For students to take an aesthetic stance, they need time to experience and reflect on the text and know that their personal responses will be a major part of their evaluation.

> They can savor the images, the sounds, the smells, the actions, the associations, and the feelings the words point to...After the reading, the

> experience should be recaptured, reflected on. It can be the subject of further aesthetic activities—drawing, dancing, miming, talking, writing, role-playing, or oral interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 447).

Even literature read with a predominantly aesthetic stance will have efferent elements for the reader to attend to. If students are encouraged to take note of figurative language, they are reading with a partially efferent purpose. With a historical novel, like Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen (1993), the focus is on the powerful emotions the literature evokes, but students gain information about slavery as well.

The efferent stance is overwhelmingly the most common stance taken by secondary students for school tasks. In nearly every class students have a textbook they read for information. All readers are expected to get the same information out of the text, so it is a public reading. Students are expected to read and often memorize information they are expected to recall for some type of evaluation. This information may or may not be of use or relevance beyond a course grade. Regardless, efferent reading is an important skill to master. All functioning members of society need to be able to read to gather information. The problem in school is that this may be the only or predominant type of reading a student does. In fact, Sam Sebesta (1997) fears that students who read solely from an efferent stance will become aliterates. There needs to be a balance. According to Rosenblatt (1991), "We need to make sure that students are cumulatively developing, in their transactions with texts, the ability to adopt the stance on the continuum appropriate to their particular personal purposes and to the situation—in short, the ability to read both efferently and aesthetically" (p. 448).

One of the problems with a modernist approach to teaching literature is the tendency for students to respond to books the way their teachers typically do. If a teacher is at the front of the class all of the time, asking questions and sharing her thoughts, students will usually adopt her stance (Spiegel, 1998). Students need the chance to develop their own personal responses, preferably after the teacher and other students have modeled a wide variety of responses. These examples open new possibilities and model thinking from numerous perspectives.

Personal response is what awakens readers to literature. With an awareness of response, reading becomes an active process (Hackman, 1986; Hancock, 1993a). When students know teachers expect them to respond individually and personally to what they are reading, they are more engaged in the text and therefore have a deeper understanding of what they read (Blatt & Rosen, 1984). When teachers ask students to respond personally, thoughts and ideas surface that students might otherwise not know they have (Moffett & Wagner, 1991).

Most importantly, reader response focuses on meaning-making (Gambrell, 1985). Students are not accountable for irrelevant and inconsequential information, such as the color of a character's hat, unless it has meaning for them. Student response provides the teacher with much more information about what the reader knows and thinks than an objective test (Pottle, 1992).

Written Response

Written response provides students with opportunities to explore and synthesize their thoughts and ideas. In addition, it provides information to teachers about students' understandings of facts and concepts.

The response log provides a place for personal reflection on the learning taking place in relation to reading. Laura Saunders' (1997) case study is a prime example of how this process works. One of her students connected so well with Dicey Timmerman from Dicey's Song (Voigt, 1982) that she constantly compared herself and other characters to Dicey. When Saunders asked this student to reread her journal, the student was able to pick out the pattern she had established, and wrote about the impact of the novel on her life. She went so far as to say "Every [sic] since I've read Dicey's Song it's like I've really changed. I guess certain books have certain effects on different people" (Saunders, 1997, p. 553). This is the impact we want literature to have on all students, but without the time to reflect on a body of their own writing, students will never discover its power.

In addition to providing material for reflection, Janet Emig (1997) supports writing about literature because it is a slower process than speaking, requiring more thought and deliberation. "Perhaps because there is a product involved, writing tends to be a more responsible and committed act than talking" (p. 124). Students will blurt out answers as quickly as possible if a teacher allows it, but those same students will sit and think before beginning to write. Both processes have their place.

Sharon Wolter (1986) challenges those teachers who worry about whether or not students are "learning" the text. Her study of seventh and eighth grade students' reading

comprehension suggests that expressive writing, specifically in what she calls dialogue journals, actually increases reading comprehension. In fact, Wolter points out that in most classrooms, teachers spend very little class time actually teaching comprehension, but a lot of time testing it [congruent with Durkin's (1978-79) findings about basal reader lessons in elementary classrooms]. With its focus on meaning, expressive writing is a powerful tool for teaching comprehension. Students are given the time necessary to concentrate and share what they do know. Teachers' concerns, comments, and questions are relayed through written dialogue in the journal or conferences.

In addition, the students in Wolter's (1986) study who wrote in dialogue journals had better attitudes toward both reading and writing than students who did not write in journals. Penny Oldfather (1995) explains that students generally lose their frequent chances for self-expression when they leave elementary school. Students in her study felt that class discussions in junior high "were teacher centered and served to reveal whether students had basic knowledge of factual information rather than being opportunities for students to express themselves, exchange ideas, express opinions, or think deeply together about issues and problems" (p. 421). Students lose their intrinsic motivation when they lose opportunities for self-expression. Allowing students to express their personal thoughts gives them what Oldfather calls an "honored voice" (p. 422). The feeling that what they have to share is important is what motivates students to get involved.

In a detailed study of sixth graders' written responses to four novels, Marjorie Hancock (1993b) describes nine types of responses based on her examination of students'

literature journals. Students exhibited understanding, character introspection, prediction of events, questioning, character identification, character assessment, story involvement, literary evaluation, and reader/writer digressions.

In May of 1998, I conducted a pilot of this study with my seventh grade language arts students. I also found nine categories of response. Using Hancock's (1993b) means of data analysis, I categorized student responses as I read them, allowing the categories to emerge from the data. The names of my categories are slightly different, but many of them are similar to Hancock's. I found character comments, literary criticism, summaries, predictions, inferences, personal connections, advice, questions, and references to other books. I found that students were more likely to summarize when they thought I had not read the book to which they were responding. When the whole class read a book, or a student was reading a book they knew I was familiar with, they were more likely to write responses that involved analysis. Their responses were much more interesting for me to read and respond to. Students made connections and comparisons between their lives and the lives of characters, shared ideas for solutions to problems, related the books they were reading to other books, made informed predictions, and asked thoughtful questions.

The wide array of categories that emerged in these studies suggests that response logs can provide expanded learning opportunities for students, and a wealth of information for teachers and researchers. For students who are new to response, it may be difficult to move beyond basic summarizing at first. A student who has connected with a text may find it easy to perform a higher-level task, such as relating a character's situation to a similar one of his or her own. All six levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Whitton,

2000) can be incorporated into the response log: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Each student can respond at his or her current level of understanding, and the teacher can continually challenge students to move on to more complex connections with the text.

Types of Response Logs

Teachers have a variety of basic journal or log styles to choose from to incorporate written response into their curriculum. Anna McWhirter (1990) has her eighth grade reading students address their entries to her and establishes a dialogue through writing, based on the method described by Nancie Atwell (1987) in In the Middle. McWhirter's dialogue journals are a major component of the reading workshop she conducts in her classroom, and she stresses the importance of her feedback for her students. Through dialogue journals, she feels she provides individualized instruction for each student based on goals they set together. In addition, the journal is a record of each student's progress throughout the year. Students can also exchange journals and write back and forth to each other.

In an effort to motivate her seventh grade students, Leigh Van Horn (1997) focuses on character in her reading classes. In their character journals, her students pick a main character and write from that character's point of view. The students have a lot of leeway, some choosing to interject their own thoughts in a different color of ink, and some incorporating more than one character. They work through the characters' problems

as those characters, learning what it is to be someone else and becoming motivated through that experience. The student entries included in her article are insightful.

For teachers who prefer more structure in their assignments, Jeffrey Cantrell (1997) adapted the K-W-L comprehension strategy for use in his students' journals. His undergraduate and graduate education students write what they know (K) about a topic, what they want (W) to know, and what they learn (L) as they read. With this method, the teacher is challenged to help students find answers to questions not answered in the text.

Jane Sullivan (1998) motivated her fifth and sixth grade special education students by having them keep and exchange dialogue journals with preservice teachers via e-mail. Students and teachers read one of four books and shared their thoughts and feelings with one another. Both teacher and students enjoyed the activity, and Sullivan felt the students were more excited about reading and responding.

Characteristics of Successful Written Response

While there are countless types of response logs, there are several components that are consistently present in those that are successful. Jean Pottle (1992) stresses that one necessity is ample time for students to write. Susan Hackman (1986) encourages having students write while they are reading, so that students can record their reactions as they happen and the writing is not left for the end of class when there is rarely enough time. Another teaching strategy that is helpful to students is modeling (Dionisio, 1989; Sebesta, 1997; Youngblood, 1985). Sebesta (1997) claims that response is a learned activity. Guidelines and teacher modeling take some of the guesswork out of an open-

ended assignment, and modeling also encourages students to use the different types of responses.

Charles Duke (1982) suggests having students start with their gut reactions and move toward association with the characters and their own situations. Teachers' comments are the most important factor in moving students toward more difficult and in-depth responses, and are therefore another necessary component of a successful response log.

Literature Discussions

Response logs are valuable for students as vehicles for comprehension, meaning-making, and higher-level thinking. They can also be used in conjunction with other activities in the classroom. One of those activities is literature discussion.

In contrast to written response, discussions about literature tend to be more spontaneous, and they are one effective way to meet the important social needs of middle level students. In their synthesis of recent research on comprehension instruction, Linda Fielding and David Pearson (1994) insist that students need to talk to classmates and adults about literature every day. In fact, time to talk about responses to reading is one of the four major components they find necessary for successful comprehension instruction. With the opportunity to talk about text, students are more likely to use a wide variety of responses, help each other clarify basic meaning, and use the processes and opinions of others to fully develop their own ideas. All of these activities engage students more than whole-class question and answer sessions do.

Literature Circles

Literature circles, spontaneously started by students and developed by teachers more than a decade ago (Daniels, 1994), provide an excellent opportunity for students to discuss literature in a small group format. In the method described by Harvey Daniels (1994) in his book Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom, students use role sheets to prepare for discussions and explore various stances and responses to literature. Roles like Discussion Director, Word Wizard, and Literary Luminary guide students as they learn different ways to look at and respond to text. For example, the Illustrator creates some type of picture or image to represent the day's reading, while the Creative Connector gets students thinking about how the selection relates to their lives. Students rotate roles for each meeting, and as they internalize the roles and learn to look at text in a variety of ways, the role sheets are phased out and reading logs take over. Students meet two or three times per week to discuss their reading, and spend their off days reading and filling out their role sheets or attending to other class work. Literature circles, in their truest sense, are based on the theory that students will be motivated when allowed to choose their own topics to read about and study, and their own groups to read and study with.

Throughout his book, Daniels (1994) continually mentions how flexible literature circles are, and how they can be used with nearly any age group. Younger children generally use them with storybooks, and while older students typically use them with novels, they are easily adapted to nonfiction. Sherron Killingsworth-Roberts (1998) uses them with her undergraduate education students, reading nonfiction professional books.

She points out that one reason literature circles are successful is their use of all four modes of language. Students are actively involved in talking, listening, reading, and writing.

The benefits of literature circles are numerous. Bonnie Burns (1998) describes the increase in student involvement and improvement in classroom climate. "Smaller groups clearly allow more opportunity for active involvement which also changes the classroom climate" (p. 126). Her students were able to relax in the informal atmosphere and attend to social as well as academic needs. In literature circles, students get more opportunities to verbalize their ideas. They are also exposed to new and different perspectives and modes of thinking. Heterogeneous ability grouping encourages the stronger students to help, and in effect "teach" weaker students, who generally would much rather learn from peers than adults. Students who are weaker readers or writers usually have an opportunity to respond in new and different ways. They get credit for talking and drawing, and several of the typical role sheets focus on different intelligences, something that traditional whole class or individual work rarely accomplishes. Much like Burns, Neville Hosking and Ann Teberg (1998) think the empowering nature of literature circles is a great benefit. Students assume more control of their learning and take over new responsibilities. In addition, the exposure to new and different ideas and texts increases their opportunities to widen their interests. Noll (1994), in her study of seventh graders, concluded that, "The circles pushed the students' thinking and helped them develop new understandings about themselves and their world" (p. 90).

Students, as well as teachers, notice the positive effects of literature circles. In Nancy Williams and Roxanne Owens's (1997) preservice education classes, students were asked to write responses to their literature circle experiences; one class focused on children's books and the other focused on professional literature. Students felt the most important benefit was the exposure to a variety of perspectives. They felt they "got more out of" literature they discussed with peers. The opportunity for critical thinking is another component of the literature circles that students mentioned. Many of the children's books they initially thought of as simplistic, they later found to have deeper meanings. Finally, they enjoyed the choices they were given in the books read, responses, discussion topics, and final projects.

Like the college students in the previous study, Claudia Katz and Sue Ann Kuby (1997) found that middle school language arts students enjoyed hearing the opinions of other group members. They also felt working with a group helped their comprehension of the text. The opportunity to choose groups and books is an aspect of literature circles that middle school students particularly appreciate. While some of the college students in William and Owen's (1997) college classes enjoyed being assigned to literature circles so they could meet new people, middle school students wanted to choose their groups. In addition to self-selecting and sharing with peers, aspects of literature circles that students appreciate are self-pacing, student-led group meetings, and student-posed questions (Killingsworth-Roberts, 1998).

Although they give the instructional strategy a different name, Maryann Eeds and Deborah Wells's (1989) grand conversations are much like literature circles. The

grouping methods, group sizes, and frequency and length of meetings are similar. In their audio-taped student discussions, Eeds and Wells found four types of talk in every group: literal meaning, personal connections, inquiry, and literary criticism. All groups worked together to construct basic meaning. Everyone understood what was literally happening in the book and struggling members were more likely to ask for help in the small group setting. The groups also discussed personal involvement, thus developing personal significance. Serious inquiry occurred, with members predicting and verifying, and citing passages and page numbers. Finally, students critiqued the text. They wanted to share how they felt about what they read. Weaker students reap the greatest benefits of literature circles and grand conversations because they are more likely to participate in a small group than a whole class format.

Book Clubs

Kelly Chandler (1997) examined what students enjoyed about a summer reading group and applied it to the classroom. She started an optional summer book club for her high school English students because she sensed many readers had gone into hiding. She felt there was an "anti-intellectual" atmosphere at the school, and wanted a place for readers to share their responses to literature without fear of ridicule. Book clubs are popular among adults, and she hoped the same would work for high school students. The results were impressive. She held the book club for three summers, and each year student turnout increased. In addition, students increased their success at school after participating in the summer club. Chandler feels several aspects of the club contributed to

its success: choice, social interaction, quality time with a teacher outside of class, intellectual conversation, and student ownership of books. She describes the successful books as having strong characterization, a quick moving plot, enough ambiguity for different interpretations, and potential controversies. Such books led to discussions about what Chandler calls "big ideas."

While the summer book club obviously could not be transplanted directly into the classroom, Chandler did make some changes in her teaching as a result of the experience. She learned to share her own thoughts and questions about the text instead of constantly quizzing students with leading questions. She notes that students can disagree and share their conflicting opinions much more easily if they know the teacher's opinion and know they are allowed, and maybe even encouraged, to share a thoughtful opposing view. They also get to see an excellent model of a thoughtful adult reader. She suggests not grading every aspect of literature study. If a conversation involves enough students, it can sometimes take the place of an assignment or activity. The key is providing plenty of time for those discussions to develop and flourish. The result will be student connections to literature that are much more valuable than answering questions on typical objective tests.

In addition to the benefits already mentioned, such as increased student involvement and exposure to new perspectives, literature discussion builds appreciation of literature, and in some cases, social consciousness.

Critical Literacy

In education we sometimes try to accomplish so much that we lose sight of our overall objective. While skills are important, we need to encourage the development of students who will become caring and functional members of society, working to improve the world in whatever way they choose. Freire (1998) describes education as "a form of intervention in the world" (p. 91). The intervention may be as basic as either reproducing the dominant ideology or exposing it. Either way, both teacher and students need to realize they are making a decision that affects others. In the words of Stan Karp (1994), "Those of us who teach have daily opportunities to shape classroom life in ways that reflect a vision of social justice and equality" (p. 162). Unfortunately, most teachers feel too bogged down with their curriculum to incorporate this perspective in their teaching.

According to Wink (1997), time is the great enemy of public education. She explains her concern about the use of time.

> We, in schools, are often so busy *doing* that we fail to take time for *thinking*. Thinking about important ideas needs some nurturing in our classes. It takes time. The outcomes are not so immediately visible. The outcomes are more difficult to quantify initially. And, it looks like we're not doing anything. However, many of us would agree that what we are doing is not working very well (p. 6).

Roger Simon (1992) describes critical pedagogy as teaching in a social, economic, cultural, and political context. It involves the community and the world, rather than just the classroom. In addition to creating an educator open to ideas and aware of the

implications of how and what she teaches, critical pedagogy encourages students to be socially conscious and aware of how the views of society affect their lives.

Through critical pedagogy, students develop questioning habits that will serve them as active citizens in a democracy. Ira Shor (1993) claims, "This pedagogy challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their literacy and knowledge" (p. 25). Whereas traditional education encourages students to conform, Shor believes:

> [c]ritical education [based on the work of Paulo Freire] invites students to question the system they live in and the knowledge being offered them, to discuss what kind of future they want, including their right to elect authority and to remake the school and society they find (p. 28).

Empowering Students

"To empower is to enable those who have been silenced to speak" (Simon, 1992, p. 143). Socially conscious and responsible students have a sense of empowerment with the knowledge that they can affect and improve their community and world. Sheldon Berman (1990) claims that growing numbers of young adults feel powerless in the face of dangers that affect our world today. They do not think they have a political or social impact and do not believe they ever can. They are disheartened and choose not to participate in their communities politically or socially. These students need to learn how to be socially responsible, and the first step is thinking about and discussing their relationship to the world and the impact their daily choices have on the world around

them. Berman describes what he calls the six dimensions of nurturing social responsibility: understanding our interdependence, becoming part of a community, developing basic social skills, providing opportunities for social contribution, developing basic participatory understanding skills, and exploring real world issues. In addition to being modeled in the classroom and school, these components need to be integral parts of the school curriculum in order for students to develop and maintain a positive and empowered outlook. In other words, schools need to explicitly teach students how to be socially conscious and responsible.

Another way to empower students is to match the discussion of social problems with possible solutions (Ellwood, 1994). Rather than just talking about what is wrong with the world, students brainstorm what they can do and study what other people in similar situations have done. Cynthia Ellwood emphasizes heroes students can identify with. "I've always tried to present them with examples of people who strove for their dreams, who acted heroically in everyday life, who fought oppression and pursued ideals individually and collectively" (p. 98).

Student Experience as Curriculum

Peterson (1994b), editor of Rethinking Schools, says, "Focusing on problems in writing and discussion acknowledges the seriousness of a child's problem; it also fosters community because the students recognize that we share common concerns" (p. 31). Students can use their own concerns and experiences as a basis for what they study. For example, Bigelow (1992) encourages the high school students in his Literature in U.S.

History class to critique society and the way it oppresses certain groups of people. He wants students to think about what social factors place limits on them and then question who they could be without those limitations. He emphasizes historic and current forms of resistance, and makes sure students learn about individuals and groups who fought and continue to fight oppression, yet may not be typical heroes. He wants to fight the assumption that only "great people" can bring about great changes. He and Miller (1994) challenge this assumption by bringing modern activists into their classrooms.

Henry Giroux (1992) also focuses on student experiences in his university classes. He reminds us that school is a child's introduction to life and when we legitimate the dominant culture, we negate those who are not a part of it. According to Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987), even the young and uneducated can "read the world". Like Bigelow, Giroux wants his students to challenge the world by examining how society helped create them and asking themselves if they are who they want to be.

Critiquing Bias

Part of being a critical teacher and a critical student involves critiquing bias within the schools. Through literature, community resources, and personal reflection, Carol Fuhler (1991), another history teacher, encourages her middle school students to critically examine the history textbook and curriculum. She wants students to know who is being silenced through omission and what is misrepresented or glorified.

Michelle Commeyras and Donna Alvermann (1994) were not content with history textbooks either. Their study of three high school world history textbooks developed by

major publishers illustrates the Eurocentric and western view assumed by all three. Their study focused on how Third World countries are represented in these textbooks. In the three textbooks they examined, when these countries were mentioned, the writers emphasized their colonization and subsequent struggles with recovery. The histories of flourishing African, Asian, and South American cultures were marginalized unless they had close ties with the development of western civilization, like Ancient Egypt. Even the drive for Third World countries to break free of imperialism was attributed to their leaders' western educations. If students and teachers view these textbooks as fact, numerous cultures are discounted as unimportant and their accomplishments are attributed to others. Many of our students have historical ties with these cultures. Commeyras and Alvermann suggest supplementing textbooks with trade books, non-print media, and students' and community members' experiences. In addition, they have students examine texts themselves for deficiencies and misrepresentations and have them reflect on what that implies about our culture.

Social Justice

Miller (1994) is a middle school history/language arts teacher who focuses on social justice in her classroom. She believes that middle school students have an inherent sense of fairness, and she puts it to use to combat prejudice and racism. She knows these are sensitive issues in her community, so she begins her immigration unit by focusing on history. Students are not immediately confronted with their own stereotypes and prejudices. First she asks students, "What is an American?" Many answers focus on

being born in America, speaking English, or even being white. Then she has students assume the identity of an immigrant from the 1880's. They come up with names, family histories, occupations, and religions. Most immigrants at that time were from Western Europe, so her predominantly white, working-class students can identify with them, but students quickly learn that these immigrants faced prejudice too. Trained students from other classes come in and act as Ellis Island officials who mispronounce their names, push them into lines, and even deport some for health reasons. Students record their hardships and triumphs as immigrants in journals and create family albums. When Miller brings in a panel of current immigrants, mostly from Asia and Russia, students are much more empathetic about the racism and prejudices new immigrants face. Students also write essays about times they have been discriminated against as teenagers.

Peterson (1994a) takes the quest for social justice even further. His fifth grade students role play examples of discrimination and ways they can respond. They write letters and start petitions for issues that concern them. He has even taken some students to protest marches, although he is careful to keep such activities completely separate from school. Most teachers shy away from such political action or even discussion with students, but he insists that politics always enter the classroom, and that what teachers do *not* do sends a message as well as what they *do*. "For a teacher to pretend to have no opinion on controversial topics, however, is not only unbelievable but sends the message that it's OK to be opinionless and apathetic toward key social issues" (p. 40).

The social issue Arlette Willis and Julia Johnson (2000) focused on in their research of a high school class studying an African-American literary work was the death

penalty. The researchers incorporated a variety of sociohistorical resources in a semester long study focusing on the book A Lesson Before Dying (Gaines, 1997). The book, set in the South in 1948, is about an uneducated young black man wrongfully accused of murder and sentenced to death. In addition to reading the novel, students read transcripts of an interview with the author, listened to an excerpt of the book on audiotape, read a short story and a poem with similar themes, watched a documentary about the Scottsboro trial, and listened to four guest speakers on the death penalty and life in the South. While all students had to write written responses at times, they also had opportunities to respond through drama (Image Theatre), visual art, and oral presentation. The researchers' goal was to move students "beyond personal expression to greater social consciousness" (p. 16). When they analyzed student responses, they found that the sociohistorical information helped students form and evaluate their opinions about social issues, but that students' viewpoints did not change significantly as a result of the course. The different response forms allowed the students to connect to the social issues in personally meaningful ways. Willis and Johnson went far beyond literal instruction of the novel and encouraged students to "read the world."

Critical Pedagogy with Literature

Critical pedagogy is not just for history teachers. For any teacher using literature circles to encourage socially conscious thinking, Burns (1998) suggests picking a theme, like power, oppression, poverty, or racism. These themes are general enough to encompass a wide range of texts and can bring the whole class together. Students can see

how different aspects of one issue fit together through whole-group discussions or displays and presentations of final projects. This strategy seems particularly effective for classes with limited time or resources for their literature circles.

Noll's (1994) seventh grade language arts classroom is a prime example of how literature circles, critical pedagogy, and social consciousness go hand in hand. Her students form and reform literature circles based on mutual interests. They read novels and nonfiction, discuss ideas, and create plans of action. These young adults of twelve or thirteen are following Freire's critical learning guideline: name, reflect critically, act (Wink, 1997). For example, after a group of her students read about and studied child abuse, they wanted to do more. They took their concerns to the community, interviewing social workers, teachers, physicians, and foster parents. They sent away for additional information. As a culminating project, they shared their final presentation with their class and other classes. They went beyond the classroom for resources, reflected on what they had learned and how to best share it, and finally, they acted. Other groups in Noll's classes have visited nursing homes and interviewed veterans as extensions of their literature circles.

Karla Möller and JoBeth Allen's (2000) research with four fifth-grade girls illustrates how deeply literature circles based on critical literature can affect participants. The four struggling readers, three African-Americans and one Hispanic, read The Friendship by Mildred Taylor (1987) and met with one of the researchers to discuss it. They connected the racism of the 1930's to events in their lives to such an extent that the girls actually became frightened and expressed concerns about their own safety. While

the researcher could not deny the dangers of the present world, she helped create a place where the girls could discuss their fears and address painful issues. She was uncomfortable with the intensity of the discussions, but she knew ignoring the issues would not make them go away. Instead, the group talked, wrote, and found hope through the resistance of the characters in the story. Though teachers are not usually able to work so closely with small groups, this research demonstrates how students and teachers working together can create truly meaningful experiences with literature.

Leland and her colleagues (1999) describe the use of critical books with elementary children. Some teachers had mixed reactions about presenting sad or serious stories to children. These teachers felt the social problems presented in the books might actually encourage such problems in their schools. Yet the teachers who used critical books in their classrooms were astonished at how well the young students paid attention and grasped the issues. Some students even decided to take action after listening to the books. One third and fourth grade class decided to hang up posters around their school depicting the dangers of guns after reading a book in which an adolescent shoots a store clerk with his father's gun. Other upper elementary students, after reading several critical books, decided to write an editorial in the school newspaper demanding that younger students be able to talk in the lunchroom, even though the older students already enjoyed the privilege. The use of these critical books, which are controversial in many cases, reflects the real world much more accurately than the typical curriculum.

Darolyn Jones (1997) focuses on power issues in students' responses to the books Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen (1993) and My Name is not Angelica by Scott O'Dell (1989).

In addition to various research and debate projects, students write diary entries from the perspective of the slaves in each novel, much like Van Horn's character journals. Students reflect on their assumed living conditions, feelings, and actions. This is an example of the perspective taking that Berman (1990) includes in his social responsibility curriculum, in the category called "developing basic social skills." Examining oppression may make students more compassionate toward those who suffer.

Ben Brunwin (1989) describes a long literature unit in which his middle school English students journey through five centuries in five novels. Each one of the five novels focuses on the social conditions, class structures, and industrial development of the places and times they visit. Students gain empathy and understanding by reflecting on the social, economic, cultural, and political aspects of the novels they read.

Book clubs are continuing to increase in popularity for adults, and several researchers have adapted them for use with students and examined the results. Kathleen Carico (1996), Kelly Chandler (1997), and Sally Smith (1997) are three such researchers, and they comment on the in-depth discussions about critical issues that occur when groups of students get together to openly talk about literature. Carico's study involved four adolescent girls who met after school. Without the presence of boys, these girls were able to examine and re-evaluate their attitudes and beliefs about what being female means in today's society. Smith worries that girls become disconnected when they realize the implications of being female, and wanted a place for girls to discuss their thoughts and feelings. She used critical texts with strong female characters to get eight girls to think about and discuss how their gender and race affects their lives. Chandler's summer book

club gave her students a place to read and discuss literature away from the ridicule of the non-academics at school. These book club ideas can be transplanted into the classroom as literature circles.

Rather than a warehouse of worksheets and study guides, school can be a place of critical discovery and growth. Miller (1994) says, "My role as a teacher is to help them learn how to form opinions, to understand what those opinions are based on, and, I hope, have them act on those opinions" (p. 44). In his book Literacies of Power, Donaldo Macedo (1994) provides an example of a student who did just that. In the early 1990's, twelve-year-old David Spritzler of Boston Latin School refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance. He proclaimed that there is not "liberty and justice for all" in the United States. He refused to accept the hypocrisy of the Pledge and was threatened with disciplinary action until the American Civil Liberties Union took his side. The simple act of not saying the Pledge is David's critical thought in action. This child stood up for what he believed despite the opposition of his teachers and his principal.

According to Shor (1993), "In traditional classrooms, students develop authority-dependence; they rehearse their futures as passive citizens and workers by learning that education means listening to teachers tell them what to do and what things mean" (p. 29). But Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann both placed America's hope for a successful democracy in the hands of the public schools. Students would acquire the knowledge, habits, and literacy necessary for participation in what Mann called "common schools." More than two centuries later, those expectations have not changed (Oakes & Lipton,

1999). In order to achieve a democracy in which the majority of citizens participate, we are going to have to change the way we educate America's students.

CHAPTER THREE:
METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides details about the implementation of this study. It describes the participants and the method used to observe them. It summarizes the books used in the literature circles, as well as the data I collected as students read and responded to those books. It describes in detail the procedures I led my class through as students practiced and then participated in the literature circles. Finally, it explains how I analyzed the resulting data.

Participants

The participants of the study were students from one of my seventh grade language arts classes who received parental permission to participate. These students attended the only middle school in a small, racially homogeneous (Caucasian) Midwestern town, where I am the only language arts teacher for the seventh grade. All students in seventh grade participated in literature circles with critical texts and discussed and wrote about power relationships, but only one class was studied in-depth and reported on.

I was pragmatic when choosing which class to study. There were many factors involved in my choice, including the students' attendance, responsibility, their assignment completion, and their demonstrated ability to work well in groups.

All students in the class participated in the instruction. However, students in two groups were randomly chosen as focus groups by picking numbers out of a hat. The only

criteria was that all students in both groups had parental permission to take part in the study.

Method

As a teacher collecting data for a qualitative study in my own classroom, I was a participant observer (Spradley, 1980). I had to go beyond the participation of the usual teacher and observe what happened when students were reading, writing, and interacting in their literature circles with explicit awareness. I kept records of those observations as well as the reflections I had during the course of the study.

My degree of participation was moderate. I was an insider in that my students were comfortable with my presence since they had been in my classroom for two months. They were used to seeing me walk around with a clipboard jotting down notes any time they were working independently or in small groups, something I continued to do during this study.

I was an outsider in that I was not actually a part of the literature circles. The students were in small groups according to the book they picked, and they ran the literature circle discussions themselves. I occasionally sat down to listen, and maybe even asked some questions or made some comments of my own, but I basically observed. First and foremost, I was the teacher, so I had to participate more with the groups that were struggling to start or maintain discussions, or the groups that were frequently off task. While participating, I restrained myself from controlling the conversation, or the literature circles would have just become a small version of teacher-led whole class

discussions. To minimize my control, I did not spend more than a few minutes with any one group.

Daily reflection helped me determine whether or not changes needed to be made during the course of the study. Reflection on the data and the resulting analyses helped me decide what action to take as a result of my study in order to best help my students learn.

The Books

The class participated in a four week unit, reading, discussing, and writing about books in literature circles, and working on a final project of their choice. The books for the literature circles all dealt with power relationships and the struggle of the oppressed to acknowledge their position and gain personal empowerment.

I chose six books for the study based on several factors. I wanted six different titles so there would be groups of four to six students, with each group reading a different title. (After the study, all of the books were available to students for independent reading.) I picked books that I have read and enjoyed that have an underlying theme of power and oppression. So while each book was very different and focused on different aspects of oppression, they all featured abusive power relationships. The main character in each book realizes he or she is in an oppressive situation and takes action to confront or defy the person or group in power. The oppression was in the form of racism, poverty, or control by peers and/or society. I purposely selected three books that have males as the main characters, and three that have females, as well as a mix of historical and

contemporary fiction. Three of the books were read and recommended by recent former students, and four of the six books have won or been nominated for national awards. Finally, I kept Chandler's (1997) list of characteristics of successful book club books in mind: strong characterization, a quick moving plot, enough ambiguity for different interpretations, and potential controversies. Each of the six books is described in detail below.

After listening to book talks about each book, the students rated their top three choices, and were placed in heterogeneous achievement groups according to those choices. These heterogeneous groups brought together varied experiences and backgrounds that enhanced the discussions.

Music of the Dolphins, by Karen Hesse (1996), is an imaginative story about a girl who is raised by dolphins. After many years of living with her dolphin family, Mila is discovered, captured, and subsequently studied by scientists. Throughout this process, she is treated like an object, rather than a human being. Her emotional needs are completely ignored while the scientists work to make her conform to society's expectations of a teenage girl. She learns to speak and read, and is fascinated by music, but she misses her dolphin family. One of the scientist's sons befriends her, and together they find a way for her to go back to the home where she belongs.

Junebug, by Alice Mead (1995), is the story of a young African-American boy growing up in the projects. He dreads turning ten, because that is the age when boys in his neighborhood typically get involved in gangs and drugs. He has watched helplessly while his friends choose the wrong path. Despite the power and expectations of his peers

in the gang, his goal is to avoid a life of crime, drugs, and danger. He has dreams that he refuses to let die.

Lyddie, by Katherine Paterson (1991), takes the reader back to 19th century New England and traces a young woman's role as an object in several contexts. Lyddie's father has died, and her mother has hired her out to an inn to work and live. There Lyddie meets a young woman working in the Lowell, Massachusetts textile mills. Lyddie leaves the inn to work in the mills. She works long grueling hours and starts saving money to pay off her family's debts, but the work load continues to increase, and she notices more and more girls getting sick from poor working conditions. Eventually she decides to join her coworkers in the battle against their exploitation.

Under the Blood Red Sun, by Graham Salisbury (1994), shares the lives of a Japanese-American family living on Oahu during the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Tomi's grandfather's Old Country ways and his father's job as a fisherman endanger the family. They face increased racism and are accused of spying for the enemy. When Tomi's father is sent away to an internment camp, Tomi struggles to protect and support the family.

The Witch of Blackbird Pond, by Elizabeth George Speare (1958), is the Newbery winner from 1958. It is the story of Kit, a young woman from the Barbados, who moves in with her Puritan relatives when her grandfather dies. Kit's free-spirited ways conflict with the Puritan life-style, and in her sorrow, she befriends an old lady persecuted by the townspeople, who believe she is a witch. When the townspeople go witch hunting, Kit is caught between her friend and her family.

Wringer, by Jerry Spinelli (1997), is the story of Palmer, who like Junebug, fears turning ten. At the town's annual Family Fest, ten-year-old boys wring the necks of the pigeons the townspeople injure during a shooting contest. Things get complicated when a pesky pigeon shows up on Palmer's windowsill, and refuses to leave. Palmer feels oppressed by the expectations of his friends and family, and engages in an inner struggle between acceptance and doing what he believes is right.

Data

There were four data sets to collect and analyze. They were role sheets, transcripts of literature circle discussions, response logs, and notes from debriefing sessions held with each group at the end of the unit.

Role Sheets

The first data set was the role sheets. The roles rotated, and each student was responsible for preparing one role sheet for each literature circle meeting. The six role sheets are open-ended, and their purpose is to get students to use different modes of thinking while reading and discussing the book. The role sheets are used to guide the literature circle discussions, so they also help students stay focused on the book and issues related to the book during the meetings.

Since a literature group was composed of four to six students, all six of the role sheets were not prepared for each meeting. Two of the six roles were required for every meeting. First there was the Discussion Director (Appendix A). The Director had some

procedural tasks, such as turning the tape recorder on at the beginning of each meeting, turning it off at the end, and labeling the audiotape with the group's name and date. But the director's main function was coming up with several open-ended, "big idea" questions related to the book for the group to discuss. They wrote down anywhere from three to six questions on their role sheet to take to the meeting.

The other required role was the Character Critiquer (Appendix B). The Character Critiquer had seven open-ended questions to answer and discuss with the group related to the main characters' thoughts and actions.

The Illustrator's (Appendix C) job was to draw a picture or graphic related to the book. It could be a picture of a scene in the book that the student really liked or thought was powerful, or anything the reading made them think of or feel. Rather than telling the group what the picture was when they met, he or she let the other group members guess and talk about it first.

The Literary Luminary (Appendix D) picked passages from the reading that he or she wanted to share with the group. The passage could be chosen for many reasons; perhaps it was funny, shocking, important to the plot, controversial, sad, or thought-provoking.

The Word Whiz (Appendix E) shared words or phrases he or she found that were important or puzzling in some way. The words may have been particularly relevant to the plot, or may have helped to sum up or describe a character or situation. He or she was also supposed to include difficult vocabulary that the group members probably would not know.

The Connector (Appendix F) looked for connections between the reading and the real world. For example, he or she could relate the book to his or her own life, events in the school or community, information on related topics, or similar events and people.

Transcripts of Literature Circle Discussions

When the students met twice a week to discuss their role sheets and what they gained from the reading, their discussions were audio-taped. The audio tapes were transcribed, and these transcripts were another data set. I was able to examine in detail what the students talked about.

Response Logs

Once per week during the last three weeks of the unit, the students were required to write in their response logs. The log was a more general type of response. For the first two written responses, I asked students to write about their books and how their meetings were going. For their last written response, I wrote the following questions on the board: 1) How did the literature circles go? 2) What did you like and not like about them? 3) Would you want to do them again? 4) How did the main character change throughout the book?

They had previous experience responding in logs to both oral and independent readings.

Debriefing Sessions

Finally, I conducted a group discussion with each group when they finished reading their book. I asked them the following questions: 1) What did you think of the main character? 2) Did you notice a change in him/her from the beginning to the end of the book? 3) Did he/she accept or fight against their oppression? 4) Did the oppressor change? 5) If you knew this was going on, what would you do?

Sometimes just one or two students in the group answered a question, and sometimes all of them did. Rather than taping the sessions, I took notes on their answers to the questions.

Procedure

To prepare students to examine issues of abusive power relationships through literature, we first began to talk as a class about power relationships. Then I read aloud the novel Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen (1993). This served a variety of purposes. Nightjohn is about a slave who is teaching other slaves to read, risking serious punishment in the form of dismemberment or death. It is also about Sarny, a young slave girl, who takes similar risks in order to learn to read. [This is an example of what Freire (1993) meant by reading the word to read the world.] Throughout the reading, students became familiar with the terms related to oppression and the struggle to overcome it. The book also allowed us to practice the role sheets that were a major part of the literature circles. Finally, the students learned what was expected from them in terms of weekly responses. We discussed the different types of responses, and focused on reading and responding from an aesthetic stance.

As we practiced the Discussion Director role sheet, we had several critical whole group discussions. We practiced this sheet first, and then continued to share and discuss critical questions throughout the novel. The following were questions both students and I came up with and discussed as a class:

- Who has power?
- What gives a person power?
- Would Waller (the plantation owner) have power without dogs, a whip, and a gun?
- Where did slaves get their last names?
- In what ways are the slaves treated like animals?
- Do people who listen learn more?
- Do we sometimes think quiet people are stupid because they are quiet?
- Why weren't slaves supposed to pray?
- If they get free food and shelter, why do the slaves want to be free?
- Why do you think Nightjohn is beautiful to Sarny?
- Why does Mammy decide to let Sarny learn?
- Why is Sarny willing to risk everything to learn to read?
- Why would Nightjohn come back after he escaped?
- Why aren't the slaves supposed to learn to read and write?

All of these were "big" questions that sparked discussion and served as examples for Discussion Directors. I gave several examples of questions I generated while previewing the book, and then students began coming up with their own.

While each student had unique answers to these questions, there were several recurring themes in our discussions throughout the novel. The most obvious one is that students said they would run if they were in Sarny's position. Some students truly weighed the possible consequences, but I think others did not realize what a serious offense it was for a slave to run. Students were also confused by the slave owners' bans on reading and religion. We spent some time talking about the phrase "Knowledge is Power" and why Sarny was willing to risk her life to learn. Students definitely recognized that Sarny was oppressed (which they thought of as being "ruled over"), and thought she was taking steps to gain power by defying Waller and learning to read. We talked about why the book is called Nightjohn, and why John is so beautiful to Sarny, even though his body is covered in scars.

While a few students responded immaturely to the scenes where slaves were naked, most understood that it was just another way for the masters to demean slaves. Students were horrified by extreme acts of oppression, such as the rape of a young girl, the dog attacks on runaways, the castration of one young slave, and the chopping off of John's toes. They frequently commented on how "gross" the book was. They were deeply affected by the graphic violence. I think most of them see a major difference between the violence in a true story and that in a video game or action film. This book held them spellbound and stuck with them a long time.

In addition to practicing each role sheet as a whole class with Nightjohn, students also practiced role sheets and the literature circles with picture books with the same theme. Students met a total of four times with their group, reading a different picture book and filling out a different role sheet for each meeting. The only exception was the

group that read Through My Eyes (1999), which is the autobiography of Ruby Bridges. Since this was a much longer picture book, the group that chose it discussed it at all four meetings.

The two picture books by Patricia Polacco were both very popular with the groups. When I previewed the books for students, I told them that Thank You, Mr. Falker (1998) was my favorite, and the students really liked it as well. It is about a dyslexic girl whose teacher stops a bully from picking on her and finally teaches her to read. Pink and Say (1994) is about two young boys in the Civil War: Pink, who is black and fighting for his freedom, and Say, a white boy who hates fighting and has deserted the Union Army. When they are captured by Confederates, they are treated very differently according to their skin color. This book was rather long, and some students had trouble finishing it in one class period.

Minty, by Alan Schroeder (1996), is the fictional story of young Harriet Tubman. Many students were familiar with this story from past teachers, and while a few students really liked it, most of them were just willing to read it when it was their turn; they did not request it like they did some of the other books.

The Rag Coat, by Lauren Mills (1991), is the story of a poor young girl who can finally start attending school when her mother and her mother's friends finish making her a coat from their quilting scraps. To her astonishment, her schoolmates make fun of the coat she thinks is so beautiful. But when she begins telling the stories she has heard from their mothers about the rags in her coat, the other students begin to see its beauty. My students really enjoyed this book, but I think the ending was a little too perfect. They may

have liked it so well because it was the only book that did have a nice, neat, happy ending.

While it was not formally part of my study, I am glad I conducted this practice session. My field notes at this time were not as detailed as those I took during the actual study, but I did discover some of the problems I would have with the study itself. Meetings were shorter than I had hoped, with less spontaneous discussions. The students went over their role sheets in a robotic manner and then told me they were finished. I constantly had to remind them to discuss power, oppression, and persecution. The role sheet they had the most trouble with at the beginning was the Discussion Director, which is the most important sheet. They frequently wrote yes or no questions, or questions that could easily be answered in a word or two. When I talked to them about why their questions were not working, they usually seemed to understand, but some students had trouble writing questions through the entire study. Others quickly learned that tacking a "Why?" on to the end of a yes or no question would promote more discussion.

The only other role sheet that did not encourage in-depth analysis was the Character Critiquer sheet. Students' answers seemed superficial. They wrote the shortest answers possible, and generally went through the sheet very quickly in discussions. Rather than changing anything at this point, I left my plans as they were. I hoped discussions would be longer and more natural with the novels. They had been sitting out for several weeks, and some students really seemed excited about them. Many knew which one they wanted to read before I gave book talks on them.

Once we were ready to get started with the literature circles, I gave book talks about each of the six books. Because students in my pilot study often summarized in their

response logs when they did not think I had read the book they were reading, I was sure to tell students I had read all six of the books. Then students rated their top three choices. They were placed in groups of four to six members based on their choices and the achievement criteria previously described. Each group met twice a week for at least twenty-five minutes over the four weeks of the study. They used this time to discuss their thoughts and ideas generated by the role sheets, or share any other reflections related to the book.

These meetings were audio-taped. The discussion director was responsible for turning the tape recorder on at the beginning of each meeting, turning it off afterward, and labeling the tape. Since there were three tape recorders available in class, no more than three groups met at a given time. The two pre-selected groups of participants had their taped discussions transcribed and studied in detail.

During an average week, two or three groups met on Monday and Wednesday to discuss their role sheets and any other thoughts related to the book. The group members who were not meeting read, silently or with their groups, and individually prepared their role sheets for the next meeting. On Tuesday and Thursday the other two or three groups met while the Monday-Wednesday groups worked. On Friday, all students wrote in their response logs and spent any extra time reading or working on role sheets. Once a group finished reading their book, toward the end of the four weeks, members spent class time working on a final project of their choice.

After the students in a literature circle had completed their reading and met for the last time, I met with them as a group to ask them some questions in an informal

debriefing session. I wanted to explicitly engage them with some critical questions. While there were certainly moments in their discussions where they took a critical stance toward the issues in their literature circle books, I was disappointed overall and felt they needed some more direct guidance toward critical thinking. I knew from our class discussions about Nightjohn that students were capable of responding critically, and wanted to hear their responses to questions I had not heard them discuss. I asked the groups the following questions: 1) What did you think of the main character? 2) Did you notice a change in him/her from the beginning to the end of the book? 3) Did he/she accept or fight against their oppression? 4) Did the oppressor change throughout the book? 5) If you knew this oppression was going on, what would you do?

To keep the atmosphere informal, I just jotted down notes of the students' responses to these questions.

Analysis

I developed detailed questions in order to answer my major research questions. Analysis of data involved reading and rereading students' written responses, transcriptions of literature circle discussions, and notes from the debriefing sessions held with me at the end of the unit. I decided it was not necessary for me to analyze the role sheets separately, because they were used to guide the literature circle discussions. Virtually all the information they contained was included in the literature circle transcripts as well. In the three remaining data sets, I looked for patterns, first within each set of data, and then patterns that appeared in all three. I changed and deleted some

categories to better reflect students' responses to the reading and discussions. This type of analysis of qualitative data is called constant comparison (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The final categories of analysis are in Table 1.

Response Log Entries—Response to Literature

First I examined the students' written responses for all book groups. I defined a written response, or entry, as what a student writes in one sitting. This analysis was conducted to answer my first major research question: What types of responses do students write in reaction to critical literature? Specifically, I wanted to know if they wrote aesthetic or efferent responses. To analyze their written responses, I adapted five categories from Cox and Many's (1992) "Measure of Reader Stance Towards a Literary Work on an Efferent to Aesthetic Continuum." Cox and Many used five categories, including one at the midpoint of the continuum that included responses that were equally efferent and aesthetic. Some of my students' entries contained characteristics of two or more of the five categories, but I was able to identify a primarily efferent or aesthetic stance in all 63 entries. Because most of the entries were short, I was able to classify them holistically, determining the category according to the overall emphasis of the response.

Ideally, there would have been three response log entries for each student. They worked in literature circles for four weeks, and wrote responses the last three. I used response log entries from all students who returned permission slips and turned in at least two out of three entries for this analysis. Some students turned in fewer than two because they were absent and did not make up their work or they lost entries before they turned

them in. Since I asked students to write about how their groups were functioning as well as their books in their first two responses, I had two entries that did not contain any information about the books at all. I wrote specific questions on the board for students to answer in their last entry: 1) How did the main character change throughout the book you read? 2) How did the literature circles go? 3) What did you like and not like about them? 4) Would you want to do them again? There were 23 students who wrote and turned in at least two entries.

Literature Discussion Transcripts and Final Debriefing Notes

The next data set I examined was the literature discussion transcripts from the two focus groups. There are seven transcripts for each of the two groups, which met twice a week for 25-30 minute discussions. The transcripts are a detailed source of information, and provide a lot of insight into how students react to power struggles. I read and reread transcripts of the discussions, looking for patterns and repeated words. First, I coded the students' discussion based on the two research questions, How do students relate to oppressed characters? and What do students say about the social factors that affect characters' choices? I examined students' response log entries and final debriefing notes using the same process. During my multiple readings of this data, I developed the detailed questions related to these two larger questions that are listed in Table 1. Some of these smaller categories were identified with my advisor. Students' statements related to each of these smaller questions were then coded. A sample of these were identified with my advisor for purposes of reliability.

Response Log Entries—Literature Circle Reflections

Finally, I went back to the response logs and studied them on their own, to examine how and what students wrote after participating in literature discussions. This analysis answered my final research question: What is the nature of students' written responses after participating in literature circle discussions?

I wanted to know if students would write about the group discussions and perhaps reflect on and extend what they had discussed. I divided each entry into two parts: what students wrote about the books and group discussions, and how they thought the groups were functioning.

Table 1
Data Analysis Questions

Major Research Questions	Detailed Questions
1. What types of responses do students write in reaction to critical literature?	• Are their responses predominantly aesthetic? • Are their responses predominantly efferent? • Are their responses equally aesthetic and efferent?
2. How do students relate to oppressed characters?	• Do they accept the situation the main character sees as oppressive? • Do they want the main character to passively resist the situation by lying to or avoiding oppressors? • Do they want the main character to actively resist the situation by confronting oppressors or acting against them? • Do they want the main character to seek help from an adult? • Do they describe the main character as an object? • Do they describe the main character as a subject?
3. What do students say about the social factors that affect character's choices?	• Do they recognize the social factors affecting characters' choices? • Do they rationalize or criticize people or groups who are oppressors? • Do they rationalize or criticize institutions that oppress?
4. What is the nature of students' written responses after participating in literature circle discussions?	• Do students write about other students in the literature circle who influenced their thoughts or opinions about the book? • Do students write about what they discussed in their literature circles? • Do students think the literature circles are helping them learn more?

CHAPTER FOUR:
RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to encourage and then examine students' aesthetic responses to literature that focuses on issues of power and oppression. This chapter explains the results of analyses of students' written responses, transcripts of literature circle discussions, and notes from debriefing sessions held with the two focus groups.

Written Responses Along the Efferent/Aesthetic Continuum

In this section, I answer the first question related to my purpose: What types of responses do students write in reaction to critical literature? Table 2 summarizes the five categories along the efferent/aesthetic continuum that I used to analyze their written responses. These results reflect response log entries for all six books.

Table 2
Categories of Response Along the Efferent/Aesthetic Continuum

Category 1 Most Efferent	**Category 2** Efferent	**Category 3** Equally Efferent/ Aesthetic	**Category 4** Aesthetic	**Category 5** Most Aesthetic
• Literary analysis • Emphasis on what the reader learned • Theme or moral • Structure • Story elements • Believability	• Retelling • Retelling including preference or judgement	• Equal amounts of efferent and aesthetic responses	• Preferences or judgements related to specific parts of the story • Characters or sections that left impressions • Specific parts liked or disliked	• Lived-through story experience • Relating to own life • Expressing wonder • Making predictions • Asking questions • Presenting alternatives

Adapted from Cox and Many (1992)

Category 1: Most Efferent Stance

Entries written from the most efferent stance focused on what the reader learned from the literature in terms of the author's skill, story elements, and factual knowledge. For example, they may have written about the theme or moral, structure, or degree of believability. Fifteen of the 63 entries (24%) were written from this stance. The following example is an entry about The Music of Dolphins. All of students' written and oral comments are included in their original form.

> The book (The Music of the Dolphins) is very good. I like the way the author made it sound so real. I mean like it is happening only I am reading it.

Another student critiques the plot of The Witch of Blackbird Pond.

> I think the book is kind of slow on getting going. It talks about her ride over on the ship too long. Otherwise I think its a pretty good book.

Many of the category 1 entries were just one sentence statements like, "The Witch of Blackbird Pond is well-written and amusing," or "The book does a good job of expressing the feelings of Tomikazu."

Category 2: Efferent Stance

Category 2 also contains entries written from an efferent stance. Rather than critiquing or stating what they have learned, these writers focused on retelling or

summarizing the story. They frequently included some statements of preference or judgement, but those statements were not connected to the story in any way. Twelve of the 63 entries (19%) were written from this stance. The following entry is an example of a category 2 response written about The Witch of Blackbird Pond:

> I like the book a lot. The book is about a girl whose grandpa dies and she has to go live with her ant and unkle. While at there house she meets the witch of blackbird pond, A nice old lady without any friends. After becoming friends with the old lady her unkle says she can't go see her anymore.

Another student summarizes The Music of Dolphins.

> After she found out the door was locked she didn't eat anything and at the end they unlocked the door and took her to the island were they found her. She wanted to go in the water. The doctor thought the dolphins would leave her but they didn't. It really doesn't tell you if she went back with the doctors or if she stayed with the dolphins.

The two efferent categories combined made up 27 of the 63 entries, or 43%.

Category 3: Equally Efferent/Aesthetic Stance

Category 3 entries were not predominantly efferent or aesthetic. These entries contained elements of both stances and were impossible to categorize as primarily one or the other. There were no entries that fell into this category.

Category 4: Aesthetic Stance

Category 4 was the stance most commonly used. Twenty-nine of the 63 entries (46%) were written from this stance. These entries included preferences or judgements related to specific parts or aspects of the story. Students may have written about characters or events that they particularly liked or disliked, or they may have talked about a character or section of the story that really left an impression on them. They also wrote about what they thought of characters' behaviors and the quality of the story. The following response to Under the Blood Red Sun is an example of a category 4 response:

> He made you think he was a sassy person by yelling orders to his grandpa, but then he stood up for his family and himself.

In the following entry about The Music of Dolphins, the writer appreciates the author's message:

> I think my book is great! I think it is a great book because the book talks about a lot of stuff. Like how people can learn stuff fast. But some people learn slower than others. In the book Shay learns slower than Mila. I like how it shows that, because we are all different.

Category 5: Most Aesthetic Stance

Entries in category 5 were written from the most aesthetic stance. These entries revealed a lived-through experience on the part of the reader. The writer reflected on what was called to mind while reading, whether they were relating similar experiences in their own lives or expressing shock or wonder about something that happened. They may have predicted what was going to happen next, asked questions, or presented some alternatives. This category contains a small number of entries, seven of the 63 (11%). In the following example, a student wants to give the characters in The Witch of Blackbird Pond advice:

> The character in this story that I feel the worst for is Mercy. I think that John Holbrook should have told Judith the truth about who he is really interested in. I don't think Kit likes William Ashby and I think that she should tell him that. I wish that I could go into the story so I could give all of the characters advice.

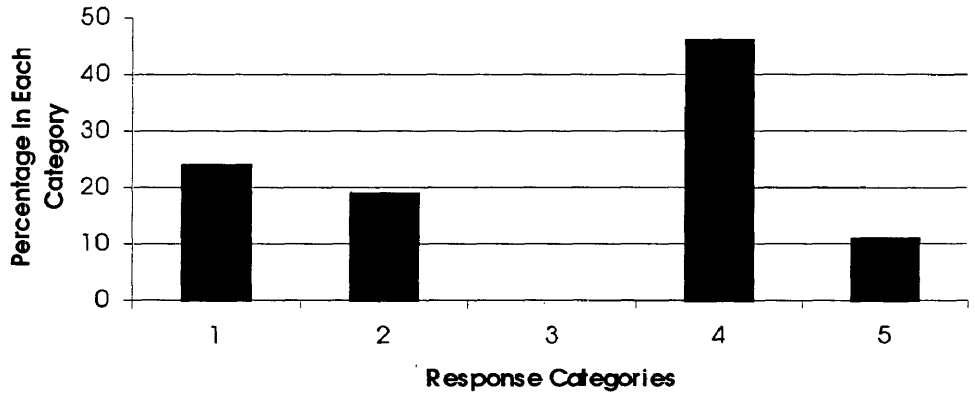
In the following entry, the reader describes what he would do if he were the main character in Wringer.

> If I was Palmer I would be friends with Henry, but not Beans or Mutto. Henry is a pretty good friend, but Beans and Mutto are not. I can kind of relate to being a Wringer because I hunt. Sometimes after shooting a game bird it is still alive and you need to wring it or pull the head off.

Although category 5 contained few entries, the two aesthetic categories combined made up 36 of the 63 entries, or 57%.

Figure 1

Percentage of Entries in Each Response Category



Students' Discussions About Oppressed Characters and Social Factors in their Oppression

I used transcripts of the literature circle discussions and notes from the debriefing sessions to answer my second and third major research questions: How do students relate to oppressed characters? and What do students say about the social factors that affect characters' choices? Unfortunately, students' response log entries about the books were not detailed enough to be of any value in answering the questions. As previously mentioned, students' responses on the role sheets were reflected in the literature circle discussion and were therefore not analyzed separately.

How Students Relate to Oppressed Characters

Students' literature circle discussions and final debriefing sessions included responses about ways in which they related to the oppressed characters. After reading the literature circle transcripts and debriefing notes several times, I identified six categories that described how students related to these characters. The first four dealt with how students wanted characters to deal with their oppressive situations: acceptance, passive resistance, active resistance, or adult assistance. They other two categories involved descriptions of characters as either objects or subjects.

Student Responses to Character's Actions

First I looked at students' responses to the oppressed characters' actions. Most of these responses were prompted by the following questions from the Character Critiquer role sheet: 1) How do you feel about the main character's actions (or lack of action)? 2) What would you do in the main character's situation? 3) Could the main character have done anything to help himself/herself? If so, what? If not, why not?

In the final debriefing sessions, I also asked the groups questions that related to the characters' actions: 1) Did you notice a change in him/her [the main character] from the beginning to the end of the book? 2) Did they accept or fight against their oppression? 3) If you knew this was going on [the oppression], what would you do?

In addition to the debriefing and Character Critiquer questions, the Discussion Directors sometimes came up with their own questions about the characters' actions. For

example, during the first Wringer discussion, the Discussion Director asked, "What would you do if you had to be a wringer? If you was [sic] forced to be a wringer?"

Responses to character's actions include instances when students expressed opinions about a character's actions, shared what they thought a character should have done in a particular situation, or stated what they would have done if they were in that same situation. All of the responses about characters' actions seemed to fit in one of these four categories: acceptance, passive resistance, active resistance, or adult assistance. (See Table 1.)

Acceptance. The first category, acceptance, includes responses that indicate students would accept the situation the oppressed character sees as oppressive. When students say they would take no action against oppressors or express a desire to join the oppressors (either as themselves or as the character), they are accepting the oppressor's influence and power over the oppressed character. For example, in the dialogue about The Music of Dolphins below, the students are responding to a question on one of the role sheets. The main character, who is being studied by doctors, wants to return to the ocean to live with the dolphins she grew up with. (Students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.)

Andrea: How do you feel about main character's...how do you feel about the main character's actions or lack of actions?

Dena: Well, she really can't do anything about it because she doesn't know where the ocean is.

Mindy: And she can't drive.

Dena: Yeah.

Mindy: And she doesn't even know what a car is.

Rather than exploring options, the two students responding to the question accept that Mila cannot do anything about her oppressive situation.

In the next excerpt of dialogue, students are responding to a question about Palmer, the protagonist in Wringer, and the pigeon he has been caring for.

Brandon: If you were Palmer, what would you do with the pigeon?

John: I would keep it.

Chad: I would have got rid of it, cause it caused so many problems already.

John: I wouldn't care.

Brandon: I would get rid of him cause, because of the problems it's causing, and he tried to get rid of it once, but then it came back. It was sitting on his window sill before he got back.

...

Mark: I would get rid of it just 'cause, it's caused, it's caused so many problems and he probably doesn't want it to die, so I'd just let it go.

While John disagrees, three of the five students in the group say they would get rid of the pigeon, not because it would be better for the bird, but because the oppressors would not approve of him having it.

Passive Resistance. The second category, passive resistance, includes responses that show that students would resist the oppression, but not openly. They would not confront the oppressors, but they would lie to them or try to avoid them. Several of the students reading Wringer repeatedly said they would run away to avoid Palmer's

oppression if they were in the character's situation. In this excerpt, the oppressive situation is the expectation that Palmer will wring the necks of injured pigeons.

Mark: What would you do in the main character's situation?

John: I would run and hide.

Brandon: I would do it, just because it's tradition, and I would rather kill animals myself than see them sit there and suffer. 'Cause I hunt and...

Chad: I would run very, very far away.

John: I would uh, I would like uh...just take a whole bunch of food for ever and ever and steal food if I had to. I would hide somewhere.

So while Brandon would accept the oppressive situation presented by tradition, Chad and John would both run away to avoid it. The boys also talked about whether or not Palmer should keep his pet pigeon, since he lives in a town that shoots pigeons for recreation, and his friends hate them. A common solution was keeping the bird, but hiding it from his family and friends, which is exactly what Palmer did for a while.

John: What would you do in the main character's situation?

Brandon: I'd turn the pigeon loose.

Mark: I'd keep him.

John: That's what I put.

Mark: I'd keep him just 'cause...(trailed off)

Randy: I think I would keep him as a pet.

Brandon, the only one who disagrees in this conversation, only wants to turn the pigeon loose because it is causing problems for him with his friends. At one point in the story,

Palmer's pigeon lands on his head in front of his friends. The students approve of his actions—lying and denying that the bird is his.

> Brandon: He was smart to act like he hated the pigeon that landed on his head.
>
> Randy: Yeah, that was pretty smart, 'cause those, those guys were gonna...they were pretty mad.

When asked what types of struggles or problems the character has, Brandon responds, "Um, well, he has the pigeon, so he's gotta face his friends and make sure they don't find out about it, hopefully."

While passive resistance was a fairly common response for the Wringer group, The Music of Dolphins group never responded this way, perhaps because the main character was literally captive and constantly observed by her oppressors. It would be nearly impossible to avoid her oppressors, and as a human raised by dolphins she has no concept of lying.

Active Resistance. Another response to oppressed characters' actions is active resistance. Students' responses were categorized as active resistance when they said they would directly confront the oppressors or openly take part in actions counter to the oppressors' expectations. For example, if students wanted two or more oppressed characters to join forces against the oppressors, their responses would be categorized as active resistance. When Palmer confides in his neighbor, a girl he and his friends have oppressed in the past, John responds, "I think he was really brave about telling Dorothy

about the pigeon [he has been caring for], because he had been tormented for the past few weeks or months or whatever." Palmer and Dorothy work together to solve their problems with the boys who are tormenting them. In the debriefing session for the Wringer group, students said they would be friends with Palmer and Dorothy if they were the same age as the characters, and encourage their friendship if they were older.

Also included in this category are students' plans to deceive oppressors in order to eventually act against them. For instance, some students think Mila from The Music of Dolphins should act more human in order to make her oppressors complacent, so she can escape. They express this opinion again in the debriefing session. They would not directly confront the oppressors immediately, but the end result would qualify as active resistance. Dena's response in the dialogue below is an example.

> Michaela: What could you, what could, what would you do in the main character's situation?
>
> Dena: I'd do exactly what she's doing. I'd be asking for them to unlock the door.
>
> Michaela: That's what I put. I put that I would try to do what Mila's doing.
>
> Dena: Trying to get the door unlocked, try and act human enough to get the door unlocked so that she can run away to her family.

Mindy's response below is an example of a student supporting a character's active resistance. Mila is refusing to do what the doctor, one of her oppressors, is telling her to do.

Mindy: I like the part where she says no, she doesn't want to get out of the pool. That's pretty cool.

The students who read Wringer express approval when Palmer takes the ultimate action to resist the oppression by his friends and the community. He runs out on a field to save his pigeon during a shooting contest, refusing, near the end of the story, to go along with everyone's expectations.

Randy: How do you feel about the main character's actions or lack of actions?

Mark: He was pretty brave to go out on the field and save that pigeon.

Chad: Yeah, good action.

Mark: Well, that was good and bad.

Randy: Um, I put, I liked how he ran on the shooting field.

Many of the responses that fit in this category were made after the oppressed character had actively resisted the oppressors and the results were positive. This was especially true of the comments during the debriefing session. At this point, the students were finished reading the books, and were very supportive of the actions the characters take. For example, the students who read Wringer describe Palmer as brave for taking in the pigeon, and talk about how much wiser and smarter he is at the end of the book. They also say he is more mature; they like how he hangs out with Dorothy instead of the gang.

Adult Assistance. Finally, some students want the oppressed characters in Wringer to turn to adults for help. Such responses are categorized as adult assistance. The

students who read The Music of Dolphins never had this response, probably because all of the adults in Mila's life are her oppressors. But in the Wringer group, one student in particular constantly says that Palmer should turn to his parents for help. Throughout the book, Palmer is worried about having to be a wringer and Randy has the following response when asked for a solution to Palmer's problems.

Randy: I think he can just tell his dad that he doesn't want to, or he can tell his mom. His mom would definitely take [him] out.

Mark: Cause she doesn't want him doing it.

Randy: She didn't like it when she saw that bird being wrung.

When Palmer eventually confides in his teacher, Randy responds, "I like his actions because he went and told his teacher."

Although the students in the study were only two to three years older than Palmer and Dorothy in the book, one boy talked during the debriefing session about how he could really help the two of them because of his age. Though he was not an adult, he thought he could "get the gang off his [Palmer's] back." He was sure the gang would listen to him as a seventh grader.

Combined Responses. While students sometimes had similar responses to characters' actions, it was more common for them to disagree. Toward the end of Wringer, Palmer's friends begin to suspect that he is hiding a pigeon. In order to avoid his friends' oppression, Palmer tries to get rid of his pigeon by taking him out in the country on his bike. He and Dorothy ride all day, only to find the pigeon sitting on Palmer's window sill when they return home.

Mark: Okay, what would you do in the main character's situation?

Randy: I would keep the bird.

John: Yeah.

Brandon: I would have got rid of the bird.

Chad: I would have done it in an easier way.

John: I would keep the bird, like, I would just take it to, I would just take it to a different place, to where it would be safe.

Brandon: I would have tried to talk Henry out of being Beans' and Mutto's friend.

Chad: I'd sell it.

The students who want Palmer to get rid of the bird are complying with the oppressors' expectations, accepting the situation. Those who say they would keep the bird are displaying passive resistance. They would continue to lie about the bird as long as possible. Brandon responds with active resistance when he says he would try to talk Henry out of being Beans' and Mutto's friend. Henry is the most passive member of the oppressive group, and Brandon wants him to join forces with Palmer so they could stand up to the other two together.

In the following excerpt, the students who read The Music of Dolphins discuss what they think of Mila's refusal to eat. This is the action that finally convinces her oppressors to unlock her door and eventually set her free.

Mindy: How do you feel about the main character's actions or lack of actions?

Andrea: I think her actions were good, because she got the door to be unlocked.

Dena: Yeah.

Mindy: And she got to go back to the sea.

Michaela: Well, maybe, she could like, cause she always wants her way, and she got her way from not eating, so I mean, she could become like...(cut off)

Mindy: A little spoiled brat?

Michaela: Yeah.

Mindy: Well, I don't think so.

All of the girls but Michaela approve of Mila's empowerment. Therefore, their responses are categorized as active resistance. Michaela worries that Mila will become a spoiled brat if she uses her power to get her way. She wants Mila to accept her oppression.

Descriptions of Characters as Objects or Subjects

In addition to examining how students responded to characters' actions, I also looked at how students described the main characters as part of my second research question. Rather than focusing on adjectives like "nice" or "brave", I wanted to know if the students described these characters as objects or subjects. This dichotomy reflects Freire's emphasis on empowerment. If oppressed people see themselves as objects of others' actions, they are unlikely to participate in their liberation. In contrast, if they see

themselves as subjects, then they look for ways to liberate themselves from their oppressors (Freire, 1993).

When students talked about characters being forced to do things, being passive, or giving in to oppressors, I categorized their responses as describing the character as object. For example, when Brandon says, "He's a follower, because he does what other people does, instead of being a leader," he is describing Palmer as an object. The students in the Wringer group have a conversation about how Palmer's new friends are using him during their first meeting.

Brandon: I think they just came to his birthday because they wanted him to get the treatment, and they wanted the cake and ice cream.

Randy: Yeah.

Brandon: And they just came to pick on him.

Randy: 'Cause they kept on saying "more cake" and stuff.

The only time they describe Palmer as a subject early in the book is when they discuss what he could have done rather than what he did. For example, they discuss how he could have made better choices by not becoming friends with these boys. Once he takes in the pigeon and hides it, they start describing him as a subject. He has taken an action against his oppressors, even though it is passive.

Chad: I like his actions, because he, uh, he's...[trails off]

Brandon: He's being brave.

Chad: Yeah, he's being brave and taking it into his home and sticking up with the bird and trying not to be caught for it or get in trouble.

Brandon: I don't like it, because I don't like pigeons.

Randy: I think, I think that he's doing a good thing, 'cause the bird could need help, like it could be starving.

By the end of the book, when Palmer actively stands up to his oppressors, the students are almost always describing him as a subject. As one student said during the debriefing session, at the end Palmer realizes he is being bossed around and refuses to play with the gang anymore.

The Music of Dolphins is slightly different, because Mila is literally being studied by doctors. She is the object of their observations. She is usually described as an object by the girls at the beginning of the book, probably because that is how she is portrayed. The words "scared" and "confused" are repeated throughout the literature circle discussions and the debriefing session.

Michaela: Could the main character have done anything to help herself? If so, what? If not, why not?

Andrea: I do not know.

Dena: She really, I mean, she doesn't have to help herself, but...I don't know.

Michaela: I put no, because she doesn't know a lot of stuff about anything.

Andrea: She probably couldn't help herself because she's so, she doesn't know anything and remember it said that when she went through the house, her and Shay had their own rooms, but their doors have windows in them.

The students frequently focused on the windows as a topic of conversation. They realized that Mila is constantly being watched. In fact, one girl describes her as similar to a pet fish.

> Mindy: This, okay, some things today reminds, uh reading, reminded me of fish, pet fish. When she said she was a thing to look at, not to touch or care for, um, you're not to touch your pet fish. All you do is clean its cage, feed it. And that's the same thing that they did to Mila. That's what it reminded me of.

This student obviously realizes that Mila is being treated as an object. Shay, another feral child being studied by the same doctors, is not progressing, and the students have the following conversation about her, starting with a Discussion Director's question.

> Michaela: If Shay doesn't make progress shortly, what do you think is going to happen? 'Cause Shay isn't making as much progress as Mila. So what if Shay doesn't make progress as fast as Mila?
>
> Mindy: They'll just keep working with her, I guess, 'cause it's not anything they can try...(trails off)
>
> Michaela: Well, they could probably get a new person, like Mila.
>
> Andrea: What do you mean like a new person?
>
> Michaela: Like, they could trade Sheila [Shay] with somebody else.
>
> ...
>
> Andrea: So what do you mean they could trade?

Michaela: They could trade her for a different person, cause...[trails off]

Mindy: A different person from the wild.

Rather than talking about a person, these students seem to be discussing an animal or an object that can be traded in for a different model. Andrea, on the other hand, describes Shay as a subject. She does not think Shay is a slow learner; she thinks she is standing up to her oppressors. In response to the other students, she says, "I bet she knows how to talk. She's just not talking."

Students reading The Music of Dolphins discussed Mila as a subject more frequently toward the end of the book when she starts standing up to her oppressors.

Andrea: What predictions do you have?

Mindy: Um, that someday Mila is going to get out...

Michaela: ...of the house and stuff.

Mindy: And to back to her...[trails off]

Michaela: What do you think she'll do after that?

Andrea: I think, I think she might be really good, and just act like she's really good, and then they'll unlock the door and then she'll escape. I think she will.

Michaela: Yeah, but what do you think she'll do after she escapes?

Mindy: She'll run to her ocean family.

What Students Say About Social Factors that Affect Characters' Choices

Analysis of the literature circle transcripts and final debriefing notes also answered my third research question: What do students say about the social factors that affect characters' choices? In order to make sure students talked about society's oppressive role in the main characters' lives, I asked two questions on the Character Critiquer sheet that I felt would foster responses about society: 1) Who or what is the

cause of his/her problem? 2) Is the character being affected by society's beliefs or ideas? If so, how?

Students also responded to two questions in the debriefing sessions that evoked comments about social factors: 1) Did the oppressor change? 2) If you knew this was going on, what would you do?

As part of my third research question, I wanted to know if students recognized the social factors that affected characters' choices. They were able to do so, and frequently did in response to the questions on the Character Critiquer role sheet. Students' responses about the social factors fit into two main categories: what they said about individuals or groups and what they said about institutions. The first category involved statements about specific characters that students were introduced to in the reading. For example, in The Music of Dolphins, students frequently made comments about Dr. Beck, the main doctor working with Mila. Responses about institutions focused on the government in The Music of Dolphins and the Family Fest in Wringer. For each category I looked at instances where students rationalized the oppressor's actions and where they criticized the oppressor's actions.

Social Factors—People as Oppressors

First I examined what students said about the effects of individuals or small groups of people as oppressors in the main characters' lives. While students did not identify these individuals or groups as society, they did frequently discuss their influence on the main characters. Since students got to know the oppressors as individuals in both books, I thought they would be more likely to hold them accountable for their oppressive

actions than they would the larger institutions that fostered their oppressive behaviors. These oppressors were not some distant "they." They were making decisions about the fate of the main characters. The students knew their names and exactly what they did to the oppressed characters. I subcategorized students' responses about oppressive individuals' actions as either rationalized or criticized.

Rationalized Oppressors' Actions. Students tended to rationalize individual oppressor's actions at the beginning of these stories. They did this in a variety of ways. Some students just accepted the oppression with no comment. To them, this was acceptable and normal behavior. In the passage below, students are discussing Mila's treatment in a detached manner. The students here are responding to the question about whether or not the character is being affected by society.

> Dena: Yeah, I put, I put, "Yes, the doctors are examining her and people probably want to know about her, because they might want to know if she can actually communicate with dolphins."
>
> Andrea: I don't think they realize she can do that yet.

Wringer presents an interesting case because Palmer actually joins his oppressors for a while at the beginning of the book. He sees this gang of boys as cool, and desperately wants to be a part of their group, even though that means taking part in tormenting Dorothy, a neighbor who was once a friend. He only disconnects himself from the group when they begin to suspect he is hiding a pigeon and turn against him. At this point the oppressor becomes the oppressed, and Palmer joins forces with Dorothy

once again. Students get to see the main character as both an abuser and victim of the small group's power. Students disagree at times about Palmer's role in the book, as seen in the response below.

Brandon: If you were him [Palmer], would you have invited them [the oppressive gang] to your birthday?

Mark: No.

Chad: Yeah.

John: Yeah, because...[trails off]

Chad: They're the only friends he has.

Randy: Well, I don't think I would. I'd just make new friends if they're punks like that.

Brandon: Yeah, I wouldn't.

Mark: Yeah, but he's a punk too.

Randy: No he's not.

John: Yeah he is.

Randy: The kid's not a punk.

John: Palmer, yeah he is.

Randy: Palmer's not!

John: Yeah, 'cause he called her [Dorothy] fish face.

Randy: 'Cause he just joined the group.

Chad: He's going along with them, so that way he has friends.

Particularly in Wringer, students focused on the oppressive acts of the gang as humorous instead of hurtful. While they saw the pain the oppressors were inflicting, the oppressive acts were so humorous to them that they did not focus on that pain.

John: Uh, which scenes are your favorite?

Mark: Beans putting beans on Dorothy's shoes.

Brandon: With the muskrat, when he put that muskrat on her door and she runs out and screams.

Mark: That was pretty good.

...

Chad: I like, I like the muskrat.

Even later in the book, when students claimed they no longer liked the oppressors in Wringer, they still identified their oppressive acts as their favorite parts of the book.

Finally, there were times when students defended the oppressors' actions. For example, in the response to The Music of Dolphins below, Michaela feels Mila's doctors are only doing what the government tells them they have to do. She thinks they are trying to protect Mila, even though she obviously does not want to be protected.

Mindy: Okay, who or what is the cause of her problem?

Andrea: The government, the doctors, and everyone.

Michaela: Yeah, but it's not really the doctors, 'cause the doctors have to do what the government does.

Mindy: So basically, it's the government. Bad, bad people.

Michaela: Yeah, but they're trying to keep Mila safe.

Mindy: But it's not working.

Michaela: It could be.

In another discussion, the same student defends the doctors again. One student complains about how the doctors will not let Mila go see her dolphin family. Michaela responds, "Cause she might get sick or eaten by a shark or something." She can understand why the doctors want to keep her safe in their environment.

Several of the students reading Wringer defend Palmer's actions when he joins the gang and participates in tormenting Dorothy.

Brandon: In a way I see his point, because that's the only friends he has, and then that girl...[trails off]

John: Well, he didn't, he's not really, he didn't really do what they did. Uh, what Beans and Mutto and Henry did, because uh, because he didn't want to do that so, he just, just sat there and watched while they did all that stuff, and then he called her fish face toward the end.

Criticized Oppressors' Actions. Despite their seeming indifference early on in the stories, students eventually came to see the oppressors in the books for what they are: people who take advantage of others to entertain or further themselves and increase their own power. Initially, the students reading The Music of Dolphins liked the doctors studying Mila, probably because Mila herself thought of them as family. It is when Mila discovers that these doctors are locking her in her room that she rebels. After they refuse to unlock the doors, claiming it is for her own safety, she actively resists their power over her by refusing to eat. Once the students read about the doctors' refusal to unlock Mila's

door, they begin to see the doctors as oppressors and criticize their actions. Yet there is a definite tension in their conversations. They find it hard to criticize these doctors that they had thought of as helpful and caring, whereas criticizing the faceless institution of government does not seem to bother them at all. Two students even refer to the locked door as a problem.

Mindy: Who or what is the cause of her problem? Um, I think it was...

Dena: The door that was locked. The people who locked the door.

Mindy: Yeah, the doctors, the government.

Michaela: Well, the doctors locked it, but the government had...[trails off]

Mindy: The door...I think it was the door, the government, and the doctors, because she wanted to go back to her family, but they wouldn't let her, and she was like frustrated.

Andrea: Yeah, me too.

...

Michaela: I put the doctors because they locked her door, and she couldn't...she can't get out of her bedroom. That's the night she wanted to get out of her bedroom.

During the debriefing session, the students who read Wringer described Palmer as bad and mean when he was mixed up with the gang. They also talked about how the gang picked on Palmer the entire book, both when he was a part of their group and when he rebelled against them. Most of them said they would do anything they could to get the gang to leave Palmer alone if they knew something like this was happening to someone

they knew. These comments imply they do not approve of oppressive actions, but these are the same students who found many of those actions hilarious while they were reading.

Social Factors—Institutions as Oppressors

Students identified oppressive institutions as society in both stories when answering the questions on the Character Critiquer sheet. In The Music of Dolphins, the social institution was the government; in Wringer, it was the town's tradition of shooting pigeons at the annual Family Fest and expecting the boys to wring the necks of the wounded ones. When students responded to these institutions as oppressors they were rather detached, and quickly started to give monotonous answers to questions on the Character Critiquer role sheet involving social factors in the oppressed characters' lives.

Rationalized Oppressors' Actions. There were very few instances in which students rationalized the behavior of the institutions; in fact, they seemed unsure of who or what they were talking about at times. In the following excerpt, one student is defending the practice of putting down animals that do not die when they are shot.

> Mark: Why do you think he flashed back?
>
> Chad: 'Cause the birds are a bad memory for him and he was thinking about the festival, the Family Festival, and that's his first one that he was at and the boy wringed it right in front of him.
>
> Brandon: Because he uh, remembered the boy wringing it right in front of him and the pigeon looked right at him, right before his wring, and that's one of the worst things he ever wants to do, 'cause he probably thinks it's

cruel, but really it's being humane, killing an animal that's suffering, to where it can't be revived.

Brandon continues on the same topic later in the discussion. He is one of the hunters in the group, and seems intent on explaining the necessity of putting animals out of their misery. What he does not discuss is the fact that the town's tradition of shooting pigeons is causing the pigeons' misery in the first place in Wringer.

That's what people don't realize though, because they don't like it, is that if you just let them sit there and suffer, it'd be the same for you if...if there wasn't no hospitals, you suffer and die, you want to be killed.

Randy: Yeah, you'd just want to be put out of your misery.

Criticized Oppressors' Actions. Students frequently criticized the institutions in the stories as the cause of the main characters' problems, although they did not go into any detail. The excerpt about Wringer that follows is a typical response to an institution's actions.

John: Is the character being affected by society's beliefs or ideas? If so, how?

Mark: Yes.

Brandon: Yes, because the town just shoots birds, doesn't stick them up in closets.

Mark: It's tradition.

Randy: Yeah, I think it's the tradition for the...for the town, and like Bobby said, usually people don't put them in their closets for pets. They usually have them in a pen.

John: A pen.

Randy: Or they just shoot them.

Because the debriefing sessions were held after students finished reading the books, their comments about the institutions were even more critical. They had seen the results of the oppressors' actions, and had come to realize how harmful those actions could be. The students who read The Music of Dolphins talked about how the government made the doctors keep Mila's door locked, treating her like an animal in a cage. They thought the government should have let Mila go back to her father who, it was discovered, lived in Cuba. One girl talked about how she would write letters to the government if she knew something like this was going on.

Results of this examination are actually the opposite of what I expected. I thought students would hold individuals more responsible for their actions than the institutions. Students frequently read about what the individuals were doing to oppress the main characters, whereas the institutions were rarely mentioned and kept in the background. Apparently the students came to know the oppressive individuals as humans, some of them seemingly kind or funny, and therefore found it harder to place blame on them. It was easier to focus on the distant "society" of government or Family Fest as evil.

Students' Written Responses

After Participating in Literature Circles

I was disappointed with students' response entries, basically because they were frequently very short and did not contain reflections or expansions on what was discussed in the groups. After determining whether their responses were efferent or aesthetic in order to answer my first research question, I examined the entries again to answer my final research question: What is the nature of students' written responses after participating in literature circle discussions? As part of this question, I wanted to know if they wrote about other students in the literature circles who influenced their opinions, if they wrote about what their group discussed, and if they thought the literature circles helped them learn more. Unfortunately, responses to the literature circle discussions were frequently very short, consisting of one or two sentences. Students spent more time writing about how the groups worked, which was not part of my research question.

I think the biggest effect of literature circles on written responses was negative in terms of quantity and quality. After students had discussed their books with others, they did not seem to think they needed to write about those same books, certainly not at length. Comments about the books also tended to be very general. The following response to Wringer is typical.

> Since the last time I wrote in my response log, the book has been cool. There has been many funny parts. My group has been having great conversations about different topics and parts. We have had very few arguments over little things. Our group has got off task a few times but then back on.

Students did not mention other students in the group who influenced their thoughts about the books, although I did observe that happening in the discussions. When students mentioned other students in their entries, it was always to tell on them, either for not doing their role sheet or for not participating in the discussions. For example, one girl writes, "The group is going good but Rich doesn't do his role sheets or talk in group discussion." Other students refer to people in their group who do not work, but do not identify names, like the student who wrote, "One person only did his sheet once."

It was extremely rare for students to mention what they discussed in their groups other than in a very general way. Comments like, "We talked about what we liked or didn't like" and "Something I can remember from our group is when we happen to get on the hunting subject" were typical. Occasionally students were more specific. For example, one girl wrote, "We talked about that letter they think is from her father and we talked about what we thought was going to happen after they read that letter to Mila." Students did not expand on group discussions at all, either to disagree with something someone said or to reflect on the discussion influencing their thoughts. This may have been a result of me taping all literature circle discussions. Students thought they would be repeating what I had already heard.

The literature circles may have had a negative affect on students' written responses, but the students definitely thought literature circles aided their learning. Many students chose to write about how the literature groups were helping them, and what the groups were doing well or could do to improve. Their measures of effective groups were

using up the allotted time, staying on task, getting work done, and getting along. Those four characteristics were repeated again and again in student entries.

A majority of the students wrote about how they learned more by discussing the books with their groups. Comments like, "When I hear want [what] they have to say I actually understand the book more" are typical of these entries.

While some students wrote about how they were annoyed by other group members, most wrote about how they liked hearing different perspectives, such as the student who wrote, "When everyone shares their thoughts it makes you think about all the different possibilities." Thinking about the possibilities is exactly what critical literacy is all about. We want students to look critically at the world around them and take actions to make it a better place. This combination of reflection and action is what Freire (1993) calls praxis.

CHAPTER FIVE:
CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

I designed this study to encourage and examine students' aesthetic responses to critical literature. I looked at two types of responses: written responses in response logs and oral responses in literature circle discussions.

The results show that the majority of students' response log entries were aesthetic, and students were able to discuss power relationships in their literature circle groups, but they usually needed prompting in order to do so. Following the literature circles, students did not write about what occurred in those discussions or others who influenced their thinking in their response logs, but most of the students felt the literature circles were beneficial.

This chapter includes conclusions which can be made from the results of analyzing the data, limitations that may have affected the results, and implications for my teaching and the teaching of those interested in critical pedagogy.

Conclusions

I categorized students' response log entries along the efferent/aesthetic continuum developed by Cox and Many (1992). It showed whether students were writing primarily efferent or aesthetic entries in response to the critical books they read. Like the findings in Cox and Many's study (1992), I found that the majority of my students' written responses to critical books were aesthetic. Category 4, the basic aesthetic category, contained the largest number of responses (46%), in contrast to category 5, the most aesthetic category, which contained few entries (11%). So while students were

comfortable with and capable of writing about their likes and dislikes and what parts of the stories left impressions on them, they rarely connected to the books in the deepest sense. The majority of students did not write about the stories as though they were living through them, relating the books to their own lives, expressing wonder, making predictions, asking questions, or presenting alternative solutions to problems. If students shared these types of responses, it was almost always part of a literature circle discussion.

Two other sets of data, the transcripts of the literature circle discussions and the notes from the debriefing sessions, I analyzed using the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Students suggested or approved of four ways for oppressed characters' to respond to their situations: acceptance, passive resistance, active resistance, and adult assistance. When I examined how students described the oppressed characters, I found that they characterized the protagonists as objects at the beginning of the stories, and then as subjects later, after the characters began to resist the oppression.

When it came to responding to the social factors, students' comments about the oppressors were divided into two categories: comments about individual oppressors and comments about oppressive institutions. Contrary to my expectations, students tended to place more blame on the institutions than on the individuals they had come to know through the stories. Apparently the oppressors had some redeeming qualities, and it was much easier for students to condemn the faceless institutions, the town's tradition in Wringer (Spinelli, 1997) and the government in The Music of Dolphins (Hesse, 1996).

Finally, the response log entries were analyzed again, to examine what students had to say about the books after they had participated in the literature circles. Research (Pottle, 1992) suggests that students should be given plenty of time to write in their

response logs, but even with a full class period to complete their entries, my students' written responses were short and lacked detail. They made general comments about the stories and their groups, but there was no evidence of reflection on or extension of ideas discussed in the literature circles.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is the small number of students I focused on. I picked two groups rather than studying all six in the class, because I knew I would not be able to study all six groups in depth. I also knew transcribing the discussions and analyzing all the data from two groups would be time consuming; doing this for all six groups while teaching full-time was not possible. Out of a total of twenty-eight students in the class, I focused on only nine. While I observed the other four groups, I may have missed some important discussions by concentrating on the two randomly chosen groups.

It should be noted that, unlike Cox and Many's (1992) study on response stance and level of understanding, the literature groups in my study only read one of the critical books chosen for the study. If each group had read each story, I would be able to see the effect of each book on readers in general and determine whether or not it was a successful book for this purpose. For example, The Music of Dolphins was much more of a fantasy than any of the other books. During one conversation about the Connector role sheet, several of the students reading this book said it was hard to connect to. However, I think it is important for students to read books in which the oppressors are seemingly kind and helpful to the oppressed. Students need to understand that oppressors do not necessarily

appear to be evil, and they may even think they are assisting the people they are oppressing.

There were definitely differences in the way the two focus groups responded to the books they read. As previously mentioned, few students advocated passive resistance or adult assistance for Mila, the protagonist in The Music of Dolphins. Those were not viable options for Mila. Yet for the group reading Wringer, passive resistance was one of the most frequent responses. Students continually suggested that Palmer flee his situation. Which critical book students read affected their perceptions of how to handle oppressive situations. With that in mind, it is necessary to carefully consider which critical books students read if their time is limited, like it was in this study. Another option would be for the literature groups to share excerpts from their books and their responses with the other groups.

Chandler (1997) identified characteristics of successful books she used with her summer book club that can be applied to the critical literature books teachers choose for literature circles as well: strong characterization, a fast-paced plot, enough ambiguity for different interpretations, and possible controversies. One of the few negative comments about Wringer came from a student who complained that it kept talking about the same problems over and over again. He wrote, "I did not like parts of the book. I thought [it] draged through some parts." Another student apparently felt the same way about The Witch of Blackbird Pond (Speare, 1958). She wrote, "I think the book is kind of slow on getting going. It talks about her ride over on the ship too long. Otherwise I think it's a pretty good book." These students obviously felt these two books had slow-moving plots.

While most of the students enjoyed these two books, there were books that were more successful overall.

While I did not observe the group that read Junebug (Mead, 1995) as closely as my focus groups, I know from my pilot study in 1998 that students connect very well with that critical book. While it is a lower level book, it has many of Chandler's (1997) suggested characteristics. Nightjohn (Paulsen, 1993), the book we used to practice the role sheets, was also a very successful book, generating much thoughtful discussion. Another book I would like to try, perhaps as practice for the literature circles, is Mildred Taylor's The Friendship (1987). Möller and Allen (2000) used this book with a group of struggling fifth grade females. The story engaged the girls to the point that the oppressive events made them fear for their safety. While these girls were African-American and Hispanic, and may have related to this book more than most of my students would have, there still seems to be a general pattern as to what types of books students connect with. All three of these books are about African-Americans, and both Nightjohn and The Friendship are explicit in their portrayal of the violence the characters must endure. A book like The Friendship, easily read in one or two days, could be used for introducing critical literacy to the classroom.

In addition to the books, another limitation of the study may have been the students' inexperience with the literature circle format. None of the students had participated in literature circles before, and therefore their interactions were somewhat stilted at times. It was hard for them to talk about the books for twenty-five to thirty minutes. Especially at first, they just read through what they wrote on their role sheets and then said they were done. It took awhile for them to begin responding to each other's

comments and debating the issues. Two students commented that they would have preferred to use response logs rather than the role sheets, but Daniels (1994) suggests sticking with the role sheets until students are familiar with a variety of ways to respond to the texts.

In addition to their inexperience with literature circles, it was unlikely students had had the opportunity in school to read with a critical stance. The only time they had used a critical stance to examine issues of power for my class was when we practiced the role sheets with Nightjohn. The results of the study may have been different if students had used a critical stance on more than a few occasions.

There were two clear limitations for the response logs in that manner they were used in my class. I tried to use them for two purposes: to find out what students thought of their books and to find out how they thought their literature circles were functioning. However, they did not write much detailed information about either topic, and occasionally only wrote about one or the other instead of both. Another possible cause of the limited amount of information about the books in the entries is that students had already talked about the stories, and apparently did not feel like they had to repeat what was said in writing. I was hoping for students to reflect on discussions and extend previous ideas after participating in the literature circles. However, I was uncertain about prompting students in that direction rather than learning what stance they would take on their own. As a result, I did not see any evidence of either in the entries. When I used, "Write about your books and how things are working in your groups" as a prompt, students apparently did not consider reflecting and extending.

Implications for Teaching

Needless to say, in most schools, critical pedagogy is not a standard part of the curriculum. Wink (1997) and Peterson (1994b) describe the lengths they go to to incorporate it into their classes. Those of us who want our students to think critically about issues of power and social justice have to find ways to make critical pedagogy fit, either by adapting the curriculum, or by making it a priority within the existing curriculum.

There are several obstacles to fostering critical literacy in the classroom that stem from the curriculum. As Wink (1997) predicted, time was one of those obstacles for me. While I was able to drop small projects I had incorporated into my curriculum over the years, I was still expected to cover the same amount of material in less time. Although I knew I would not have much time, I was determined to try critical literature circles with my classes. I had six weeks to conduct the practice sessions and the study, so it was not possible to accomplish everything I wanted. For example, I would have liked for the literature circle groups to read all six of the books. I think the study would more accurately reflect the effect of the chosen books if they had. The interdisciplinary aspect of the middle school where I teach, which I have enjoyed in the past, was another restriction. When I wanted to explore different types of response, like reader's theatre, I had to move on to a mythology unit I teach with three other members on my academic team.

While I cannot spend the entire year facilitating literature circles based on critical books, there are things I can do to foster critical thinking about issues of power and social justice in my classroom. Within our school setting there are many chances for students to

observe power relationships. For example, what does it mean to be popular? Who, if anyone, sticks up for the students whose power has been stripped away by the cruelty of others? What gives a student power? Do students have the power to influence what they learn or how they are treated by the adults in the system? These are critical questions for the students of today.

There are also ways to incorporate critical pedagogy into the standard curriculum. While I do not have a textbook for my class, my classes can examine the texts we read in much the same fashion as Commeyras and Alvermann (1994) and Fuhler (1991). I would not choose to use a Greek mythology book in a critical literature circle, but as a class we can certainly discuss the power relationships presented in the myths we read. How were humans treated by the gods? How are females portrayed as opposed to males? How did this religion affect its believers? How are these power relationships similar to those in our culture today? Keeping the concepts of power relationships and social justice foremost in students' minds is important when they are just learning to think critically. It is necessary to discuss oppression throughout the year, preferably every year, in order for students to see it in their world and act on it.

This leads me to the most important implication for my teaching. I learned that if I want students who are new to critical pedagogy to think in terms of power relationships and social justice, I have to constantly remind them and ask them questions pertaining to issues of power. We discussed vocabulary like "oppression," "power," and "persecution" in the practice sessions with Nightjohn and the picture books, but that was not enough for students who had never used this language to begin using it when they started the literature circles. I found that my students are capable of discussing issues of power and

social justice, but I must explicitly ask them to do so. Simply asking for them to respond to what they are reading in general does not elicit a response about power relationships. My previous experience with the transactional theory made me want to keep my questions general. Yet asking questions like, "Is the main character being affected by society's beliefs or ideas? If so, how?" is much more likely to get them to discuss or write about power issues.

There are several other implications related to critical literacy that I discovered in the course of my study. The role sheets and the response logs combined were not effective. Students did not want to repeat themselves. At the suggestion of Daniels (1994), I will start my next literature circle unit using only the role sheets, because the ultimate goal of the literature circles is to foster discussion. This does not mean that I will not have students respond in writing to the stories and the literature circles; they will just do so less frequently and in a more structured fashion. I will specifically ask them what they have learned from fellow group members and how their opinions about the social issues in the books have changed or evolved as a result of participating in the discussions. Peterson (1994a) and Miller (1994) both cite the necessity of forming opinions.

The role sheets could also use some adjustments. For example, the Word Wizard role sheet could be adapted to focus on language of power—which words are used to describe the oppressed and which are used to describe the oppressors? This is similar to what Josephine Young (2000) did as part of her study on gender. Her participants read two articles, one featuring a female athlete and one featuring a male athlete, and examined the language used to describe each. I could change the Character Critiquer

sheet I developed to ask about the oppressed and oppressive characters instead of the main characters.

I have no doubt these role sheets can be used for critical response, because at times students responded critically on these sheets without being reminded. For example, one student asked, "Do you think it was right that nine-year-olds had to be a wringer?" when he was the Discussion Director. Another student shared a powerful image in response to a scene in Nightjohn when we were practicing the Illustrator role sheet—she saw the spring house wall where slaves were chained and tortured inside of a giant teardrop. If my future classes are able to spend more time in literature circles and become accustomed to the different critical roles available to them as readers, I would try to phase the role sheets out and have students prepare for meetings by writing or drawing in a response log. I would also like my students to experiment with a wider range of responses, like Willis and Johnson's (2000) students, who were successful at responding with creative writing, visual arts, and drama.

An unintentional aspect of my research that affected both focus groups was gender. When I let the students choose which book they wanted to read and randomly chose two of those groups to study, I ended up with an all male group reading Wringer and an all female group reading The Music of Dolphins. While I intentionally picked three books with male protagonists and three books with female protagonists, I did not expect students to only choose books with protagonists of their own gender. In fact, that did not happen with Junebug and The Witch of Blackbird Pond; yet only boys chose Under the Blood Red Sun (Salisbury, 1994) and only girls chose Lyddie (Paterson, 1991).

I think the gender make-up of the two focus groups definitely influenced the way the groups interacted and discussed the books. Two of the girls in The Music of the Dolphins group were very soft-spoken, and I think they were more comfortable talking in the all female group than they would have been if males were present. Carico (1996) and Smith (1997) suggest that girls are more likely to examine and discuss their place in the world without the presence of boys. I also think the girls focused more on what they perceived to be a romance between two of the characters than they would have if there was a male in the group.

As for the boys, they were probably more comfortable with no girls in their group as well. I just wonder if they would have cheered the oppressors on as they picked on Dorothy so much if there was a girl in the group, or if they would have been a little more reserved. As I mentioned previously, they thought many of the oppressive acts were humorous, and most of those funny acts were aimed at Dorothy, the only young female in the book. As well as condoning the way the gang treated Dorothy, the boys also spent much of their time talking about a traditionally male activity—hunting. Three of the five boys claimed to hunt, although one boy was constantly questioned about his hunting experience, as if the other boys did not believe what he said. When they got off task, they frequently discussed sports as well. They spent much of their time establishing what Young (2000) calls masculine Discourses [capital in original].

Final Comments

Though it was not part of the study, I asked students to write about what they thought of the literature circles as part of their final response log entry. Although a few

students said they did not like the circles because they could read faster on their own, most of the students thought the groups were fun and beneficial. The following are comments from their entries:

- Our literature circles were GREAT! We had the best discusions. Everybody I think had a good time. We all laughed a lot at what other people thought. What I liked was the discussions.
- I think the groups are a good idea. I also think the groups are fun. I realy like book groups. I am learning more by discussing, here's how. I get to hear what other peoples point of view is. We are all reading and always discussing a lot.
- I like my group because we really get together and talk. I'm learning more by listening to others inputs. When I hear want [what] they have to say I actually understand the book more.
- I think the circles went really well actually. I learned what other peoples thoughts were and learned more about stuff that I didn't really know.
- I liked our literature circles because if there was a part that you did not understand your group members could tell you what it ment.

In conclusion, the literature circles using critical books definitely enhanced my curriculum. I believe my students experienced of a new way of looking at the world, and while they are far from taking action, they did occasionally take part in debating ideas and sharing opinions with their classmates about social justice and power relationships. During their discussions, they did not always just defer to the oppressors. Especially toward the end of the stories, they recognized and named oppression, and questioned the

actions of authority figures in the books. They were taking part in aesthetic readings that sparked critical questions. Through their critical questioning of oppression they became subjects rather than objects.

The study of aesthetic response to literature has been going on for many years. My study adds to the small but growing number of studies (Möller & Allen, 2000; Willis & Johnson, 2000; Young, 2000) that go beyond that research to combine aesthetic response with critical literacy. I hope this will lead to students who can, in Freire's words, "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

In Nightjohn, one of my students' favorite books, John and Sarny are willing to risk physical torture and death to read and write. The unmistakable message is that literacy is power, in the spirit of Freire's (1993) work. In this excerpt, Mammy has just caught John teaching Sarny letters, and fears for Sarny's safety.

> "Why does it matter?" Mammy leaned against the wall. She had one hand on the logs, one on her cheek. Tired. "Why do that to these young ones? To Sarny here. If they learn to read—"
>
> "And write."
>
> "And write, it's just grief for them. Longtime grief. They find what they don't have, can't have. It ain't good to know that. It eats at you then—to know it and not have it."
>
> "They have to be able to write," John said. Voice pushing. He stood and reached out one hand with long fingers and touched mammy on the forehead. It was almost like he be kissing her with his fingers. Soft. Touch like black cotton in the dark. "They have to be able to read and

write. We all have to read and write so we can write about this—what they doing to us. It has to be written" (p. 57-58).

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Appendix A

Discussion Director

Name_____
Book_____
Assignment: page _____ to page _____

You are the **discussion director**. Your job is to write down some good questions that you think your group would want to talk about. Your task is to help people talk over the big ideas in the reading and share their reactions. Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read.

Possible discussion questions or topics for today:

1. _____
_____

2. _____
_____

3. _____
_____

4. Why...

5. How...

6. If...

Topic to be carried over to next meeting: _____ ___
*Assignment for next meeting: page ____ to page _____

Adapted from H. Daniels (1994)

Appendix B

Character Critiquer

Name_____
Book_____
Assignment: page _____ to page _____

You are the **character critiquer**. Your job is to examine the characters and their actions. Answer the following questions (on the back or another sheet of paper if necessary).

1. Who is the main character in this section?
2. What do you think of the main character?
3. What types of struggles or problems does he/she have or cause?
4. Who or what is the cause of his/her problem?
5. How do you feel about the main characters' actions (or lack of action)?
6. Is the character being affected by society's beliefs or ideas? If so, how?
7. What would you do in the main character's situation?
8. Could the main character have done anything to help himself/herself? If so, what? If not, why not?

Topic to be carried over to next meeting: _____
*Assignment for next meeting: page ____ to page _____

Adapted from H. Daniels (1994)

Appendix C

Illustrator

Name_____
Book_____
Assignment: page _____ to page _____

You are the **illustrator**. Your job is to draw some kind of picture related to the reading. It can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flow chart, or stick figure scene. You can draw a picture of something that's discussed specifically in your book, or something the reading reminded you of, or a picture that conveys any idea or feeling you got from the reading. Any kind of drawing or graphic is okay—you can even label things with words if that helps. Make your drawing on the back of this sheet or on a separate piece of paper.

When your group meets, don't tell the other members what your drawing is. Let them guess and talk about it first. Then you can talk about it.

Topic to be carried over to next meeting: _____
*Assignment for next meeting: page ____ to page _____

Adapted from H. Daniels (1994)

Appendix D

Literary Luminary

Name_____
Book_____
Assignment: page _____ to page _____

You are the **literary luminary**. Your job is to pick parts of the story that you think your group would like to hear read aloud. You decide which passages or paragraphs are worth hearing, and then jot down plans for how they should be shared. You can read passages aloud yourself, ask someone else to read them, or have people read them silently and then discuss.

Possible reasons for picking a passage to be shared:

Important	Informative	Funny	Sad
Surprising	Controversial	Confusing	
Interesting	Well written	Thought-provoking	

Location	**Reason for Picking**	**Plan for Reading**
1. Page _____	_____	_____
Paragraph___	_____	_____
2. Page _____	_____	_____
Paragraph___	_____	_____
3. Page _____	_____	_____
Paragraph___	_____	_____

Topic to be carried over to next meeting: _____
*Assignment for next meeting: page ____ to page _____

Adapted from H. Daniels (1994)

Appendix E

Word Whiz

Name_____
Book_____
Assignment: page _____ to page _____

You are the **word whiz**. Your job is to be on the lookout for a few words or phrases that are important in today's reading. Maybe the words really help describe a character or situation well, or maybe they stand out somehow in the reading—words that are repeated a lot or used in an unusual way. Explain why they are relevant to the book. If you find words that are puzzling or unfamiliar, write those down also, and then later jot down their definitions, either from a dictionary or from some other source. When your circle meets, help members find and discuss these words.

Page # & Paragraph	**Word/ Phrase**	**Relevance/Definition**
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Topic to be carried over to next meeting: _____
*Assignment for next meeting: page ____ to page _____

Adapted from H. Daniels (1994)

Appendix F

Connector

Name_____
Book_____
Assignment: page _____ to page _____

You are the **connector**. Your job is to find connections between the book and the world outside. This means connecting the reading to:

--your own life
--happenings at school or in the community
--similar events at other times and in other places
--other people or problems that you are reminded of
--other books or stories
--other writings on the same topics
--other writings by the same author

Some things today's reading reminded me of are...

Topic to be carried over to next meeting: _____
*Assignment for next meeting: page ____ to page _____

Adapted from H. Daniels (1994)