

TALKING BEYOND THE TEXT:  
IDENTIFYING AND FOSTERING CRITICAL TALK  
IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
JENNIFER L. WILSON

Dr. Carol Gilles, Dissertation Supervisor

DECEMBER 2004

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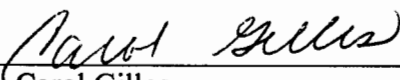
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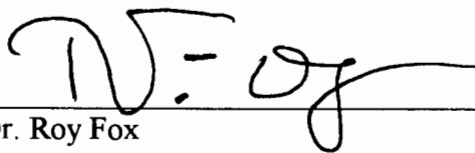
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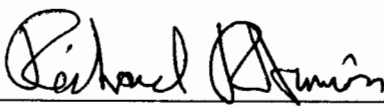
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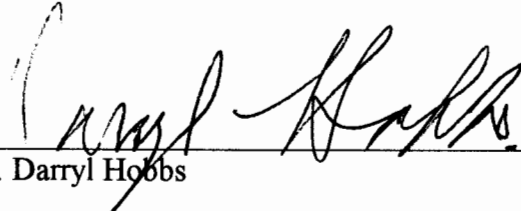
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# TALKING BEYOND THE TEXT: IDENTIFYING AND FOSTERING CRITICAL TALK IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study serves two purposes: 1) to observe a master teacher/researcher in order to determine how to enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk and 2) to provide another layer to the critical literacy discussion by illustrating the critical talk that occurred in a middle school classroom.

Procedures: This naturalistic, qualitative inquiry examined eighty-one transcribed student and teacher discussions, teacher and student interviews and artifacts, and field notes to determine the type of talk that occurred as the teacher invited small groups of students to take part in dialogue prompted by literature. The analysis occurred in two phases. First, data was coded to determine how a teacher facilitates critical talk. The second phase occurred as ten transcripts were selected by the classroom teacher and researcher for in-depth analysis. Using techniques borrowed from grounded theory and three different lenses (content analysis, discourse analysis, and general semantics), the ten transcripts were analyzed to provide deeper insight into the nature of critical talk.

Findings: The context of the study and four additional themes emerged from this data to answer the question: how does one teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk? The four themes included teacher's knowledge, processing time, various forms of scaffolding, and oral rubrics. During the in-depth analysis of the ten selected transcripts, additional themes of the nature of critical talk emerged. First, students explored critical concepts such as recognizing a need for action; becoming aware of injustices; and challenging the

status quo. Also, student talk scaled the ladder of abstraction, offering concrete examples that made the discussions more applicable to their lives, while at the same time traveling up the ladder, abstracting the issues to begin to explore larger more systemic causes of particular injustices. Second, some students believed that they were changed by the interactions while others felt as if they had gained new understandings of particular concepts, issues, or beliefs.

Conclusions: A continuum of the type of talk that emerged from the classroom data can be superimposed upon a larger understanding of the role of critical conversations in a classroom. The continuum shows how students' talk moves among social talk, fundamental text talk, socio-interpretive text talk, critical talk, and critical conversations. As students travel along the continuum, various needs can be met. As teachers recognize where students' talk is on the continuum, they can lead students to deeper literature study discussions. In order to help students take a more critical approach when discussing texts, teachers must scaffold the talk and provide the time for students to grapple with critical concepts.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*We really kinda went deeper than just the story. I mean we got into the characters and everything but we went deeper into kinda deeper meaning that touches life.*

- Tim, a sixth grader

Tim's comment describes exactly the type of talk I was interested in observing. Teachers have been doing literature discussions for many years. Recently, they have been interested in asking how to get students to engage in the type of dialogue Tim describes.

I piloted this research in Columbia, Missouri with five fifth grade students. I listened to the talk that originated from their literature discussion group. Within that inquiry, I saw fifth graders hold deep conversations that ranged from procedural debates to political commentary. They struggled with difficult cultural norms, applied sociocultural knowledge to create meaning in a new context, and made literacy valuable to them. They were political and personal as they used diversity as a strategy to comprehend, not only the story, but of other narratives in life. They climbed into the story and built understanding from each other. The talk these fifth graders used to negotiate narrative was a concrete example of Freire's "reading the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). That literature discussion group did exactly what Tim described in the

comment above; they had discussions that touched life. It was this pilot study that inspired me to continue looking at the critical talk students used during literature discussions.

### Significance of the Study

In the United States only 51% of citizens under 30 years of age voted in the 2004 presidential election (Fleischer, 2004), 7.2 million families live in poverty (US Department of Commerce, 2004), and in 2003 60% of African American 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored below the “basic” level in reading comprehension (Fuller, 2004). These alarming statistics are disheartening for the world’s wealthiest, most powerful nation. In describing the role of education, Dewey (1961/1997) wrote, “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 78). In order for democracy to flourish teachers must help students learn how to join this “conjoint communicated experience.” The question becomes what types of pedagogies have the most promise for creating a thoughtful, critical citizenry advocated by Dewey?

In searching for a pedagogy that would meet the rising demands of education today, talk, or dialogue, emerged as an effective curriculum engagement (Barnes, 1975/1992; Gilles, 1991; Pierce, 1990/1998). Freire (1998) suggests that “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 73). This research adds to that body of knowledge by examining how one teacher uses talk to extend her students beyond the basic literacy and social studies content. By examining how she enacts, nurtures, and sustains critical talk, I broaden the



discussion on the teacher's role in facilitating critical literature discussion groups.

Recently many researchers (Boyd & Rubin, 2002; Foss, 2002; Möller, 2002; Nussbaum, 2002; Rogers, 2002) have studied critical literacy by examining students' discussions in the classroom; however, many have stopped short of analyzing the talk itself. By determining the dimensions of critical talk, teachers will be able to not only recognize when these discussions are occurring, but value and nurture these discussions in order to foster an environment where critical talk can flourish.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

An exemplary middle school provides the context of this study. The school operates around the standards put forth in *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). These standards were created with the characteristics of adolescents in mind. Adolescents are in a unique stage in their lives. Physically, adolescent students may have many different outward characteristics; however, most children in this phase experience unequal growth spurts and require large amounts of sleep (Forte & Schurr, 1993); while intellectually, adolescents are curious and beginning to grasp more abstract concepts (George & Alexander, 1993). Psychologically, this age group experiences mood swings that often confuse them as well as those who live and work with them. Adolescents are sensitive to criticism and may seem self-conscious. They are optimistic and idealistic. This age group is concerned with issues of fairness and justice (Forte & Schurr, 1993).

The characteristics of adolescents guided the founders of the middle school philosophy to create a more effective educational experience. The middle school philosophy argues for such a structures as advisory time, exploratory curricula, and

interdisciplinary teaming (Jackson & Davis, 2000). It is this interdisciplinary teaming that is often the most apparent difference between a middle school and a junior high school. Interdisciplinary teaming requires the grouping of different content teachers together with the students they teach. This teaming has been proven to be effective in nurturing higher student achievement (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2001). This success of teaming has primarily been attributed to the development and implementation of curriculum integration.

James Beane (1997), a respected middle school scholar, offered four features of successful curriculum integration: organization, knowledge, timeliness, and application. He argues that curriculum integration needs to be designed and organized around students' personal needs and experiences while providing relevant knowledge in a timely manner. There are several examples in the literature of curriculum integration that meet Beane's stringent criteria (George & Stix, 2000; Kurtzberg, Mineo, & O' Reilly, 1998; Stix, 2000; Tucker, Hafenstein, Tracy, Hillman, & Watson, 1995). My study illustrates curriculum integration in a slightly different way than the above studies. The classroom in this study is a literacy/social studies block class. This means that Kathryn Mitchell Pierce, the classroom teacher, is responsible for covering both the literacy and social studies curricula in a daily, 90-minute block class. This is similar to Linda Christensen and Bill Bigelow's (Christensen, 2000) high school literature and U.S. history class. In this type of curriculum integration, Pierce is solely responsible for the integration and does not team teach with another content teacher, although Pierce did have a teacher intern throughout the year.

Pierce masterfully integrated the two curricula by employing student talk as a major part of her pedagogy. She relied on conversations, discussions, and dialogue as a means for students to get deeper into required content and explore contemporary connections to various curricular engagements. Some writers use the terms *conversation*, *discussion*, and *dialogue* interchangeably, yet the words have different denotations and connotations making one term often more appropriate than another term in describing the type of talk observed. The Webster Dictionary (McKechnie, 1983) definition of *conversation* is “a talking together, informal or familiar talk; verbal exchange of ideas, information etc.” and offers such synonyms as *communication*, *discourse*, *conference*, and *talk* (p. 399). Bomer and Bomer (2001) suggest that this type of talk is unavoidable. They argue, “opportunities for conversations about socially important ideas arise any time a group of people is living together and studying together” (p. 45). For the term *discussion*, Webster’s defines it as “talk or writing in which the pros and cons of a subject are considered” (p. 523). Synonyms for the word *discuss* include *argue*, *debate*, and *dispute*. This type of talk is often associated with literature discussion groups in which students explore conflicting views of character motivation or theme. Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) define successful classroom discussion as “that over the course of a given lesson, builds an intricate network of understandings as each piece of new information sequentially transforms and expands given information into new understandings” (p. 90). They argue that “each discussion has its own life, and different conversants will always interact differently” (p. 91). The term *dialogue* is defined by Webster as the “interchange and discussion of ideas especially when open and frank as in seeking mutual understanding or harmony; a talking together” (p.503). This definition

encompasses some of the other two definitions yet emphasizes a more harmonic talk over the debate-like talk in discussions. Peterson and Eeds (1990) describe *dialogue* as:

More than an exchange of information and sharing of ideas, dialogue requires personal investment. It cannot be pursued in a passive state...Dialogue is demanding work, requiring that all involved have initiative and wide-awake imaginations. Tensions and anxiety are not foreign to it. In fact, dialogue ceases when participants exempt themselves from the necessity of exerting intelligences and imagination. (p. 14)

This more equitable view of classroom talk extends from Freire's (1970/1993) political description of dialogue in which he defines it as "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 69). By naming the world, Freire suggests, is to "change it" (p. 69). He writes, "without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education" (pp. 73-74). Thus in his view, dialogue is "an essential necessity" (p. 69).

Conversation, discussion, and dialogue are all a part of *oracy*. "Oracy" is a term Andrew Wilkinson (1970) first used in regards to talk in literacy education. He writes, "it is a word which enables one to think about the importance of these skills of speaking and listening; and these skills are, of course, not only important but fundamental" (p. 73). Wilkinson provides a model to illustrate his concepts of oracy in relation to literacy.

Table 1

Wilkinson's (1970) Model of Literacy

	<b>Production</b>	<b>Reception</b>
<b>Oracy</b>	Speaking	Listening
<b>Literacy</b>	Writing	Reading

From its inception, scholars were drawn to the exploration of oracy. Douglas Barnes (1975/1992) extended oracy by pushing teachers to view talk as an integral part of

any curriculum, suggesting that “language must enter into the curriculum in two ways: 1) as the communication system of classroom and school; 2) as a means of learning” (p. 31). Halliday (1993) argued for a classroom model that asks children to “learn language, learn through language, and learn about language” (p. 112). Egawa and Harste (2001) extended Halliday’s model by adding in a fourth component, learning to use language to critique.

Recently researchers have explored the use of talk in the classroom (Gilles, 1991; Short, Kaugman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999; Smith, 1995). There has also been a significant amount of research in the middle grades on talk and gender (Evans, 1996; Johnson, 2000; Peterson, 2002). The research, however, that was most influential to this study was the research that focused on one particular talk pedagogy: literature study.

Literature study, literature circles, book clubs, and book groups are various names for a strategy used in language arts classrooms. *Grand Conversations* by Peterson and Eeds (1990) was one of the first books published explaining literature study. The authors argue that through dialogue students work collaboratively and “spend time contemplating meaning and digesting it. Group members help each other begin to *see* where previously they may have only *looked*” (p. 13). Literature study centers on small groups of students talking about a shared reading experience (Schlick & Noe, 2001). It begins with a teacher giving a book talk on pre-selected books. Students then chose a book from the choices and the teacher tries to place students in groups based on those choices. Together or silently the students read the book and then respond in some format. Response options include journal writing, art, graphic organizers, etc. The students meet in small groups to discuss the literature often using their response as prompts for the small group discussions. If the teacher has nurtured a community of learners, structured the learning

environment, and practiced the discussions with the students, talk often flows from the students as they work to make meaning from the text (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Schlick & Noe, 2001).

Researchers and teachers have studied literature study to better understand the role of the teacher (Maloch, 2002; Short et al., 1999), the use of historical fiction (Harmon & Wood, 2001; Roser & Keehn, 2002), students' perspectives (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002; Evans, 2002), the type of talk used (Gilles, 1993; Junker, 1999; Short, 1992), the social interaction (Carico, 2001; Lewis, 2001; McMahon & Goatley, 2001), and gender (Evans, 1996; Johnson, 2000). However, Vasquez's (2003) book, *Getting Beyond "I Like the Book"* shed light on the critical approach that students can take during literature study. Vasquez uses classroom examples to help move students beyond the text to foster more critical conversations. She emphasizes a critical stance for students to take in literature discussions in order to "realize how text could be reconstructed in more equitable ways" (p. 27).

Pushing the edges of literature study to include a more critical approach originates from a critical literacy philosophy. Critical literacy is defined in many different ways. It is language use that questions the assumptions of societal norms (Baker & Freebody, 2001; Comber, 2001; Edelsky, 1999; Freire & Macedo, 1987), explores multiple realities (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1997; Vasquez, 2003), questions social constructions of self (Shor, 1997), assumes a non-neutral stance (Luke & Freebody, 1997), studies the sociopolitical (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002), and proposes action (Freire, 1970/1993; Shor, 1999). Edelsky (1999) argues a critical pedagogy examines "systems of domination" (p. 14) and frontloads the concepts and issues for students to interrogate.

Luke and Freebody (1997) see critical literacy as a critique of text and how it works ideologically. These practices include “an awareness of how, why, and in whose interest particular texts might work” (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 218). Green (2001) writes, “critical literacy offers a critical approach to text, a language of critique or a critical discourse, and examination of literacy across content areas” (p. 12). Each perspective provides richness and texture to critical literacy theory.

I chose to focus my examination of critical literacy on the research that revolves around classroom talk. I found several studies that dealt with critical classroom talk and literature discussion groups. Rogers (2002) argued that in order for critical classroom talk to occur she had to change her interactions from a closed questioning pattern to a more open, student-centered pattern. Möller (2002), too, examines critical dialogue and found that in order to facilitate critical talk, the teacher’s role needed to vary depending on the students needs. Lewis (1999) argues that in discussions where a teacher is not present, students struggle “to read against the grain” (p. 188). She argues that by allowing students to have complete ownership, teachers are perpetuating the status quo. Bean and Moni (2003) suggest that teachers should provide prompts to support student discussions. They argue that when students are prompted to take a critical stance, texts can then be manipulated, made transparent, and explored. Other research suggests the use of critical talk helps to develop a social imagination and foster inquiry (Noll, 1994), to construct identities (Encisco, 1994), and to take risks in becoming an “empowered citizenship” (Fairbanks, 1998, p. 202).

However, it was Karen Smith’s work with critical conversations that provided the most insight into this research. In a graduate level children’s literature course, Smith

(2001) engaged her students in “critical conversations.” These conversations asked the participants to interrogate whose reality is being portrayed in the texts as well as challenge contemporary systems of oppression. Karen Smith (personal communication, October 18, 2004) later extended her view of literature discussion in an interview with me. She says a critical conversation is “a conversation, interrogation, discussion about unjust social practices.” She suggests that students need to get at the underlying assumptions of particular social practices and this occurs through “dialogue and constant discussion.” She argues for the explicit teaching of the language of critique, “We need to forefront it; we need to teach it...Because kids can get into discussions on beliefs, societal beliefs, but they don’t take it to a level of interrogation.” Smith’s notion of critical conversations guided me throughout the analysis of my data as I explored critical talk in Pierce’s sixth grade classroom.

#### Purpose of the Study

This study serves two purposes. First, I chose to observe a master teacher/researcher who has published widely on the issue of talk in the classroom and children’s literature in order to determine how to enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk. This was an intentional decision. By studying a teacher who is a confident and effective facilitator of critical talk, I was able illustrate how critical talk works in the classroom. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkerson (1985) argued that in order for education to progress “verified practices of the best teachers in the best schools” should be “introduced throughout the country” (p. 120). This study does exactly that. By observing Pierce in her high achieving school, I present the possibilities critical talk has for adolescent students.



The second purpose the study serves is to provide another layer to the critical literacy discussion. Theorists have defined critical literacy in various ways. This study extends these discussions. When theory is placed into practice inevitably it will appear differently. The examples provided in this research provide another example of critical literacy theory enacted in the classroom. Each example of theory into practice extends, challenges, and builds upon that theory. One purpose of this research is to illustrate how critical theory informed the work of one teacher, and highlight the resulting critical talk.

### The Research Questions

The following questions guide this study:

1. How does the teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk? What teaching strategies foster engagement in critical talk?
2. What is the nature of critical talk in a literacy-social studies middle school classroom? How is critical talk identified? What are its characteristics?

### Procedures and Limitations

In order to answer these questions I conducted a naturalistic, qualitative inquiry. For three months (January through March), I tape-recorded and transcribed student and teacher talk in a sixth grade classroom in Cheshire, Missouri (pseudonym). The data collected included the transcribed discussions, artifacts (e.g. teacher journal, student journals, and other written work), field notes, and interviews of both teacher and students. To organize my data I used a software program (Nud\*st) and data briefs. I also used memoes and a dual chronology to document emerging theories and my evolving thought process. I borrowed techniques from grounded theory and used constant comparative methods. From the eighty-one transcripts collected during the study, I chose ten to analyze in more depth. I used three analytical lenses to provide a deeper analysis of those

ten selected transcripts: content analysis, general semantics, and discourse analysis. These borrowed techniques provided a richer understanding of the transcribed talk.

Within the study I designed several features to ensure ethical research. First I gained entry through the appropriate gatekeepers; I received IRB approval from both the University of Missouri-Columbia and from the Cheshire School District. I also maintained confidentiality throughout; all student names and places have been changed to protect anonymity with the exception of Pierce who requested her name to be used in the publication of research results. I also participated in multiple member checking experiences. I first brought transcripts and initial findings back to the teacher and the students. I also shared my evolving theory with peers, colleagues, and scholars in the field. Last, I presented the findings at critical friends groups, graduate classes, and conferences. Each venue provided additional insight that influenced my own understanding of critical talk.

#### Methodological Limitations

There are several methodological limitations to this research. First, my study lasted four months, thus I was unable to follow the threads of critical talk past that date. Students may have continued engaging in even deeper discussions later in the year or in other classes, however, I collected data only in Pierce's literacy-social studies block class and did not follow the students to other content classes. I was also unable to observe the foundational aspects of critical talk as those were set in the first semester. The information gained about the first part of the semester was taken strictly from interviews with and the journals of the classroom teacher. Third, this study took place in an upper middle class suburb in the Midwest. The majority of the student population was

educationally privileged adolescents. Thus the results are specific to this particular group of students. Last, this research examined ten transcripts selected from the eighty-one collected. The sample was purposeful, thus the findings are specific to those discussions and are not representational of other discussions within the class.

### Organization of the Study

This study is broken into five chapters. Chapter One provides a brief overview of the research. It describes the significance, the most pertinent theoretical underpinnings, the purpose, the research questions, and the procedures and limitations. Chapter One also outlines the organization of the study. Chapter Two provides an in-depth description of the literature and theory that influenced this study. Chapter Two covers the adolescents and middle school philosophy, focusing on curriculum integration; talk in the classroom, emphasizing both the theory and talk in practice; literature discussion groups, highlighting the logistics, theory, and recent research; and critical literacy, discussing the theories and recent research on classroom talk. Chapter Three outlines my approach and the procedures I used to conduct the qualitative research. It includes a rationale, the guiding questions, the context, data collection and analysis, and ethical research considerations. Chapter Four narrates my findings to the two questions posed in this research. It begins by providing a context and discussing four themes that emerged from the data: teacher knowledge, scaffolding, processing time, and oral rubric. Chapter Five provides conclusions and offers a discussion as well as implications of the research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

My study is conducted in a unique context, an exemplary middle school where teachers integrate subject matter fluidly (i.e. literacy-social studies block). Thus, critical conversations can be woven between two content areas. Literature concerning middle level students and curriculum integration, classroom talk, literature study, and critical literacy provide the underpinning for my study.

### Section I: Adolescents and Middle Schools

My study takes place in a sixth grade classroom with students eleven to thirteen years of age. Many of the classroom structures and organizational procedures were created to meet the specific needs of early adolescents. In order to fully illustrate the context in which my study takes place, it is important to examine the exemplary middle school philosophy that Cheshire Middle School uses as a model. This section will discuss not only the needs of early adolescents, but also the philosophy of exemplary middle schools.

#### *Adolescents*

Adolescence is often viewed as a biologically driven stage in life (Forte & Schurr, 1993; George & Alexander, 1993). It is generally defined as a period of time in which children anywhere from the age of ten to fifteen years old begin to go through many physiological and emotional changes. The physical characteristics of middle school students vary greatly, as this is the time for not only sexual maturation, but also growth

spurts. These changes occur at different times for different students (George & Alexander, 1993). Therefore, it is difficult to physically describe a middle school student in even the most general of terms. Because these students are experiencing such changes physically, they often have increased appetites and may require large amounts of sleep. They may appear restless or tired depending on the day (Forte & Schurr, 1993).

Intellectually, adolescents are curious (Forte & Schurr, 1993). They are beginning to grasp more abstract concepts and becoming more metacognitive about their processes. Though they are still egocentric and will often ask, “Why are we doing this?” it is often indicative of their attempt to connect their learning to the real world. Adolescents prefer active learning and social learning. Therefore, in designing a curriculum, it is imperative to “require a rich, meaningful, and challenging educational experience” (George & Alexander, 1993).

Early adolescents also experience psychological changes. During this time in their lives adolescents experience a variety of unpredictable behaviors, which often confuses them. These students are also concerned about how others perceive them, thus making them sensitive to criticism and peer pressure (George & Alexander, 1993). They may appear moody and restless. The most common trait among adolescents is self-consciousness (Forte & Schurr, 1993).

However erratic their behavior may seem, middle school students are in general optimistic and idealistic. They are concerned with justice (thus the “That’s so unfair!” comment). These students also are faced with tough decisions about their lives. This is the age when they are allowed to decide legally if they will live with one parent or another, decide who their friends will be, and choose whether they will be sexually

active. Though their peer groups are incredibly influential, family is still the most important influence to this age group. During this time adolescents crave positive attention and approval from adults (Forte & Schurr, 1993).

Some theorists describe adolescence in terms of a culture or a subculture. Brake (1980) defines culture as “a cohesive force binding actors together, but it also produces disjunctive elements” (p. 6). He defines subculture as “alternative forms of cultural expression which reflect a cultural plurality in a culture which seems on superficial examination to dominate the members of a society” (Brake, 1980, p. 8).

In a year-long qualitative study, Finders (1997) examined female adolescent culture within a middle school/junior high setting. She states that, “assumptions of adolescence as a life stage are now beginning to shift toward a conception of adolescence as socially situated rather than biologically driven” (p. 12). Many consider this socially situated culture as an “oppositional culture” (Dornbusch, 1989, p. 236). Identity placed upon adolescents is much debated in the literature. Eve (1975) believes that “while adolescents do apparently maintain a statistically distinct value system from adults, this should not be a cause for alarm” (p. 165). She goes on to describe the adolescent value system as mainly created from the adult value systems with the difference being primarily in the “degree to which certain values are approved by adolescents” (p. 165). The socialization of adolescents in the youth culture is the attempt “to gain control over their lives as a major aspect of peer culture” (Kinney, 1993, p. 36).

### *Middle School Philosophy*

Though every middle school is different, there are common criteria indicative of the middle school philosophy. *Turning Points 2000* provides a list of goals that all middle

schools should strive to achieve. They are as follows:

- Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best
- Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners
- Staff middle schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities
- Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose
- Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best
- Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens
- Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pg. 23-24)

Often a middle school can be identified by the structures in place. Advisory time, a period of time during school in which students can meet with a caring adult to talk about issues that ultimately effect academic success, is one such structure. Research on advisory programs have found that in order for these programs to be successful in forging relationships with middle-level learners, teachers must feel comfortable in the advisory role (Black, 2002). In addition, the programs must meet the needs of both teacher and student (Esposito & Curcio, 2002); provide helpful and timely information (Brown, 1999); “help achieve the school’s mission” (Black, 2002, p. 50); and finally, allow a time for students to develop close personal relationships with advisors (Brown, 1999).

Interdisciplinary teaming is another structure often found in middle schools. The idea behind teaming is to create smaller schools inside the larger middle school. Thus a team “consists of two or more teachers and the group of students they commonly instruct” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 125). Teaming is associated with higher student achievement (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999, 2001) and improves the teachers’

working environment (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999). Research on interdisciplinary teaming suggests that common planning time and block scheduling is one of the most important factors in team success (Crow & Pounder, 2000; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000). Homogeneity of educational philosophy among the team members is also important for success (Crow & Pounder, 2000), and teachers need to be strong in such areas as interpersonal skills, flexibility, leadership and teacher expertise before beginning a teaming experience (Crow & Pounder, 2000). Finally, teams with fewer students tend to engage in more team activities (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000). Other structures include block scheduling (Smith, Pitkin, & Rettig, 1998), multi-age grouping (Hopping, 2001), looping (Lincoln, 1997; Lincoln, 2000; McGown & Sherman, 2002), curriculum integration (Dutt-Doner, Wilmer, Stevens, Hartmann, 2000; Howes, Hamilton, & Zaskoda, 2003; James, Lamb, Householder, & Bailey, 2000; Reinke, Mokhtari, & Willner, 1997; Usnick & McCarthy, 1998), etc. However, it is important to remember that a middle school cannot be completely defined by structures. The degree that a school knows about and cares for its students is what separates an average middle school from an exemplary one.

#### *Middle Level Integration*

Classroom research on curriculum integration has been varied. Some middle school teachers have integrated only a few subjects such as science, literature, and technology (Howes, et al. 2003) or science, math, and technology (James, et al., 2000). Others have focused on integrating two contents such as science and technology (Dutt-Doner, et al., 2000) or math and language arts (Reinke, et al., 1997; Usnick & McCarthy, 1998). Still others have focused more on integrating one skill or content across all the



contents such as the use of movement (Lancaster & Rikard, 2002), the use of technology (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1998), and the use of literacy across the content areas (Daisey, 1996/1997; Pierce & Gilles, 1993).

James Beane (1997), respected middle school scholar, characterizes curriculum integration as having four components: organization, knowledge, timeliness, and application. Curriculum integration, according to Beane, should be organized around students' personal and social experiences and contain pertinent knowledge that is immediately relevant to students' lives. Beane's vision of curriculum integration involves authentic projects and experiences to enable adolescents to understand the "democratic process of problem solving" (Beane, 1997, p. 9).

Peña, Brown-Adams, and Decker (1999) used discourse analysis to extend the discussion of curriculum integration. They found three rationales in favor of an integrated curriculum: it develops the whole child, it prepares students for society, and it promotes social change. Critics of curriculum integration argue that the content knowledge taught is less stringent, the instruction focuses too much on the individual child instead of the good of the whole society, and it does not adequately prepare students for the future. Though the authors found that the two camps work from different philosophies, they argue that the debates occur without taking into account the special needs of middle schools. They wrote:

Analyses of past and current discussions suggest that many theorists do not recognize that middle school students tend to live in age-segregated societies. That significant biological changes occur and middle school youth acquire metacognitive skills leading them to be more introspective, self-critical, and distinct from others are issues that are unaddressed in discussions of middle school curriculum integration. (Peña, et al., 1999, p. 34)

The findings from the discourse analysis also suggested that underlying the debate lies an inaccurate belief of problematic middle school students. The authors argue that, “we must revolt against characterizations of youth that are binary and inaccurate as opposed to accepting them as real and self-evident of the nature of middle school students” (Peña, et al., 1999, p. 35).

Designed after Beane’s model of curriculum integration, the Ricks Center for Gifted Children integrated Latin, math, science, language arts, and social studies with fifth through sixth graders (Tucker, et al., 1995). Highly experienced teachers who were all widely published in their own fields conducted this action research. The context of the study included forty-eight middle level students in a multiage fifth through eighth grade setting and several outside specialist teachers in art, physical education, and Spanish. The teachers combined two models of integration, parallel and integrated thematic, in order to best meet the needs of the individual content areas while studying unexplained phenomenon (i.e. angels, UFOs, monsters, etc.). Meshing the two models together allowed the teachers to stay true to the specific content skills that needed to be taught yet still be able to interrelate the subject matter. After analyzing the data, the teachers found that the students’ test and project scores were higher than they were in past years, the students felt the curriculum provided them with new knowledge and ways to apply that knowledge, and the students’ skills in cooperation and collaboration increased. The teachers felt this model best met the needs of middle level learners because it eliminated the common problems of curriculum integration (i.e. polarity and potpourri). Studying curriculum integration before initiating the unit allowed the teachers to choose a model that would best meet their needs and the needs of their students.

Another example of classroom research is the seventh grade Revolutionary War unit conducted by five content teachers (Kurtzberg, Mineo, & O'Reilly, 1998). In this unit the teachers created four questions that guided the study in each content area. The goal was to design an integrated unit that allowed "students to learn by doing something real, exciting, and filled with a great variety of challenges and problems for them to solve" (Kurtzberg, Mineo, & O'Reilly, 1998, p. 43). This parallel integration ended in a culminating activity, a trial, with each content focused instruction toward the trial. The language arts classes read the novel, *The Hession*, upon which the trial was based. The social studies classes provided background on legal issues. The math classes focused on logic, and science classes looked at evidence. The teachers found that by designing curricula in this manner, pedagogy was varied, students saw teachers as learners, and the students saw the need for each content. Other outcomes from this unit included increased student excitement and enthusiasm as well as a new awareness of time and needs of other content teachers.

In a case study about one veteran social studies teacher, George and Stix (2000) found that by integrating literature into the social studies curriculum this teacher was able to foster "more interesting discussions of historical periods and increased understanding of the major figures who shaped history" (p. 26). They also found that student engagement and motivation increased. This veteran social studies teacher was able to use pedagogical tools from language arts such as literature circles, text sets, and self-selected readings, to move from a teacher-centered, textbook driven curriculum to one that favored a more student-centered curriculum. The incorporation of literature into the social studies classroom challenged this teacher to reflect on what middle school students

need in order to be successful in social studies.

Another classroom research project came about after a mandate in New York City, which required all middle level students to read twenty-five books per year. Content teachers began to use trade books in their classrooms. This classroom research looked at how building a multilevel book room and implementing literature circles in social studies increased student motivation. It was difficult to initially implement the book room and literature circles. Content teachers were uncomfortable with the literature circle strategy and unfamiliar with the young adult literature. They wanted additional in-services and modeling. They also found that the logistics of who taught what books at what time created tension. Some teachers wanted additional copies of the same texts while others wanted to spend the money buying additional titles to provide more choice. Despite all of these initial challenges, however, the social studies teachers eventually found that “incorporating literature into the social studies curriculum and cooperative learning into instruction made the social studies classroom a more interesting, more pleasurable, and more productive learning environment for both students and teachers” (Stix, 2000, p. 220).

In many schools, curriculum integration is enacted by interdisciplinary teaming (i.e. providing common planning time for teachers of different content areas) and block scheduling (Hackmann, 2002). Other possibilities of curriculum integration include parallel integration where lessons or units are “developed across many disciplines with a common organizing topic” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 51) as seen in some of the above studies. My study examines a classroom where one teacher integrated social studies and English curricula into a single block. This is similar to Christensen’s (2000) high school

classroom, where she used the two contents to explore social justice issues.

Christensen (2000) co-teaches her untracked junior level Literature and U.S. History class with Bill Bigelow. In this class she used poetry to help students “crawl inside their own lives as well as the lives of literary and historical characters” (p.126). Christensen has students read and write their own poetry of historical or literary figures. The combined approach to literature and history helps students to “peer into the society of a given time period” as well as gives voice to those figures who are usually silenced (p.126). Another unit created specifically for this class dealt with immigration. For this unit Bigelow and Christensen created a research/ inquiry project in which students developed questions and researched to find new perspectives on immigration.

#### *Summary of Adolescents and Middle Schools*

Though there is debate over whether to attribute the specific demands of adolescents to social or biological causes, it does not alter the underlying needs specific to this age group. An examination of the characteristics of contemporary adolescents, *Turning Points 2000*, a report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, outlines goals and challenges middle schools face and the particular needs of the early-adolescent students that they strive to meet.

The middle school philosophy suggests structures such as advisories, interdisciplinary teaming, looping, etc. to meet the needs of students. However, in practice, each middle school prioritizes the *Turning Points 2000* standards, thus creating their own structures and rationales for their school. One particularly difficult structure that many middle schools struggle to implement is curriculum integration.

Few examples of curriculum integration meet Beane’s stringent definition. From

the classroom research examples discussed, middle level curriculum integration is enacted in different ways in order to best meet the needs of the teachers, the students, and the curriculum. However, regardless of the exact way in which it is implemented, it can be argued that it results in increased student engagement and motivation. Teachers have found that by integrating the curriculum, students see that content lines blur and overlap, and the applicability of acquired knowledge to the real world becomes more readily apparent. Other than Christianson's example mentioned above, there has been little research on literacy-social studies block classes, and none that take place in a middle school setting.

## Section II: Classroom Talk

In order to examine critical conversations, one must understand the nature of talk. Douglas Barnes (1975/1992) argues, "we cannot consider language in the classroom only in terms of communication, but must also consider how children themselves use language in learning" (p. 19). This parallels Halliday's model (1993) of synoptic/dynamic complementarity in which children "learn language, learn through language, and learn about language" (p. 112). In this model, Halliday argues that language should not be taught in isolation and offers a theory of human learning as "a process of meaning making—a semiotic process; and the prototypical form of human semiotic is language" (p. 93). Harste extends Halliday's model with his own "Halliday Plus Model" (Egawa & Harste, 2001) in which he suggests optimal learning occurs when students are learning language, learning about language, learning through language, and learning to use language to critique.

Researchers have examined the benefits of talk as a tool for learning in regards to

writing (Graves, 1983; Kerr, 1998), literature study (Evans, 2002; Gilles, 1991; Lewis, 2001; Smith, 1990; Smith, 1995), inquiry (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Short, Schroeder, Laird, Kauffman, Ferguson, & Crawford, 1996), and even in specific content areas such as science (Gaskins, 1994) and math (Cooke & Adams, 1998). However, much of the research conducted on talk in the middle school focuses on gender (Evans, 1996; Johnson, 2000; Peterson, 2002).

### *Theory*

Douglas Barnes (1975/1992) is one of the most influential theorists of talk in the classroom. He examines how talk can be beneficial in schools:

Often when we meet a problem we want to talk it over; the phrase ‘talk it over’ seems to imply something other than communicating ideas already formed. It is as if the talking enables us to rearrange the problem so that we can look at it differently. Such talking is as much for ourselves as for the other persons present. (p. 19)

This talk helps students to explore problems and create meaning. Barnes argues that this occurs because the nature of language allows people to reflect on their thoughts. To extend the idea of communication in class, Barnes uses a portion of a transcript showing a teacher who was involved in a conversation where a student misunderstands the idea of a mill. Barnes (1975/1992) argues that these misunderstandings represent the “normal part of learning” (p. 21). When classrooms are most effective, learning becomes an “interaction between the teacher’s meanings, and those of his pupils, so that what they take away is partly shared and partly unique to each of them” (p. 22).

Barnes (1975/1992) observed four groups of students as they worked through a poem together without the teacher present. He wanted to examine how students use talk to help make meaning from a given activity. He found that the students “worked through

their interpretation in collaboration” (p. 28). They used what Barnes terms *exploratory talk*. The characteristics of exploratory talk include “frequent hesitations, rephrasings, false starts and changes of direction” (p. 28). Students participating in exploratory talk also may make hypothetical statements. Barnes explains that when children create a hypothesis they have two ways of testing it: they can test it against what they already know or look for evidence within the experience itself. He argues “the more a learner controls his own language strategies and the more he is enabled to think aloud, the more he can take responsibility for formulating explanatory hypotheses and evaluating them” (p. 29). This type of talk helps students learn when the definition of learning is deeper than regurgitating teacher-fed knowledge. Talk and writing, Barnes suggests, “provide means by which children are able to reflect upon the bases upon which they are interpreting reality, and thereby change them” (p. 31). Because of the potential of talk, Barnes argues that it should be implemented into schools in two ways: “as the communication system of classroom and school and as a means of learning” (p. 31).

Students use talk to explore meanings and deepen their understanding. Smith (1982) argues, “language permits thought to fold back on itself; the product of thought itself becomes an object that thought can operate upon” (p. 65). This interaction between language and thought allows for thinking to go deeper to “create and explore new worlds” (p. 66). The ability of language to influence thought occurs because it “freezes time” (p. 66). As thought is ongoing, language stops that continuous process and allows thought to reflect upon itself. Barnes (1975/1992) suggests that talk is a “means for controlling thought” (p. 29). Once students learn to use language strategies, they can begin to also explore and construct multiple meanings of a text.



Some argue that teachers use talk to control the classroom. Mehan (1979) describes the talk that occurs in teacher-directed lessons in comparison to talk that occurs in more student-centered classrooms. In a teacher-directed classroom, the talk resembles a pattern of initiation, reply, and evaluation (IRE). The teacher asks a question, the student replies, and the teacher then evaluates the response. In student-centered classrooms, “students often have some responsibility for organizing their course of study, deciding their length of study time, and influencing techniques of discipline” (p. 11). The student ownership in these classrooms changed the pattern of talk to a more open pattern.

Two other theorists add to the body of literature on talk: Halliday and Wells. Though Halliday (1978) is a linguist, he provides teachers another way in which to view language used in the classroom. He names several characteristics of language: field, tenor, mode, and register. Field is the setting in which language occurs. Field also includes the subject matter of the language being used. Tenor describes the relationship of the participants. This includes such aspects as how well the people know each other, whether one is older or in a higher position, as well as to what degree of permanence exists. Mode, according to Halliday, is the form of communication used. This is more than whether a person chooses to use the spoken word versus written language, but it includes a more narrow definition of communication format such as question and answer, patterns of voice, repetition, etc. Field, tenor, and mode collectively constitute register; thus register is “the contexts of situation in which language is used and the ways in which one type of situation may differ from another” (1978, p. 31). Register includes what is taking place, who is taking part, and what role language is playing in a given situation.

Wells (1990) describes five different modes of interaction with text: performative,

functional, informational, re-creational, and epistemic. Performative interaction occurs when the reader pays particular attention to the code of a given text; for example, proof-reading is a performative interaction. Functional interaction is when the reader uses a text for a specific purpose, such as checking a bus schedule. Informational interaction with text is when text is viewed as means of communication. An example of informational interaction includes consulting a reference book to identify an unknown insect. Re-creational mode is when the text is viewed as a pleasurable exploration of the world through words. The epistemic mode of interacting with a text is when the text is seen as:

a tentative and provisional attempt on the part of the writer to capture his or her current understanding in an external form so that it may provoke further attempts at understanding as the writer or some other reader interrogates the text in order to interpret its meaning. (pp. 372-373)

Though Wells places these interactional modes into separate categories, they often overlap and can be found working simultaneously as a reader interacts with a text. Wells goes on to categorize the four types of texts most often found in schools: basal reading series, notices and signs, content area textbooks, and “real” books. The interactional modes in which these types of texts typically engage students depends on the students’ stance during reading. Wells argues that to be literate one must “have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, thinking, and feeling in the context of purposeful social activity” (p. 378).

Wells further suggests that “if students are to discover the potential that literacy has to empower their thinking, feeling, and action—in other words, they are to become fully literate—they must engage with texts in this way at all stages in their development” (p. 378). He offers the notion of a literacy apprenticeship in which the more expert performer inducts the learner (Wells, 1990; Wells, 1999). Through this apprenticeship,

the “literacy is learned and taught” as “literate behavior is made overt through talk” (Wells, 1990, p. 381). He describes this role of apprentice and master:

Certainly the role of the master includes that of modeling the activity and explaining the principles and practices involved. But these contributions are of greatest value, not in the form of abstract precepts, but when offered as guidance and assistance as the apprentice is actually engaged in performing the activity. (Wells, 1999, p. 156)

Wells uses this idea of a literacy apprenticeship to help teachers use concepts like the zone of proximal development and scaffolding to help students reach a higher level of achievement.

### *Recent Research on Talk*

In a year-long qualitative study of two secondary classrooms, Phelps and Weaver (1999) observed classroom talk about texts. They found that when teachers encourage authentic student talk in the classroom, several dangers must be taken into account. First, the extent to which students used their authentic voice and participated in the class discussions was influenced by the “competing discourses within the classroom” (p. 350). A comment made in class by a student enters into a relationship with other discourses that are in that classroom (e.g. gender, class, race) as well as standards and ethics of public speech that may not place students on equal ground. Phelps and Weaver also argue that teachers must recognize that classroom talk for some students and teachers is “potentially dangerous” (p. 350). For teachers, the risk is feeling as if the curriculum is not being covered or that students will not be prepared for tests, which require one right interpretation of events or issues. For other teachers, it is risky to place students in a situation that could cause emotional harm due to the social hierarchies that exist. For students, authentic classroom talk opens up the potential for ridicule, peer ostracization,

and verbal attacks. Phelps and Weaver are adamant that this should not discourage teachers from using talk in the classroom, but warn teachers to “be aware of social hierarchies, the gendered nature of student talk, and the potential harm that may come when students are left to ‘go at it’ on their own” (p. 352).

Connolly and Smith (2002) worked together as researcher and teacher to look into the dynamics of classroom talk as Connolly, the classroom teacher, tried to create dialogic interactions in his classroom. From teacher journals, observations, and student writing several insights were gained. First, Connolly found that due to the students’ school past histories, small moves to give authority to the students was not enough. Students did not recognize when the teacher moved back to give them more power, therefore the students remained in traditional roles. Instead, Connolly needed to be explicit in his moves to hand power over to his students. Connolly and Smith were also reminded that often students have a different perspective of what constitutes a good book discussion. By encouraging students to reflect on their conversations, something that Connolly admittedly did not do frequently before, he helped students to see what worked in their groups and what needed to change. Finally, the research validated their views that discussions do not occur within a social vacuum. Students did not always feel comfortable to speak their opinions freely for fear of, as one student wrote, being “exposed to the special brand of teenage cruelty” (p. 24).

Studies on talk extend into content areas beyond discussions of text, including science (Arvaja, Häkkinen, Rasku-Puttonen, & Eteläpelto, 2002; Mueller, 2002), math (Thornborrow, 2003), and art (Cotner, 2001), as well as those studies looking at particular aspects of the language arts content such as writing conferences (Peterson,

2002), English as a second language instruction (Boyd & Rubin, 2002; Rymes, 2003), and presentational or formal speech (Luke, 1986). The following sections examine several research articles that provide a unique lens in which to view this study: 1) talk about texts, 2) gender issues, 3) margin talk, and 4) teacher talk.

### *1) Talk about Texts*

Raphael, Gavelek, & Daniels (1998) conducted a qualitative research inquiry in a fifth grade classroom to examine the talk resulting from a historical fiction novel over a three week interval. The researchers found that students were able to sustain topics and themes over an extended period of time. Each time the students returned to a theme or topic their discussion deepened. One strategy the students used to sustain topics was creative play. In the initial stages of the conversation, creative play consisted of predicting what could happen in the story. Midway through the three weeks, the students used creative play to place themselves in the story. Near the end of the time period allotted for discussion, the students used creative play to ask “What if” questions about the text. The researchers also found that the students began taking on the perspective of the “Other.” This included students noting the viewpoint of the author, recognizing the different political views of the North and the South during the Civil War, and becoming aware of the characters’ individual perspectives. Awareness of multiple perspectives was a theme that ran throughout the book club conversation. As the conversations progressed, the students were able to move from placing themselves in the perspective of the character (i.e. asking questions like “what would you do in his place?”) to seeing more conflicting ideas as they examined their own beliefs and that of the characters. Though the researchers found that the progression of sophistication in viewing multiple

perspectives was not linear, the development was generally a “positive trajectory of increasing sophistication” (p. 125). Last, the researchers found that through the historical fiction discussion, the students’ understanding of the content developed. The content understanding grew along thematic lines. For example, students discussed themes such as freedom versus slavery and humanity. These themes deepened the content understanding of the Civil War.

Hinchman and Young (2001) also examined students’ talk about text. In their qualitative study, critical discourse analysis was used to explore how two students talked about written text. The research was conducted in two classrooms and followed two students: a sophomore level global studies (Colin) and an eighth grade language arts classroom (Desuna). The research suggested that both students “exhibited behaviors that did not allow them to participate successfully in classroom talk about text” (p. 262). In the beginning of the study, Colin was an enthusiastic participator in the conversations; however as the class became more challenging to him, he slowly began to withdraw. The students in his group discounted his contributions leaving him feeling powerless. By the end of the study, Colin had become so withdrawn he often did not even comment during group discussions. Desuna also began the year by participating in small group discussions. However, in Desuna’s discussion the students ignored her contributions almost completely. Though her withdrawal was not as linear as Colin’s, she began to more frequently choose not to participate in the conversations. When she did attempt to add to the discussion, she was often ignored. The power structure in these groups contributed greatly to the conversations. Hinchman and Young suggested that “the students’ own myriad of influences inside and outside the classroom fed the particular

stances they took within these transactions” (pp. 262-263). This positioning by peers prevented these two students from fully participating.

## 2) *Gender Issues*

In a feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis, Baxter (2002) examined how student talk in a secondary classroom positions males and females. When females were vying for the teacher’s attention they found themselves in a catch-22: if the teacher favored the student giving her “teacher approval” then often that student lost “peer approval;” thus students who received power from teacher approval were not seen as having power by their peers. Baxter also observed that in both speech and behavior, girls conformed more to the classroom rules than the boys. This conforming often left the girls powerless. The girls would sit quietly with hands raised, only to find that they were not called upon by the teacher, whereas the boys often broke the rules and were treated the same. The girls also were more supportive. In the data provided, the girls were supportive of other girls’ comments as well as other boys’. However, never once in the conversations did the one of the boys support a girl’s comment. Overall girls were “systematically positioned at a disadvantage” (p. 17). Baxter, however, argues that girls should not be victimized in this research. She writes:

Girls are nonetheless subject to a powerful web of institutionalized discourse that constitutes boys more readily as speakers and girls more readily as an appreciative and supportive audience. Thus, teachers and educators do need to intervene to take some form of transformative action. Girls need to learn how to resist certain dominant classroom discourse, so that they can, for example, operate within multiple and competing conversations, or ‘run the gauntlet’ of male barracking in order to cope with the particulars of speaking in mixed-sex, public contexts. (p. 17)

This ability to persevere through the dominant attempts to gain control was seen in one female student during this research. The teachers described this student as

one who can “think on her feet,” “develop” her thoughts, and “articulate” her ideas (p. 17). Baxter argues that valuing this ability is not enough; teacher must teach the skills in which to develop the aptitude.

Tannen (1990) in her book, *You Just Don't Understand*, examines the gender differences in conversational styles. She discusses metamesages, defining them as those broad messages that are received not through the direct surface level of talk, but through the way in which the words are said. Males tend to listen to the informational aspect of the talk, while females often attend to the metamesages of talk. These differences are just one example of the gender disparities in talk. Others include pitch, cultural differences, voice level, indirectness, and joking. Tannen also discusses the term framing. Framing provides the context that help individuals determine “what someone is saying by identifying the activity that is going on” while at the same time making the individual aware of “the position the speaker is assuming in the activity”(p. 33). Tannen’s idea of framing is relevant specifically in reference to gender issues as males and females talk often frame their conversation differently, thus creating a power imbalance usually benefits the male.

### 3) *Margin Talk*

In a qualitative research study on the talk of a small group of multi-age boys working on a math assignment, Thornborrow (2003) examined the on-task and off-task talk that occurred. He found that a hierarchy was created through the use of talk. The older boys would use “teacher-type talk” in order to establish a social position within the group. The older boys also did not respond to the off-task talk of the younger boys, again reestablishing the social hierarchy among the members. The off-task talk was only



allowed by the older boys when it was in reference to a moral dilemma (i.e. smoking).

However, the boys used the off-task talk as they worked through the math activity to place themselves in a wider context. Thornborrow argues:

The accomplishment of the ongoing task is thus interwoven with talk where such matters can be attended to; the boys have completed the math problem by the end of the session, but in the course of that activity, social relationships and peer group hierarchies are also being played out. (p. 30)

Thornborrow suggests that teachers must be aware of the use of off-task talk as “an interactional site for displaying the organization and membership of social groups as well as establishing positions within those groups” (pp. 30-31).

Rymes (2003) focused her research on the talk that occurs in the margins of the classroom. In a two-year case study of an ESL second grader, Rymes found that the elicitation of narratives occurred during literacy instruction and during times when the lesson had ended. In this study, the second grader remained quiet and reticent during the literacy instruction. However in the second year, the student had a teacher who after the lesson would spend the rest of class time talking with the students about the students’ home lives. It was during this unstructured time that the targeted student was able to practice longer stretches of discourse needed for literacy learning. This research argues for teachers to reflect on the unstructured time during class. Rymes writes:

Even those moments during the school day that are considered wasted time can be highly productive time. These unstructured conversations are important not because they allow teachers to squeeze in more content matter but because they permit teachers to *take a break* from formal schooling, to listen to children, and let them listen to each other, much as children and community mentors do in non-school contexts. (p. 401)

The talk that occurs during this unstructured time is “collaboratively achieved in dialogue and all classroom participants learn and feel validated” (p. 403).

Searle and Dudley-Marling (1995) examined informal talk that occurred in three primary, special education classrooms. They call this informal talk that occurred outside of the regular instruction “talk-around-the-edges” (p. 25). This type of talk is valuable in that it often meets the predetermined goals teachers have set for language development. This occurs as students use informal talk to communicate needs, ask questions, sequence events, and attempt to make their meaning clear to others. Searle and Dudley-Marling argue that teachers can promote talk-around-the-edges by putting “children, their knowledge, and their intentions at the center of language interactions while providing an audience who is interested in and responds to the content of what is said” (p. 26). The results of this research suggest that interaction or talk that appears to foster language development the most is that interaction which “focuses on, and contributes to, the meaning which the children are making of the situation” (p. 29).

#### *4) Teacher Talk*

Newton and Newton (2001) examined fifty primary science lessons. The teachers of these lessons were categorized as having less, equal, or more qualifications than required for the Advanced Level of the General Certificate of Education in science. The quantitative study then categorized the type of talk used by the teachers as either descriptive/factual, causal explanation, intentional explanation, procedures without reasons, procedures with reasons, predictions, and other. The statistical analysis suggested that teachers who had less content knowledge “tended to interact less, to ask fewer questions overall, and fewer questions about causes in particular” (p. 373). The researchers suggested the lack of interaction could be due to the lack of content knowledge and thus less confidence in the subject matter, a lack of interest in or a dislike

of the subject matter, or it could be due to the teachers' perceptions of science as factual and descriptive, thus focusing their talk on those functions.

Another quantitative study on teacher talk examined teachers' ability to self-assess their own talk (Roskos & Boehlen, 2001). In this study, Roskos and Behlen (2001) assigned fifteen practicum teachers into three groups: instructional talk analysis tool (ITAT) with debriefing, IAT without debriefing, and an alternative tool which included a checklist for assessing teacher- student exchanges. The ITAT is a tool designed to highlight those aspects of teaching that enhance constructivist strategies by involving the "teachers in transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting samples of their instructional discourse," focusing their attention to specific codes of conceptual and social aspects of their talk (p. 60). The primary goal of this study was to determine what aspects help teachers become more aware of their own talk in the classroom. Though the number of participants were low for a quantitative study, the findings suggest that the use of the ITAT and debriefing were the most effective because the "increase in reflective thinking about the language of literacy teaching boosts the potential of self-assessment as a means of learning and goal setting in relation to one's own literacy teaching practice" (p. 67).

Nystrand & Gamoran (1997) also examined the role of the teacher in classroom language and learning. In a two-year study, Nystrand & Gamoran observed over 200 eighth and ninth grade, English/Language Arts classrooms to determine how teachers use dialogue. They found that typically teachers used a monologic, traditional approach to teaching that inhibited student learning. Those teachers who used a dialogic approach had increased learning and student achievement. Nystrand and Gamoran define dialogic instruction as instruction that occurs when "teacher-student interaction extends to the

substance of the discourse, so that multiple perspectives offered by teacher, students, and course readings all affect the shared understandings that the class collectively negotiates” (p. 18). Dialogism is in contrast to what he termed monologic instruction, which they define as “recitation” or interactions that are “superficial and procedural” and are most often “prescribed by the teacher” (p. 18). In analyzing their data, Nystrand and Gamoran found that dialogic instruction promoted student learning through three techniques: uptake, authentic questions, and high-level evaluation. They write:

...by incorporating previous student answers into subsequent questions, many teachers use uptake to follow up and elaborate student perceptions and interpretations. By asking authentic questions and not prespecifying answers, teachers open the floor to student interpretations, signaling to students that *their* ideas—and not just those presented in their textbooks—are important and can provide opportunities for learning. Finally, through high-level evaluation, teachers ratify the importance of student responses, allowing their ideas and observations to affect the course of the discussion in substantive ways. (p. 90)

Nystrand and Gamoran argue that in order for students to achieve at higher levels, they must be able to see classroom roles shift and “fluid boundaries between student, teacher, and text” (p. 82). These “fluid boundaries” will help students to see the source of knowledge in not just the teacher or the text, but in themselves and their peers.

### *Summary of Classroom Talk*

The theoretical underpinnings of talk have led educators to a new understanding of the influence talk has in the classroom. This includes not only the benefits of talk as a tool for thinking and learning, but the influence teacher and student talk has on the classroom environment and in communicating official and unofficial curricula. This foundation has led researchers to begin examining classroom talk in more depth.

The use of talk in the classroom extends beyond the initial discussions of logistics

and benefits. Recent studies have examined talk about texts, gender issues in classroom talk, margin talk, and teacher talk. All the above studies exhibit successful strategies for eliciting and maintaining productive talk, with some specifically looking at talk about text. However, none of the studies above use literature study as a structure in which student and teacher talk occurs.

### Section III: Literature Study

This dissertation centers on the talk that occurs in literature circle discussions. Literature study, literature circles, book clubs, and book groups are various names for a strategy used in language arts classrooms. The following discusses the theory informing literature study, the historical roots, logistics, and the recent research.

#### *Theory that Informs Literature Study*

The theorists Vygotsky, Rosenblatt, Bakhtin, and Barnes inform literature study. Vygotsky (1978) informs literature study through two ideas: zone of proximal development (ZPD) and social learning. He explains in his book *Mind in Society* that learning and development interact by his notion of the “zone of proximal development” (p. 85). The ZPD is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 88). Vygotsky also introduces the concept of social learning. He states that learning occurs through interaction with others. As students talk together in a social context to construct meaning, their learning is occurring within their ZPD.

Rosenblatt’s (1978) notion of reader response also informs literature study. Rosenblatt believes that readers “transact” with the text. In other words, students are not

passive consumers of the text, but they interact with the words, the author, and the meaning to construct their own understanding of the book. Knowing that students will “transact” differently with the text provides rich conversation within literature study.

Bakhtin (1981) adds to literature study by bringing to the forefront his notion of social dialogue and the dialogic process. He states that the role of discourse relies on the socio-historical role it has played in the past. Bakhtin goes on to discuss the dialogic that exists within a single language, between other languages, within national language, and within other national languages. It is this dialogic that exists in language that creates the “artistic potential” (p. 275) The dialogic process is thus described as a word (or idea) traveling through a varied path before meeting its intended target. Value judgments, point of views, alien words and dialect are all part of this path. As ideas travel they tend to connect or reject to other words or ideas ultimately changing the social discourse by adding “semantic layers” (p. 276). Words spoken at one time in one environment become interrelated with all other words. Thus, words spoken today are a part of earlier conversations that have taken place.

And last, Barnes (1975/1992) suggests that talk is the medium through which students understand. He provides the example of students who use collaborative exploratory talk in order to make sense of a poem. He offers the notion of “talk as a means of controlling thought” (p. 28). Barnes’s theory on talk underlies the importance of using literature study groups to provide students with an opportunity to explore deeper into the meaning of a text.

### *History of Literature Study*

One of the first books published on literature study was *Grand Conversations* by

Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds (1990). This book provided a rationale for using real books in the classroom and outlined a literature-based reading program. Part of this literature-based reading program was intensive reading in which students spend time on one book and “give conscious attention” to the text to “examine and weigh possible interpretations” (p. 13). Peterson and Eeds argued that, “through critical interpretation, children and teachers expand a text’s potential for meaning by sharing their insights and the connections they have made” (p. 13). They also described how talk works in intensive reading:

In practice, teachers and students might begin by sharing impressions, ideas and problems they encountered in constructing meaning. When a topic surfaces that commands the group’s interest and has potential for altering perception, the talk shifts from sharing to dialogue. Through dialogue, the group (teacher and students together) works to disclose meaning, thereby potentially expanding the meaning of the work for all participants. Because a text’s meaning is embedded in the mood of the story, in the ordering of time, in the creation of place, in the way the characters cope and develop, in the story structure, in the point of view, and in the use of language and symbols, these elements of literature will surface naturally through dialogue. Working collaboratively, the group spends time contemplating meaning and digesting it. Group members help each other begin to *see* where previously they may have only *looked*. (p. 13)

It is through this dialogue that students work together as they “seek to comprehend the world” (p. 14).

In the same year *Talking about Books*, edited by Kathy Short and Kathryn Mitchell Pierce (1990/1998), was published. This book contains chapters written by classroom teachers on those conversations that occur from texts including read aloud, literature circle, and authoring discussions. The chapters include not only logistical information (Hanssen’s chapter 12) but also ways to evaluate talk about texts (Watson’s chapter 10), special needs students and literature circles (Gilles’s chapter 4), and the role

of the teacher in literature discussions (Smith's chapter 2). Two chapters that were particularly pertinent to this study includes Von Dras's chapter 8 in which students discuss historical fiction and nonfiction texts to supplement their social studies curriculum as well as to "bridge the gap between the segmented areas of reading/language arts and content area studies" (pp. 124-125) and Kauffman and Yoder's chapter 9. In chapter 9, the authors examine the use of literature groups with both texts sets and literature circles and found that the most productive groups were those whose conversations were "connected to each other and to the broader curriculum" (p. 137). They found that when their students talked in the informal literature circles, they were able to explore multiple perspectives and interpretations of the text. This occurred because they were "not forced to take a stance on any discussion topic, but play with multiple ideas generated from the literature and their life experiences" (p. 139).

In 1993, *Cycles of Meaning* (Pierce & Gilles, 1993) was published. The book's title came from the research done by Gilles (1991) in which students' talk in literature circles was found to be cyclical as students worked together to create meaning. *Cycles of Meaning* focuses on many ways talk is used in the classroom. Part four of their book focuses exclusively on literature circle discussions. Gilles's chapter 11 examines literature circles with special education students. Her research suggests that students engaged in literature study discussions by retelling, visualizing, exploring deeper meanings, and hypothesizing about the text. The students also engaged in social talk. This talk included logistics of the literature study, as well as personal stories. However, the talk that appears in literature study cannot be delineated into clear categories or phases. Instead it occurs in a cyclical nature (Gilles, 1993). She suggests that:



Students never moved in a linear fashion from retelling the story to discussing deeper meanings and then to considering the group's routine. Instead, meanings interwove the tapestry of social talk. They emerged through talk that moved from conversation to dialogue to story and back again. Few topics emerged neatly. Students moved quickly from one topic to another and returned to those they considered important. This dynamic, circular movement I've labeled 'cycles of meaning.' (p. 206).

This recursive and circular nature of dialogue is the foundation of understanding talk within literature study groups.

### *Logistics*

Schlick Noe and Johnson (1999) describe literature study as a pedagogy centering on students talking about their reading in small groups. Literature study begins with students choosing a book of interest, reading the book, and responding in some format (i.e. writing, art, etc.). In order for these discussion groups to be successful, students must feel that they are in a climate of success among a community of learners. Authority in literature study usually lies within the students themselves. Students choose the book they wish to read, usually from a pre-selected list of books; they often negotiate the amount of reading the group is expected to do each night; and they choose what portions of the book will be addressed during the discussion (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999).

Talk grounds literature response in book groups (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). It is through conversation and dialogue that students construct and negotiate meaning which leads to deeper understanding of the text (Gilles, 1991; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 2001). A study by Peralta-Nach & Dutch (2000) found that even students who participate in a more structured approach to literature study favored by Daniels (1994) were still able to construct knowledge. The conversations of these students became "more relevant and

complex as they tapped into the background and personal experiences of group members” leading to “opportunities to reshape students’ understanding of human events and dilemmas” (p. 36). Martinez and Roser (1995) refer to this type of talk as “good book talk” and suggest that it is characterized by talk that shows students struggling with important themes in the book, asking thoughtful questions, observing closely, and relating the narrative to their own lives.

In her book, *Getting Beyond “I Like the Book,”* Vasquez (2003) uses classroom research examples to extend literature study discussions and create opportunities for more critical conversations. In her examples of students talking about text, she found that:

...no longer did the children read blindly, accepting how texts, construct them; they began to realize how text could be reconstructed in more equitable ways not only for boys and girls, men and women, but for people or groups who have been marginalized, disadvantaged, or discriminated against. (p. 27)

By emphasizing a critical perspective with texts, students were able to dig deeper. She facilitated these discussions by using books that encourage critical conversations; pairing everyday texts with texts written for children; using pedagogical tools that encouraged inquiry, student voice, and democratic practices; and adopting a critical literacy perspective herself.

#### *Recent Research on Literature Study*

As literature study has matured into a more common pedagogy found in the classroom, the research on literature study has also expanded. The following review examines various aspects of literature study: 1) the role of the teacher, 2) using historical fiction, 3) student perspectives, 4) types of talk, 5) social interaction, and 6) gender.

### *1) Role of Teacher*

Maloch (2002) describes research in which she follows the progression of teacher-led discussions to student-led literature discussions. Maloch found though the initial transition to a more student-centered discussion format was problematic, through scaffolding, teacher guidance, and anticipation of possible challenges, teachers can ease the transition and reap the benefits of student-led discussions. For example, the teacher in the study found that by varying her “interactional techniques” she was able to hone her ability to foster student-led discussions based on the “students’ developing understandings of the discussion practice” (2002, p.104). This research suggests that the role of teachers during student-led discussions is that of a facilitator.

Short et al. (1999) examined transcripts of literature circles to determine the roles of teachers in successful discussion groups as well as to determine how teacher talk influences the conversation. They found that teachers acted as facilitators in the conversation. In this role, teachers “encourage student interaction and talk and monitor social interactions which interfered with discussion” (pp. 378-379). This role was enacted by questioning, providing additional information, restating comments made by students in the group, maintaining order, and challenging students’ comments. Teachers also took on the role of participant. This occurred when teachers interacted “as readers by sharing personal connections, opinions, and questions that stemmed from their understandings of the book” (p. 379). The participant role was used to demonstrate the kind of talk expected in literature discussions as well as to build from student understanding and push the group to deeper issues. Acting as mediator, defined as those times when teachers used “facilitator or participant talk to encourage students to connect their discussion about the

book to their own life experiences and values” (p.380), was another role teachers took on in literature circles discussions. Teachers used the mediator role to gain knowledge about the students’ thinking, to encourage students to work through personal issues, and to talk about important life issues. Finally, teachers acted as active listeners in the conversations. This was illustrated by comments such as “yeah” and “hmmm.” In comparing those literature discussion groups where a teacher was present to those that did not have a teacher present, the researchers found two distinct differences. Groups with teachers present discussed more topics, while groups without a teacher present spent more time working through the details of the story. Yet all groups went beyond retelling and strived to find connections.

## 2) *Historical fiction*

One classroom research project (Harmon & Wood, 2001) explained how using an approach similar to literature study in the content classroom helped students gain more out of the text material. The TAB Book Club approach involved using chapter books that dealt with the topic covered in the content class (in this instance it was the Civil War in a social studies class) and allowing students to participate in student-led book discussions. Journal writing and charts were used to help students “find ideas” to talk about during the discussion, and after the discussion each group shared with the class their findings. Harmon and Wood found that when first implementing book club ideas into the content area, students need “strong support from teachers” (p. 55). They also found that struggling readers were still able to grapple with the ideas presented in the text through the discussions, on-task student talk increased, and the choice aspect of picking the text to read motivated more students to read the required text material.

In a similar study, Roser and Keehn (2002) describe a qualitative inquiry in which they observed in two separate fourth grade classrooms in two separate schools to examine how the use of literature and talk promoted inquiry in social studies. The study was done in three phases. Phase one was a biography read aloud of a historical figure from the Texas revolution. During this phase, the talk stayed strongly based in evaluative comments about the character (52% of the comments were coded as evaluative). Phase two was literature circles in which students read historical fiction novels dealing with the Texas revolution. The talk that occurred during this phase focused mostly on making inferences about the characters in the texts while only 8% of the talk at this time was evaluative. Phase three was whole class discussion and small group inquiry in which informational texts were used to help students gather factual material about the time period. The talk that occurred during this phase was equally distributed between making inferences, sharing information with peers, and interpreting information to the small group. The study found that the students' misconceptions were reduced by half and the accurate notion of the historical time period increased fourfold (results determined by pre- and post- assessments). Students also had an increase in their willingness to work together to build understanding, wanted the unit to continue, and built summaries after comparing multiple perspectives. In analyzing the talk that occurred in those conversations that were more productive than others, Roser and Keehn found that the "most productive conversations, those that included questions and wonderings, seemed to be prompted by language used in particular ways" (p. 425). Those ways include opening bids, invitations, acknowledgements, refocusing, questioning, probing, speculating, uptaking, raising, responding to the speaker, and providing an example. Roser and Keehn

also found that there were ten mediators that also contributed to successful conversations: multiple texts, reading charts, response journals, big idea journals, inquiry or data charts, book club tasks, flexible book club roles, book club procedure checklist, artifacts, and alternative ways to represent thoughts. All students “demonstrated a kind of energy in these classrooms that happens when they themselves generate thought, talk, and inquiry” (p. 425).

### *3) Student perspectives*

In a yearlong study of a fifth grade classroom, Evans (2002) examined students’ perspectives on literature discussion groups. Evans videotaped and transcribed the literature discussion groups that occurred in the class and then brought the group together to reflect and comment on their perception of the conversation. During this time Evans asked questions to elicit reflection and encouraged the students to talk about what influenced their conversation. Evans found that the students knew what made good literature discussions: the general requirements, respect, knowledge of which students they worked well with, clear instructions from the teacher, and the quality of the text. She also found that students were influenced by the gender of their group members. They shared with Evans the difficulties of working in mixed-gender groups and their preference of working in same-gender groups. Though gender was important, many of the students reported that the presence of a “bossy” group member was influential in their participation in the group discussion as well. From this research, Evans suggests that teachers must become more cognizant of the factors that influence students’ participation in literature discussion groups and reconsider the role the teacher plays in creating the groups and facilitating the conversations.

Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom (2002) quantitatively measured struggling adolescent readers' perception of their abilities before and after using a literature discussion group strategy in their language arts classroom. These middle school students were labeled special needs and their scores were compared to the scores of the rest of the class to determine whether literature discussion groups were significantly more effective. The literature discussion group was modeled after a more structured approach favored by Harvey Daniels (1994). The target group significantly improved in three of the four categories assessed by the pre-post survey. They improved in their self-assessment, remembering what they read, and explaining their ideas about the text. However, the target group still felt that they did not understand the text as well as the other members in the class. The quantitative research was supported by qualitative data examining one student, Aaron, in more depth. The mixed data suggested that the target group students and the teachers of those students perceived literature study as an effective pedagogy, and that literature study promoted self-determination.

#### *4) Type of talk*

Junker (1999) worked with primary students in literature discussion groups to examine the type of talk that occurred when stories with strong issues were shared. In analyzing the transcripts, four types of moral talk occurred. The first was "a statement of a moral event or stance" (p. 404). This occurred when a student stated a moral dilemma or stance that occurred in the text. The second type of moral talk that students participated in was "interpretive commentary" (p. 404). This took place when students responded to the story by evaluating or more deeply exploring a character's or the author's stance. The third type was a "moral story." This occurred when students shared a

personal story in response to the text. The fourth type of moral talk involved comments that touched on socially charged issues, which “opened doors to the possibility of deeper, more direct moral inquiry” (p. 404). From these findings Junker suggests that teachers can create environments, which give students the opportunity to participate in this type of dialogue. One way to do this is to use books that encourage this type of talk to occur. Junker writes, “Books that foster moral meaning-making must allow room for interpretation, as personal moral understandings, those which hold true meaning and power for living well, are created and fashioned, not ingested and assimilated” (p. 404). It is the complexity in these books, Junker argues, that enables students to wrestle with important ideas and gain new perspectives on moral issues.

In an ethnographic study on four sixth grade girls, Broughton (2002) examined how book club groups facilitate the construction of self. The data gathered during this six-month period suggests that book clubs enabled the girls to “reexamine their views of themselves and others” (p. 26). One way this was accomplished was by projecting themselves into the story. They placed themselves in the role of the character and made judgments about the characters. They also constructed a view of themselves through the social interaction of the book club. Since both novels used in the book groups were realistic fictional pieces with Hispanic characters, Broughton argued that, “through the social interactions with peers, the girls became more aware of the complexity of the socially constructed subject position of ethnicity” (p. 29). The girls also used the book club to “explore the ways they had constructed themselves” (p. 30). The girls became more aware of their own beliefs and values through the reading and talk that occurred. This awareness led some to feel validated and others to begin questioning their beliefs.



Short (1992) pulled together several longer studies to focus on the idea of intertextuality in literature circle discussions. She defines intertextuality as “the process of making connections between current and past texts; of interpreting one text by means of previously composed texts” (p. 314). The process “involves both dysjunctions and connections that are set in motion when learners encounter anomalies through their interactions with other learners and texts” (p. 317). Her study suggests that moving to a more collaborative relationship within the classroom helps students to feel more comfortable and safe, thus facilitating intertextuality. Other factors include emphasizing anomalies and abductive thinking, creating curricular engagements that support making connections, and using texts and experiences that reflect the different ways of knowing.

#### *5) Social interaction*

Through qualitative research, McMahon and Goatley (2001) examined a fifth grade classroom in which some students had participated in small group peer-led literature discussions before and others had not. They found that the pattern of talk in initial discussions resembled Mehan’s I-R-E pattern. However after the teacher had modeled and used direct instruction to support the development of student conversations, the pattern of talk evolved into an alternative format for discussion. McMahon and Goatley suggest that “by providing instruction that is focused on turn-taking procedures and on the types of contributions students could make during their conversations, as well as providing opportunities to lead their own discussions about books, the teacher expanded their [the students’] repertoire of discourse patterns about school subjects” (p. 32). McMahon and Goatley go on to suggest that the development of student roles within the group became more sophisticated as students become more aware of their

responsibilities and roles. This awareness, though scaffolded by the teacher, was also supported by the “knowledgeable others” within the group.

Carico (2001) participated with a group of four middle school girls in two literature discussion groups. After the discussions, she returned to reflect with the girls on the tape-recorded discussions. Carico classified the talk that occurred among the girls as real talk, inappropriate talk, talk preferences, and privileged talk. Real talk was described as conversations that “revealed the girls’ attitudes and values,” conversations that offered “opportunities for discovery, reflection, and examination,” and “conversations that revealed needs for strategies to improve reading skills” (p. 513). Inappropriate talk was that talk that could be labeled “inappropriate for school” which consisted of negative comments about others, swear words, and off-handed, derogatory comments. Talk preferences were times when the girls shared their own thoughts about what influenced their ability to participate. Those influences included a more structured session, dominant group members, written reflection as opposed to verbal, and thoughtful responses versus overly eager responses. Finally, privileged talk was that talk which was most valued. Since the groups were made up of entirely female members, the personal connections in response to the novel *Lyddie* were valued by the group. Privileged talk also played out in how articulate the girls were. Those girls who were more eloquent in their speech were viewed by their peers as being smarter and thus the group seemed more patient and would “hear her out” versus the girls who spoke slower and with less fluency. These findings suggest that teachers must be aware of when students are placed in literature discussion groups wherein their talk may be deemed less valuable and others’ discourses may be more valued. Carico also suggests that teachers need to be aware of students’

preferences about group discussions so as to help facilitate the best environments for students to respond and reflect on the text.

In a yearlong qualitative study, Lewis (2001) examined the peer-led literature discussion groups in a fifth/sixth grade classroom. She found that the most salient factor that influenced the social negotiation that occurred during literature circle discussions was social class. Those students from middle class families “possessed social and interpretive aptitudes and dispositions that matched those of the classroom, whereas working-class students possessed aptitudes and dispositions suited to their families and communities” (p. 86). Other factors that influenced the discussions included perceived ability, age, and gender.

#### *6) Gender*

Evans (1996) looked at the role gender plays in student talk during literature discussion groups. In her study of two fifth grade classrooms, Evans examined two groups: a group of girls who read a realistic fiction novel and a group of boys who read a Civil War-era historical fiction novel. The group of girls “frequently used their own emotional responses to the text in their discussions and emphasized human relationships among the characters” (p. 186). In contrast, the group of boys emphasized the events of the story that drove the plot, rarely discussing character motivation or emotional responses. The boys’ group also spent more time talking about outside happenings unrelated to the book, and they spent more time teasing each other than the girls. The girls spent time wrestling with gender stereotypes, while the boys did not discuss gender stereotypes at all. Evans suggests that the climate among the two groups shaped the resulting discussions. The girls felt safe to respond to the text with more emotional

insights as it was valued by the other female members, while the boys stayed close to the facts as their group had created an environment of teasing. Evans also suggests that text choice also influences the discussion. The factors related to the text include whether the story portrays a more lived-through experience or focuses on action, as well as whether the students enjoy the book. Evans argues:

...girls and boys are likely to need support and guidance as they attempt to read against the grain. Providing texts, support, and guidance will not be sufficient, however, if the texts are read and discussed in contexts that students view as unsafe...such contexts make it unlikely students will risk confronting gender stereotypes or try on alternative gender roles when they are simultaneously experiencing the real-life gendered roles of the male aggressor and female victim in their discussion group. (p. 194)

She suggests that literature discussion can “open, as well as close, spaces for dialogue to occur” and gender often is one factor that influences whether this space is created (p. 194).

Johnson (2000) worked with two groups of adolescent girls in a girls’ only literature study. She read similar novels with both the seventh and eighth grade literature groups and examined the differences in talk between the two groups. Her research suggested that literature circles “create spaces for girls to rediscover their own voices and to question what seems like the cultural prerogative for girls to follow a predetermined path that does not allow them to discover for themselves who they are and who they might like to be” (p. 356). One reason these opportunities occurred was because Johnson recognized early on when certain members of the group were silenced. Johnson argues that by disrupting the silencing of group members early on, the teacher sets a precedent for the type of talk and the atmosphere that is most conducive to the risk taking that needs to occur when students are exploring texts. She argues that a girls’ only literature circles

is not the end goal, but rather the process of facilitating the growth of female students to grapple with issues of gender and culture should be the goal of single gender literature circles.

### *Summary of Literature Study*

The theorists Vygotsky, Rosenblatt, Bakhtin, and Barnes provided the foundation for the development of literature study. From this foundation, researchers have been able to define literature study as an effective literacy strategy. As literature study grew, teachers moved beyond the traditional skill-and-drill strategies of teaching reading. The theoretical and historical foundation of literature study led to the work of others who focused on logistics—specifically, in what way do teachers begin using literature study in the classroom, what does it look like, and how do you extend it?

The recent research on literature study groups enables educators to further refine the structure. Each of the above studies provides additional insight into critical conversations that can occur through literature study, whether focusing on the role of the teacher, the genre used, the students’ perspectives, the type of talk, the social interaction, or the gender issues with regard to literature circles. However, none of the studies specifically defined critical conversations, though arguably many of the conversations that occurred in those classrooms could have been categorized as critical.

### Section IV: Critical Literacy

Another underlying component of this research is critical literacy, a dynamic pedagogical philosophy. Ira Shor defines critical literacy as “language use that questions the social constructions of the self” (1997, p. 2). Though this definition emphasizes using language to construct identity, critical literacy may also be defined as language use that

questions the assumptions of societal norms (Baker & Freebody, 2001; Comber, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Green, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Shor, 1999), explores multiple realities (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Sahni, 2001; Shor, 1997; Vasquez, 2003), and proposes action (Freire, 1970/1993; Morgan, 1997; Shor, 1999). The following section reviews the theory behind critical literacy and then focuses more closely on those aspects of critical literacy that are most pertinent to this study: classroom talk and critical conversations.

### *Theory*

Shor and Pari (1999) do more than define critical literacy; they also provide a rationale by arguing that critical literacy helps to “remake ourselves and society, if we choose, through alternative words and dissident projects” (p. 1). They go on to write that through critical literacy, students can begin to use “words that question a world not yet finished or humane” (p. 1). In this view, critical literacy pedagogy does more than create a student-centered classroom; it places dissident politics in the foreground of that classroom. This can occur because the underlying belief of critical pedagogy is that a classroom, teacher, or curriculum cannot be neutral. Choices are made and those choices “orient students to map the world and their proper place in society” (p. 22). Shor and Pari write, “to be for critical literacy is to take a moral stand on what kind of humane society and democratic education we want” (p. 23).

Another critical literacy theorist is the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. One of Freire’s (1970/1993) most influential concepts is his idea of “banking education.” This notion explains education as the process in which information is deposited into students’ minds like money in a bank. Students are passive receivers of this knowledge and it is perceived as a gift. In contrast to banking education, Freire suggests the problem-posing

method of education, in which teachers and students learn together in dialogue. Freire writes:

Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality. (p. 62)

Freire believes that problem-posing education becomes cyclical— as students are challenged they find new understandings, which often lead to new challenges.

Another important Freirian (1970/1993) concept with regards to critical literacy is the idea of “conscientization.” Freire believes that once people are conscious of the conditioning in their lives they can move beyond it. The first stage of the conscientization process is becoming cognizant of the oppression and the contradiction that one lives in as a result of the oppression. Freire describes conscientization as the “deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence” (p. 90).

Freire brought the idea of a “culture of silence” into the foreground in which he describes the state of the oppressed (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 159). The premise is that, “literacy conducted in the dominant standard language empowers the ruling class by sustaining the status quo” (p. 159). He continues on to say that as students are denied the opportunity to use their home language in reflection and critical thinking, they find themselves “unable to re-create their culture,” thus remaining in a culture of silence (p. 159).

Other concepts in which Freire (1970/1993) influenced critical literacy education include praxis, generative words/themes, and reading the word and the world. Freire’s definition of praxis is “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in

order to transform it” (p. 60). Though one leads to the other, Freire agrees that reflection can also be action as people gain new perspectives through reflection. It is through praxis, Freire believes, that liberation can occur. Generative words/themes are words or ideas that emerge as areas of study, from the group itself rather than from an outside teacher or source. Freire writes (emphasis added), “The important thing is for people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their *own suggestions and those of their comrades*” (p. 105). Using words common to a particular community not only begins from students’ own lives, but it also helps make literacy learning more authentic to students. Finally, “reading the word and the world” is a phrase that describes the process of understanding text (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire writes, “the act of learning to read and write is a creative act that involves a critical comprehension of reality” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 157). He goes on to say that the process of reading a text requires the reader to make sense of the text in a social context, thus reading the word and the world.

Through reviewing the literature on critical literacy theory-to-practice, Comber (1992) found three approaches to critical literacy pedagogy. The first was to “reposition students as researchers of language” (p. 6). In this approach students examine how language is used in different social situations. The second approach is “respecting student resistance and exploring minority culture constructions of literacy” (p. 6). Examples of this include those teachers who have used their knowledge of or re-examined students’ culture to adjust literacy instruction in order to maintain consistency between home and school. The third approach to critical literacy Comber found in the literature was to “problematize classroom and public texts” (p. 7). This approach examines the texts used



in the classroom to determine whose ideologies are being reinforced and what reality are the texts representing. This approach includes pedagogy that compares traditional and nontraditional fairy tales to examine the gender stereotypes, and placing both the teacher and the text in a place where critique and challenges are respected and taken seriously.

Edelsky (1999) argue that in order for a “critical, pro-justice, pro-democratic whole language curriculum” to be effective it must be “infused throughout” the classroom (p. 19). In order for this to occur it cannot be just something that is done for a given amount of time each day. This belief should be seen in all aspects of the classroom (i.e. the books found in the classroom library, the teacher’s comments during class discussions, the word problems in math, etc.). Often teachers need to be the ones to bring up sensitive issues such as racism, gender discrimination, or issues regarding social classes. Yet Edelsky warns that these issues must be couched in the students’ own experiences. She writes, “The point is not for students to come up with the teacher’s ‘right’ answer. Rather, it is to raise the question, to start to *notice*...systems of domination” (p. 21).

### *Classroom Talk*

Critical literacy pedagogues often look to the talk that occurs in classrooms as an underlying structure to examine power, perspectives, and what Barnes (1992) terms “the hidden curriculum.” Since this study examines the role of the teacher in initiating, sustaining, and nurturing critical conversations, literature focusing on classroom talk provides an additional lens to view the data. The following look at two research studies that examine classroom talk and critical literacy.

Morgan (1997) found in analyzing transcripts from a teacher known for his

critical pedagogy that teacher talk could be placed on a continuum. This continuum ranges from a traditional approach similar to Mehan's I-R-E to a more student-led dialogue. She argues that teachers who engage in critical literacy pedagogy are not static on that continuum. Instead, the talk is more "responsive to opportunity, and the relations of leader and follower more open to negotiation and co-construction" (p. 124). Morgan argues that the times when a more traditional talk pattern may be appropriate are when "voices not institutionally sanctioned are silenced" (p. 126). Often this may be a time when teachers are introducing alternative readings of texts. Morgan observed the classroom teacher traveling smoothly on the continuum, using such tools as "obedient answers to closed, known-answer questions; guided discovery; student-centered group discussion in which meanings are jointly constructed and negotiated; students' initiative in questioning and responsibility for argumentation; and their questioning the teacher's formulations and views" (pp. 129-133).

Baker and Freebody (2001) also write about classroom talk. They discuss the various aspects of classroom talk that may seem inauthentic. Though the talk may be different than that spoken in the community outside of school, the authors argue that the talk is authentic of literacy classes because it is a way for teachers to determine how well students understand specific concepts. Baker and Freebody write, "teachers do not rely on formal tests to infer how good students are at literacy; they hear this competence minute by minute in exchanges" (p. 67). They go on to argue that everyone in the classroom is an audience to talk about text. The authors provide a list of four ways in which talk permeates the classroom:

- Teachers' questions, no matter how simple or straightforward they may appear, admit of more than one answer

- Teachers' questions may be heard as courses of instruction in how to read
- Teachers' receptions of student answers are used to display preferred courses of reasoning
- Teachers' receptions of student answers credit students differently with literacy-in-the-making (p. 72)

When a teacher and student are interacting in a question and answer pattern, the teacher values certain answers over others. The emphasis on a specific style of thinking is picked up by the students. Baker and Freebody describe this interaction when they write, "the classroom talk is apparently everyone's collaborative construction, but through the differential crediting and use of responses, the production of differences in literate competencies begins" (p. 71).

### *Critical Conversations*

As this study focuses on those aspects of critical literacy that occur as students use talk to critique texts, it was important to narrow the literature review to those research studies that deal with issues related to dialogue. The following eight research studies look at various aspects of critical conversations.

One example of critical conversations was evident in a two-year research study in which eight African American adolescents participated in a book club. In this example, Rogers (2002) uses critical discourse analysis to analyze excerpts from transcripts where the students touched on social issues or challenged the assumptions in the text. Even with a strong background in critical literacy pedagogy, this researcher found that when engaging in literature discussions, her intent to bring about a social view of the text often found her resorting to the traditional teaching methods of closed questioning and I-R-E patterns. However, Rogers found that by changing her interaction, asking more open-ended questions and following the students' lead, the students were able to become more

critical of the text. Rogers writes, “critical literacy includes both the content and the process of the interactions around the texts (p. 786).

Smith (2001), in a graduate level children’s literature course, carved out time for critical conversations in order to help make the “diversity-and-difference model of education” more explicit and to demonstrate ways that teachers can use critical conversations in their own classrooms. Smith distinguished critical conversations from engaging conversations by its topic. Critical conversations about texts should question whose reality is being portrayed and challenge contemporary systems of oppression. Smith found that “personal responses provided the raw material for critical conversation” (p. 158). Once students made a personal response to the text, the group was able to go deeper. The conversations that Smith observed during her class were “much more demanding” (p. 162). She suggests that successful critical conversations require students to “speak honestly and truthfully” from their “own position in the world,” and demand that students “learn to listen with more open minds and to push” themselves into places they “would rather not go” (p. 162). Smith admits that both she and her students recognized the discomfort that occurred when the conversation moved from “personal response to critical responses that closely examined the cultural and ideological values that were embedded in the stories read” (p. 162). Smith argues that in order for students to become more critical in their conversations, her role was to scaffold the literacy experience. For example, she combined a story with “rich potential for critique” with conceptual pieces that helped move the conversation to a new direction. The conceptual pieces helped to provide a framework for the topics and provided a discourse for critique.

Möller (2002) collaborated with a fourth grade teacher to look at how teachers

can help students in literature discussions to “explore emotionally challenging events and social inequalities” (p. 468). Möller described the teacher’s role in these discussions as moving between having a strong presence to having no presence at all, depending on the needs of the students. Her data suggested that the role of the teacher was one of four functions: to open spaces for students to share, provide encouragement for student contributions, to clarify unfamiliar events or ways of thinking, and support and comfort students who reveal their pain and suffering. Möller found that in order for her to participate in these roles, trust had to be built among the group members. She writes, “there needs to be an either/or between teachers taking part and students having autonomous spaces for response” (p. 476). She argues that creating this trust and balancing the role of the teacher in discussion groups facilitates the kind of discussions that include the “complexity of literary, societal, and personal issues without any one party either dominating the process or relinquishing the responsibility to teach and learn” (p. 476).

In Noll’s (1994) inquiry into literature study groups in her seventh grade class, she found that students choosing their own social issues to investigate led to a more powerful experience. She used the example of a group of girls who were reading about child abuse. She writes, “the adolescents in these particular literature circles pursued questions that they had developed themselves and about which they cared greatly” (p. 92). Noll argues that the literature circles enhanced the students’ ability to have a social imagination about real issues. Noll’s students moved beyond the literature circles by interviewing a social worker who worked with abused children and then sharing the information with the class as well as other classes in the building. Another example from

Noll's middle school class was a group of boys who were interested in Vietnam and another group interested in censorship. Noll writes, "beginning with their personal concerns and interests, their investigations moved them toward broader social contexts and understandings" (p. 92).

A collaborative research study conducted by Fairbanks (1998) with a public middle and high school aimed to explore how certain literacy practices enhanced the curriculum, more specifically, how students used their stories "to extend into the literate world" (p. 191). The teachers used inquiry projects, writing workshops, and student discussion groups to help students take a stand on social issues. Fairbanks argues, "if teaching and learning are to open spaces and nourish conversations, both students and teachers will have to take risks" (p. 201). These risks may seem difficult at first. Fairbanks writes, "conversations that sustain democratic classrooms are not always comfortable places" (p. 199). However, if these conversations are nourished, "teachers and students may discover the roles literacy plays in their journey to empowered citizenship" (p. 202).

Enciso (1994) read the book *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990) with a fourth/fifth grade racially diverse class. Throughout the conversation, the data from her classroom research suggested that students relied on certain cultural maps to make sense of characters and events in a story. These cultural maps often are learned from popular media and may not be accurate. This led to stereotyping based on mainstream culture. Enciso also found that students readily modified reasoning in order to 'make it fit' better with their map. This led to students' avoidance of such topics as race and poverty. Enciso argues that this modification of the issues enabled students to define their own identity

and pledge their allegiance to certain social groups. In one transcript, Enciso shows how two students could construct parallel identities using similar media but drawing from two separate worlds: one a white middle class lifestyle and the other an African American working class lifestyle. Though these fourth and fifth graders came from two separate worlds, Enciso found that they were able to work together to better understand the concepts of race and prejudice. She argues that teachers must create curriculum engagements that “actively question and invite conversations about how the books we read and the images we share are shaped for us and by us” (Enciso, 1994, p. 532).

Bean and Moni (2003) used critical discourse analysis to look at the discussion of adolescents. The students were given prompts to encourage a more critical discussion. These prompts included such questions as “what social function does the novel serve; how does the adult author construct the world of adolescence in the novel; who gets to speak and have a voice in the novel and who doesn’t; and how might we rewrite this novel to deal with gaps and silences” (p. 645). The authors argue that by prompting students to take a more critical stance when reading the text, “the texts themselves become manipulable, transparent constructions that can be accepted or rejected, and in which multiple meanings are explored” (p. 646).

Lewis (1999) examined how a fifth/sixth grade teacher used literature discussion to help students adopt a critical approach. The teacher in the classroom used these discussions to “probe dominant belief systems in an effort to examine hidden assumptions” (p. 187). She did this by helping situate the text in a social context. However, the teacher was not present in all literature discussions. Those without the teacher present struggled to take on this critical approach. Lewis argues that by allowing

student choice and leadership without direction, teachers are inadvertently maintaining status quo. Students need support and encouragement in order “to read against the grain, to examine or resist” the text (p. 188).

### *Summary of Critical Literacy*

When teachers begin to employ a pedagogy guided by a critical literacy philosophy, they encourage students to ask questions such as *What is left out of this text?* *Who benefits from this text?* and *How does this text represent reality?* These questions lead teachers and students to conversations far beyond the literal interpretation of the text (Edelsky, 1999; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys 2002; Rogers, 2002; Vasquez, 2003). For example, Foss (2002) found that by providing curriculum engagements that encouraged students to take a critical stance, they began to question the institution of school, recognize the social construction of multiple positions, and identify the privilege in their own lives. However, Vasquez (2003) argues:

there is no one-size-fits all critical literacy, and that we need to construct different critical literacies depending on what work needs to be done in certain settings, contexts, or communities, and that it needs to be negotiated using the cultural and linguistic resources to which children have had access. (p. 56)

Both classroom talk and critical conversations are ways in which critical literacy pedagogy can be responsive to the individual needs within classrooms.

### Section V: Summary

The review of literature suggests that adolescents, due to their unique needs, require pedagogies specifically designed to work for them. Both curriculum integration and literature study are effective pedagogies for middle level learners. What drives these two pedagogies to a more critical approach is the use of talk in the classroom. In this



study, the students participated in literature circles similar to those used in George and Stix (2000), Christensen (2000), Harmon and Wood (2001), and Roser and Keehn's (2002) social studies classrooms. These literature circles enabled students to participate in the type of conversations that critical pedagogues describe in their studies (Bean & Moni, 2003; Lewis, 1999; Möller, 2002; Smith, 2001).

Several areas that are not addressed in current literature are addressed in my study. Although researchers refer to the critical conversations that occurred in their classrooms or research context (Enciso, 1994; Fairbanks, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Möller, 2002; Noll, 1994) while some use the actual terminology (Harste, 1999; Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Smith, 2001). No one has defined exactly what critical conversations are. The closest definition came from Smith (2001) when she described the critical conversations that occurred in her college class. These discussions of critical conversations lead to many questions. For example, how do you determine a critical conversation from dialogue that emphasizes critical thinking? What are the parameters of critical conversations? What ignites these conversations? What drives them? How do critical conversations engage or disengage students?

This research also addresses the teacher's role in initiating, nurturing, and sustaining these conversations. Research has been done on prompting students to go deeper in their discussions (Bean & Moni, 2003; Vasquez, 2003) as well as the teacher's role in the conversations (Maloch, 2002; Short et al., 1999). However, the literature does not address the teacher's role beyond taking part in the conversations. How does the teacher nurture those conversations when he/she is not present in the literature circle? What preparations need to be made by the teacher to scaffold the students to get deeper

during the conversations? How does the teacher create environments that “open spaces” (Möller, 2002) for these conversations to occur? These questions help frame this research.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research is to describe and analyze the nature of critical talk that emerges from or leads to texts in a middle school literacy-social studies block class. The intense examination of the discussion that occurs provides researchers with an understanding of how critical talk is enacted, nurtured, and sustained by the teacher, as well as a working theory of the nature of this talk.

### Rationale

This study focuses on literature study and the group discussions (i.e., jigsaws, presentations, class discussions, text set conversations, etc.) that one teacher uses to facilitate critical talk in her classroom. Literature discussion groups provide an opportunity for critical literacy skills to be attempted, practiced, and refined. Ira Shor (1997) writes that critical literacy begins as students “question power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just or humane” (p. 1). By encouraging critical dialogue, teachers are helping students learn skills necessary to participate in an effective democratic society.

### Approach

The research questions guide the design of this study. The research was a naturalistic, qualitative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklan, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer several characteristics of naturalistic research: (a) it takes place in a natural setting; (b) the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection;

(c) the research is qualitative; (d) purposeful sampling is used to open space for multiple realities; (e) grounded theory and inductive data analysis is used as theories emerge; (f) negotiation with participants of outcomes and results provides an accurate reconstruction of reality; and (g) criteria for trustworthiness is emphasized throughout the research.

I studied the teacher and students in their classroom with an attempt to eliminate the intrusive nature of the research. I began by spending one month as an observer in the classroom to build rapport. The teacher tape-recorded group discussions regularly, which helped to eliminate the novelty of the recording machines during the three months that I collected data. Data collection remained qualitative and includes my field notes, transcripts of student-led and student-teacher discussions, interviews, and artifacts. Ten transcripts were chosen for in-depth analysis. This was a purposeful sample chosen in conjunction with the classroom teacher. Grounded theory and constant comparative strategies were used in an inductive manner that allowed the theory to emerge. Initial results and final results were shared with participants (the teachers and the students) for feedback, as well as with additional researchers to ensure accuracy and accountability.

This study was conducted within postmodern theories. Postmodernism can be defined as the assumption that “knowledge claims must be set within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender, and other group affiliates” (Creswell, 1998, p. 79). This study highlights the diverse student population as one of the influential factors in the outcome. It recognizes that the transcribed discussions must be considered not only in the immediate context of the classroom and the school, but in the larger context of contemporary society. I searched for meta-narratives among

the discussions, and brought to the foreground the unique characteristics within the class, particularly between the teacher and the students.

### Questions

Teachers understand the need for discussions that go beyond literary elements or summarizing text in the classroom but are often stymied as to how to initiate and facilitate this type of dialogue, as well as how to recognize when students are engaged in critical discourse. Thus I asked the following questions:

1. How does the teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical conversations? What teaching strategies foster engagement in critical conversations?
2. What is the nature of critical conversations in this literacy-social studies middle school classroom? How are critical conversations identified? What are its characteristics?

In qualitative research, questions often evolve during the study. As I consulted the literature, talked to researchers about their current understandings, and analyzed the data, my questions did, in fact, change. Thus the following questions guide this study:

1. How does the teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk? What teaching strategies foster engagement in critical talk?
2. What is the nature of critical talk in this literacy-social studies middle school classroom? How is critical talk identified? What are its characteristics?

### Context

Bennington School District, a small, affluent, Midwestern suburban district adjoining a large city, includes three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The total number of students in this district is 2,442, of which 24 students are non-residents. This district has a low drop-out rate (1.3%) with an expenditure per student (\$13,884.50) that is much higher than the state average (\$6,991) (Missouri

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002).

This study takes place in Cheshire Middle School, the only middle school in Bennington School District. In 2002, of 602 students enrolled at Cheshire, 1% were non-residents and 14.19% were eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch. The ratio of classroom teachers to students is 11 to 1. The average teacher salary is \$52,615; 98% of the teachers at Cheshire have full teaching certificates and 83% have advanced degrees (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002).

Kathryn Mitchell-Pierce, the classroom teacher, has taught for over 25 years. She has been recognized for her outstanding work in her multi-age (K-3) classroom, as well as for her work as the district professional development coordinator. She received her Ph.D. in Reading and Language Education from Indiana University in 1986 and has published widely on the topic of talk in the classroom (Pierce, 1986; 1994; 1995a; 1995b; 1999; Pierce & Gilles, 1993; Short & Pierce, 1991). She recently returned to the classroom to teach middle school for the first time and was highly involved in this study, providing frequent feedback on the data analysis.

Twenty-two students comprised the sixth grade classroom that I observed. These students were socioeconomically, ethnically, religiously, and academically diverse. Three students were of Asian descent; one of these students immigrated to the United States fifteen months prior to the study. Five students were African American; three of these students participated in the voluntary transfer program, a program that offers urban parents the option of sending their children to suburban schools. Three students were biracial; of those three, one student participated in the voluntary transfer program and one was labeled learning disabled. Eleven students were Caucasian; two of these students

were on medication for various psychological struggles. The students ranged in academic abilities as well. The third quarter literacy grades were as follows: 27% received an A, 41% received a B, 9% received a C, 9% received a D, and 14% received an F (percentages taken from third quarter literacy grades). However diverse this group appears, they can all be classified as either economically privileged students due to their socioeconomic status, or educational privileged due to the importance placed on education that would motivate a parent to send his/her child to this suburban school.

In-depth analysis occurred on ten excerpts from eighty-one transcribed discussions. The ten chosen represented the best examples of critical talk from the researcher's and teacher's perspective (Appendix A). Of the ten transcripts, six were discussions that occurred during text set activities, two occurred during discussions about a particular novel, one was a whole class discussion, and one occurred during a jigsaw activity. All twenty-two students are represented in the discussions; however, this was not done purposefully. The transcripts were a "purposeful sample," but chosen for the talk that occurred, not for the students involved in the discussions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Pierce participated in four of the ten discussions.

#### Data Collection

Before I began collecting data, I first gained entry into the school through the appropriate gatekeepers (Homan, 2002). I spoke with the principal of the school as well as the classroom teacher, Kathryn Mitchell Pierce. I applied to the district's institutional review board and received a written letter from the school district stating that they agreed to allow me to collect data in Cheshire Middle School during the second semester of the 2003-2004 school year (Appendix B). I also obtained permission from the University of

Missouri Institutional Review Board.

In addition, I also asked for informed assent and consent by both the students and their parents, respectively (see Appendices C and D for sample informed assent/consent letters). This was to ensure that all participants involved understood the data that would be collected from them as well as the extent to which the research would be disseminated. The informed assent/consents notified the students and the parents of my intent and allowed the participants to choose whether they wished to participate in the study. As part of this informed consent process, I spoke with participants and explained the process in “kid-friendly” language. During this discussion, I emphasized the voluntary aspect of the study. I also asked the faculty members involved in this research for informed consent (see Appendix E for sample faculty consent letter). The faculty involved included the classroom teacher and two teacher interns who worked in the class daily as well as specialist teachers (e.g. the ESL teacher, the reading specialist, and the special education teacher).

In order to ensure ethical educational research, a primary concern was confidentiality. In this research confidentiality was maintained through several methods. First, all student and faculty participants were given a pseudonym. These pseudonyms were used whenever the data were discussed with my committee or others. The pseudonyms were given immediately and were used in the transcribing as well as the reporting of the data. Dr. Pierce requested that I use her name in the reporting of data, thus her name was not changed. Confidentiality was also maintained in the storage of my data. Digital data files were not saved on my computer; instead all files were saved to a USB Mass Storage Device and kept in a locked closet.



I gathered data from January through April 2004, thirty-four sessions in total. I used three data collection strategies: interviews with students and teachers, transcripts of student discussions during class, and documents/artifacts (e.g. student journals, artwork, projects, reflections, etc.) that accompanied the discussions. Table 2 illustrates the data sources that informed each research question.

Table 2

Questions and Data Sources

Questions	Data Sources
1a. How does the teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk?	Field Notes Teacher Journal Teacher/Student Interviews Selected Transcripts
1b. What teaching strategies foster engagement in critical talk?	Field Notes Teacher Journal Teacher/Student Interviews Selected Transcripts
2a. What is the nature of critical talk in literacy/social studies middle school classroom?	Selected Transcripts Student/Teacher Interviews Field Notes
2b. How is critical talk identified?	Selected Transcripts Student/Teacher Interviews Field Notes
2c. What are its characteristics?	Selected Transcripts Student/Teacher Interviews Field Notes

The data provide multiple lenses through which to observe how critical talk is achieved as well as to what extent these discussions transfer or influence other aspects of the students' work.

The first month of data collection was spent taking field notes and gaining rapport with the teachers and students. At the beginning of February, I began to record classroom talk during large and small group discussions; the talk was supplemented by my field

notes. In April I interviewed the students about their participation in the literature discussion groups and brought the transcripts back to them for review. I transcribed those interviews with students who were most talkative and metacognitive about their talk. I also transcribed the interviews of those students who seemed to create an anomaly to my study. For example, Devon's interview was transcribed, as he was one of the students who often did not verbally participate in the discussions. From these interviews, I chose ten students' composition books to collect, copy, and examine more carefully. Table 3 illustrates the chronology of data collection.

Table 3

Chronology of Data Collection

Month	Date	Data Collection
January	5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, 21, 23, 27, 28, 30	Field Notes
February	4	Field Notes
	9	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Cinderella text sets)
	10	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Text sets: Two Worlds/Two Cultures and Friends)
	11	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Text set: Two Worlds/Two Cultures)
	17	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Text sets: Making Changes and whole class)
	18	Field notes, large group discussion (Introduction to literature sets)
	20, 24, 25, 26	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Lit. Study: <i>Outcast</i> , <i>Wringer</i> , <i>Wreckers</i> , and <i>Holes</i> )
March	1	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Lit. Study: <i>Outcast</i> , <i>Wringer</i> , <i>Wreckers</i> , and <i>Holes</i> and jigsaw groups)
	2	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Lit. Study: <i>Outcast</i> , <i>Wringer</i> , <i>Wreckers</i> , and <i>Holes</i> )

	5	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (presentations and processing groups)
	8	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (presentations, processing groups and text sets: <i>War and Peace</i> , <i>Fitting In</i> , <i>Two Worlds</i> , <i>Perspectives</i> , and <i>Journeys</i> )
	9	Field notes, tape record KMP introducing new lit. books
	15, 16	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Lit. Study: <i>Request</i> , <i>Mountains</i> , <i>Esperanza</i> , and <i>Dragon</i> )
	19	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Lit. Study: <i>Request</i> , <i>Heaven</i> , <i>Esperanza</i> , and <i>Dragon</i> )
	22	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Lit. Study: <i>Mountains</i> , <i>Heaven</i> , <i>Esperanza</i> , and <i>Dragon</i> )
	23	Field notes, tape record small and large group discussion (Lit. Study: <i>Request</i> , <i>Mountains</i> , and <i>Dragon</i> )
April	23	Interviewed individual students
	27	Brought transcripts to groups of students and recorded their feedback and photocopied student composition books

### Initial Data Analysis

As I collected data, I immediately transcribed and analyzed the tapes. I stored the data in files placed on QSR Nud\*st v5, a data analysis software designed specifically for organization of qualitative data. See Appendix F for an example of the Nud\*st printout. I manipulated the data using data analysis tools borrowed from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

During the preliminary reading of the data, I used “open coding” to develop the initial categories within the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 204). Open coding is the researcher’s “first impressions, thoughts, and directions” to herself about the data. Next I used “axial coding” to look for interrelationships between the categories (Strauss &

Corbin, 1990, p. 211). The use of open coding provided me with initial threads to follow. Examples of open codes included *perspectives*, *racism*, and *children literature*. As axial coding progressed, a conditional matrix of the evolving theory emerged. A conditional matrix is a visual portrayal of the influential factors and conditions of the maturing theory. The matrix found in Appendix G is the final representation of theory of critical talk.

I employed five additional analytical tools to aid data analysis. The first was the use of memos. Memos are “written records of analysis related to the formulation of theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 197). Though many of the open codes were a type of memo, additional memos helped to record initial thoughts and ideas about the developing theory as analysis took place. One type of memo I used was reflective fieldnotes (Bogdan & Biklan, 1998). These were written after each observation and recorded my initial thoughts of the day. Other memos were written during the transcription and analysis of the transcripts. I recorded memos in the Nud\*st program and word documents.

I also used data briefs, first designed by Gilles (1991), to organize the data. Data briefs are “a summary of the [literature study] discussion and the researcher’s perceptions of the themes and behaviors of participants” (Gilles, 1991, p. 120). I modified this approach and created a chart in which a brief description was given for each of the eighty-one transcripts. See Appendix H for a sample of my modified data briefs. Creating the data briefs validated the initial patterns I saw emerging. From these I began to code for *perspectives* and *critical talk*.

I also used the constant comparative method during open coding. In this approach, each piece of data is continuously compared to existing categories. These categories can

be made up of any number of instances from the data. However, those categories with only few instances are either discarded as not having enough data to support it or used as an anomaly to further tease out the emerging theory. The use of the constant comparative method occurred in this study until the data were saturated and no additional properties or dimensions evolved. The process of comparing each data source to existing initial categories provided multi-layered levels of conceptualization, which enhanced theory development (Merriam, 1998). For this study the constant comparative method facilitated the development of the first question's themes: teacher knowledge, processing time, various forms of scaffolding, and oral rubric.

During the initial data analysis I brought my emerging theories to three separate groups of colleagues. The first was a critical friends group that Pierce created for her own professional development. Pierce invited me to share my early findings. From this first sharing, I returned to the data to examine the relationship between Pierce's verbal description of her classroom and my field notes. The second peer debriefing occurred between Pierce, myself, and two other researchers who were participating in a similar study. During this meeting in March, we developed the initial definition of critical talk as those times when students question, reflect, and/or articulate personal beliefs. The third debriefing occurred during the Qualitative Research Conference in which my preliminary findings were discussed in a roundtable session.

Another analytical tool I used to aid data analysis, was the use of a dual chronology. Aaron Courcel (1980) suggests the use of "two chronologies" when analyzing discourse. I created a similar document to illustrate the research process and the audit trail of my thought evolution. The dual chronology documents not only the

coding and emerging themes, but also records the member checks and peer debriefings. An example of the dual chronology can be found in Appendix I.

### In-depth Analysis of Critical Talk

From the data briefs, ten transcripts were chosen as exemplars of critical talk. I chose the ten by applying my expertise in recognizing critical talk; in a similar manner and at the same time Pierce chose three excerpts. There was an overlap of our choices. Pierce also read through the additional seven I had chosen and agreed that they were examples of critical talk. However, our intuitive selection enabled me to redefine the initial definition to be more inclusive of the dialogue that occurred: Critical talk is longer stretches of talk in which students leave the text to articulate, reflect on, and/or inquire into personal, communal, or societal beliefs; these discussions may shed light on a belief or provide a new lens in which to view a belief. At this point I created a chart to visually represent when the critical talk occurred. This chart can be found in Appendix J. It graphs the dates and the discussions against whether the talk was considered critical and whether the theme of multiple perspectives occurred.

Throughout the in-depth analysis of the critical talk, member checking and peer debriefing checking occurred. In April, I returned to the students. I brought the ten excerpts selected and asked the students to read through the transcripts and comment on their thoughts. This did not provide me much insight, as the students were more intrigued about seeing their talk recorded than they were interested in reflecting on their thinking. I also brought the findings to my own critical friends group. I shared with the group my working definition; we examined a transcript and discussed particular strands that I may want to follow. They suggested I return to the literature to see how critical conversations

are being defined, not through language but through student examples, and to define various words related to talk, more specifically the distinction between *dialogue*, *conversation*, and *discussion*. In various venues I shared my visual figure (in Appendix G). Each version of this diagram was saved digitally to maintain an audit trail of my emerging theory.

I then borrowed techniques from content analysis (Barnes & Todd, 1977), discourse analysis (Gee, 2001; Potter, 1997; Rogers, 2003), and general semantics (Hayakawa, 1964/1991) for in-depth coding of these ten excerpts. These lenses provided semantic layers to view the language that occurred in the classroom. I coded each lens in a different color (content analysis in green for the students and purple for the teacher; discourse analysis in blue, and general semantics in red). See Appendix K for an example of a hand-coded transcript.

Content analysis looks at the substance of the talk: what is actually said during the discussion (Barnes & Todd, 1977). Though content analysis is often theory driven, this research uses the method in an inductive approach (Ratcliff, 1994). In theory driven content analysis, the researcher predetermines the theme, categories, or rules to analyze the data. However, in an emergent theory inquiry, the use of content analysis occurs as the researcher examines the data and lets the categories and themes emerge by focusing on what topics are reoccurring. This type of analysis is often associated with the quantitative aspect of counting the number of occurrences of particular categories. In this research, content analysis was used to determine not only the topics that were discussed in the critical talk, such as recognizing the need for action or exploring alternative realities, but also to determine the type of talk used in the conversations (e.g. questioning,

probing, etc.).

Discourse analysis is the analysis of “rhetorical or argumentative organization of talk” (Potter, 1997, p. 147). Discourse analysis provided a systematic way to view such aspects of language as the situated meanings, social languages, and cultural modes (Gee, 2001; Rogers, 2003). In this research, I used Rogers’s (2004) three strategies to examine classroom talk: genre, mode, and field. In analyzing the transcripts for genre, I examined such features as repetition, revoicing, and turn taking. In examining the mode of the data, I focused on pronoun usage, formality of language, and types of sentences. Last, field allowed me to review the content as well as the context of each transcript. This analysis technique brought out issues such as the change in pronoun usage as students became engaged in the dialogue, the variations of talk between student-led discussions and teacher-led discussions, and particular concepts which repeatedly appeared as students struggled to understand, such as different versus same, hard versus easy, understanding versus knowing, and ignorance.

General semantics, though not as frequently used as a qualitative analysis tool, is helpful in “analyzing people’s language and behavior” (Fox, 2004). I borrowed three techniques from general semantics to analyze student and teacher discussion: maps versus territories, two-valued orientation, and the ladder of abstraction (Hayakawa, 1964/1991). Maps and territories are people’s perception of reality and reality, respectively. These terms flow from the idea that a map is a representation of the territory, but it is not the territory. Hayakawa (1964/1991) explains:

If a child grows to adulthood with a verbal world in his head which corresponds fairly closely to the extensional world that he finds around him in his widening experience, he is in relatively small danger of being shocked or hurt by what he finds, because his verbal world [his map] has



told him what, more or less, to expect. He is prepared for life. If, however, he grows up with a false map in his head—that is, with a head crammed with error and superstition—he will constantly be running into trouble, wasting his efforts, and acting like a fool. He will not be adjusted to the world [the territory] as it is. (p. 31).

In this study I examined how students used their perceptions of reality (maps) to persuade, debate, and/or inquire into the content (e.g. immigration). For example, the data suggests that when students are provided information that does not fit into their maps, they need to recalibrate their maps to a new understanding of reality. When Colin began to see that America was not the land of opportunity he initially believed it was, he had to change his view of America to fit this new information. This is similar to Piaget's (Lavatelli, 1970) notion of accommodation and assimilation. Two-valued orientation is "the proneness to divide the world into two opposing forces—'right' versus 'wrong,' 'good' versus 'evil'—and to ignore or deny the existence of any middle ground" (Hayakawa, 1964/1991, p. 230). A two-valued orientation is in opposition to a multi-valued orientation, which is defined as seeing endless possibilities and reconciling differences. During my analysis I used this general semantic technique to examine how students used two-valued and multi-valued orientation in their discussions. The last technique borrowed from general semantics, ladder of abstraction, allowed me to examine the extent to which students used abstract or concrete language during their discussions. Hayakawa presents the ladder of abstraction by providing an example of Bessie the cow, in which *Bessie* can be called by her name, by the term *cow*, or by the word *livestock*. *Bessie* is lower on the ladder of abstraction than the word *livestock*. The more abstract language becomes, the higher on the ladder it fits. Alternatively, the more concrete language is, the lower on the ladder it can be found. Abstracting is necessary

because “it makes discussion possible” (p. 102). Hayakawa presents the example of four families. Each family calls their house something different. One may call it *maga*, another *biyo*, another a *kata*, and still another may call it *pelel*. This level works well when each is discussing one of the homes. However if a new house is to be constructed, a more general name would need to be used since none of the previous four would be applicable. Instead the new home may have characteristics of each of the original four and thus would need a more abstract name. Hayakawa also discusses the importance of traversing back and forth on the ladder of abstraction. He suggests that by becoming stagnant in one level (i.e. dead-level abstracting) the speaker does not provide additional information to those who may not have a similar experience. Hayakawa warns, “speakers who never leave the higher levels of abstraction, however, fail to notice when they are saying something and when they are not” (p. 107). He argues that too many times high-level abstraction is used specifically to confuse the audience. Lower levels of language can be used to bring the text closer to reality. However, students can also dead-level at lower levels, thus being unable to draw conclusions from specific details. Hayakawa suggests that one should move “quickly and gracefully and in orderly fashion from higher to lower, from lower to higher, with minds as lithe and deft and beautiful as monkeys in a tree” (p. 111). This analytical technique helped me to see whether students were taking the discussions both down the ladder to more concrete and real language as well as up the ladder to more abstract ideas.

After the data was analyzed I again brought the information back to professionals and colleagues in the field. At this time I modified the transcripts slightly to make them read smoother. The content was not changed; repetitions and insertions were deleted to

aid in reading the student talk. I returned to the initial group who helped me develop the first definition and walked the group through the evolution of not only my patterns and themes but also the conditional matrix. At this point suggestions became much more detailed (e.g. terminology on diagram, particular authors who might provide additional insight, etc.). It was during this discussion that I first made contact with Dr. Karen Smith, a scholar on critical conversations. I later scheduled a conference call to discuss with her the idea of critical talk. Before the call I sent her a summary of the work I had done in Pierce's classroom and the questions I wanted her to address. These questions can be found in Appendix L. As I was drafting the findings of chapter four we held a phone conference call with Smith in a tape recorded session to discuss her current notions of critical conversations and my research findings. It was from this discussion that I gained deeper insight into her perception of critical conversations which has been influenced by Carol Edelsky, Jerome Harste, and her own reading of the critical literacy literature. Through collaboration and additional talk with peers, I was able to see where the discussions I collected fit into the larger frame. It was then that I created the term *critical talk* to better articulate what I saw occurring in Pierce's classroom.

#### Ethical Considerations in Naturalistic Research

Lincoln and Guba (1985) write, "it is essential that certain measures be employed ... that increase the probability that a judgment of trustworthiness will eventually be achieved" (p. 281). Trustworthiness, they define, as the ability to "establish confidence in the truth," applicability of the findings to other contexts, consistency in analysis, and neutrality from "biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives" of the researcher (p. 290). In order to maintain trustworthiness in this research, I employed strategies such as

member checking, maintaining an audit trail, and triangulation.

“Member checking,” a term used by Stake (1995), is a process in which participants provide feedback to the researcher about the data. Thus I used retrospective discussion group sessions where I brought portions of the transcripts to the students. I asked the students to read through the transcripts and note any comments or patterns they saw in the text. I also asked them to elaborate on a comment made or describe their thoughts during a particular portion of the transcript (see Appendix M for interview protocol). This allowed me to provide the participants with my initial thoughts and codes and ask for feedback as to authenticity and plausibility. Several times throughout the data analysis, initial findings and emerging themes were brought to Pierce and other colleagues as a way to assess if my emerging theories were accurate and consistent. The final report was also given to Pierce for her feedback and approval before publication occurred (see Appendix N for Pierce’s written response).

An “audit trail” (Halpren, 1983) provides a visible path that other researchers can follow to replicate the data collection and analysis. It allows for external review by peers that increases the “dependability and confirmability” of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 378). To create an “audit trail,” I carefully collected and stored data and made it available for audit.

Triangulation (Denzin, 1970) of information also took place in order to increase accountability. Triangulation occurs when researchers “make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). Triangulation occurred in this study by the use of multiple data, multiple data sources, and multiple data analysis methods that supported assertions made.

Ethical concerns in qualitative educational inquiry are not specific to naturalistic research. Researchers experienced a renewed interest in the topic of ethics and have recently debated such issues as the levels of informed consent (Christians, 2000), the use of powerful gatekeepers (Homan, 2002), professionalism (Tickle, 2002), and accountability (Winch, 2002). In this research, students under the age of 18 were observed. Their talk was recorded and thus they were at risk of being exploited. Thus the above structures were positioned in the research design to protect the participants from harm.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Two questions guide this inquiry: How does a teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk, and what is the nature of critical talk in a literacy-social studies middle school classroom? I collected data from teacher artifacts, including curriculum materials, journals, and presentation notes; student artifacts, including sample projects and journals, 81 tape-recorded and transcribed literature group discussions; teacher and student interviews; and researcher field and reflective notes.

The following narrative illustrates the findings by focusing first on the question, *How does a teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk?* as it influenced how I defined critical talk. The second question, *What is the nature of critical talk?* is addressed last.

### Examining Question One:

#### How Does a Teacher Enact, Nurture, and Sustain Critical Talk?

In order to answer the first questions, I began by examining the context in which this study took place. I then address four additional themes that emerged from the data. I begin with the context as much of the preceding section is contingent on the classroom environment.

#### *Context*

In order to understand critical talk, it is important to first examine the classroom in which these discussions occurred. This context provides background to understand

critical talk and how it emerged, through examining 1) the classroom teacher's educational philosophy; 2) the middle school environment; 3) the literacy/social studies curriculum; and 4) the pedagogical beliefs and tools employed.

### *1) The Teacher's Philosophy*

Kathryn Mitchell Pierce's educational belief system underlies everything she does in the classroom. The physical set-up, the curriculum, and the pedagogy are all outcomes of a well-defined and articulated set of philosophical beliefs. Pierce suggested that I use her writing to articulate her beliefs. In analyzing several pieces of her writing, Pierce's educational philosophy can be categorized into five belief statements.

*Learning is social.* Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning occurs through interactions with others. Pierce concurs and is committed to "building a supportive *social* community" in her classroom "as a necessary prerequisite to developing a successful *learning* community" (1992, p. 202). Valuing the social nature of learning influences her classroom decisions. Thus she is dedicated to "establishing a collaborative learning environment, supporting groups of learners in using language and other communication systems to explore and construct meanings, and understanding role relationships as they affect the functioning groups" (1992, p. 204). However, Pierce recognizes that valuing talk in the classroom is not enough to ensure that her students succeed. She argues that before "effective talking to learn can occur, the classroom climate must be a safe learning environment in which learners are encouraged to function in a research community" (1992, p. 204).

*Learning is inquiry.* Harste and Leland (1998) argue that the inquiry cycle is a philosophy, not a method. They describe curriculum as inquiry as "a community of

learners in the process of collaboratively constructing knowledge as they continually seek understandings of personal and social significance from new perspectives for purposes of creating a more just, more equitable, a more thoughtful world” (Short, et al., 1996, p. 60). Pierce, who studied with Harste, believes that learning “is a self-regenerating cycle” (Pierce, 1993, p. 311). In an interview with Pierce, she described the role of teachers as getting students to identify “a problem and think through it. I basically want to help them develop the habits, comfort level, and tools to be both problem-posers and problems-solvers.” She often reflects on her own learning in order to help understand students’ learning. It was this reflection and learning that shapes who she is as a teacher. She wrote:

The more I worked to understand the reading and learning processes, and to find ways of evaluating what readers and learners were experiencing, the more I reflected on my basic beliefs about learning, reading, and evaluation. Through this constant interplay of reflection and experience I have changed my values and beliefs, my teaching practices, and my means for evaluating learners. (Pierce, 1993, p. 295)

Pierce uses reflection on her own learning to inform knowledge about student learning. This reflection often occurred in small groups with other knowledgeable peers. In describing one of these “critical friends groups” (Bambino, 2002), Pierce writes:

What mattered was that we were focusing on teaching and learning, that we did it in small collaborative groups, that we used our observations of real learners, and that we used reading, writing listening, speaking, sketching, and demonstrating as ways of learning. (Pierce, 1990/1998, p. 196)

Pierce also believes that *learning is changing*. She sees curriculum as the “transaction between the learner and the classroom experience” (Pierce, 1992, p. 203). This belief is strongly influenced by Dewey (1961/1997) and Rosenblatt (1978). When Pierce applies this belief specifically to reading instruction she argues, “We read in order



to change ourselves and thereby to expand out potential to change the world” (Pierce, 1993, p. 295). She defines good readers as those who “construct complex connections as well as explore their responses to books” (Pierce, 1993, p. 294). It is through the reading experience in which the reader transacts with the text that Pierce feels that learners change. She states, “that’s the power of literature: to help us understand ourselves and our world, both present and future, real and imagined” (Pierce, 1993, p. 295). She believes that reading is a transaction and “a means to achieve an enhanced sense of social responsibilities” (Pierce, 1993, p. 301). Changing then is seen as a transaction and a transformation in which students take their learning to levels beyond basic comprehension. Pierce writes:

The goal of education must be to change us, must leave us able to handle new experiences in more complex ways and passionate about using our education and our vision to change the world. Reading education in our schools should be aimed at nothing less. (1993, p. 295)

*Learning is growing.* In evaluating growth in learners, Pierce believes that teachers must have “a sense of where they [the learners] have been and where they [the learners] perceive themselves as going” (Pierce, 1993, p. 305). Without this sense, effective evaluation cannot occur. In 1993, Pierce wrote:

I currently believe evaluation is best when it is collaborative; involves systematic and intentional collection of and reflection on data; is multifaceted and includes several different ways of looking at a learner’s growth; captures changes over time, presenting a video-view of learning rather than a snapshot view; respects the learner as an individual with responsibility for his or her own learning; offers a sense of perspective or direction for continued learning; communicates useful information to the learner and others interested in the learner’s work. (p. 298)

Pierce suggests that “most of our best instructional strategies provide the information we require in order to support learners’ growth” (1993, p. 310). She also believes in the

“importance of students’ involvement in the evaluation of their own learning” and demonstration of student “awareness of the curricular strategies they were experiencing” (Pierce, 1993, p. 303). Building on Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, Pierce writes, “evaluation best serves the needs of learners when it is focused on what they can do now and what they will be able to do in the near future” (Pierce, 1993, p. 310).

The last belief statement is *learning is sharing*. Pierce believes in building strong relationships between parents and teachers. She writes about her efforts to share the growth of her students with their parents, “this sharing was essential in establishing mutual trust and an environment in which teachers and parents felt comfortable talking about and exploring new ideas” (Pierce, 1993, p. 307). Without this trust, Pierce believes that parents feel isolated and left out of crucial educational decisions regarding their children.

The five belief statements provide a foundation for the work that Pierce does in her classroom. She reflects frequently on this foundation and uses it as a guide to make educational decisions. She writes:

I became a teacher in large part because I wanted to ‘change the world.’ In accepting this challenge, I must also accept the responsibility for empowering my students to do the same by supporting them in developing the tools, the feelings of responsibility, and the passion to actively pursue their own causes. (1993, p. 312)

## 2) *The Middle School Environment*

Cheshire Middle School is modeled from the middle school exemplar described in *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Thus, there are

several structures in place that impact the daily schedule and planning within Pierce's classroom which are identified by italics.

*Cheshire Middle School uses block scheduling for core classrooms.* The most obvious structure is the large blocks of core time the team is given. Most days this core time begins with 87 minutes of class time (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> period) in literacy/social studies, math, or science. This morning block of time (which starts at 10:00) ends with thirty minutes of "team time," that provides additional time for teachers to work one-on-one with struggling students, provides extra instruction in a particular area, offers extension experiences to students ready for more of a challenge, etc. The students then go to lunch and Spanish and return to the core teachers for another 87-minute block of time (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> period). The schedule rotates daily depending on whether it is an A day or a B day. Thus if a student has a literacy/social studies block for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> periods on an A day, then she would have the literacy/social studies block 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> hour on the next day, which is a B day. This rotating schedule allows teachers to work with the same students at different times of the day. The A and B schedule is modified on Wednesdays. Wednesdays are called Q days and have their own schedule. Q days allow an extra half hour in the day for advisory activities. This would include watching the school news show, team building activities, organizational planning, etc.

*Cheshire Middle School teachers and students are placed on interdisciplinary teams.* Another component of an exemplary middle school, interdisciplinary teams, is also evident at Cheshire Middle School. During the time I collected data, there were approximately 200 students in sixth grade. These students were divided among three teams: Central, North, and South. Two teams, North and South, have four teachers: two

literacy/social studies, a science, and a math. The Central team was a half team and had only 40 students and two teachers, a literacy/social studies teacher and a math/science teacher. The sixth grade teachers met in their teams daily to create interdisciplinary units, discuss students, meet with parents, work on scheduling issues, and complete other administrative functions that arose. Typical of many middle schools, team classrooms were in close proximity to one another. Thus few opportunities existed for interactions among the three sixth grade teams. Students spend their entire core time with their team, but work with students from across all three teams during elective courses. This created the smaller school within a larger school atmosphere that *Turning Points* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) suggests.

*Pierce's sixth grade team consisted of core faculty and two teacher interns.*

Pierce's team had the assigned core teachers and two additional teacher interns. Both interns were fifth year students from Truman State University participating in a year-long paid internship and graduate program. This program is designed for students who have already completed an undergraduate degree in a particular content area as well as methodology courses and fieldwork in education. The role of the year-long intern is not that of a student teacher as much as it is as a full-time teacher. Truman State University's website describes the role of the intern as "as a teacher of record by a public school. The intern signs a contract and is paid by the public school to fill a full-time teaching position while completing the internship requirement" (Division of Education, 2002). However, in this school district, the Truman Interns were not considered teachers of record. They assumed roles similar to traditional student teaching as well as some work associated with being a teaching aid. They did function as classroom teachers in some contexts such

as at sixth grade camp, but the majority of their time was as a student teacher or teaching aid. One of the requirements for this program is an action research project. The sixth grade team used their interns as additional help. They placed one intern in math and science and one in the literacy/social studies block. Halfway through the year the interns switched positions to receive a broader experience within the core subject areas.

*Pierce deliberately arranged her classroom to facilitate curricular engagements.*

Worman and Haussler (1989) write, “the layout of the classroom and the amount of space available in it are fixed factors that often limit the ways in which the class can be organized. But the allocation of the space is critical” (p. 47). Pierce’s particular classroom, situated next to the sixth grade office and amongst the other core teachers’ classrooms, held 25 students. The outskirts of the classroom contained bookshelves overflowing with professional books and resources and student books and resources (e.g. textbooks; computers; picture books and novels; hanging files for student work; and pencil, paper, glue, scissors, etc.). The students sat at six collapsible cafeteria tables on wheels. In an interview, Pierce discussed her rationale for choosing this type of table:

I chose to have tables and chairs rather than desks because I try to structure the time so that the students spend most of their time talking in small groups and so that my talk time is limited... I chose to have collapsible cafeteria tables so we could have four or five different seating arrangements and I spent a lot of time in the beginning teaching the kids how to get in and out of those arrangements so we didn’t lose time in transition. You [Jennifer] saw mostly when they were at their tables, but another configuration, Teams, had three groups of two tables. Board Room was where we pushed all the tables together and the kids sat around the outside. That was for serious discussions. The last arrangement was Theatre where we pushed the tables completely away and sat around the edge so we had the room open. I was real explicit about how to change the room arrangement, so they could do it pretty much to the count of six. I learned from preschool and elementary teaching, we gave a name to each seating arrangement and again that was a very important symbol and we talked about why we were in this seating arrangement, what it allows you

to do. I can say, “Board Room.” I turn my back, count to six, and they are in one. That’s how long it takes.

The deliberate set up of the room allowed Pierce to use the space to best meet her needs during individual lessons. In the three months I observed, I saw the students change the physical set up, going into “Board Room” or “Theatre” many times.

*PBS videotaped Pierce’s classroom.* Due to Pierce’s extensive knowledge on multicultural literature, she was requested to take part in a documentary series on multicultural literature discussion groups by WNET channel 13 PBS New York, funded through the Annenberg Foundation. Due to this honor, three weeks of third quarter found an additional four adults in the classroom including camera equipment, lighting, and other technical paraphernalia needed for the taping. This taping required several different daily structures that are important to note. First, there were two days in which three days of filming needed to occur due to the tight schedule of the television crew. This meant that the first day, March 8<sup>th</sup>, a typical schedule was maintained; however the second day, March 9<sup>th</sup>, a modified scheduled needed to occur. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, one class was kept all day. The other class that would normally have come to Pierce after lunch stayed with their math and science teachers that day for an extra block. Therefore, on March 9<sup>th</sup>, Pierce had one group of students for two 87-minute blocks of core time. The morning was considered Day Two in the taping and the afternoon was considered Day Three. In the transcripts this is noted as March 9A and March 9B, morning and afternoon respectively. Another aspect of this taping was the somewhat intrusive nature of having a camera and sound crew attempting to capture the discussions at multiple tables. Due to acoustics, the television crew often needed students to recreate a discussion they were unable to record. Often times, students were asked to “hold that thought” while the

camera crew needed to change a battery pack or try for a different angle. This interrupted the discussions and at times may have impacted the degree of depth the students were able to reach. However, with a camera crew taping every discussion, the students appeared to rise to the occasion and produced excellent talk in which many of the discussion threads were termed critical.

### *3) The Literacy – Social Studies Curriculum*

*Pierce taught in a literacy-social studies blocked classroom.* When Cheshire Middle School made the transition between a junior high school and a middle school, a sixth grade team was made up of two teachers; one who taught a social studies/literacy class and one who taught a math/science class. Each team was made up of approximately forty students. This created a smoother transition for students as they left their self-contained elementary schools and moved to a larger departmentalized middle school.

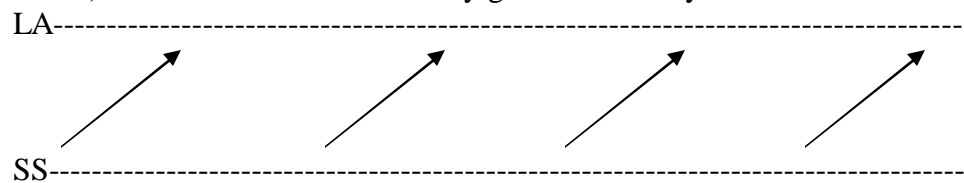
However, as the middle school curriculum developed, the math and science became so demanding that specialists were required. The math and science were then split up, but the literacy/social studies block was intentionally retained to support integration of these two core subjects. Many of the teachers who were hired to teach the social studies/literacy block had strong backgrounds in literacy with less professional preparation in the teaching of social studies. Though some teachers in the building have questioned the value of the integrated literacy/social studies block in sixth grade, Pierce believes firmly in the integration. She said:

I fought last year to keep it...I think in terms of curriculum opportunities it is a very rich combination and it gives you a 90-minute block of time. I'm highly in favor of it. When I look at the depth with where the kids got in social studies, and I think it is mostly from the interplay of what we did in literacy, I am impressed.

This excerpt emphasizes not only the positive logistics of the block, but also the richness and authenticity that Beane (1997) suggests in curriculum integration.

During one particular conversation the summer after the collection of data, Pierce described how the literacy integrated with the social studies:

One of the things that I think is interesting is because of the way this class is blocked: lit/social studies, here's the literacy stuff. Here's the social studies stuff and the lines just go like this all the time (Draws the image below). I don't know how often they go the other way.



I felt the kids bringing the social studies content into their book discussions constantly. I'm sure that they talked about knowledge they learned in their books while we were doing social studies, but I was much more aware of it going the other direction. And that's one of the things that I've been looking at all the way back to Charlene's piece in *Cycles* (Klassen, 1993). In order to get good content area literature discussions of nonfiction titles, the context is so essential and having that rich social studies going on simultaneously just made a world of difference in the literature study...Our choice of immigration novels [for literacy] was not an accident. I don't know that I would have intentionally put together a collection of novels that were all immigration stories if we hadn't been doing a study of that in social studies.

This excerpt suggests that the literacy/social studies block provided more time to create a deeper understanding of both social studies and literacy. It also provides a concrete example of Beane's (1990) proposed middle school curriculum in which content is "repositioned...within the context of personal and social themes where it becomes what is known and prized" (p. 73).

*The literacy curriculum supports students' growth in reading and writing.* Even though literacy and social studies classes are blocked and integrated, each has a separate curriculum guide. Pierce was an outside consultant brought into the district during the



creation of the literacy curriculum thirteen years ago. The literacy curriculum guide revolves around five strands: systems of language, inquiry, social interaction, personal growth, and aesthetics. These strands extend from pre-kindergarten to high school and are “representative of what a literate individual does with language.” Pierce explained that “we chose ... to assume that all kids are literate. We help them become more expert in particular strands. As life long learners we are all getting better at these strands.” Student learning in these strands is developed through engagement in seven classroom practices that all literacy classrooms will engage in throughout the year: shared reading, independent reading, writer’s workshop, assigned writing, discussion, inquiry, and demonstration and celebration. The curriculum guide provides characteristics and sample strategies for key stages (i.e. pre-K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade, 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade, and 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade) as the classroom practices will look different in a first grade classroom in comparison to an eleventh grade classroom. Pierce said, “We call the curriculum a document of inspiration, not a document of prescription.” The document includes teacher vignettes, samples of student work, sample documents to support the lessons, etc. Each grade level also has class sets of three core literature titles that students are expected to have “an in-depth literature experience” with sometime during the year and ten copies each of several protected titles that are encouraged for use throughout the year. Teachers in the preceding grade levels are asked to refrain from using these “protected” titles for in-depth literature study. The three core novels in sixth grade in the school year of 2003-2004 were *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969), *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* (Cushman, 2000), and *Holes* (Sachar, 1998). The Cheshire district tries to create a diversity of titles and content

throughout the K-12 experience. Pierce said of the literacy curriculum, “There’s a lot of freedom. That is a curse and a blessing.”

*The social studies curriculum is structured around broad themes.* The social studies curriculum is structured slightly differently than the literacy curriculum. Sixth grade is the second of a three part series of United States history. Fifth grade covers the discovery of the New World through to the American Revolution. Sixth grade covers the 1800’s and seventh grade covers the 1900’s. Within the social studies curriculum there are six units of study and each one is focused on a set of big questions along with specific learner outcomes similar to Wiggins and McTighe’s (1998) *Understanding by Design*. Similar to the literacy curriculum, the social studies curriculum has strands that run from kindergarten to high school: civics, geography, history, culture, contemporary applications, and economics. Each grade is to cover every strand; however, teachers emphasize the ones that are most appropriate to the specific area of study. For example, in sixth grade the emphasis is history, geography, and culture. In order to carry out the social studies curriculum, the sixth grade teachers have classroom sets of three types of texts: *Call to Freedom* (Stuckey & Salvucci, 2002), a traditional textbook; *A History of Us* (Hakim, 2002), a narrative-based text; and class sets of novels (e.g. *Lincoln: A photo biography* (Freedman, 1987), *Soldier’s Heart* (Paulsen, 1998), *Across Five Aprils* (Hunt, 1966), etc.). Pierce said, “You could teach a whole year out of trade books if you wanted.” The district also provides many resources and supporting material for each unit. In describing the social studies curriculum Pierce stated, “Social studies is a little more structured than literacy. There is less freedom. There are specific lesson plans available but you don’t have to use them.”

*Pierce uses a curricular map and an overarching broad theme to create coherence throughout the year.* In the Cheshire district there are fourteen curriculum specialists who are released 2/5 time from their regular classroom duties. During that time they provide leadership in the district, meet with teachers, find resources, review test data, etc. The middle school, in a role similar to a high school's department chair, has subject managers. There is also a district coordinator for each of the main content areas. The elementary school has an instructional coordinator who works with subject area coordinators to help smoothly integrate all the contents. It was the district's social studies curriculum coordinator and the middle school social studies subject manager whom Pierce visited as she began planning for the sixth grade literacy/social studies class. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) argue that when planning a unit or curriculum, teachers should look for the "big ideas" (p.10). They write, "enduring understandings go beyond discrete facts or skills to focus on larger concepts, principles, or processes" (p. 10). Pierce asked the district curriculum coordinator to give her the big ideas, or big questions, that her students should be able to address by the end of the year. Pierce used this discussion to make her curricular map.

The curricular map (see Appendix O for a sample) allowed Pierce to see the "year at a glance." Pierce created a curricular map for both literacy and social studies in order not only to assure coverage of the required curriculum, but also to scaffold the engagements throughout the year. The social studies curricular map charts each of the four quarters. Underneath each quarter are listed the specific topics falling under the broad categories of historical focus, key concepts, major product, current events, social studies tools and strategies, geography skills, and map skills that inform the curricular

engagements Pierce chooses. For example, in the third quarter of social studies two units were the historical focus: Vanishing Frontier and Immigration. The key concepts for these units were displacement, assimilation, economic expansion, and homestead. The major product Pierce selected as the vehicle for shaping the student inquiries was an immigrant journal and a native cultures piece on “Then and Now.” During this study of immigration and vanishing frontiers students learned about interviewing, as well as primary sources such as diaries, journals, and letters. Under geographic skills, they learned about scale and proportion, and the relationship between geography and culture. For map skills they learned about population and precipitation maps, as well as a deeper understanding of Native American lands, waves of immigration, population patterns, and changes in land use.

The same structure is used for literacy as well; however, the topics listed under each quarter are under categories specific to the district literacy curriculum (i.e. genre focus, text sets, core literature, language tools and strategies, visual literacy/critical literacy, composition, writing traits, and oral presentation). To follow the thread of third quarter, the students in literacy study the genres of traditional literature, including folktales, fables, myths, and legends, and poetry. During this genre study they worked with text sets such as immigration, poetry, Native American cultures, and civil rights. Students also read the core literature text, *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* (Cushman, 2000) and extend their knowledge on figurative language and plot structure (language tools and strategies), on text layout/design, and on transmission of cultural values through traditional literature. The writing pieces the students engage in include, but were not limited to, a compare/contrast essay, an immigrant journal, poetry, and self-selected

writing pieces. They also create an oral presentation and engaged in informal storytelling. Beyond the curricular map for literacy and social studies, Pierce charted the field trips, events, and family activities that would occur during each quarter.

Pierce attempted to adhere to her curricular maps as a guide throughout the year. While each of the units was supported with enough curricular materials to become a year-long study, the curricular map helped Pierce pace the work in order to ensure each unit was addressed with integrity. Pierce explained:

My sixth grade colleagues and predecessors warned me that the social studies curriculum, because of the wealth of material and the potential to study each unit for long periods of time, could infringe on the literacy curriculum. I used the curricular map to help me be intentional about protecting space for the things that were important in *both* curricular areas.

When asked about her successes of the year, she said:

We got through all six units plus the unusual Lewis and Clark and World's Fair year. And I felt like each unit was distinct enough in the kids' minds that it sticks with them. We didn't have to rush through any. The joke is, "Can you do a decade a week the last part of school?" And we didn't have to do that. The curriculum map really worked.

This excerpt illustrates the importance Pierce placed on not only creating, but sticking to her curricular map.

Part of the curricular success Pierce found was due to her creation of an overarching theme. Short, et al. (1996) define a broad concept as "an umbrella that students and teacher can use to encompass a wide range of topics, themes, and ideas. It does not limit the possibilities for class and students' inquiries, but provides a point of connection" (p. 19). This idea of a broad concept or theme that held the year together has been a part of Pierce's teaching for years. She said, "I am committed to the power of that to create a cohesive year for the kids and to provide them with touchstone experiences

and concepts that we can return to to help them see the connections.” Pierce explained to me how she developed the theme, *All Men Are Created Equal*:

I was looking for something that would help them understand what is the big idea of the 1800’s. If there is one thing that you will remember about the 1800s, what is it? I talked to the curriculum coordinator and said, “Talk to me about this time period, the way you would want an AP high school class to understand.” And from that discussion we found this theme [All Men Are Created Equal] worked well. It also gave me the excuse to work with contemporary issues of justice and equity and take it back to the roots of inequities in the 1800s. The essential question, the enduring understanding. I was looking for more than, “what are the five things you need to know about the Civil War.” I was trying to make the lens bigger.

This excerpt illustrates several aspects about Pierce’s educational beliefs. First, she was committed to the idea of depth over coverage. She was not interested in passing on specific facts to students as much as helping them to understand particular time periods and how these can provide a context for understanding contemporary issues. This excerpt also illustrates her commitment to helping students see the contemporary world issues that relate to the historical study. Here Pierce describes the development of the broad concept, *All Men Are Created Equal*. During a conversation we had after a PBS taping session, Pierce explained:

I searched for that overarching idea that helps provide continuity across the year. *That All Men are Created Equal*, was a really useful one. It still continues to be. I’m enjoying that one and plan to use it again as long as it continues to be fresh for me. When it stops being fresh for me I’m going to have to find a new one even if it works for them [the students].

This broad concept allowed Pierce to tie the two contents together, scaffold critical literacy concepts, and provide unity throughout the year.

*Throughout the third quarter, Pierce focused her curricular engagements on Immigration.* In the third quarter, one area of study was the Immigration unit. This unit came after the unit on Native American rights and before a unit on the industrial

revolution. The curriculum was written in a way that the study of immigration focuses on the 1800's. This created a problem for Pierce as she began researching information about immigration. She found it difficult to represent diverse perspectives, as much of the immigration literature and historical data was about European immigrants. She struggled to find immigration stories about people of color. She shared her own learning when she said, "One of the things that struck us as professionals was how hard it was to find immigration novels of people of color or even non-European immigrants." However, Pierce was able to use contemporary immigration novels and contrast those with the stories they were learning in social studies about immigration in the 1800's. Pierce explained:

the kids were really taken with novels like *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) and *Dragon's Gate* (Yep, 1995). Those books were about people who came from society that highly respected them; they were honored in their own society. But when they came to America there weren't. The kids were really troubled by this. It's almost like a backwards rags to riches. It helped the kids to understand the passion behind people who chose to immigrate.

Throughout the Immigration unit Pierce and her teacher intern smoothly integrated social studies content with literacy. Some of the curricular engagements included interviewing family members about immigration experiences of ancestors; viewing documentaries; searching the internet for resources; creating maps to represent journeys; and writing poems, journals, and vignettes from the point of view of immigrants. The students also did an informal inquiry in which they browsed through nonfiction texts to find information on immigration and then charted the information they found on a timeline on the front white board. This inquiry led the students to develop a generic outline for immigration stories that included the following components: what was going on in the

homeland, why did the person chose to leave, what was the journey like, what was the initial reception in America, and how did they adjust to life in a new country? This story outline was used as students worked with themed sets of picture books, and in their literature discussion groups helped students make sense of the books and compare and contrast contemporary and historical immigration stories. It also provided a frame for understanding the key phases of the immigration experience, making sense of the immigration stories they read, and connecting contemporary immigration issues and experiences with those of the 1800s.

The students were captivated by the information they were discovering in the immigration unit as Pierce describes:

Two things seemed to capture the kids the most. One was that the African Americans brought here on slave ships were not considered immigrants. When you look up things on immigration you can't even track African Americans until the 1900's and that really shocked the kids. The other was the role of the Chinese who came to work on the railroad. The United States actively recruited Chinese laborers and then there was the fear that too many were coming over and they were concerned the Chinese would take over. Very similar to what we did with the Native Americans. We studied some political cartoons that showed this mentality. Then we studied legislation on reducing the numbers of Chinese that could immigrate. That was the start of the immigration laws and quotas that are still in place today. That helped up make connections to today's issues.

Pierce provided opportunities for students to engage in inquiries about immigration and use that information to make sense of the novels they were reading. At the same time the novels reminded the students of the human aspect of immigration, putting faces and family stories behind the facts, figures, and laws relating to immigration.

The immigration unit engaged students in the human experience and drew them into the issues that surrounded immigration. Several of Pierce's students had their own fairly recent immigration story to share. During a text set discussion, I overheard Tiffany



and Jin discussing Jin's recent immigration from China to the United States. Jin was asking Tiffany what route would have been the best route for him to take from his home country to America. Tiffany, in a pink gel pen, drew a map on her hand and provided the most direct route and then in a green gel pen offered alternative routes. This scenario was significant for several reasons. The first was that it illustrates the students taking ownership of mapping and the skills that they were learning in social studies. However, more importantly, the scenario illustrates a sharing and understanding of the immigration story as something that is meaningful and essential to discuss. In this particular class, the students did not always value Jin. However, one of the powerful members in the class, Tiffany, took the time to discuss and learn about Jin and his story. The immigration unit was powerful in creating opportunities for students to share their own stories while at the same time learn social studies content and explore larger social issues. Pierce commented:

I was really struck with the strength of the connection with the research and social studies inquiry and the influence of the novels for the literacy piece. It was probably the most successful integration of the year. Where the two became seamless, you couldn't see the boundaries between the two. And reflecting on that unit I feel that both curricular areas are well represented in that unit.

#### *4) The Pedagogy*

Pierce uses a variety of pedagogical methods to engage her students in the issues and topics they are studying. She describes how she sees her pedagogy in a broader sense:

If I look at it in a schematic, the base is beliefs about teaching and learning: curricular theory. On top of that I put curricular structures. These are generic structures that go horizontally throughout the year: literature study, dialogue, partner reading. Those are key structures that I use regardless of what I am teaching, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. That gives me

a structure for the day, week, month, and year. Within that I plug in strategies. For me literature study is a curriculum structure we do all year long, but we may change the strategy. It may be writing in their journals, quiet reading, etc.

Pierce scaffolds her view of teaching strategies from her beliefs about teaching and learning and from structures she knows are effective.

*Pierce uses literature study to help students better understand issues in regards to Immigration.* Pierce uses literature study as one of the many ways she creates a “culture of talk” (Gilles & Pierce, 2004) in her classroom. From experience, reflection, action research, and professional reading, Pierce has developed an in-depth way to structure literature study inquiries. She creates engagements that often follow, but are not limited to, the following chronology:

I like to begin planning with the *target text* in mind – this is the text or text set that all students will work with or the key focus of our work. Thinking about the themes we are studying and/or the overarching concept we are dealing with this year (*All Men are Created Equal*), I read the text closely to see which themes or perspectives it might add to our discussions. Karen Smith talks about a similar planning process in which she reads the selected novel closely to inventory what it might provide to readers. This is not to say that either Karen or I feel that this is the *only* thing the text might offer, rather, we are looking at the text in a particular context and for a particular purpose. Then, having selected these perspectives, I build text sets of primarily picture books to help set the stage or to introduce the reading. Students spend time – one to five days – reading and discussing these text sets and sharing their insights with one another. This provides a shared background for our reading of the target text, and helps prepare the students to look more deeply in the target text. During the reading, I make note of particular questions, themes and issues that emerge in our discussions. I listen to the students talk about the target text, review what they’ve written in their response logs, and consider the perspectives they have chosen to share in our presentations. Sometimes these questions, themes and issues mirror the ones I selected to introduce the text, more often they do not. Then, as a group, we generate a list of big ideas or themes that have helped us look at the book. I ask students, “What have been the dominant questions, themes, or issues that you found yourselves returning to again and again in your discussions? What are the big ideas that you came to in your discussions?” From these, I build a second set of

text sets – each set to represent at least one of the big ideas from our list. Again, students spend 1-5 days reading and discussing these texts. Sometimes we present again, other times the sharing is much less formal. Finally, we return to a culminating discussion of the target text, informed by our work with these themes.

This chronology guided Pierce as she developed her immigration unit. She explains her literature study structure through the notion of mega text sets (see Appendix P for a visual representation of the mega text set chronology). Students are placed into literature discussion groups based on their choice of novels. After reading and discussing within their own groups, the students jigsaw. The new groups include students who each read a different book. These groups discuss the big themes that emerged in their respective books and begin to draw comparisons, look for patterns, and understand larger world issues. This rotation often ended in whole class discussions in which the students and teachers shared their new understandings.

*Pierce uses a text set cycle to foster deeper discussions.* Pierce used the initial text sets and the mega text sets together. Text sets are groups of texts pulled together with the purpose of exploring a particular theme or topic. These texts are read by students to “facilitate the connections” students make as they “compare and contrast the related texts” (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988, p. 358). For example, in the immigration unit, Pierce began with the initial text sets: making changes, dreams, two cultures/two worlds, perspectives, friends, and finding my place. After students had read and discussed their texts in small literature groups, she then moved the students into the mega text sets in order to foster an even deeper understanding of immigration. The mega text sets groups made up of at least one student from each of the novel groups: *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000), *Dragon’s Gate* (Yep, 1995), *At her Majesty’s Request* (Myers, 1999), *A Step from*

*Heaven* (Na, 2001), and *Behind the Mountains* (Danticat, 2002). The students discussed these novels, jigsawed, and shared their learning with the whole class. Pierce described the goal of using text sets:

A part of helping students go deeper into their reading is to situate the study of a particular novel or text set within a larger inquiry. The literature becomes the tool to invite/support students in looking more deeply into a topic, issue or theme.

The text set structure Pierce created scaffolded the critical talk. Devon described his experience in the *Two Cultures /Two Worlds* text set:

Well, in *Two Cultures/ Two Worlds*, I changed my point of view probably two or three times about, like, the basket of books we read. One book I would have a certain point of view and the next I'll have a different point of view.

By providing multiple perspectives of a particular topic, Pierce prompted students to begin thinking about their own understanding. This thinking was visible in the resulting critical talk.

*Pierce shares her perceptions of critical conversations.* In a key-note presentation at Hofstra's International Scholars Forum in March 2004, Pierce articulated her current understanding of critical conversation:

I'm defining *critical* as in *essential*. Critical conversations are essential to the learning of the participants and to their lives....Critical conversations are critical or essential to student learning. But I'm also using *critical* as in *critique* – looking closely to examine cultural, social, and political beliefs, actions and systems that perpetuate the status quo; that keep the power relationships the way they are. So we're looking for critical conversations that are essential to students' lives and their learning, that involve a sense of critique. For students, any learners, to engage in such critical conversations, they must take place within a supportive learning community in which learners feel comfortable taking risks, putting forth half-baked ideas, and raising difficult questions that examine their own and others' beliefs and actions.

This understanding of critical conversation comes from Senge's (1990) systems perspective in which he writes "there are multiple layers of explanation in any complex situation" (p. 52). He argues for three levels: events, patterns of behavior, and systemic structure. Events are viewed most commonly in our culture and thus we often rely on a reactive stance. Patterns of behavior are when an individual focuses on "seeing longer-term trends and assessing their implications" (p. 52). The third level, systemic structure, Senge suggests, is the "most powerful" as it tries to answer the question "What causes the patterns of behavior" (p. 53). This parallels Kohl's (1996) cultural iceberg metaphor. The portion of the iceberg apparent above the water represents the behavior, words, customs, and traditions that are visible characteristics of culture. The portion of the iceberg usually hidden underwater represents the beliefs, values, assumptions, and thought processes of the culture. These hidden or deep characteristics are similar to Senge's second and third levels of systems perspectives. Pierce pushes her students to engage in critical conversations so they will begin to grapple with those deeper, more systemic levels of understanding. Pierce then suggests that:

...critical conversations enable us to explore events and patterns at the systemic level, at the level at which we are dealing with beliefs and world views. Literacy and oracy – reading, writing, talking and listening – can help us move to this deeper level. Critical conversations are the types of exploratory conversations needed to go deeper.

This excerpt illustrates Pierce's belief that literacy, most notably critical conversation, is a way for students and teachers to begin to grapple with ideas that are bigger than the text. This priority on talk and the critical discussions that result can be seen in her response to an interview in March. She said:

The literature is really not the end. It's a means to the end. And there've been times all year, where I get the sense that they just plain didn't get the

book. And that's okay as long as the books sparked really deep conversations.

### *Summary of Context*

Pierce's philosophy, the middle school environment, and the pedagogy used provide a context in which to understand how students were able to engage in critical talk. Pierce, in her writing, presentations, and interviews shed light on the environmental framework in which these discussions occurred.

### *Additional Themes That Informed Question One*

In determining how a teacher enacts, nurtures, and sustains critical talk, four additional themes emerged: 1) the teacher's knowledge; 2) processing time; 3) various forms of scaffolding; and 4) oral rubrics. Though the following description separates these into defined categories, the themes cannot be viewed as mutually independent of each other.

#### *1) Teacher's Knowledge*

The first and most obvious characteristic of Pierce is her own knowledge of the students, children's literature, and of the literacy and social studies content.

*Pierce had extensive knowledge of her students.* The term "kidwatching," first named by Goodman (1978) and later expanded by Watson (1992), is used to describe the "enlightened observation of learners; it is a professional endeavor enacted by teachers who have done their homework on learners, learning, and language development" (Watson, 1992, p. 99). Goodman's initial work (1978) on kidwatching emphasized the developmental process of language and language learners, and that teachers making informed observations was an informal alternative to testing. Goodman discusses the need of building a professional sense:

Professional sense comes from the interplay of what teachers know about language and learning, what they observe in their relationships with students, and the knowledge that is built on those relationships. The professional sense becomes more focused as teachers seek opportunities to raise their intuitions to a conscious level. (Goodman, 1989, p. 6)

This professional sense is essential to being a kidwatcher. Watson (1992) elaborates by defining successful kidwatchers as teachers whom “have no doubt that they are informed about their students’ development. They have confirmed some of their expectations and they are totally surprised by other observations” (p. 104). The data validated that Pierce was a skillful kidwatcher, someone who was informed not only about the nature of learning, but was an avid observer. For example, the following excerpt is from an interview Pierce and I had close to the end of data collection. We were discussing the way in which the students were grouped. Pierce said:

And we’ve been really watching Steve because in one context he seems to feel really confident and he contributes a lot and in other contexts he doesn’t seem as willing to contribute and we wanted to build a group intentionally where he felt he could contribute a lot. So that’s how he ended up there.

In this excerpt Pierce explains her regular observation of Steve and how that observation informed teaching decisions.

Sometimes this observation of students did not always provide such clear answers, like the following excerpt about Ray and Janet. Several times Pierce discussed what she was seeing in the class and shared her thought process of how she was beginning to make decisions based on her observations. This excerpt came from a discussion that occurred during the immigration literature study in which four students were reading *A Step From Heaven* (Na, 2001). Here Pierce is discussing her concerns

about this group's progress during the literature study in which the students after the first day felt like they "ran out of stuff to talk about":

It's painful. This far along in the year it shouldn't be happening. They ran out of things to talk about and that's a really rich book. And there was a lot of discussion about the book before they read it. And so I know it's not just the book, but I can't figure out is the book just not connecting with this group of kids or do we have a particularly unusual group. We have Ray who does exactly what you tell him to do. He's a very good student because he does exactly what you tell him to do. And then you have Judy who reads voraciously but she doesn't talk and she doesn't write. And she doesn't process.

This excerpt illustrates Pierce's thought process as she begins to sift through the information she collected from kidwatching. After this discussion, she sat down with the group and as a nonparticipating member took copious notes while they held their literature study. She was then able to pour over her notes that evening and return to the group the next day to help extend their discussion.

Pierce's knowledge of students and how students learn continually appeared as a strength, which led her to facilitate critical talk. The following excerpt, from Pierce's teaching journal, illustrates not only her awareness of a potential problem with two students but her attempt to draw on her knowledge about student learning to hypothesize about the problem:

One thing that's fascinating me right now is that Judy and Suzanne will both risk getting in trouble in class for reading when they shouldn't be – they both have books with them that they just can't put down. But, they aren't keeping up with the reading of the literature books, even though they got to choose. I'm also worried that Janette is having troubles understanding and responding to what she reads. I wish now that I'd had more tape of that group's discussion so that I could have analyzed more of what she WAS saying. Hard to sort out whether this is a reading issue, an ELL issue, or a "work completion" and motivation issue. Will have to look closer.



Being cognizant of individual student needs as well as student learning allowed Pierce to address problems as well as successes in a timely manner, which nurtured the critical talk. In the above excerpt, Pierce's recognition of the problem was only the initial stage. She used her journal to wonder about the possible causes. From this reflection, Pierce was able to become more aware of the issue and thus begin to take action. This continual use of her knowledge of student learning and her particular students appeared frequently in the data. The data were collected in the third and fourth quarters; thus Pierce had had several months in which to observe and learn about her students. However, it is this use of her knowledge that the data suggests may have impacted the occurrence of critical talk.

*Pierce has broad knowledge of children's literature.* Another area in which Pierce had considerable knowledge was the area of children's literature. Huck, Helpner, Hickman, and Kiefer (2001) argue that teachers must have a strong knowledge of literature in order to "provide children with a frame of reference to direct their insights" (p. 570). They argue that knowing literature helps the teacher "tune in to where children are and extend their thinking and understandings" (p. 570). This knowledge frees the teacher "to ask questions directly related to the needs of the children in the class" versus relying heavily on predetermined, textbook questions.

In Pierce's classroom not only was her own library fully stocked with the best in children's literature, she frequently referred to various critiques written about particular pieces. When I asked Pierce about how she prepared for teaching sixth grade this year, she responded, "I read a lot of young adolescent novels, because until this time I had focused more on books for younger kids." Pierce taught elementary and believed that one

important factor that would influence her effectiveness as a literacy teacher was her knowledge of young adult literature. During the three months that I worked with Pierce, she often bought, read, and shared young adult novels with me.

When Pierce was not familiar with texts from a particular genre or topic, she worked diligently to find appropriate pieces. The best example of her research process was when she was looking for novels that represented the Native American perspective. This occurred during the beginning of the immigration unit, as she wanted novels that illustrated the effect immigration and the westward expansion had on the native people. Though she checked the school and local library, she also referred to other sources that would provide her with information as to authenticity and accuracy of the information in published works. She checked several sources: a website (<http://www.oyate.org/>), the book *Through Indian Eyes* (Slapin & Seale, 1998), a review of Native American literature found in the *New Advocate*, and various colleagues well-versed in children's literature. All of these resources allowed Pierce to find quality, multicultural literature to share with her students.

Pierce's knowledge of children's literature allowed her to recognize the importance of putting good literature into students' hands. Fiona called the books Pierce brought into the class the kind "that picks you off your feet." Pierce broadly read young adult literature and researched new titles, checking those titles against reviews. Huck, et al. (2001) state that in the selection of children's literature, "reliable reviews of children's books play an important part" (p. 605). Pierce's awareness of children literature reviews also encouraged the students to read more deeply into their books. The following excerpt

is from an interview in March with Pierce. I asked her how she dealt with authenticity within multicultural literature chosen for literature study. Pierce stated:

One of the reviews of that [*A Step from Heaven*], I think it was in *Kaleidoscope*, talked about the fact that it was a really rich book, has authentic perspectives, it's written by somebody from within the culture, but there's an inaccurate piece in there. It's just one thing, one phrase, or one term that's used inaccurately. I'll tell the kids that right up front, "Somebody read this book and found a problem with it but they are still recommending it, let's talk about that."

This excerpt illustrates Pierce's knowledge not just of specific titles that might be appropriate for middle school students, but an in-depth knowledge of the text as well as what others have said about it. The excerpt also illustrates how Pierce shares this knowledge with students, thus encouraging them to take a more critical approach during their own reading of the text.

*Pierce was knowledgeable in literacy and social studies contents.* The last aspect of teacher knowledge is having an extensive knowledge base; in Pierce's classroom that included both literacy and social studies contents as well as effective pedagogy. Geringer (2003) stated that having a good teacher is "the single most important factor affecting student learning" (p. 373). Darling-Hammond (1997) agrees, stating, "the single most important determinant of student achievement is the expertise and qualifications of teachers; what teachers know and can do makes the most difference in what children learn" (p. 38). Pierce has this expertise not only in her profession but also in the content in which she is teaching: literacy and social studies.

Pierce has extensive knowledge of literacy. She has published widely on such issues as literature study (Pierce, 1991; 1994), talk in the classroom (Pierce, 1995a; 1995b; 1999), children's literature (Beck, Koblitz, O'Connor, Pierce, & Wolf, 1999;

Beck, Pierce, & Nelson, Faulkner, 2000), and writing to learn (Pierce, 1988). This strong literacy background provides her with the knowledge needed to facilitate the smooth integration of the two contents. Since the social studies curriculum drove much of the curriculum, Pierce reflected on how she acquired some of the social studies content:

A lot of what we are getting ready to do in social studies is influenced by things that I did as a member of my community, and very little to do initially with my work as a teacher. But I suddenly found a connection and that knowledge base is now becoming very helpful. I worry about early career teachers who haven't had as much time to soak up lots of different topics or ... hadn't had the chance to teach a lot of subject areas. They are not as likely, I am assuming, to see connections across subject areas, not as likely to have the depth of knowledge, in other topics...Where the history, science, literacy things just seem to jump out at me.

In this excerpt, Pierce acknowledges this particular characteristic of her teaching, but seems hesitant to accept it as a prerequisite for critical talk. She does agree, however, that the knowledge gained from life experiences and in-depth study did help her make connections between the subjects area easier.

Pierce did not know everything. Often when she found an area she did not feel as confident in, she began to research and learn more. Knowing that she was going to teach immigration in sixth grade, Pierce traveled to Ellis Island and visited the New York history museum, which had exhibits on tenement housing and the life of children in the 1800's. While there she not only toured the facilities, but also bought books and videos to use in her class during this unit of study. Pierce describes this trait when she reflects upon herself as a teacher:

I've had a chance to explore a lot of different topics and I'm a fairly curious person so I tend to collect information not knowing when I might need it. I think that influences the way I look at both the literature and our teaching of social studies.

This natural curiosity and life-long learning, provides a foundation for the teaching of literacy and social studies contents. Pierce is continually learning and adding to her store of knowledge. This is illustrated yet again in her explanation of her preparation to teach social studies. She said, “I read pieces of textbooks that are used at the college level to give me a deeper understanding of what might be in the text for the kids.” Pierce was dedicated to gaining a stronger understanding of the topics and issues covered in her sixth grade class.

*Pierce was knowledgeable of effective pedagogy.* Beyond content knowledge Pierce was also aware of effective teaching strategies to pass on that knowledge. As previously noted, she has extensive knowledge of pedagogy. She has accumulated this knowledge from experience, reflection, and inquiry into effective pedagogy. Pierce stated, “Years of experience [led me to effective pedagogy], but that by itself is not sufficient. There has been a concerted effort to reflect on that experience.” Reflecting on her teaching occurred in the many critical friends groups she had been a part of in the past years. She explained how she was influenced heavily by Kathy Short’s idea of inquiry:

the whole idea of curriculum as inquiry and what does it mean to have inquiry drive curriculum. That built a foundation in which my instructional practices are built. I am constantly holding up as a heuristic, the notion of reflecting on what happened in our teacher study group and what does that tell us about what we are thinking about what students are doing in inquiry study groups. I constantly look at how the two inform each other.

Being able to use her own experiences, reflection and inquiry in her own life has led her to develop best practices in her teaching. She described how her philosophy of education and her own learning has driven much of her lesson planning:

I am basically a constructivist. My job is to create these curricular engagements where the engagement is designed and selected because I think it has tremendous potential to support their learning which means it has the potential to have them face anomalies. I selected curriculum engagements that are open-ended so that kids can access them from varying developmental levels or from different ways so that they can participate regardless of where they are. This is heavily influenced by my experience in teaching multiage. I had to design experiences so that 6-10 year olds could all engage in the same experience. I had to think more broadly.

As Pierce stated earlier, her teaching experience was not enough to help her develop effective teaching strategies. However, Pierce is aware of the scholars who have influenced her thinking and is able to articulate a philosophy. From this she then inquires into ways in which her philosophy can be put into practice, thus discovering a never-ending source of teaching strategies and techniques. Pierce's understanding and adoption of constructivist theory was influential in how she perceived her role in the classroom.

## 2) *Processing Time*

This section, *processing time*, is a way to articulate Pierce's deliberate and intentional pace of her curriculum, of her daily lessons, and of her oral transactions with individual students. Gross (2004) argues, "Educators must feel empowered to negotiate structures that limit and constrain their actions while confident that their decisions will result in positive outcomes" (p. 261). The time that Pierce provides her students in her curriculum, daily lessons, and oral transactions illustrates the confidence she has in her decisions and her ability to resist outside pressures to accelerate through material.

*Pierce pre-planned her curricular pacing for the year.* Many teachers feel the pressure of curriculum coverage over content understanding. Pierce also felt the pressure to cover the material, especially in her social studies curriculum. In a discussion about curriculum pacing, Pierce stated one of her concerns was:

getting through it all. Each social studies unit was so rich not only in terms of what it offered conceptually. Any one of the units could have been a yearlong study and I wanted to be intentional about addressing each of them in an intellectually honest way.

This excerpt illustrates that Pierce, too, felt the intense pressure of coverage. However, she remained strong in her belief that “Deeper is better than faster.” Wiggins and McTighe (1998) write, “A matter of understanding involves inquiring both into what makes knowledge knowledge and how to turn discrete skills into a purpose repertoire” (p. 25). As Pierce began her preparation for teaching social studies she inquired into the big questions:

I talked to the curriculum coordinator and pushed him to give me insight into the big questions. I didn’t want to get bogged down in covering units and concepts. But bottom line, how does this fit into an ongoing stream of learning about social sciences particularly with the historical inquiry?

It was this big picture that enabled Pierce to then develop her curriculum map for the year, outlining what would be covered in each quarter. Though she admittedly did not stick to the map exactly, it was a guide that provided a timeline. Pierce attributed her pacing to the curriculum map:

I knew about how much time each major unit was going to take in order to get through the year and still be done. So I knew that Civil War had to finish by semester or we wouldn’t be able to get everything else done. In the past, other 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers worked on the Civil War unit second quarter and third quarter, so they did basically a unit every two weeks in fourth quarter, if they did it. So part of that was that I budgeted my time ahead of time. So I knew that if I extended Civil War a week, I knew up front, I would have to take it out of something else. That’s partly why I didn’t feel the pressure because I had already planned out where I was going.

Pierce’s focus on the big ideas and her organized curriculum planning enabled her to keep an intentional pace that allowed for a deeper coverage of the content material.

*Pierce extended individual lessons to provide additional time to ensure student understanding.* Time for processing appeared also in the context of Pierce's individual lesson planning. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) write, "The craft of teaching is combining the art and science of blending adult objectives with student needs and interests" (p. 168). Several times in her journal, Pierce reflected on timing issues for individual lessons. This included concerns about moving too quickly, whether individual students needed additional time, or where students were in terms of content understanding. One example of this reflection can be found in Pierce's teacher journal:

I'm not sure about timing. I'm anxious to move ahead, and yet I know they need time to mess with these books. I'm hopeful that they can dig into the books quickly, and still have time to select books for lit groups. I'm thinking that Monday may be the earliest we can introduce the lit books – using this week to read, browse and reflect on the text sets. The themes in the text sets are essential to supporting the deep reading of the literature books.

This excerpt illustrates Pierce's attention to the need for slowing down and allowing the students time to process the information they are learning. Other pacing decisions occurred due to more logistical reasons. Pierce wrote in her journal:

I realize that I was rushing them in order to keep to a reasonable calendar. I should have spent more time today on the Cinderella discussions and then moved into the text sets...I sensed they were ready to move on from Cinderella. This gave them a chance to move on in their minds but in my mind I know that we'll come back to it.

In this excerpt, Pierce moved on due to external pressures of time, but remained aware of the need to continually bring the students back to the issues they were discussing during the Cinderella unit.



Creating deliberate pacing was a theme that emerged many times in talking with Pierce. This next excerpt, longer than most, was in response to my question, “Can you describe how you decided to move from the text sets into the novels?” She responded:

Some of it is intuitive so it is difficult. With text sets it’s like a cycle. Early in the cycle it is, “Wow, these are books. Look at this book.” It’s show and tell. Then when they go deeper, they start to see connections. On the third level, I hate to use the word level, is when they begin to critique the perspectives within that text sets. Steve’s text set conversation about *America Is* is an example of this level. That is an essential awareness. The fourth is when they are ready to start posing questions and grappling with issues that we are getting ready to go into in the novels or social studies content. If they are not ready to go on, then you wasted the time. To really take advantage of the potential of text sets you have to stick with it. So until kids have lived with those ideas, until they are ready to hit that 4<sup>th</sup> level, you can’t predict how long it will take. Sometimes it depends on what they brought in with them in the first place and sometimes it is how abstract the ideas are to begin with. Asking questions is essential. If they get to the connection part that’s fine, sometimes I can scaffold the last part. The Cinderella text sets are an example. They were comfortable with the story but it took a little longer to critique it. Once they get there, I can move to another text and get to that critical thinking part. We don’t have to stay in the text set, because we can keep coming back to it.

This excerpt describes exactly how Pierce uses her knowledge of student learning and curriculum to help make the day-to-day lesson planning decisions. Pierce acknowledges in this excerpt that the time spent in text sets may vary for several reasons. A pre-scripted, recipe version of her lesson planning could not occur. Each text set rotation takes a different amount of time based on the students’ background knowledge and experience or the theme of the text set.

*Pierce provided additional time for individual students to work through and articulate their thoughts.* This theme, *processing time*, emerged also within Pierce’s interactions with individual students. She intently listened to each student’s response. When the response was not the expected or the response or was completely off base,

Pierce processed with the student, helping her to work through the idea. Wheeler and McLeod (2002) refer to “in the moment events” and argue that teacher’s must respond to these events in ways that “preserve the continued integrity of the learning environment” (p. 714). The following excerpt illustrates how Pierce worked together with a student, Kelly, to understand her response. In this section Kelly is reporting to the class about the topic that most interested her group in regards to the Cinderella text sets:

Kelly: One is the race.

Pierce: Tell us what you mean by that.

Kelly: Most of the Cinderella stories that we read had something about how the race was in the book

Pierce: You mean the culture that was telling the story gave you insight into that?

Kelly: There weren’t any mixed cultures.

Pierce: Oh, always within a single culture. Fascinating. So you want to talk about how it is that a Cinderella story usually focuses on one culture and doesn’t show multiple cultures.

This is a typical interchange that illustrates how Pierce encourages students to think through their oral responses. She does this when students are using high levels of language and their responses are not providing concrete information, when the response is incorrect, or when she herself is unsure of the thought process of a particular student.

In reviewing my field notes I found myself frequently noting Pierce working with an individual student and helping that student process information. Pierce suggested that her ability to do this came from her feeling comfortable with the long-term goals of the class. She explained, “I knew what niche that the experience was filling for the inquiry, the unit, the whole year.” Being comfortable with the big picture of the curriculum allowed Pierce to take advantage of the teachable moments or the extra time spent to ensure understanding. She also attributed this ability to slow down and focus on an individual student’s response to:

years of experience with kidwatching, knowing how much I can learn, like when I know someone's answer is a bogus answer, it's like a miscue, it creates an anomaly for me and it made me interested in knowing where was that kid coming from and what could I say in front of the whole class.

This excerpt illustrates how Pierce's in-depth understanding of student learning was a motivator for her to see incorrect responses as a window into the student's thought process.

Last, Pierce attributed her willingness to process with an individual student as a means of detracting from growing stereotypes. The class had several students who were considered socially inept by their peers. Pierce stated:

I was really conscious of not contributing to that growing stereotyping, as often as Jin asked an off the wall question, he also asked insightful, really interesting questions and I didn't want the other kids to write him off...I wanted to make sure that Jin was taken seriously.

This excerpt illustrates Pierce's sensitivity to Jin's status in the class and her effort to reduce the effect of his often "off the wall" responses. Pierce also talked about another student, Steve, who frequently asked somewhat off-topic questions. She explained that upon first meeting Steve, teachers often "write him off as a disrespectful, mouthy kid." But after talking to his mother and learning more about him, Pierce realized the "questions he asked in class were not meant to be disrespectful, in his mind they were real questions." Valuing student responses is often stated as an effective teaching strategy (Warwick & Maloch, 2003). However Pierce takes it one step further and explains why it is so important for her to value every question:

Do not underestimate these kids, treat every question as the most brilliant question you ever heard for the sake of the kids, of those who need to be seen as successful, but also so they continue to ask questions. The saying, "there're no stupid questions only those who refuse to ask questions." If I believe that, then I have to treat every question that comes to the table with respect.

### *3) Various Forms of Scaffolding*

Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) first introduced the term “scaffolding” to describe the “process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90). Vygotsky (1978) extended this by providing insight into what he termed the “zone of proximal development” which he defines as, “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 88). Scaffolding then is “providing support to help learners bridge the gap between what they know and can do and the intended goal” (Fournier & Graves, 2002, p. 31). Warwick and Maloch (2003) argue that “teachers who have a clear view of the learning as a social process, and of the need to scaffold the learning of their pupils in specific contexts, can move pupils forward in a manner that allows them to internalize an understanding of the ‘game plan’ encountered in those contexts” (p. 61). Scaffolding therefore is a tool that teachers use to help students experience success. Three types of teacher scaffolding emerged from the data: curricular scaffolding, scaffolding of talk, and deliberate scaffolding of critical literacy concepts.

During an interview in February, Pierce articulated her belief on scaffolding. She said:

[James] Gee has a piece on physics. There really is no Physics 101; you just enter into the stream of conversation within the profession itself and you pick up what you can and take off from there. Like Frank Smith’s notion of the literacy club, you know, the stamp collectors get together; you don’t wait until you reach a certain competence level to join the conversation. You just join in and you continue to refine. The point in which you joined in and the point at which I joined in –we’re not bringing the same things necessarily but we still add to the conversation. So that

influences my notion of scaffolding. My scaffolding is how to help students become part of the conversation.

*Pierce scaffolds curricular engagements.* One way Pierce scaffolded students' content knowledge was through her curricular map. The purpose of creating the map was two-fold; it enabled her to assure coverage of the curriculum while at the same time planning activities, strategies, and projects that built upon one another in a deliberate way.

An example of the way Pierce scaffolded the knowledge in her sixth grade curricular engagements was “the notion of a research paper:”

I was told by my predecessor that the research paper is a big part of 6<sup>th</sup> grade. So I built in each quarter something that built up to the research paper—for example, the Civil War magazine. Each student had to have a bibliography, each student had to have their notes, and each student had to identify the genre they were going to write in, the thesis, and all their notes to show their research. Even if they did a book review or a political cartoon you needed to have research. We built up the thesis as taking a stand and building up support. We defined thesis as a statement of opinion about which reasonable people might disagree...So I knew by the end of sixth grade they should be able to write a fairly in-depth research paper. So I built in things along the way so that they could understand the importance of the components.

As Pierce planned out her year, she made sure she was inviting her students to partake in various aspects of the research paper so that when they were finally asked to write one, the students had experienced each stage and knew why it was important.

Another example of Pierce's deliberate curricular scaffolding was in the use of a broad concept. The theme she chose, *All Men Are Created Equal*, was a way for the students to continually return to those aspects of perspective and equality. Pierce stated:

...by the time we got to immigration they [the students] had fairly sophisticated ways of approaching text. It's easy to see what worked in

immigration and trace it back to what we did at the beginning of the semester. I can't say that in September I knew this was where we were going, but there's a great potential to get there.

This excerpt illustrates how Pierce scaffolded her students through the use of an overarching theme. Each time she returned to the question of how a particular text or additional information related to the broad concept, she helped students to become more comfortable with looking at texts through different lenses.

The final culminating project in Pierce's sixth grade literacy and social studies classroom was the Dreams project. This project invited the students to reflect on the big questions from each of the four quarters, and connect those ideas to their contemporary lives. For example, in second quarter the students studied the Civil War. Pierce reminded the students of the big questions the students explored during this unit and asked them to choose one question to reflect upon. Tim chose to write about why people fought the Civil War and connected it to his own life by describing those things that he cared enough about to fight against a family member. Third quarter focused much on immigration and the industrial revolution. Jean chose to respond to the theme of progress and connected it to her own life by relating what she hopes her generation will be remembered for and describing the cost she was willing to pay for that progress. The project, when completed, was similar to a magazine in layout. The students downloaded, scanned, and/or drew illustrations to capture their own perceptions and views of the big questions and issues from the year and referenced particular books that were influential to their learning. Pierce said, "The Dreams project was the ultimate scaffolding. Everything we did all year long built up to that Dreams project."

*Pierce scaffolds student talk.* Pierce also scaffolded the talk in her classroom. In the keynote presentation at Hofstra International Scholar Forum in March 2004, Gilles referred to this as creating a “culture or climate of talk.” Pierce used talk in a variety of ways throughout the class; it was part of her daily classroom routine. Students were given many types of forums to use talk. Some of these forums were informal and for a short period of time. For example, in the middle of the read aloud, *Raisel’s Riddle* (Silverman, 1999), Pierce gave the students 23 seconds to tell the person sitting next to them how the story was different than the Disney version. Another day she had students check their neighbors’ planners to make sure it was filled out correctly. During the introduction of the literature study books, she had students tell their group which book they would choose and why. From these short, informal talk sessions, students learned to use talk for a variety of means. They became comfortable communicating with everyone in the class and the idea of “talking in class” became less of a novelty. These examples reflect Pierce’s view on talk. In an article for *English Education* Gilles and Pierce (2003) urge teachers to explore the value of different talk strategies in the classroom in order to gain a new perspective on “learning, teaching, and working with one another” (p. 74)

Other times the talk in Pierce’s classroom occurred in longer lengths of time. In an article describing talk in a science classroom, Mueller (2002) suggests that in order for students to effectively learn through talk, “a great deal of time and planning” is required (p. 298). The same is true for other contents as well. For example Pierce had the students work in groups on larger projects like the Civil War magazines, in which the students spent an extended amount of time in the same groups researching the information and formatting their magazine. Through this extended time, students became comfortable

working with one particular group and working through diverse opinions to make a cohesive final project. Warwick and Maloch (2003) argue that through scaffolding of talk, students move “toward more independent and collaborative work with peers” (p. 60).

Pierce also used a variety of grouping techniques such as jigsaw, pair share, and student-selected groups. Sometimes the students picked the groups based on common interests. Other times Pierce picked the groups based on who worked well together or who needed similar instructional support. The groups ranged in size from two to six members and the memberships of the groups were fluid, changing frequently.

Pierce said using talk in her classroom comes from intentionally, “creating time in the day to do meaningful talk. By that I don’t mean filler, turn and talk to your neighbor. It’s very intentional time where talk serves a purpose.” Her use of text sets is an example of purposeful talk. She explained, “each time I tell them to get in a group and talk, it’s because I want them to go to the next level of analysis.” Therefore she provided her students with time for a “meaningful purpose that is connected to big ideas.” The students are accountable for the talk in Pierce’s classroom. Pierce is committed to:

...holding them[the students] accountable in that talk time to themselves, to others at the table, and to the rest of the class. It could be as simple as summarize the three themes of talk at your table and report them to the rest of us, or record them in your literacy logs or social studies journals. We try not to leave the talk hanging. I move it to presentational talk or written or rough draft work as often as possible. By that I don’t mean several times during the talk, but a concerted effort at the end of the talk episode to report.

This excerpt illustrates her dedication and commitment to protecting the time for students to use talk to learn. Another way Pierce holds students accountable for their talk is through her role as a teacher. Based on her study of Barnes’ (1975/1992) work, Pierce



believes that “if you want to know what kids are working at understanding, listen to their conversations.” Because of this she is often seen walking around the classroom dropping in on student discussions. She said, “I float around the classroom during the table talks. I don’t know exactly what I am looking for. It is an intuitive feel of what is on track and moving forward.” Pierce’s use of talk in the classroom is highly influenced by her work with Douglas Barnes. She explained, “The influence of Douglas Barnes on my thinking is beyond significant. One is the difference between exploratory and presentational talk. In my mind I protect more time for exploratory than presentational. When I am planning, that is my priority.”

Pierce also scaffolded talk through her use of writing. The students used their literature composition books as a strategy to help them plan future discussions, organize information during discussions, and reflect on past discussions. For example, during the Cinderella text sets, Pierce asked the students to create a list of possible questions, issues, or topics they would like to explore further. She then collected the lists, read through them, and returned to the students a master list of all the questions. This allowed the students to not only see what others thought was important or interesting to talk about, but prompted the students to dig deeper in their discussions by providing them with additional questions to ponder. Some of the questions are as follows:

- Why is it always a girl who is pretty in stories like these? Why not an ugly boy?
- Why do you have to have nice clothes all the time? It’s still the same face when the clock strikes 12.
- It’s kind of disturbing that the prince falls in love with Ashenputtle [sic] based sheerly [sic] on looks, and the sisters fall in love with the prince based completely on power.
- What would happen if you changed her [Cinderella’s] race but not his [the prince’s]?
- What would the stepsister’s/step mom’s/prince’s version of the story be?

These questions were not frontloaded by Pierce, but emerged from the students after reading and discussing the Cinderella text sets. Other ways the writing scaffolded the talk was through basic organizational techniques used during the discussions. The students were encouraged to keep notes of their discussions, sometimes formally, other times informally. When they were formally asked, it was usually through the use of a graphic organizer. To stay with the Cinderella example, the students were asked to create a graphic organizer in which the various versions of Cinderella were compared. They made note of the Cinderella character, the element of magic, the supporting characters, the tests Cinderella faced to be deemed worthy, etc. in each variant they read.

Writing supported the talk by helping students reflect on their discussions. The following is an excerpt from a journal in which Tim reflects on the Cinderella text sets (underlining from original writing):

Do girls seem to be more desirable to men than men are to women? It seems like it. It's always the boy asking the girl to go out, the girl dressing up for him and the man falling in love at first sight with a girl in modern culture, never visa versa. Even in literature, Adam was made for Eve, and the prince fell in love with the decked out Cinderella. I suppose it's just a common belief found in the beginning of time that women were made to be man's companion one that's less true than anything in reality. Cinderella kind of follows this frame, kind of not.

This excerpt from Tim's composition books illustrates the use of writing as a way to facilitate reflection on the talk within his group. In an interview at the end of the research,

Tim told me:

I think that her requirement for summary and response is really good because it helps us, while they may not go right into our conversation, it helps to kinda get us going. If we just bring one up in conversation and then it can start a whole conversation.

*Pierce scaffolds the critical literacy concepts students choose to explore.* Last, by drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, Dewey's (1938) "more knowledgeable others" and Wells' (1990, 1999) "literacy apprentice," Pierce scaffolded the critical literacy concepts of her students. The best example of this was how she slowly and deliberately led the students deeper into the notion of multiple perspectives. In the beginning of the year, Pierce provided many themes that the students could choose to pick up. In talking about the theme of multiple perspectives, Pierce stated:

The kids ended up turning it into a major theme. In the past the kids picked up on the idea of "That's not fair, and I'm going to something about it?" This year these kids latched onto perspective. I couldn't have predicted it. It's easy to see how it happened, but I didn't say, "we're doing perspective this year." It's built into how you take a critical look at history; it's trying to understand the perspective of different players, the author of the story. In that sense it was everywhere.

Though the students picked up of the idea of multiple or alternative perspectives, Pierce allowed the theme to emerge in the classroom and even facilitated the occurrence of it. One way she did this was by bringing in a picture book. *A Diary of a Wombat* (French, 2003), is tale told from the wombat's point of view. After the read aloud, Pierce asked the students to recall the fractured fairy tales that are also written from a nontraditional point of view (e.g. Scieszka's (1996) *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*). She invited the students to continue to look for perspective, point of view, and whose voice is being heard as they began their Cinderella text sets. Another way Pierce facilitated the continuation of the multiple perspectives theme was through the introduction of literature study novels. During her book talk of *Music of the Dolphins* (Hesse, 1996), Pierce said:

At times our perspective as human is more sophisticated, more advanced, but these books, that author says, what if you took the perspective that dolphins or wolves have a more sophisticated or caring value system?

And again during her book talk for *Witness* (Hesse, 2001), Pierce said:

Now this book is written with each chapter written by a different member of that community. To get a lot of different perspectives on what happened when the Klan tried to come in...So a lot of people were working for change but because their perspectives were so different they were working for different things.

Both excerpts show Pierce bringing the critical literacy concept of multiple perspectives to the forefront of the students' thoughts so that they may choose to take up the invitation to continue the inquiry.

Another way Pierce scaffolded the critical literacy concepts was in the choice of text sets she created for the students. In talking about a particular choice she had made for a text set, Pierce said:

I chose the book because it could support multiple inquiries...a really rich book has the potential to stimulate really rich ideas within the reader. That led to how I chose books, how I chose curriculum engagements. I look for texts that have a tremendous potential to transact differently with different readers.

To continue with the multiple perspective example, in both text set rotations there were six themed text sets the students could choose to browse. Both rotations included a text set on multiple or alternative perspectives, however, the books changed. For example, the first text set on multiple perspectives, which Pierce described in her journal, were "books that take a different perspective than the one commonly assumed, or books that show a character with a different perspective – raising questions and seeing things in a different way." These books included *Sleeping Ugly* (Yolen, 1981), *The Wednesday Surprise* (Bunting, 1989), *All I See* (Rylant, 1988), *How Does it Feel to be Old?* (Farber, 1979), *Dinnertime* (Williams, 2002), and others. In the second rotation of text sets, which had the overarching theme of immigration, the set on multiple perspectives included books

such as *Marianthe's Story: Painted Words/Marianthe's Story: Spoken Memories* (Aliko, 1998), *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 2001), *Over the Deep Blue Sea* (Ikeda, 1992), *Nim and the War Effort* (Lee, 2002), and *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993).

Pierce continually scaffolded the critical literacy concept of multiple perspectives across books thus helping her students to get deeper, and since it was a theme that they “latched onto” the students felt ownership in it and were internally motivated to continue the inquiry. Pierce spoke about the multiple perspectives theme:

But it really came to a head when *Wreckers* (Lawrence, 1998) did their skit. It was one of those touchstone events where *The Wreckers* skit became a culturally constructed symbol. You could say *The Wreckers* skit and it would conjure up a whole cluster of ideas from the kids.

In this excerpt, Pierce describes a presentation to the whole class in which the literature study group who had read and discussed the book *The Wreckers* did a dramatic interpretation of the idea of listening to multiple perspectives. The presentation was done in a tableau vivant format in which the group members each broke from the tableau to share a possible perspective of a particular character in the book. As each character spoke, the student shared what that character might have been thinking about the events in the book. This presentation, fabulously executed by the students, left a lasting impression on the rest of the class with many classmates referring to the presentation as they worked through their ideas about multiple perspectives and searching for whose voice was not being heard. Much like a “touchstone text” (Nia, 1999), this dramatic presentation became a touchstone event that scaffolded the students’ understanding of multiple perspectives.

Pierce also scaffolded the critical literacy concepts through questioning or prompting students during whole class discussions as well as during literature study.

Warwick and Maloch (2003) describe the teacher's role as establishing "conventions and approaches that can be appropriated by the pupils through modeling and clear expectations" (p. 61). Pierce not only provided the questions for students to ponder, but modeled the type of discourse she wanted them to enter. The following is an excerpt from a whole class discussion. In this exchange, Ethan's group is reporting back to the whole class about what they wrote about on their agendas for future discussions about the Cinderella text sets:

Ethan: Let's say that, let's say that Cinderella is telling the story and she is saying how she never talks back and how she is so beautiful and how the stepsisters are so mean, but if the stepsisters told the story they'd probably say the same thing about her. So what would it be like if she was like the evil one and the stepsisters were all the nice ones?

Pierce: And like I said I do have a copy of a book in here where somebody did just that. They said what would happen if the stepsisters told the story. How would they view the same event? Like the wombat book, if the wombat is telling the story it looks one way; if the humans are telling it it's another way. How many of you have read...what's the one about the...John Scieszka's book about the wolf and the three little pigs...

Carrie: *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*

Pierce: The wolf is saying, "I've been framed. I've been set up. It didn't happen that way at all." There's a lot of market in telling the other point of view. Okay so finding another point of view. The Cinderella stories that we all read have been told from the point of view of the Cinderella character. There are other characters whose stories haven't been told or whose perspectives haven't been represented. Think about the history of the United States, told, written mostly by white people. People of color, their story hasn't been fairly represented and certainly not through their own voices until more recently.

In this excerpt Pierce does not ask the class a question, as her goal at that time was not to spark an immediate discussion. Instead she validated the group's idea and offered

information that might prompt additional thinking about the issue and potentially fuel future discussions.

Smith (2001) writes about critical conversations in her college classroom in which she found when the students touched on critical literacy concepts there was “quiet discomfort” (p. 162). Pierce talked about this feeling as she described how the students felt as they began to wrestle with critical literacy concepts. She explained that when her students are confused, she feels like she is getting through to them:

One of my favorite responses is, “I am so confused” or “I don’t get it.” I live for that. Some of that is from the very beginning of the year. We talk about “brain blaster work,” “making your brain hurt because you are that unsettled with the ideas.” That is a desirable state to be in. I think there are times when kids think there is something wrong with being confused.

This excerpt illustrates that Pierce is cognizant of the difficult nature of unpacking critical literacy concepts with educationally and/or economically privileged students. She shares this awareness with her students in order to help them feel more comfortable with those often new feelings of disequilibrium. Piaget refers to disequilibrium as the period of time in which a learner is forced to make sense of new information by either accommodating or assimilating that information into existing or new understandings, respectively (Lavatelli, 1970). Pierce believes it is her job to value this feeling. She said, “Dewey and Piaget talk about when your brain kicks into high gear. It’s my job to increase the likelihood for their brains to do that.”

#### *4) Oral Rubric*

I am using the term *oral rubric* to describe those times when Pierce orally provided the class with directions of what was expected, the type of talk they should be engaging in, and feedback to the students about their talk. This idea is similar to Warwick

and Maloch's (2003) "oral framework" in that the expectations and directions are explicitly stated (p. 61). However, I chose to use the term *oral rubric* to emphasize how Pierce used this as an informal way to guide and gauge student discussions. Phillip (2002) describes the role of rubrics in the classroom as providing students "with quality criteria, guidelines, or standards of evaluation connected to an assignment" (p. 26). Though evaluating talk in the sense of assigning a grade, inevitably changes the nature of that talk (Barnes, 1975/1992), this informal assessment informed Pierce's teaching decisions and is not meant to evaluate student talk in order to produce a grade. In an interview with Pierce, she stated, "My role was my quick assessment of what they were doing and how they were doing. And there were times when I would drop in and listen and then I left." This quick assessment enabled her to make in-the-moment decisions about how best to nurture and sustain the discussions. Pierce commented on the *oral rubric* theme:

The oral rubric I think is a really fascinating way to talk about that. And I noticed today as I was giving directions, even yesterday, that I was, in my head I was playing that through and I was thinking, "Yeah that's a good fit." And I think it connects back to an early question that you asked, I tried to be very explicit about what I expect them to do so that the conversation goes well.

*Pierce gave explicit directions for small group work.* Pierce gave thorough directions each time she had the class work in text sets or in literature study groups. The following is a typical example of Pierce's directions. This excerpt is from the Cinderella text sets and illustrates the type and extent of directions Pierce provided her students:

There were a couple of questions. I'd like to clarify those. After you are done reviewing, then on one sheet of paper which is in the middle of your table, one person writes down what is the agenda that has been generated by your group. One person writes down the questions, issues, or topics that you want to discuss further. Issues raised by the Cinderella books.



Now I know most of you don't really want to talk about Cinderella. We've had plenty of time to talk Cinderella; you know the story. But what are the issues about people, about culture and values, about how people relate to one another? Or questions that are just interesting things that you are asking yourself. Those are the things that you want to capture on your paper. Everybody in your group should be contributing ideas and one person write those down. If you have more than five go back and pick out, put a star next to the three to five that are the most important or the most interesting to you.

This excerpt exemplifies the thoroughness of her directions as well as the clear way in which Pierce explains her expectations of the time spent talking.

Another example of Pierce's clearly laid out sets of directions she provides the students is illustrated in the following preparation for a whole class discussion. Pierce spoke to the class:

We're going to talk as a whole group. I'm going to ask one person from each table to tell us what is the topic or the pink label for your pile of books....First I am going to ask you to share what is the topic of your books and secondly to summarize for us what are some of the things you've been discussing in your groups. We don't want to hear about individual books, we just want to hear what some of the big ideas.

In this excerpt, Pierce is preparing the students for a whole class discussion, by explaining clearly the information she expects to be shared with the class. She not only describes what she is looking for but also what she is not looking for. This resembles the matrix found on a written rubric.

Yet another example of Pierce's use of verbal directions prior to sending the students into groups occurred before a literature discussion group in which the students were reading their immigration novels. Pierce said:

Okay at your tables here are your discussion questions. Are you ready? I'm not sure. Amy are you ready? [pause while she waits] Discussion questions: What have you been reading so far? What do you think about the book so far? And then I want you to talk about the characters. What is happening to the main character of your book from beginning to end? Is

the character changing? How are the character's life experiences influencing the character's beliefs and ideas? And anything else that came out of the reading that seems important to you, put it on the table for discussion. We will have about 15-20 minutes in your groups. I will be monitoring groups to see how the conversation is going. And then I may stop in and give new directions depending on how things are going, alright? So general reactions, what are you reading, what are you thinking, what do you notice about the main character, and what else do you want to talk about. Alright? Talk.

This excerpt illustrates Pierce's directions for the group. The directions include not only the time length the students will be given, but also guiding questions for the discussion. These help the students better understand what Pierce expects of them and what she will be looking for as she is "monitoring groups."

*Pierce provided explicit criteria for the type of talk she expected in small group discussions.* Pierce also explained clearly to the students the criteria or the type of talk she expected within the groups. Wiggins (1998) defines criteria as "the conditions that a performance must meet" (p. 154). For example, Pierce may remind the students that they should be asking questions or that they may be feeling frustrated or confused while they are struggling with deep issues. Other times she explains that they are presenting to the class, which means that they should be clear and easily understood. The following came from an oral rubric that Pierce provided the class about their literature study discussions.

She said:

Your responsibility is to use these books to help you see things differently, more deeply, more complexly...I know you can read the book, that was never an issue. But your job is not just read the book, but to use the book as a springboard to new, bigger, deeper ideas...So start right now by soaking in new ideas in your own head...because sometimes those new ideas take a while to percolate through and come up to the surface.

In this excerpt Pierce explained to the students what the standard was for the discussions.

She was not looking for plot summaries of the book; she provided the students the

“quality criteria” for a good discussion (Phillips, 2002, p. 26). Pierce valued the use of talk in helping students learn, but also articulated those views to the students so they knew exactly what was expected of them during that particular discussion.

Another example of Pierce providing criteria for the type of talk she expected was during her directions for the immigration text sets. She explained to the class:

Eyes up here so I can give you directions. You are going to have about 15–20 minutes. During that time you are supposed to read, browse the books. Read some, skim some, look through some others, just try to get a sense of what are all the books in our basket? How do they all go together? You know how they go together in a certain sense because of the topics I gave you. But now you want to look at, see, so what do all these books contribute to those ideas? How do those books help me think about that big idea? What connections do I make to the Cinderella conversations we’ve been having? What connections do I make to the discussions about native rights? Okay. Three very different ideas. So play around with all three. Mostly you are going to be reading quietly; there can be a little bit of whispered sharing. A little bit...I’m going to be giving you a piece of graffiti paper for your whole table and you are going to just scribble thoughts, ideas, pictures, whatever, on your table.

This excerpt illustrates two of the aspects of an oral rubric. First, it provides the directions or the requirements for the assignment: read through the books using the questions provided as prompts. Second, it explains to the students the type of talk expected: whispered sharing.

*Pierce provided constant feedback to the students during their small group discussions.* Another subset of the oral rubric is feedback. Wiggins (1998) defines feedback as “information about how a person did in light of what he or she attempted—intent versus effect, actual versus ideal performance” (p. 46). Pierce orally provided the students with constant feedback throughout the class. She encouraged students to have serious discussions, gently refocused groups by reminding them of the questions they should be talking about, asked the class to keep the noise level down, requested feedback

and evaluation from the students regarding aspects such as the amount of time they felt they still needed, and other logistical aspects. Pierce provided positive feedback by praising groups who have good discussions and students who bring up interesting ideas. As noted in the scaffolding of critical ideas, students often became confused as they struggled to understand bigger more abstract ideas. Pierce helped students become comfortable with that confusion. The following is an exchange between a student and Pierce during a literature study discussion:

Lee: I'm very confused now.  
Pierce: Oh good, I love it when you are confused.

Another similar example occurred after a literature study discussion. Pierce asked the class:

How many are feeling a little anxious, a little frustrated and like, this isn't working? Good, then you guys are on the right track. It should be hard, it should be confusing, it should be uncomfortable. That's a sign that your brain is working.

These excerpts illustrate how Pierce not only helps students to accept the confusing feelings that arise as they explore deeper issues, but also provides positive feedback when the students are in that uncomfortable phase.

Another example of providing feedback occurred during literature study discussions. Pierce interrupted the students to share some concerns:

I have a few concerns as I look around the room. One is some groups are having sub-conversations, meaning two people are over here have one conversation and two people are over here having another conversation. Your goal is to have a shared group conversation. Secondly in order to hear the people at your table your voices are getting louder and louder and louder. Try keeping your voices at the table. Do you understand what that means? That means your voice should be loud enough so that the people at your table can hear, but not loud enough so that the people at the next table can hear.

This excerpt is a typical example of the many times Pierce had to remind her students about the noise level. It was an aspect Pierce struggled with herself. As the students became engaged in the discussions, the noise level in the class rose. They became excited about the issues they were discussing, or often debating. However, the noise level also disrupted other groups, thus there were times when Pierce felt compelled to remind the students of the appropriate volume for classroom talk in order to provide an atmosphere for everyone that was conducive for discussing. This type of feedback occurred frequently as the different groups' discussions ebbed and flowed.

During a whole class discussion, in which the students were getting excited about the ideas shared, they all began to talk at once about the themes that were emerging. Pierce called attention from the class through a series of claps that she and the students developed as a way to get everyone's attention. After the students quieted their side conversations, Pierce said:

This won't work if we have sixteen conversations. We need to have one right now. You have had a lot of time to talk in partners, a lot of time to talk in small groups, now it's whole class time, which means one person at a time talks.

This example of oral feedback illustrates how Pierce positively redirects the students. She explains to them the type of talk that is required in this type of forum. In a large group discussion it is inappropriate and often considered rude to have side conversations. Pierce explains this to her students and redirects their enthusiasm back to the whole class discussion. An important note to make about this subsection of oral rubric is that Pierce did this throughout the year. These examples came from third quarter. The students had been participating in pair, small, and large group discussions. This information was not new. However, Pierce often reminded the students of the type of talk she expected in the

particular forum in which they were to participate. These reminders prompted and reminded the students to consider their role and responsibility during the group discussion.

There were times when a particular literature discussion group struggled for one reason or another. This next example occurred at the beginning of the class with a group discussing *At her Majesty's Request* (Myers, 1999). The day prior, the group, which was unusually large, had problems working together. Pierce first reminded the whole class what their responsibility was as a group member. She explained the students' role was to:

...help one another to understand this book in more complex ways, and to sort out the questions and issues that you have about your book, to help one another to know what is happening, to help them use the book, to help them think new ideas about immigration. Remember, just knowing the plot is not sufficient. You need to know how the book connects to immigration, and you need to know how the book invites you to think about characters' lives in different ways. So cultural differences, moving from one culture to another, and immigration and all those themes we've talked about in immigration should be part of your conversation.

Once Pierce provided the rest of the class with instructions and ensured they were working, she sat down with the struggling group and provided a more structured set of directions specifically for them. She said:

This group had troubles the other day talking as a group. My criteria for success for you today is that everybody at the table, Steve, that everybody at the table has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way. That means everybody talks and everybody listens and everybody invites other people into the conversation. This should not be a one sided conversation.

By providing specific directions, the type of talk expected, and timely feedback, Pierce was able to facilitate and sustain the type of discussions that ask students to think in "more complex ways."

### *Summary*

Four themes emerged from the data that informed the first question, *How does a teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk?* The themes, teacher knowledge, processing time, various forms of scaffolding, and oral rubric enabled Pierce to extend her students beyond the traditional literature study discussions and move them to be more critical readers. Her extensive knowledge, be it of students, learning, or children's literature, enabled her to create curricular engagements that fostered critical talk. She scaffolded both the talk and the critical literacy concepts in order to create for the students a safe environment in which they felt comfortable engaging with concepts that were more difficult and touched on more personal and often emotional topics. She used an oral rubric to direct and redirect particular groups, state explicitly the type of discourse, and provide feedback to the students as they began to engage in these discussions. Throughout all of this, Pierce ensured that the students had the time to not only talk about issues, but to value student response and allow extended time for student discussion.

### Examining Question Two: What is Critical Talk?

Though Pierce and I felt like we knew intuitively when students participated in critical talk, defining these occurrences required an in-depth analysis of the data through various lenses. The questions that guided this portion of the research were as follows: What is the nature of critical talk in this literacy-social studies middle school classroom? How is it identified? What are its characteristics?

The following discussion begins by describing the context of each of the ten

transcribed excerpts we identified as critical talk, as the context helps to inform the question. These excerpts on average are two to three pages long and can be found in their complete form in Appendix A. This includes an introduction to the students and the dynamics of the group, the directions and assignments, and other pertinent information necessary for understanding the context of the discussion. Next the discussion chronologically addresses the questions posed in an attempt to create a comprehensive understanding of the type of discussions that occurred.

#### *Context of Selected Excerpts*

In order to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the selected excerpts, I read all of the transcripts and together with the classroom teacher chose ten excerpts deemed “critical” to further investigate. The ten transcripts were chosen as the best examples of extended discussions in which students took a critical approach to understanding social issues within the text. The ten chosen represent all the students in the class; however, this was not intentional.

Six of the ten excerpts were text set discussions. Students routinely sat in assigned seats at round tables with three to four students per table. In their table groups, students were asked to choose a crate full of themed picture books. The teacher provided a brief introduction to each crate before each groups made their selections. The first day the students spent reading and browsing the selections. The subsequent days were spent discussing the texts in a small group. I observed three different text set rotations. The six that were selected all originated from the immigration unit and all were collected during the days the television crew taped the class.



Three of the text sets excerpts came from a group of boys: Steve, Jeff, Tim, and Carl. This group was reading books that were grouped under the theme *Two Cultures/Two Worlds*. The group was intentionally created by Pierce and her intern in order to create a group in which all members could be successful. In the past, Steve had struggled in other groups. The two teachers wanted to create a safe and nurturing group for Steve. They did this by placing him in a group with two strong students, Tim and Jeff. Tim was strong in all aspects of literacy. He was a voracious reader, deep thinker, excellent writer, and thoughtful listener. Jeff, much more of a typical adolescent, loved sports and was involved in many extracurricular activities. Jeff was confident in his role in the classroom and was not shy about speaking his mind; yet Jeff was patient with others. These two stronger students provided Steve a feeling of security to participate effectively in the group. Carl also was a member of this group. Carl, though a high ability reader, struggled with outside forces that often left him, like Steve, unable to productively work in a group. However, with the support of Tim and Jeff, Carl, too, was able to succeed.

The other three text sets each were made up of different groups. The *War and Peace* text set group was comprised of four girls who, like the all-boy group, complemented each other well. The girls, Tina, Fiona, Aisha, and Emily, were placed together to foster a strong discussion. Tina and Emily were both straight A students in literacy and social studies. Fiona and Aisha both struggled. Aisha had an IEP for language difficulties and Fiona struggled with outside issues that often impinged on her ability to concentrate on school work. However, both Aisha and Fiona provide an important element into the group. Since this group was so carefully picked by the

teachers, Aisha and Fiona found themselves in a supportive group, in which all the members valued their input and listened to their ideas. This enabled both Fiona and Aisha to flourish. However, they also helped Tina and Emily. Tina and Emily, who were top students, struggled with the process of exploring books to construct unifying themes or questions for discussion. They often wanted the “right” answer, Emily more so than Tina. This constant need to have the right answer, or say the right thing, often inhibited the discussion. By adding Fiona and Aisha to the group, the girls were able to explore issues that were not as comfortable for Tina and Emily. Fiona and Aisha’s authentic questions brought out issues for Tina and Emily that may not have risen had they been placed in a group with members who had similar educational characteristics. This is similar to what Barnes (1975/1992) suggests occurs in peer groups when a more capable peer helps to provide information to the group while a less capable peer asks questions that often challenges the more capable peer to articulate his/her ideas more explicitly, making stronger connections between themes.

The last two text sets, *Fitting In* and *Journeys*, were mixed-gender groups. The text set, *Fitting In*, included Evan, Ray, Charis, and Beth. This group was unique in that it was made up of all fairly high achievers. The difference between these students, however, was their willingness to engage in the discussions. For example both Evan and Charis often dominated discussions. Diametrically opposed to Evan and Charis, were Ray and Beth, who often quietly listened to the discussions. The text set, *Journeys*, was made up of Adam, Kelly, Jean, Tiffany, and Jin. This group consisted of three strong, popular females, Jean, Kelly, and Tiffany, and two somewhat undervalued males, Adam and Jin. Jean, Kelly, and Tiffany, all of whom were friends, were unhappy at first with the

grouping. The first few discussions in the group were wrought with chastisements from the girls telling the boys to stop fidgeting, to get focused, or to “shut up.” However as the group began to share personal information about their own cultures, the group slowly became a safer place for the boys. These last two groups were some of the most diverse groups, ethnically, socioeconomically, and academically. Within the four *Fitting In* group members, three ethnicities, two distinct religions, two languages, and two socioeconomic groups were represented. Within the five *Journey* text set members, five ethnicities, two languages, two academic levels, and three socioeconomic groups were represented.

Two of the ten discussions chosen to be included were from the literature discussion groups. These groups were chosen by the students through their choice of novels. After brief book talks and time to browse the options, the students gave Pierce their top three choices of novels they wanted to read and she placed them in groups based on those preferences. *Losers* (Spinelli, 2003) was a book Pierce chose to introduce to the students during an intermediary literature discussion rotation between the Civil War unit and the Native American unit. Five students made up this group. In the initial phase of literature discussion groups, Pierce did a book talk on ten to twenty books. The students then chose their top three choices and Pierce tried valiantly to assign the students their first choice. Often student ballots were used to narrow the range of options and then students were asked to select again from the smaller set of titles. *Losers* was one of the titles in the set and Pierce hoped that most students would read it in a discussion group at some point during the year. A majority of students had either read the book prior to sixth grade or in an earlier round of literature groups that year. The five students who comprised this group had not read the book at this point in the year. This group consisted

of Fiona, Charis, Sean, Devon, and Jin. The group was unusual in that none of the students were considered high achievers, yet many had potential. Fiona, who struggled with most of the texts commonly used in sixth grade, had deep insight into books and a naturally inquisitive nature. Charis was an average reader who was outspoken and often found it hard it to see other's points of view. Sean rarely participated in discussions as he struggled with a hearing deficit. Though the students used a microphone and were sensitive to his needs, when he couldn't hear the discussion, he often disengaged. His hearing loss made it more challenging for him to participate actively in small group discussions, even with the help of the microphone in his group. Sean worked with a language specialist and another resource teacher to help him keep up with the reading and process the text one-on-one. Devon was a strong student but often hid that fact. He had wonderful, insightful comments; however, he only talked when he "had a whole lot to say." Jin, a member of the Journey text set described above, was also in *Losers* (Spinelli, 2003). He had immigrated from China within the last fifteen months of my observation. He struggled with English language fluency and adjusting to different cultural norms, such as making friends, behaving inappropriately, etc.

The second literature discussion group, *Behind the Mountains* (Danticat, 2002), occurred during the immigration unit. The student members included Jean, Tiffany, Devon, and Aisha. All of these students have been introduced above; however the unique aspect of this group was that it began as an average group. They were neither struggling, nor having amazing discussions. Several times in my field notes I mentioned how tired this group seemed to be. They didn't seem to hit on a topic that was meaningful to them until one of the last few discussions. We were intrigued by the fact that, in both excerpts

taken from literature discussion groups of shared novels, the excerpts were selected from discussions that occurred near the end of the literature study and after students had completed the reading of the entire novel. In this classroom students participated in literature discussions of shared novels during various points along the way of reading the book and for several discussions following the reading of the book. At other times, groups met informally during the reading of the book, and concentrated their discussion time upon the completion of the book. Students established their own agenda for these ongoing discussions, within the parameters of the larger discussion. Both of the excerpts taken from literature discussion groups with novels emerged after all the students in the group had read the book, and both occurred near the end of the time allotted for literature discussions.

One excerpt took place during a whole class discussion. The class had been engaged in small group discussions of text sets of Cinderella variants in which Pierce was encouraging students to compare and contrast the stories to the familiar Disney version as well as examine how cultural information is embedded in folktales and fairytales. The whole class discussion brought the students together to share some of their findings and challenge students to think more deeply about the issues and topics they were uncovering. The whole class was involved in this discussion, however one student in this transcript has not been previously introduced. Mark was the lone Republican in a class of Democrats and often pointed out the differences in his political views. He was the student who complained the first month of school about the “liberal propaganda” Pierce “fed the students” by assigning them to read articles from *Teen Newsweek* published by Weekly Reader Corporation. Mark was outspoken and loud. He often chanted into my tape

recorder, “Bush Rocks.” He was incredibly intelligent, but often used his intellect to put others down. His comments, though sometimes offensive, brought out overlooked points and prompted dialogue and debate. Pierce commented that Mark:

pushed me to examine my beliefs about creating a space for all voices, about encouraging students to speak up about injustices they recognize, and wanting to promote a greater tolerance of others and a sense of compassion for those who have been oppressed.

The last excerpt we chose came from a modified jigsaw activity at the end of a literature discussion group. Each group was asked to create some kind of visual presentation to represent the theme of their book, write a thesis statement, and ask a thought-provoking question. The groups shared this with the whole class. After each group presented its information, the class divided into small groups to discuss the thought-provoking question. The presenters sat in on the groups to facilitate the discussion. The excerpt came from the presentation by the novel group, *The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place* (Konigsburg, 2004). The students presented a visual model and then asked the question, “Can children change the world? And if so what would you change?” The group members participating in the excerpt included Ethan, Evan, Jean, Tiffany, and Carl. These students have all been introduced prior except for Evan. Evan was a strong student who was popular in the school. A newcomer to the school district this year, he was very involved in school drama productions and various other extracurricular activities. Most recently Evan had the lead in the school play. Evan was an interesting student who was given the covert nickname, “Eddie Haskell” by the teachers. Evan often made thoughtful, complementary comments to Pierce, only to return to his group and say something hurtful to another student. His behavior wasn’t evident at first, but as the



### 1) *Fundamental Book Talk*

*Fundamental book talk involves students clarifying meaning and talking about literary elements.* Many of the literature discussions were what I termed “fundamental book talk.” Fundamental book talk is the foundation of literature study. Peterson and Eeds (1990) suggest discussions about books should include students talking about story structure, multiple layers of plot, characters, place, point of view, time, mood, and literary elements. They write, “Story elements provide insights into levels of story that may otherwise go unremarked. Talking about them provides us with a pathway for entering the text in the study of literature” (p. 26). I defined fundamental book talk as those occurrences of discussion that resembled Peterson and Eeds literary elements. However, it also includes working together to understand a particular text and questioning one another about confusing aspects. The following is an example of fundamental book talk. A small group of five students finished the book, *The Wreckers* (Lawrence, 1998), and this was the first discussion they had upon completion. The discussion began with the five students discussing whether one of the main characters had wanted to follow through with her plan to sacrifice herself to save the sailors. During this part, one group member returned to the text to support her point. The group discusses whether or not there was gold in the wrecked ship. The following excerpt illustrates how the students worked together to clarify the plot of the story:

Ethan: It was kinda funny at the end when there was no gold.

Carl: Yeah, it was just like people cheating him.

Jane: He was debating whether to stay on the island because of the gold.

Evan: I thought there was gold.

Carl: No.

Ethan: I thought there was until the end.

Tiff: I didn't think there was gold.



Jane: I thought there was gold and then he was debating about whether he should save his father at the end.  
Ethan: No, his father was debating whether to save him or the gold.  
Jane: No  
Ethan: Yeah.  
Evan: He was debating whether to give his father up because he was so mad at him.  
Tiff: Wait, I thought he was in chains.  
Ethan: Well once he got out of the chains....

This excerpt illustrates how the students talked about the text. Together they shared their initial understandings of the text and clarified points that might have become confused in the fast-paced story. This discussion continued as the group discussed the father's gruesome captivity.

## 2) *Socio-interpretive text talk*

*Socio-interpretive text talk involves students using social issues to get deeper in the text.* The next type of talk represented on the continuum is “socio-interpretive text talk.” This type of talk describes the instances when students used social issues to get deeper into the text. Though they moved closer to critical talk, they remained focused on the text and used their personal experiences, cultural knowledge, and social issues to better understand the text. This text-bound approach does include critique but does not extend beyond the text. It does include connecting the text to the world but occurs more broadly than the “text-to-world connection” Tovani (2000) discusses. Students do more than recognize the connection; they use the connection to add another layer to the discussion thus building and extending meaning from the text. The following excerpt illustrates this type of socio-interpretive text talk. The discussion occurred after the students had read *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), a novel in which the main character is sentenced to digging holes at Camp Greenlake for a crime he did not commit. The excerpt picks up

as the group is talking about the epilogue and what they wish they knew about the characters' lives at the end of the book:

- Kelly: Yeah all you know is that Zero's mom is sitting in chair.  
Tim: And his mom is like combing his dreads.  
Kelly: Or messing with his hair or something.  
Tim: And singing some. It says Zero's black, but then it said Madame Zeroni was Egyptian.  
Kelly: Egyptian?  
Tim: Then that makes no sense.  
Kelly: Zero and Madame Zeroni aren't parents?  
Tim: They're related. Hector Zeroni. That's the whole thing about him being carried up the mountain by a Yelnats.  
Kelly: How can that happen? That's impossible.  
Emily: She's Egyptian. She had like a grandson or something in America.  
Tim: Yeah but also I mean they can't just change races in some generation all the sudden.  
Kelly: Exactly. Unless you got married to a different race.  
Tim: They could inter-marry but even then you would look Egyptian, still.  
Emily: No you wouldn't. Because sometimes, um, like Tiffany. Tiffany's parents are African American and Caucasian.  
Tim: Yeah  
Kelly: African American and what?  
Emily: Caucasian

This excerpt illustrates how the students used talk prompted by the text. They were able to “construct and share personal interpretations” and make connections. Though they did not have the correct cultural information about the country of Egypt, they made connections to fellow biracial peers in their class to make a hypothesis of the ethnicity of Zero's family. Interestingly this line of dialogue stopped, there was a pause, and then Kelly said, “All the sudden it's quiet.” The group sat quietly for a while. When they continued, Kelly and Emily initiated the discussion with comments, “For me this book is really awesome” and “I think it's a really good book,” respectively. This example of socio- interpretative text talk represents how close dialogue can be to critical talk, but the students chose not to plunge into such uncomfortable topics. Though they connected

personally to social issues and used those connections to better understand the text, the talk remained text-bound.

Another example of this socio- interpretative text talk is the group who discussed the book *The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place* (Konigsburg, 2004), which is about a teen, Margaret, who tries to save her uncles' backyard sculpture from being torn down. The group was engaged in their first discussion since the entire group completed the text. This was also one of the few times that this group had an extended, on-task discussion:

- Tina: Margaret could have been black and we wouldn't have known the difference.
- Beth: Right, because she didn't say.
- Aisha: Right
- Mark: That might have been part of it. They were Hungarian.
- Beth: There is no black Hungarians.
- Tina: But they're her uncles. You know she could still be black and her uncles could be white.
- Mark: Does have a point. There is no black Hungarians.
- Tina: They could have married an African American person.
- Beth: Yeah they could have.
- Aisha: There were, from my point of view...
- Mark: Okay, if you were an African person, would you name your daughter Rose?
- Aisha: No
- Tina: They could have.
- Mark: She was white.
- Tina: Yeah but Rose isn't exactly the perfect name for a Hungarian person either.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Beth: She's Hungarian.
- Mark: She was born in America.
- Tina: Because she was born in American...
- Mark: But she wasn't black.
- Beth: Well it never said race, so you don't know.
- Aisha: Okay, in my point of view that is not a black book. Okay. It's not because a person in the book. Would an African American person name their kid Rose? No.
- Beth: Why not?
- Aisha: They would name her something else.
- Mark: She's[Aisha] African American, ask her.
- Aisha: I'm half African American.

Tina: So, Aisha could have been a black or white name.  
Aisha: Nobody that I know would name their daughter Rose.  
Tina: I know somebody named Rose.  
Aisha: That's African American?  
Tina: I didn't say who's African American or white?

This excerpt was also close to critical talk. Yet it remained socio-interpretive as they focused intensely on the name of the character and never moved to explore or come to understand underlying personal beliefs or systems that led each to perceive the character's racial background. In other words, the discussion remained text-bound. When Tina says "we wouldn't have known difference" at the beginning, she provided a prompt to dig in to personal understandings or societal beliefs that the group chose not follow. They instead tried to argue their point. It is important to note that this was one of the best discussions this group had. Some students in this group, for various reasons, did not keep up with the reading initially. The group also struggled socially with leadership and interpersonal issues. The group often deteriorated into negative comments about each other. Thus Pierce saw the above discussion as a success. The group was able to reach a level of sophisticated discussion about race as it affects literature and life. They willingly challenged one another's ideas in ways that did not shut down the dialogue. This willingness to wonder about the "invisible" parts of the story and to connect their anomalies to their own lives, was celebrated by Pierce as progress.

### *3) Critical talk*

*Critical talk involves students using the text as a spring board to discuss social issues.* In looking at the two types of discussions that made up the majority of the literature discussions in the classroom, I wanted to determine what made one dialogue

more “critical” than another. In returning to the data, the following definition of critical talk evolved:

Critical talk is longer stretches of talk in which students leave the text to articulate, reflect, and/or inquire into personal, communal, or societal beliefs; these discussions may shed light on a belief or provide a new lens in which to view a belief.

This definition, which emerged from my analysis of the data, is different from how others in the field define critical conversations (Harste, 1999; Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Smith, 2001). Karen Smith (personal communication, October 18, 2004) suggests critical conversations are those times when students focus on the “systems that either created, perpetuated, and make it [societal ills] exist.” Critical talk, then, is the dialogue that occurs in discussions where students become critical. Often, one or more students may suggest a systemic aspect of the concepts discussed, but it was not taken up by the rest of the group.

The following examples help illustrate the practical application of this definition. The first example is from a teacher-led literature discussion from the *Journeys* text set described above. Here Pierce joined the already in-process discussion, listened for a bit, and then decided to enter the dialogue in order to more explicitly scaffold talk:

- Pierce: So sometimes your words send a message that you didn't really intend.
- Jin: Yeah and sometimes in my country the basic rule to make friend is that you have to be working hard like try your best in your studies...But you have to study well, that's all they need.
- Tiff: I think that by the way people talk they are, like, persecuted sometimes. Like, people would sometimes ask me how come I don't talk black or whatever, you know, quote unquote. But most people don't actually take the time to realize that I'm half. My dad's Caucasian and so I grew up in, like, the suburbs so people just wonder how come I don't talk the same way most other African American people talk.

- Jane: I think it's kinda like *My Fair Lady* where she was judged. Back then you were judged on how you spoke and that would determine what job you could get and, you know, what you can do. I think that still sorta affected.
- Pierce: Can you expand on that a little bit? I've heard references to that, in fact, I've read books and things about that—what kind of language you use determines how other people view you either in terms of status or how smart you are or what your potential is. And I think you just challenged that a little bit. You said, “I may look black but I don't speak black and people shouldn't try to guess who I am just by the way I speak or guess what my culture is just by the way I speak” and you were saying that's true with *My Fair Lady* that just by the way she spoke there were limits on what she could do in society.
- Jane: So if you didn't really speak English here you won't be able to get as good a job. You wouldn't necessarily work at a restaurant which is, like, better pay than, you know, sweeping up a shop. So it just determines how much you know and how clearly you speak.
- Tiff: So I mean if you talked in a really thick different kind of accent it could be Chinese, Asian, maybe even sometimes it could even be a black accent but like shops they just won't take people who look or sound, um, different than from what they really want the customers to see or speak.
- Pierce: Why do you think that is?
- Tiff: I don't know. It's just like people are trying too hard to be accepted in you know in society and people are setting limits on what you can look like and what you can talk like so that they can have a better reputation.
- Pierce: Kelly, you haven't had a lot to say yet.
- Kelly: Well in different parts of the country and everything you have to like you have to do certain things to be accepted. Like for example where Jin is from you can do different things but they won't be accepted here.
- Adam: Me, like I come from New York [state] and I lived on a reservation so now since I came here everything's way different because now I live in an apartment and I actually have to like stay around because when I was in New York I could just go all around the reservation and it wouldn't matter so now when I come here I can only go up and down my street. So, I have to stay a little bit closer. I don't have more room. So it's a little bit different and when I come to school everybody like, because I dress, like, a little different, everybody thinks that that's not normal and just because like everybody looks at me and they think I am just black but they don't understand about being Native American.

This excerpt illustrates the critical talk definition. First it is a longer stretch of discussion in which an opportunity was provided for everyone in the group to offer ideas. The students, in sharing their own cultures, were able to articulate and reflect upon personal and underlying societal beliefs. This sharing was not dependent upon the text. The students used the text as a springboard to discuss societal beliefs. By sharing unique cultural experiences the group provided each other a new lens to view language use and stereotypes.

Another illustration of the critical talk definition is best represented in the discussion on multiple perspectives. Though multiple perspectives will be addressed later in this chapter, it is discussed here to illustrate that dialogue does not necessarily occur in one setting of a literature discussion group. This discussion occurred throughout the time I was in the classroom. The students latched onto the idea of multiple perspectives, Pierce nourished and scaffolded the concept through read alouds, text sets, and literature that brought multiple perspectives to the foreground. The students also returned to the idea on their own. The “perspective discussion” was a thread that occurred throughout the four months I collected data. The dialogue occurred as students gained new understandings of how the concept of perspective plays out in their world. The following examples are excerpts from various transcripts in which students return to the concept of perspective. The first excerpt illustrates how one student began to use the language Pierce modeled as she bolstered her understanding of the concept. This excerpt came from the *War and Peace* text set discussion described above:

Tina: My book was about, it was just about how people helped during, when slavery was a big issue.

Fiona: When you say people, what kind of people? Like what’s their culture?

Tina: One's like African Americans and how they were treated and stuff and what they did to help.

Fiona: So it was kinda like persp—I can't say the word.

Emily: Perspective

Fiona: Yeah perspective.

This example shows not so much the critical talk that occurred in this particular literature discussion but one of the many times students brought forth the idea of multiple perspectives in application. Other times the critical concept was brought forth as a way to help understand a text. For example in the following excerpt from the *Fitting In* text set, it illustrates how students who are familiar with the idea of multiple perspectives begin playing with the idea in their discussions:

Evan: I think we should change places.

Ray: Where?

Charis: Me and you

Evan: No. What if all people were a slave for two weeks?

Charis: I think you should, I think people should switch. You hear what I am saying, like be in somebody else's shoes for just like a week or two. So you could learn about a person. Not just to see what they go through, but learn another person's perspective on how stuff is so that maybe you could like, you could just like learn other people's perspective on life and slavery and just *stuff*.

Here, Charis is familiar with the idea of multiple perspectives but begins to imagine how understanding another's perspective could impact one's view. Yet another example of critical talk occurred during a whole class discussion about the Cinderella text sets in which Pierce asked the groups to share some of their initial ideas. In the following excerpt Ethan is sharing with Pierce his new view on Cinderella:

Ethan: Let's say that, let's say that Cinderella is telling the story and she is saying how she never talks back and how she is so beautiful and how the step-sisters are so mean, but if the step-sisters told the story they'd probably say the same thing about her. So what would it be like if she was like the evil one and the step-sisters were all the nice ones.



Pierce responds by suggesting Ethan read some of John Schiezka's books as well as some of the adapted versions of Cinderella, particularly *That Awful Cinderella* (Granowsky & Kiwak, 1994) in which the story is told through the eyes of the step-sisters.

The multiple perspective touchstone event occurred as the literature discussion group *The Wreckers* performed their tableau vivant. This skit illustrated the different perspectives of the characters in the novel by each student taking on a character and narrating one at a time that character's version of the events. The students returned to this time and time again in their discussions, using it as a point of reference to discuss perspectives.

During the final interviews many of the students referred to the new perspective they gained from others. For example Evan said:

I had a conversation in *The Wreckers* group that helped me realize how different views can be. Well, at first I thought only my idea was plausible then I heard some of the other ideas and I thought "there's no way I can believe that." But the other person, I realized, was probably also saying that about my idea.

Charis also talked about how the *Losers* literature discussion was her favorite because:

we got to see a lot of different points of view and opinions. Because like a lot of people thought he [the main character, Zinkoff] was stupid. Some people thought he was stupid. Some people thought he was just too happy. Some people thought that something was wrong with him. They had a lot of different opinions but it was just, you got to see because even though you are trying to understand a lot of people's opinions you can't understand unless you are talking to other people. So I think that was one of the best because *Loser* really talked about a lot of, it kept a lot of different points of views...

Charis went on to describe each of the points the group disagreed over and how they came to an understanding. She then explained that:

I learned that a lot of people are different but you have to like, they may seem kinda strange but people have think a certain way and a lot of people

are really, like, opinionated. Some people are opinionated but some people have really strong opinions and to decipher that is a really good thing.

These examples are just a few that exhibit the ongoing discussion of perspective and point of view. It fits the definition as it was “a longer stretch of talk” that occurred throughout the time I was there. For different students it occurred in different ways. For some it was an articulation of what they believed or were just learning about perspective, others used the idea to reflect on their current text or life experience, and still others inquired into the idea of multiple or alternative perspectives, focusing on whose voice was heard and whose was left out.

It is important to note that in viewing the continuum of the type of discussions the students engaged in, some groups reached fundamental book talk as a pinnacle in the discussion after much off task and unproductive talk. Others found fundamental book talk to be their mainstay and dipped into socio-interpretive or critical talk. It seemed these fluid movements between the types of dialogue on the continuum that occurred happened sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally.

#### *How is critical talk identified?*

When determining how to identify critical talk in the classroom, I first looked at the outward signs that would signal to a teacher that her students might be engaged in this type of talk. I analyzed the transcripts using three analytical lenses: content analysis, general semantics, and discourse analysis. From this analysis of the data, three features of critical talk emerged: 1) exploration of critical literacy concepts, 2) use of particular types of talk, and 3) participation in group discussions.

### *1) Exploration of Critical Literacy Concepts*

During the post interview, I asked Aisha to describe for me a discussion that occurred in the last few months that she thought was especially good. She referred to one of the discussions from the *Behind the Mountain* literature discussion groups.

Interestingly, the excerpt Aisha selected had already been included in the ten selected excerpts. I asked Aisha what she thought made that discussion so good. She responded, “I think because we got so deep in the conversation and talked about a lot of things like politics and how people’s lives are different, immigration, and stuff like that.” Many teachers assume that the topic of the discussion signifies whether the talk can be considered critical. If students talk about the concepts most related to critical literacy (i.e. racism, issues of gender and class, taking action, etc.), then teachers often classify the talk as critical. For example, a discussion about a particular character may not be critical unless that group discussed such aspects as stereotyping, social class, or racism in relation to that particular character. I agreed with Aisha’s comment and felt that the students did take a critical approach in the discussion. One way this was apparent was in the content the students discussed (i.e. “things like politics and how people’s lives are different...”).

In examining the ten excerpts, a combination of five major critical literacy concepts emerged from the student talk: exploring multiple perspectives; recognizing a need for action, hope, and perseverance; recognizing an injustice; challenging status quo and exploring an alternative reality; and sharing personal cultural knowledge/experience. The critical literacy concepts emerged as themes from the students and were not directly provided to them by Pierce. However, she did provide the literature that fostered these

types of discussions and protected the time for these students to engage in the dialogue. Allowing the concepts to emerge from the students instead of frontloading the concepts was a philosophical decision by Pierce. Though she created a fertile ground for the difficult discussions to surface, she did not choose ahead of time what particular critical literacy concept she wanted the students to explore. Instead she offered a buffet of topics through her literature invitations. One way she did this was by talking about various books and asking questions prior to or during discussions that would prompt students use more critical talk. Thus, the critical literacy concepts that emerged in the discussions were student initiated and developed from their interest in exploring those difficult ideas. In analyzing the ten selected transcripts for what the students were talking about, five critical literacy concepts emerged.

*Students explored multiple perspectives.* The most prevalent critical literacy concept explored by the students was the idea of multiple perspectives. As discussed above, Pierce observed the students' interest in this particular concept and thus provided engagements to foster these discussions. In the ten excerpts examined, seven discussed specifically addressed multiple perspectives. Recognizing and interrogating texts for multiple perspectives helped the students to no longer "read blindly, accepting how texts construct them" (Vasquez, 2003, p. 27). Vasquez (2003) argues that students need to "realize how text could be reconstructed in more equitable ways ... for people who have been marginalized, disadvantaged, or discriminated against" (p. 27). For example, the following excerpt comes from the Carl, Steve, Jeff, and Tim's *Two Cultures/ Two Worlds* text set discussion. I included only a portion of the discussion and I chose the portion the best represented the concept. The exchanged occurred after Steve described a picture

book biography he had read about a girl who wasn't allowed to sing in certain places due to her ethnicity:

Carl: Like you said before, people who come to the country they don't get favored. I don't understand back in the 1800's through the Civil War and slavery, when they were coming over they said that America was to be the land of tolerance and to honor all people's rights but what I don't get is that only white men got rights, no body else got anything. They were considered inferior and they still kept saying that we are in the right—we get all the equal rights.

Jeff: It's like all about, it's about them just trying to get people to come over because they had so many jobs they needed to have people who, it's basically a lie. They say we're the land of tolerance, so if you come over here you'll have rights and lots of money and they come over and they have no choice to go back. So they have to stay and they get taken advantage of.

In this excerpt, Carl turns the discussion back to the larger issue of immigration and wonders why people thought America was considered to be the “land of tolerance.” The boys try to consider other's perspectives to figure out motivational aspects of immigration all of which is not bound by the particular text that sparked the original discussion.

Another example of students exploring the critical concept of multiple perspectives is Evan, Ray, Charis, and Beth's *Fitting In* text set discussion I noted above. Recall the students were discussing who first came to America and who could technically be called “an American.” Charis and Evan recognized the value that the multiple perspectives have provided them particularly in their diverse classroom. This exchange is even more powerful considering Charis and Evan's backgrounds. Charis is an African American, urban female and Evan is an orthodox Jewish, suburban male. These two students came from drastically different home lives and yet they were valuing these differences as providing more richness to their classroom discussions. Charis in her post

interview extended this idea of valuing differences of opinion when she described to me her criteria for a “good” discussion:

Not only a good conversation but a, not only that it makes a good conversation but it makes a debatable conversation. Like when we were talking we'd be like you won't really be like no I think you are doing something, or I think you are doing something, or I think you are doing something. No I think he's stupid, no I don't think he's stupid, yes he is, no he's not, yes he is. It would be like a debate. Not only would that be a conversation but you'd have like you would be debating between is he dumb, does he do this, does he do that, you will be debating not only that but I think it makes a very good conversation. But the people have to be open to it or you might get serious fighting in the group. That's what he had, do you remember that? And yeah that wasn't a good thing. But if you're open to the conversation, I think it would be a very good conversation to have.

*Students explored issues of taking action, perseverance, and hope.* Another critical concept the students discussed was the awareness of hope, a need for action, and perseverance. Freire (1998) argues that his role as a critical pedagogue is not to “fold my arms fatalistically in the face of misery, thus evading my responsibility, hiding behind lukewarm cynical shibboleths that justify my inaction because ‘there is nothing that can be done’” (p. 72). It therefore becomes essential that students recognize hope, are aware of the need for action, and understand how others have persevered. Bomer and Bomer (2001) also describe how students need to “believe that the world will respond to their action, to learn diligence of striving, to develop identities as democratic participants, to be willing to walk ‘the long haul’” (p. 8). Six of the ten critical talk excerpts included some form of dialogue about hope, action, and perseverance. The following best illustrates these concepts. The first example is a discussion from one of Carl, Steve, Jeff, and Tim’s *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* text sets discussions. The directions given to the students by Pierce were to not only discuss their books but to begin thinking about the big

issues or patterns they saw across the texts that the students would like to share with the rest of the class:

Steve: The book I read, *When Marian Sang*, it's about this girl who's really good at singing but she can't sing wherever she wants, like the average white person would be able to do even though she was one of the best singers in the world she wasn't able to. I think it's kinda injustice how back then they couldn't just sing like they want like whenever they want to in public that I think. I like how she, made people, or made people hope that, or she showed people that black people can do the same thing as white people.

Jeff: Yeah that's it, back then but not now, back then it was like even if you were an African American or a Mexican or someone who came from a different country and your were really good at something like you were a really good lawyer you know a lot about politics maybe you're good at sports maybe your good at all this stuff but you wouldn't be able to do it because people favor who lives in the country already. Which isn't right because someone, someone could make you a lot of money but you just don't like them so you don't hire them. So it's kinda wrong.

Tim: I think that, this is just kind of a comment about what we could do based on what Sam said was in that book, I think kind of the perseverance is what keeps prejudice from being really, really bad. Because when you think about it there will probably always be at least one person that's prejudice against someone in the way that Jordan said but if as long as there are people that aren't prejudice and actively trying to be not prejudice there won't be like, people won't be put back into slavery and everything.

Jeff: Like and it's all about believing that you can still do it. Like Dr. Martin Luther King got arrested like 50 times but he always got back out of jail and did the same thing over again. That's why people heard him.

In this excerpt Steve begins with a brief summary of one of the books he read in the text set. Tim and Jeff extend the discussion by bringing up themes they found in the text set. The themes allowed them to dig deeper into the essential issues of immigration, particularly those of prejudice and stereotyping. The discussion moves away from the books in their text set as the boys discuss the need to persevere and take public action in order to eliminate the impact of those people who are discriminatory toward others. This

excerpt illustrates how students' talk moves on the continuum. It begins with fundamental book talk as Steve describes the content of a picture book he read and moves into socio-interpretive text talk as Jeff extends Steve's summary. Tim and Jeff, then, springboard from the text into critical talk as their comments focus on perseverance.

Another example of students recognizing a need for action is in the jigsaw discussion group that included Evan, Ethan, Tiffany, Jean, and Carl. The group was discussing whether or not "kids could change the world:"

Evan: If kids were allowed to vote we could definitely change the world.  
If kids were allowed to run we could change it a lot more.

Tiff: Yeah I know.

Jean: But that's Candyland.

Ethan: But seriously if we didn't have moms or dads...

Carl: We need adults because of guidance.

Tiff: Yeah.

Evan: Guidance but not dependence.

Carl: Yeah.

Jean: People write songs about it. Who gets to make the law? Who gets to be president? Who gets to decide you know what the cafeteria is serving?

Evan: They don't realize that maybe we have opinions.

Carl: They need to be choosing what the cafeteria is serving by who's eating the food.

Evan: Listen adults they vote on acts that have to deal with our schools.  
Right?

Tiff: Yeah but I mean...

Evan: If we were able to vote I think it would be very different, I bet.

In this excerpt, the group does not all agree that children can change the world. They discuss the role of adults, but through this discussion they begin to see that action should be taken by those who are most affected. Again, this excerpt is not dependent on a text, which is yet another criteria of critical talk.

*Students recognized injustices in historical events and texts.* Students were also able to recognize injustices and begin to interrogate why these injustices exist. This



critical literacy concept appeared in five of the ten excerpts. One example of this was in the following text set discussion in which Tim begins by reflecting on the injustices that he saw in the books:

- Tim: Except for *America Is* which is just a kinda strange book, I've also noticed you do not have to be coming to a new land to become a minority through conflicts in your home land. Because I found from our study of immigration and our study of Native lands and these books that Native Americans were the natives to America and yet the when the Caucasian people came they became a minority even though they were the first ones there.
- Jeff: And what I thought the books that I read, it was more about the culture of the people and not about where they lived. Like I read one, this one right here. It was about a boy and his friend was American and lived in Mexico but it didn't really talk about how they lived in Mexico it just talked about how he had a friend that no one else was his friend because he was from another country. So I think that the books talk more culture than where they lived.
- Carl: Every time they do one of these books they always do it from a discriminated person's point of view. And you know they talk about how bad the white people were when they came. I was wondering what the white people feel about this? Did they really think they were doing something bad?
- Jeff: That's the weird thing. They did it because they thought it was right.
- Carl: Yeah, I know. They thought that they were doing the Indians a favor.
- Tim: And they thought like African Americans were evil at first during slavery.
- Jeff: Yeah
- Carl: And also the so called great civilization with more technology and possibly with a greater faith in like Christianity usually dominated another culture.
- Jeff: Yeah like Tim when we had that big discussion, I thought this class was so stupid and if we didn't think, if we were still having that conversation we would still be fighting about it because we think something's right and something's wrong. So usually if you think that one thing is right, like they thought that blacks were not equal to Caucasians so they were like, "Oh well they shouldn't be treated like us, so they are going to be our slaves and we think that's right so we going go through with it." So they think it's right and they don't know if it's wrong or not. Because no one tells them it's wrong.

In this excerpt the boys are working through an injustice they recognized. They are trying to determine why someone would choose to act in a particular way and in so doing they try to view the situation from another's perspective. Like many of the excerpts, this particular transcript illustrates not only the students recognizing an injustice, but also exploring multiple perspectives. It also is another illustration of students traversing the continuum. They begin text bound (fundamental book talk) and end talking beyond the text (critical talk).

*Students challenged the status quo and explored multiple realities.* In five of the ten selected transcripts the students challenged the status quo and explored alternative realities. Bomer and Bomer (2001) use the term "social imagination" to refer to those times when students extend their imagination beyond the book to a "belief that we can make lives better and more for people" (p. 55). Recall the *Fitting In* text set example mentioned above. The discussion began with the students sharing the books they browsed and moved into exploring an alternative reality. The following revisits a portion of that transcript:

Evan: I think in the United States there should be no such as minority because I think the whole point of the United States is that everybody is a minority.

Charis: Well...

Evan: Everybody should be a small group that makes one big group.

Ray: Yeah, because Americans are basically the Anglo-Europeans.

Charis: Yeah.

Beth: But if you say that every group is a minority it also does, like if you say that every group, there's supposed to be different small groups in one whole big group, that would also bring out some...

Charis: Conflict.

Beth: Yeah conflict.

Ray: So basically...

Beth: Because you say little groups inside a big group so that would make the little groups like...

Evan: But that's not what I mean, the little groups like let's say that when people were immigrating to America, let's say there were 2 million from Eastern Europe.

...

Beth: I think we should see it more as one big group instead of more like minorities.

Ray: Because no one really originated here except for maybe Native Americans.

Evan: They came over. One of the biggest theories for them because of the shape of some of their faces that they came over like there was a land bridge between Alaska and Russia.

This text set discussion illustrates both ideas of challenging the status quo and exploring alternative realities. Charis began the discussion by questioning "is America for Americans?" The group challenges the conventional thought and extends it by exploring another way the world could be viewed. Though they end up not liking the idea of making America all one big group called minority, they do explore what it would be like if that were the case. This illustrates the definition of critical talk because students left the text to inquire into societal beliefs and values. The following transcript provides another example of how the students used an alternative reality to explore the status quo. This excerpt is from the *War and Peace* text set discussion:

Aisha: Yeah, it would be boring like that because like for example like what if like for example everybody here in here is Christian? And it's really boring because like everybody else knows the same god and it's one god and then all the sudden someone else comes in here and they're a different culture. It's like a Jew or somebody.

Emily: So it's sorta about two cultures fighting against each other and wanting to be one?

Aisha: Yeah or like another person comes and like or something like that and they say I don't like your culture or something and they like be really snobby about it and stuff like that.

Fiona: I don't get how you say they don't like the culture. I mean what's wrong with it that makes them think that?

Aisha: No.

Fiona: Like all of them like in that book I don't know what the town called but I know all of them have something alike. I mean all can't just, because I really think that everyone gonna have to be

different. Because if you all think like the whole entire world was the same and then that would be boring because you would both be the same and you'd be like "oh yeah I just that." At first you would think it was all cool but then when you think about it you can't have your personality that you think you are. And then that person has the same personality and you want your own personality. You know what I am saying?

Emily: If the whole entire world lived the same and thought the same would there probably be any wars?

Aisha: There wouldn't be any conflicts. There wouldn't be any wars. There wouldn't be any crimes. There wouldn't be nothing. So there would be nothing to fight about, there would be no war right now.

Fiona: Well yes it will. If they're fighting on two different things like...

Aisha: No.

Emily: No, if they all believed the same.

Aisha: Yeah.

Fiona: Oh.

Aisha: Yeah if they all believed the same thing there would be no conflicts, no crimes, no nothing and no lawyers.

This excerpt demonstrates how the girls worked through an idea that originated from a text in which one person was discriminated against due to her skin color, but leaves the text as they explore an alternative reality. The group of girls then began to consider the world as it would be if everyone was alike.

*Students shared personal, cultural knowledge and experiences.* The last example of how students discussed critical literacy concepts is the idea of sharing personal, cultural knowledge and experience. Though this occurred in four of the ten discussions, it was most apparent in the *Journeys* text set discussion mentioned above. During this text set discussion each person shared something particular about his/her life that was crucial to the discussion. Recall the personal comments from students like Jin and Adam. Jin said, "Yeah and sometimes in my country the basic rule to make friend is that you have to be working hard like try your best in your studies." Adam also provided personal insight when he said:

Me, like I come from New York and I lived on a reservation so now since I came here everything's way different because now I live in an apartment and I actually have to like stay around because when I was in New York I could just go all around the reservation and it wouldn't matter so now when I come here I can only go up and down my street. So, I have to stay a little bit closer. I don't have more room. So it's a little bit different and when I come to school everybody, like, because I dress a little different everybody thinks that that's not normal and just because, like, everybody looks at me and they think I am just black but they don't understand about being Native American.

These student examples and the others from the discussions surrounding that text set illustrate the critical literacy concepts of sharing personal, cultural knowledge and experience. Pierce's class was fortunate to have such a richness in diversity. The students, as mentioned above in the perspectives section, recognized this richness and valued it. Thus there was a safe environment in which students could share these personal stories and it was these personal stories that often provided an entry point for the students and prompted them to interrogate big issues they were studying from these new perspectives.

As mentioned above, the critical literacy concepts were rarely independent of each other. Many times they overlapped. The transcripts chosen to illustrate each concept were pulled to find those that best represented the concept. However, the concepts were often so intertwined that determining a transcript for a particular concept was difficult. Many of the excerpts were similar to the following. In this excerpt from the jigsaw activity, the students are actually discussing several concepts:

Evan: I think we should change places.

Ray: Where?

Charis: Me and you?

Evan: No. If all people were slave for two weeks.

Charis: I think you should, I think people should switch like people. You hear what I am saying, like be somebody else's shoes for just like a week or two. So you could learn about a person. Not just because to see what they go through, but learn another person's perspective

on how stuff is so that maybe you could like, you could just like learn other people's perspective on life and slavery and just *stuff*.

In this excerpt the students are proposing action and exploring an alternative world in the name of gaining new perspectives. This example is not unusual and in examining the above examples of critical literacy concepts, readers may see other concepts woven through as well. This occurs as students use the critical literacy concepts as tools to help them gain a new understanding of the issue of immigration.

*Students' talk often returned to specific concepts.* The students not only discussed specific critical literacy concepts, but they also struggled to understand particular concepts like *ignorance*, *different vs. same*, *America*, and *understanding vs. knowing*. These concepts appeared repeatedly throughout their ten excerpts. The students offered examples of the concepts and wrestled with the underlying meanings. For example the following is a discussion over the word *ignorant*:

- Charis: I have a question. Why do you think the kids are so mean or ignorant?  
Jin: Well because...  
Fiona: They not ignorant.  
Devon: Yes they are.  
Charis: Do you know what ignorant means?  
Fiona: Yes I do.  
Devon: You do not know something but you can be taught it.  
Charis: Yes, ignorant means you don't know don't mean nothing about mean. It's just black people started saying ignorant was a bad thing. Ignorant can be a bad thing if you don't learn. But ignorant it just means you don't know. Get it? The people at his school just don't know about him so much that they start talking about him and some call him a loser.

In this excerpt, Charis used the word ignorant and together the group defines the word.

However, this term is repeated throughout the discussion as the group continually refines

the definition. The following shows how the group was still struggling to come to a consensus not only about the term *ignorant* but also in how it applies to the book:

Jin: Charis, when you say people are mean to him...

Charis: No just mean. Why are they ignorant? Do you know what ignorant means? Ignorant means to not know something. Ignorant means to not know. If you are ignorant you do not know. So do you think they do not know about him?

Fiona: I think some of them do.

Charis: No let Jin, please.

Fiona: I think some of them do.

Charis: But a lot of them don't girl. Only like two people in the whole damn book understood about him.

Sean: This is like...

Devon: When I first come to this book, it's like when I first come to this school people talk about me because they don't know anything about me. That's what she's trying to say.

Charis: Yeah.

Jin: That's what happens to me everyday.

Again this excerpt illustrates how some concepts continually appeared in either one discussion or a thread that occurred in many discussions. As an ongoing discussion of the word *ignorant*, the students moved back and forth from talking about the text to talking beyond the text. In the first example, the students went from left to right on the continuum. They returned to the text to make sense of their discussion. In the second example, the students began with the text and moved beyond as they applied the term to their own lives.

Other concepts that arose were *difference vs. same* and *America*. In seven of the ten selected excerpts the concept of *difference vs. same* appeared. *America* was mentioned 46 times in the ten excerpts.

## 2) Use of Particular Types of Talk

Denoting critical talk by the topic oversimplifies the identification. The discussions had other characteristics. Evan said in the post interview, "I think the best

conversations we had was about *The Wreckers* because we all had different views and it wasn't a boring conversation because we didn't all say the same thing." The discussions he valued most were those that did not necessarily focus on a particular content or concept, but rather had the type of talk in which students had different views thus they were not "boring." Tim, too, provided insight in his post interview, "We really kinda went deeper than just the story. I mean we got into the characters and everything, but we went deeper into that into kinda deeper meaning that like, touches life."

*Critical talk scales the ladder of abstraction.* In order to find the type of talk that "touches life," I returned to the transcripts to focus strictly on the type of talk that was occurring. From using the lenses of general semantics, three themes emerged from this second round of analysis. First, students worked together to scale the "ladder of abstraction" (Hayakawa, 1964/1991). Recall the ladder of abstraction is the degree in which language is abstract or concrete. Language that is abstract is higher on the ladder. Alternatively, concrete language is lower on the ladder. The lower on the ladder of abstraction the students' talk is, the closer to real life they are getting. The higher the talk is on the ladder of abstraction the more students are able to see generalizations and patterns. Ideally during a discussion the students' talk would travel the ladder enabling students to connect the concrete examples from the real world to more systemic causes of these issues. The students' talk in the ten selected transcripts shifts along the ladder in one of two ways; either the students travel the ladder together with each response adding to the overall movement or in one turn the individual response scaled back and forth along the ladder. In seven of the ten transcripts, the students fully scaled in both directions the ladder of abstraction. In the other three transcripts, the ladder was scaled but not to the



full extent; more dead-leveling existed. The following excerpts revisit the text set group, *Two Cultures/Two Worlds*, and is one of the best examples of the group traveling the ladder of abstraction. In it the boys move from the idea of conflict and immigration specific to a particular text to the issue on a much larger scale:

Steve: Well like all the books have a lot of conflict maybe.	General statement
Tim: Have a lot of what?	
Steve: Conflict inside themselves like in this book like no one else thinks she is having much conflict that she's just gonna pick a name out of the jar and that's your new name.	Provides a concrete example from text
Jeff: Like when it's not you	
Steve: But inside herself she's just having a lot of conflict inside herself. In all of the books they are having a conflict inside themselves like in a lot of other books I read they're having conflicts with friends and they don't have friendship. But in this basically the whole book she has friends but inside herself she is kinda arguing what if she should get a new name, keep her name...	Extending concrete example from text
Jeff: In lots of books it's all like let's say someone is having a conflict and you're sitting there watching the person go through. You think, "Oh it's really easy, why are they having such a time?" Like picking name, people would be like, "Oh why don't you pick this one it's my name? It's really cool." It's hard. Lots of times it's harder than you think, than it looks like it is. Let's say you watch someone playing like a sport or something and like, "Oh that looks really easy." But then you go out and try it and it's not at all.	Seeing larger patterns
Tim: Especially like, if you have ever tried to catch a pingpong ball it looks so easy, but it's impossible.	Extending concrete example from text
Jeff: Yeah	
Tim: And also I've noticed a common theme among these books. It seems like whenever someone comes to a new country they kinda	Seeing larger patterns
	Providing examples
	Concrete example

<p>have to reinvent themselves and they're like new people when you immigrate. For instance she had to choose a new name. Like this one is about Native American tribes kinda blending in with the culture and finding their places in it. And this was about kinda the same thing as that.</p>	more specific examples
<p>Steve: Also in all the books they are kinda complaining and like also inside themselves like in this book she's kinda, she doesn't really think that she has any really good names. But she just doesn't know what to do and she's not really blaming herself, but there isn't really anyone to blame but herself.</p>	Seeing larger patterns Providing examples
<p>Jeff: Well, think about who it would be harder for, a parent or a kid?</p>	Abstract Question
<p>Tim: A kid because, I don't know maybe a parent because...</p>	
<p>Jeff: Because they lived in the country their whole life.</p>	
<p>Tim: Yeah because a lot of times you actually see that. Because if the whole family immigrates to America from let's say like Germany the kid usually learns English...</p>	Providing examples and offering concrete characteristics to the hypothetical situation
<p>Carl: quicker than</p>	
<p>Tim: And develops an English accent faster than the parents do</p>	
<p>Carl: because the parents have...</p>	
<p>Tim: The parents have lived in Germany and spoken in German for so long</p>	
<p>Jeff: Yeah</p>	
<p>Tim: Or wherever, it's just like almost a complete life change or ...</p>	
<p>Jeff: It would be a lot harder for the parents. Try, what would be harder, let's say you're four years old and you barely know how to speak?</p>	Placing themselves into the hypothetical situation
<p>Carl: Then it's really easy. Say you're like nine or ten.</p>	
<p>Jeff: Yeah</p>	
<p>Carl: And you've lived in that place all your life.</p>	
<p>Jeff: It gets a little harder</p>	
<p>Carl: It's a little bit more emotional once you reach that sort of age.</p>	
<p>Jeff: Especially if you have lots of friends.</p>	
<p>Tim: Yeah</p>	
<p>Jeff: If you have lots of friends it's kinda equal. Because for the parents it's hard to learn a</p>	Providing details to make hypothetical more concrete

new language if you've lived in one place your whole life and if you're a kid and you have like great friends and then you have to move and you have to make new ones.

Tim: Yeah you kind have to or like you were like really successful socially or one of the most popular people in the school then you kinda have to start over from scratch when you get there.

Jeff: And maybe the way you act in one school was cool and the way you act in another school is like mean and lame

Steve: So when you're a kid you basically have to inter-, you basically interact more. It's not as hard to learn a new language but...

Carl: Emotionally it's a little harder

Tim: When you think about kids are still developing themselves socially so they just have to like it's like they're going on a smooth path and they just take a complete detour to a different road. Because parents who immigrate to a new country probably don't interact as much with other people as kids.

Jeff: Yeah

Tim: Because kids are like the whole purpose of childhood is like...

Jeff: It's kinda like a mountain that's in your path and you can either, there's a hole that goes all the way through it and it would be a lot quicker or there's a path that goes all the way around it. It's kinda like you are on the way going right through the mountain the easy way. Then you move so you have to go all the way around.

Steve: With that path closed.

Carl: Basically.

Moving to more  
abstract language

more  
abstract language

more  
abstract language

Clarifying the metaphor

This extended excerpt is necessary in order to see the large movements by the group as they travel along the ladder of abstraction. It begins with the students discussing specific examples from the text and then moves to larger ideas as the group explores the issues immigrants face. The discussion continued beyond this excerpt as the group made a

concrete connection to a student, Jin, in the class who had recently immigrated from China and was struggling to fit into the school's social milieu. This excerpt ends in a metaphor in which the students attempt to generalize and understand their more specific examples discussed previously. It is important to note that critical talk does not always end at an abstract level. At times students may begin generally and take the information down to a more personal level. Recall the *Journey* text set discussion in which the students shared their personal experiences with immigration and stereotyping. These students began with more abstract ideas and brought those ideas to a more concrete level by using their own experiences. Creating metaphors often signified the students were attempting to make general statements about their specific examples. This suggests an upward movement on the ladder of abstraction, while making connections to self, text, and world often signaled a downward movement toward a more concrete level.

However, another signifier of movement on the ladder was the fluctuation of pronoun use. For example as students' talk became more concrete, the pronouns often became more personal (I, we, you, etc.). The reverse was also apparent; as students moved to more abstract levels the pronouns often became more impersonal (i.e. they, them, etc.). The following example, from the *Behind the Mountains* excerpt, illustrates the students moving between personal and impersonal pronouns as they place themselves into the situation:

Devon: Well say her dad wasn't in New York and he was in Haiti, and like during the time of the bombing do you think that they would have left? Or do you think they would have stayed?

Tiff: It's basically people in New York after 9-11 it's like should I go because of the World Trade Center or should I just stay in my home place. It's basically like that.

Aisha: yeah but for example I wanted to move to New York when I'm older and when I have kids and stuff. Some people think I might be crazy because some people like all Islam or whatever

Jean: Arabs

Aisha: Arabs or whatever they think they're bad and like all Arabs are bad and stuff like. I don't think, It's just like I know that everybody they're in their own world, they have their own problems and everything like that. It's just that the person who went into the Trade Center they might have really bad problems or something like that.

Tiff: And they were trying to make a statement.

Aisha: So yeah, couldn't they like, I know they couldn't like speak to the president or something like that so they had to do something very bad to be, to stand out.

In this example Devon offers a question from the book for the students to discuss. Tiffany offers a connection to a social issue and places herself in that social situation. Aisha extends the discussion of living in New York by placing herself in the hypothetical situation. The talk about the terrorists' perspective uses impersonal pronouns as the students draw larger, more general ideas about why people perform violent acts.

*Students struggle to recalibrate maps to territories.* Another technique borrowed from general semantics is map versus territory. Recall that Hayakawa (1964/1991) states, "The symbol is NOT the thing symbolized; the word is NOT the thing; the map is NOT the territory it stands for" (p. 30). Thus, like geographical maps of a country, the visual map is not the physical country; it is a representation. In language, the term *map* is used to describe a person's view of reality in comparison to reality which is termed *territory*. In six of the ten excerpts the students tried to get each person in their group to agree on a particular map regardless of territory or would work together to recalibrate their maps to the territory. One excerpt seemed to show students developing a map for the territory they were provided. In the other three excerpts students were discussing a particular map they all held. In the *Loser* literature discussion group, the group members worked

together to recalibrate their maps. In other words, as they uncovered new information that didn't fit with their current understanding of the character, they adjusted their perception in language. Enciso (1994) used the term "cultural maps" to describe students' perceptions they have of the world. The students in the *Loser* literature discussion began trying to understand the main character, Zinkoff. As the group discussed various characteristics and how other characters perceived him, they added to their understanding. Barnes (1975/1992) calls this building of knowledge "working at understanding." The group worked together to reorient themselves to a new perception of the character.

Using Hayakawa's map and territory analogy to understand the type of talk that occurred in these ten discussions, the *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* text set transcript exemplifies how Carl recognizes a need to recalibrate his belief on immigration after being provided a new piece of information. Recall the example from above:

Carl: Like you said before, people who come to the country they don't get favored. I don't understand back in the 1800's through the Civil War and slavery, when they were coming over they said that America was to be the land of tolerance and to honor all people's rights but what I don't get is that only white men got rights, no body else got anything. They were considered inferior and they still kept saying that we are in the right we get all the equal rights.

Jeff: It's like all about, it's about them just trying to get people to come over because they had so many jobs need to have people who, it's basically a lie. They say we're the land of tolerance, so if you come over here you'll have rights and lots of money and they come over and they have no choice to go back. So they have to stay and they get taken advantage of.

Due to space, I provided only a portion of this critical talk to illustrate an instance of map vs. territory. First, the information in the text set gave Carl a reason to rethink his original ideas about immigration and to start to question why people would make false claims.

This recalibration occurred while at the same time Jeff tried to create a consensus between Carl and himself. Jeff tried to make Carl see his own map of reality by extending Carl's wonderings. This interplay between participants occurred frequently as students attempted to secure support for their own ideas regardless if those ideas were close to reality or not. This meant that not all members were adjusting their maps. When students wrestle with maps and debate whether those maps represent reality, they often move beyond the text to make sense. Therefore often the struggle to recalibrate maps often leads students into critical talk.

*Critical talk explores the multi-valued orientation of issues.* The discussions were also examined for their use of two-valued or multi-valued orientation. Eight of the ten excerpts illustrate the students working to unpack issues and moving between two-valued and multi-valued orientation. In the two transcripts that the students remained heavily in a two-valued orientation, the students did use hedging language such as "I think," "probably," and "kinda." This may suggest that the students had not thought through the issues yet thus did not see it as either two-valued or multi-valued. The qualifiers attached to their thoughts may also suggest that students use "I think" and "kinda" as language that lessens the impact of the statement within the group. Adolescents are influenced greatly by how others perceive them; thus if they are "wrong," they feel as if they made an equivocal statement. For example, Steve, in the *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* discussion, said, "I think it's kinda injustice." Steve used both "I think" and "kinda" in referencing the injustice he was pointing out in the text. These qualifiers could suggest that he is not seeing racism that he was referring in the book as two-valued. However the inclusion of qualifiers could also suggest that he is uncertain about his statement and is offering it to

the group as a half-formed idea that he is willing to modify. Hayakawa (1991) writes, “the important thing is that they[producers of language] do avoid it [two-valued orientation], and by so doing they keep open the possibility of adjusting differences, reconciling conflicting interests, and arriving at just estimates” (p. 250). In the extended *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* transcript quoted above the group exhibits a move from a two-valued to a multi-valued orientation as they unpacked the issue of immigration and the difficulties for children and adults. The group explored various answers and began to see that the answer was not clear. They found that in some ways adults have an easier time and in other ways children have an easier time with immigration.

Another example of the multi-valued talk that occurred was in the *Journeys* text set. Recall the students’ comments in which they shared personal stories and experiences.

The following is a brief excerpt from that discussions:

- Tiff: I think that by the way people talk they are like persecuted sometimes like people would sometimes they would ask me how come I don’t talk black or whatever you know quote unquote but most people don’t actually take the time to actually realize that you know I’m half. My dad’s Caucasian and so I grew up in like the suburbs so people just wonder how come I don’t talk the same way most other African American people talk.
- Jean: I think it’s kinda like *My Fair Lady* where she was judged back then you were judged on how you spoke and that would determine what job you could get and you know what you can do. I think that still sorta affected.

In this excerpt, Tiffany is using a personal story to offer another perspective to the group. Jean extends her thought by providing yet another concrete example connecting Tiffany’s story to another text. By offering another perspective, Tiffany helped open the discussion up to more views than just proficient or not proficient English language use. She also suggests that people have certain language expectations based on outward appearances



that might not always be true. Jean then opens yet another window into the discussion by suggesting the variation of a language is also often viewed negatively. Interestingly, as the students move from a two-valued to a multi-valued orientation through the use of specific examples they move down the ladder of abstraction and help make the issue more real. This authenticity opens up the multiple values associated with real life. This particular strand of talk returns to a two-valued orientation as Pierce asks the girls to expand on what they said:

Jean: So if you didn't really speak English, here you won't be able to get as good a job like you wouldn't necessarily work at restaurant which is like better pay than like you know sweeping up a shop. So it just determines how much you know and how clearly you speak.

Tiff: So I mean if you talked in a really thick different kind of accent it could be Chinese, Asian, maybe even sometimes it could even be a black accent but like shops they just won't take people who look or sound um different than from what they really want the customers to see or speak.

This excerpt shows how the girls turn their new ideas into more static categories. Jean claims that "you won't be able to get as good of a job" if your language proficiency is not high enough. Tiffany argues that "shops won't take people" who look or speak in non-standard ways. These two-valued beliefs were not challenged by the rest of the group, but were built from an attempt to create a multi-valued discussion.

In the examples provided above regarding two-valued and multi-valued orientations, the students' talk also moved beyond the text. Thus the exploration of multiple ways to see an issue can often lead the students into critical talk.

### *3) Participation*

In examining the ten critical talk excerpts for participation, I first divided the transcripts into two categories, those in which Pierce was an active participant and those

that were purely student-led. The following narrative illustrates first Pierce's participation in the discussions and then the patterns of participation that occurred in the student-led discussions.

In an early interview with Pierce, she described how she saw her role in literature discussion groups:

One of my roles is to create, obviously, the physical environment. To collect books that I think merit the conversation, that can support good, on-going, deep, reflective conversations. So to create a safe social climate, where kids feel comfortable talking about and explore ideas, to provide the time to talk about the ideas, and to make sure that the ideas that we're discussing are meaningful to them and from my adult perspective...my role is saying, okay here's what they consider to be valuable and important and here's my sense of as an adult with more worldly experience, here are some other things that I consider to be significant and of importance and making sure that our topics of conversation fall in between that tension between the two. And then to have the talk be meaningful because it's connected to a wider study so we are not talking just for the sake of talking about the books, we're not talking about the books just for the sake of understanding the books, but for the purpose of letting the talk help us use the books to think new ideas.

This description explains her global view of how she saw her role. The articulation paralleled what I saw as she enacted, nurtured, and sustained critical talk. However, the ten excerpts provided more in-depth understanding of how Pierce's participation influenced the critical talk by "letting the talk help us use the books to think new ideas."

Of the ten transcripts selected, Pierce actively participated in four. Of the total 81 transcripts, Pierce participated in ten. The average number of turns by all participants in the ten selected transcripts was 34. Pierce's average number of turns in the four discussions she participated in was seven. Of Pierce's interactions, five patterns of discourse emerged: prompting (3); rephrasing (8); questioning (11) –extending or following-up (6) and getting deeper (5); sharing information (5); and facilitating

procedural aspects (20) –this includes invitations to silenced members, reprimands, asking for students to repeat, discussing future assignments, and getting the groups started.

*Pierce prompted student talk in literature discussion groups.* In an interview in February, Pierce said, “unless I’ve been a part of the conversation and can hear what they have been wrestling with I can’t suggest what to contribute.” So often, she would sit quietly in a group before she began. Once she was aware of what the students were working to understand, she then provided them with additional insights to consider. One example of her use of prompting in the discussions comes from the *Journey* text set:

I’m going to pick up on something that Adam said about how sometimes Jin uses a word or a phrase that might be different than the one that Adam uses. And Adam tries really hard to figure out what Jin means by what you’re saying when you say that. And usually we can figure out what one another means. But sometimes that may lead somebody to believe that you’re not participating or that you’re not part of the group or that you’re not able to be part of the group because the language is what’s in the way. And I’m wondering how you guys think about that and how you can connect that back to immigration and what’s the responsibility of the sort of the receiving culture for welcoming newcomers in terms of language and getting past language differences to look at personalities.

This excerpt begins with Pierce rephrasing a portion of the discussion. She uses this to provide a context and help value the comments made by the students. Pierce then prompts or challenges the students to dig deeper into those ideas, nurturing the critical talk that was occurring. She uses the “I’m wondering...” structure in the sentence to help prompt the students’ thinking.

*Pierce rephrased student comments.* Pierce, as shown above, frequently rephrased what students said during the literature study discussions. She explained in an interview that there were times this needed to be done in order to help the class see worth in

comments made by silenced students or those who were often undervalued by the other students. However, other times she used rephrasing to help slow down the discussion or clarify points made by the students. The following example illustrates how Pierce used rephrasing in a whole class discussion about the Cinderella text sets:

Jeff: In some of the books I've read like in I think it's just something from a long time ago. If you think about it now they usually don't hold balls to find people to marry I think that is something that just used to happen. Like in almost all of them they are holding a dance to find someone to marry or something like that. And some people believe that that is not right that you should pick who you want and that you need to know them longer than that. Something like that. So I think that is part of culture too from a long time ago.

Pierce: Okay so you say that if what you are looking for is just physical attributes in a mate then a ball is just as fine because you can just parade them right past and you can pick out the one you want. But if you are looking for somebody who has the personality you want then you need more time with that person to develop a relationship and figure out if they have the personality that is going to match with what you have in mind.

Jeff begins this excerpt by sharing one of his patterns he found in the Cinderella text sets. Pierce rephrases it for the class. This rephrasing not only validates Jeff's response, but clarifies the point for the entire class, extends the comments beyond the text, and models the type of discourse she hopes they will engage in.

*Pierce used questioning to extend student talk and help students get deeper into the issues being discussed.* Questioning was another feature of teacher talk that occurred in Pierce's interactions. I asked Pierce how she thought she was able to get students to take their ideas deeper. She said, "I generally tried, and this I learned from Dorothy Watson, to do it in the form of asking a question...I tried to get a more tentative, open ended question out in front of them." Tiffany in her post interviewed explained how Pierce would "come over and ask some mind-bending questions." Evan, too, talked about

Pierce's questioning. He said, "She presented questions for our discussions that made it so we knew what to discuss. So we weren't just talking about the book generally."

Questioning was obviously an important feature of Pierce's talk.

There were two types of questions that appeared in Pierce's talk: questions to extend and questions to go deeper. Of the eleven questions Pierce asked as an active participant, six of them were questions that extended an idea. These questions that extended the dialogue were not always open-ended discussions. For example Pierce responded to Tiffany's comment about the physical appearance of all the Cinderella's by asking the question, "Is that a value system that is still in place?" Though this question had a yes or no answer, it extended Tiffany's original thought and pushed the class to connect this notion of beauty to current societal beliefs. A similar type of extending question occurred during an interaction with Mark in the whole class discussion. The following is a brief excerpt, from the transcript provided above:

Mark: They are very blunt. They are basically saying that if you are tall and blonde and beautiful for females, then you are going to go places. And for men it's you're tall, you're dark you're handsome.

Pierce: Sure and do we believe that? I mean is that a commonly held belief or is it limited to just Disney?

Mark: I think in this case it is just limited to Disney, because not everyone believes that.

Pierce: Are there still some people who would believe that?

Mark: Yeah

In this example, again the questions Pierce asks are often eliciting yes or no answers, but like a lawyer questioning a witness, she extends the student's thoughts by challenging him to make a stand. However, unlike a hostile prosecutor, Pierce allows Mark to qualify his answer and think through the idea. Other ways that Pierce used questions to extend the students thinking that often pushed them beyond the text were through questions that

challenged the students to ponder an idea further, such as “Why do you think that is?” or “How does this help you think about it differently?” or “Can you expand on that a little bit?”

Pierce also used questions to challenge students to dig deeper. Of the eleven questions Pierced asked as an active participant, five were coded as questions that challenged the students to dig deeper. These questions would often elicit new ways of thinking about an issue. For example, Pierce said to the boys in the *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* discussion group:

I'd like to leave you with a question to think about. Why would authors choose to have a book show different perspectives by having a character tell a different part of the story or why do you think it's important as we look at immigration that we look at multiple perspectives? Some of it's an obvious answer and some I want you to push deeper.

Many times Pierce asked these “mind-bending questions” and then left the group, letting the students work through the answers on their own. For example in the following excerpt, Pierce asks the students to examine more closely the idea of the “American Dream:”

But what about the people that have come and that hasn't been true? A number of people have come here to look for a better life and what they found was not the American dream the way they dreamed it. Why do you think that is and why do you think that still happens today? Go ahead and talk in your group and I'll come back.

*As a participant, Pierce shared information and facilitated procedural aspects of literature discussions.* Two other features appeared in Pierce's talk when she was an active participant in the literature discussion groups: sharing information and facilitating procedural aspects. Often times Pierce would share information with students. She talked about this during an interview in March:

Well, I always started by listening in to get a sense of what are they grappling with. That's the whole Barnes's notion, "if you want to know what kids are thinking listen to them talk." So I would try to decide what they were working on. If I thought I could offer something that would offer a perspective that wasn't on the table yet then I would jump in or if I thought they were ignoring something that they had on the table, then I would draw attention to it.

The information she shared many times came from Pierce's own outside reading or background knowledge. For example in the following excerpt, Pierce is sharing information with the group working with the *Journeys* text set. Pierce is responding to Tiffany and Jean who were discussing how people also can stereotype based on language use:

Can you expand on that a little bit? I've heard references to that in fact, I've read books and things about that, about what kind of language you use determines how other people view you either in terms of status or how smart you are or what your potential is. And I think you just challenged that a little bit. You said I may look black but I don't speak black and people shouldn't try to guess who I am just by the way I speak or guess what my culture is just by the way I speak and you were saying that's true with *My Fair Lady* that just by the way she spoke there were limits on what she could do in society.

This excerpt illustrates several features previously discussed. Pierce asks Tiffany to extend her thoughts and rephrases both Tiffany's and Jean's comments as well as nurtures and sustains the talk that is not bound by the text. However, in the middle of this turn, Pierce also brings in her own reading. This not only helps move the discussion along, but ties the ideas together for the students and validates the topic. Another example of Pierce sharing information occurred during the discussion based on the *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* text set. Pierce responds to the boys' discussion about books that show multiple perspectives:

I've been thinking about what you said about how the *America Is* book presents only the really positive views about America, it's sort of a rather

patriotic book. And for me this one [pointing to another book on the table] presents a different point of view. It reminds us that other people might tell the story about what America is a little differently.

In this excerpt, Pierce shared her own understandings of a text to encourage the students to see another way of looking at the topic.

The last feature found in Pierce's turns was the facilitation of procedural aspects, such as invitations to silenced members, reprimands, asking for students to repeat, discussing future assignments, and getting the groups started. Short, et al. (1999) described the role "teacher as facilitator" in literature study as "encouraging student interaction and talk and monitoring social interactions which interfered with discussion" (p. 378). Karen Smith (personal communication, October 18, 2004) also talked about this in reference to critical conversations. She said:

The heart of this whole dialogue, because it is hard and because it is emotional and because it is personal, is that you've got to set up that space and kids have to know the rules in that space so that people's ideas can be heard and not shut down and not ignored.

Pierce shared how she determined when to step in as the "teacher:"

If I thought someone was dominating I would try to give my attention to a quieter member through body language or asking them a question. I tried to give them more space to voice their opening.

This facilitating role helped the students stay focused on their discussion by relieving them of their responsibility to keep each other on task. As Pierce stated above this type of communication was often nonverbal, or when it was verbal it was brief responses. Pierce would nod, turn her body to listen to someone, or give positive feedback through short utterances like "right" or "okay." Other times she used this type of talk to gently redirect the students, such as "have you had a chance to look at this one yet?" or "Kelly, you haven't had a lot to say yet."



*Teacher-led discussions often elicited more equality in turn taking, more explicit language use, and less student interruptions.* When Pierce was not an active participant in the discussion, the literature discussions were student-led. Six of the ten critical talk excerpts were student-led. There were several differences in the student-led discussions. First there was more inequality in turn taking during student-led discussions. When Pierce was present the students often all had similar number of turns, such as the *Journeys* text set: Jin (3 turns), Adam (2 turns), Kelly (1 turn), Jean (2 turns), and Tiffany (3 turns). Even in text sets in which one person talked less than others the numbers were still fairly close. This is quite different than the number of turns taken by individual group members in student-led discussion. The greatest inequality occurred in the *Loser* novel discussion: Fiona (39 turns), Charis (46 turns), Devon (13 turns), Jin (12 turns), and Sean (1 turn). Even with some of the most equal turn taking patterns of student-led discussions often one person was silenced, such as the *Behind the Mountains* novel discussion: Aisha (4 turns), Jean (3 turns), Tiffany (3 turns), and Devon (1 turn). This silencing however was not always imposed on the student. Recall Devon frequently chose not to verbally participate.

The second difference between student-led discussions and those that occurred with an active teacher participant was the more formality of language the students used. The following excerpt illustrates how the students used more informal or “kid-language” in their student-led discussion:

Aisha: But they had to go because of the bombings and the killings of the younger kids and older kids are whatever like a lot of people died because of like the election and I don't why people just kill other innocent people that are not even part of the election. It's kinda stupid.

Tiff: It's like making stance. They are trying to make a statement and no one's listening to them if they're just doing what's reasonable like talking or giving speeches or something. And that's probably the easiest way to get someone to actually listen to you. Not really but in like politics kinda thing.

In this excerpt, both Aisha and Tiffany use more slang in their responses (i.e. "it's kinda stupid" and "like politics kinda of thing"). This informal language often carried implied information that may or may not be deconstructed in the discussion. This is opposed to the language the students used when Pierce was present. The following example is from Jean who seemed to be the most apt at switching to an accepted or more valued language variation:

Well, our group, we talked a lot about political power. Like you know you have to be 35 to be president; you know you have to be a certain age to run for congress; and we also talk a lot about how a couple of years ago the Kids Vote where we got to choose and they picked Al Gore and if they listened to the kids maybe things would be different.

This formal language not only appropriates the correct terminology but also elucidates the concepts in much more concrete details. Thus "politics kinda thing" turns into "political power." This use of more formal language when Pierce is present may be the result of her own discourse. For example, when Pierce rephrases student responses, she often does so by providing the formal terms and language for the idea. The following illustrates this as Steve tries to articulate an idea and Pierce provides the terminology for him through her rephrasing of what he said:

Steve: Yes, I think it does show a few bad things, but it supports it with something good. So something bad and something good. So it shows the positive and negative things so there's kind of more a view so you can tell what more than one person is thinking.

Pierce: And that's kind of the point of the books. It's to try to have all the books show you different ideas because one single book isn't going to capture everything.

The discourse Pierce models when she rephrases student responses, may suggest to students that this type of language is more valued or is the standard in which they should try to meet.

The third difference of student-led discussions is that the students interrupted each other more. These interruptions were not always negative. Many times students cut one another off to help clarify or to help finish the thought. When Pierce was present there were eight times when a student interrupted another student, of those times five were to extend or help the student think through the idea. During the student-led discussions seven of the twenty interruptions were students who cut off another participant in order to extend or clarify the discussion. Recall the excerpt from the *Fitting In* text set discussion and how it illustrates positive interruptions. Beth tried to articulate her thoughts and Charis helped build the idea by providing a word. This is similar to Hurst's (1988) "collaborative storying." Collaborative storying is when one student begins retelling a portion of the text, "and then, nearly mid-sentence" another student takes over (p. 201). Other times students provided more than a word or phrase, but additional understandings. For example, in the following excerpt from the jigsaw discussion, Evan uses interruptions as a rhetorical tool:

Evan: Listen. Adults vote on acts that have to deal with our schools.  
Right?  
Tiff: Yeah but I mean...  
Evan: If we were able to vote I think it would be very different

This excerpt, shows how Evan tries the approach that many attorneys use to prove a point. By asking a closed question and then not allowing Tiffany to extend her answer, Evan was able to effectively use the interruption technique to further his point.

The instances in which the interruptions could be considered a negative attribute may have occurred for several reasons. The majority of the so called negative interruptions occurred in the *Loser* transcript. Recall this group was unique in that Jin was often undervalued by the class due to his somewhat tangential comments and his emerging English language proficiency. Sean, too, was often overlooked in discussions because he had a hearing and language disability. Though he used a hearing aid, many times he struggled to keep up and thus did not always verbally participate. Another member in this group was Charis who often monopolized the discussion. Several times a member of the group interrupted Charis during one of her monologues. Although I coded these interruptions as negative toward Charis, they were also positive in terms of helping the group move ahead and involve more voices. The students were well aware of Charis' talkative nature, Jin's often tangential ideas, and Sean's usual lack of participation. Their reputations may be one factor influencing the high number of interruptions that occurred in this particular transcript.

*Student-led discussion participants placed themselves in hypothetical situations and asked more questions.* Other differences between student-led discussions and discussions in which Pierce was an active participant occurred. For example, students used personal pronouns more during student-led discussions. When the students were in student-led discussion they more frequently created hypothetical situations and placed themselves into those situations. Recall the excerpt from the *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* text set used to illustrate the ladder of abstraction. During that exchange, the students created a hypothetical situation, explored the challenges presented to different age groups of immigrants, and then placed themselves in the situations. Jeff questioned the group,

“What would be harder? Let’s say you’re four years old and you barely know how to speak?” They continued placing themselves in different age groups and discussing the challenges each group faces. Student engagement in the discussion is obvious when they move to more personal pronouns. The students moved from seeing the issue as it relates to others and began seeing it as something meaningful to their own lives. Many times personal pronouns also signified a moving to critical talk as students moved beyond the characters and the text to applying the situation to their own lives. This engagement was a goal of Pierce’s when selecting children’s literature. Hypothetical discussions like the one above did not occur when Pierce was present. The personal pronoun usage that occurred when Pierce was present was most often associated with personal stories. Students during student-led discussions also asked more questions. In the discussion in which Pierce was present, she was the only one who asked questions. However, in student-led discussions it was the students who did the questioning. Yet even in these discussions, the questions usually came from only one or two students with the exception of the *War and Peace* text set discussion in which three of the four participants asked a question. Recall in this excerpt the students discussed an alternative reality: what the world would be like if everyone was the same. The following excerpt from that text set discussion illustrates the student-initiated questions:

Fiona: Are you saying that they wanted all them to be just the same and they don’t want anyone to be all different and stuff?

Emily: yeah

Aisha: Yeah, it would be boring like that because like for example like what if like everybody in here is Christian? And it’s really boring because like everybody else knows the same God and it’s one God and then all the sudden someone else comes in here and they’re a different culture. It’s like a Jew or somebody.

Emily: So it’s sorta about two cultures fighting against each other and wanting to be one?

Aisha: Yeah or like another person comes or something like that and they say I don't like your culture or something like and they like be really snobby about it and stuff like that.

This excerpt shows the girls using questions to understand each other and dig deeper into the discussion of sameness.

Of the 81 transcribed literature discussion groups, Pierce participated in ten. Four of those that Pierce participated were included in the ten exemplary critical talk transcripts I examined in depth. Those numbers suggest that having a knowledgeable teacher present did influence the discussions and heightened the potential for critical talk to occur.

*Pierce reflected on the challenges of both student-led and teacher-led discussions.*

I asked Pierce to reflect on student-led discussion groups versus those in which a teacher was present during an interview in March, She shared some of her perceived challenges:

The other thing that they wrestled with and I saw it in one of the transcripts and I wish I had been there when they did it. Somebody said "I don't understand why some sections are in big type." And I wanted them to pursue that. And they didn't. I know. I was like "Arh." And I guess that's the trade off of whether I'm in the discussion group or not. Had I been there I would have protected the air space for that to come back up. I wasn't there. At this point I can't go back to it. It's too far gone.

Pierce had confidence in her students and knew that if given the right amount of support they would be able to "think deep thoughts." When students brought up promising topics but chose not to pursue those threads, those same topics or threads may have been supported by Pierce had she been present in the group. Pierce said, "that's the downside with the way we're running it right now. I am sorta dotting from group to group but not able to be as involved in the development of the conversation." The balance between student-led discussions and those in which a teacher participated poses a continual

challenge for many teachers (Freedman, 1993; Maloch, 2002; Short, et al., 1999; Wedman & Moutray, 1991), and was one that Pierce struggled with as well.

During a post interview, Pierce talked about the importance of have a strong presence in the classroom discussions whether as an active participant or as a facilitator of curricular engagements:

Sixth graders have their own list of pressing concerns and we could get some really decent conversation about friends, fitting in, bullies, etc. but one of my challenges was to help make connections between the passions and interest of 6<sup>th</sup> graders and the content of history. It was easy to make connections in literacy because a really good book aimed at middle level readers should deal with issues of middle schoolers and provide insight into human character and the options that people have in their lives. I'm really picky about the books I choose. The books have to help kids see new possibilities for themselves and others. I can hook them with a book like *the Earth, my butt and other big round things* because it deals with body issues and middle school angst, standing up for what you believe in, standing up when you see an injustice, some of those things. That book was rich. It was attractive initially because it hooked in a bunch of kids. I used Huck's [chapter in] *Talking about books*, the roles of literacy. One of them is to take you out of yourself and let you live in the story of a character and then take you back as a changed individual. If kids are willing to take the journey, then it needs to leave them in a new place about issues adults think are important as well as issues that kids think are important.

#### 4) *Overlapping the Features of Critical Talk*

Though presented separately, the above themes appeared together, often overlapping. I now provide one excerpt with a discussion of all three themes in an attempt to illustrate the relationship and role of each theme in defining critical talk. I chose the excerpt from the *Two Cultures/Two Worlds* text set discussion (see Appendix K for hand-coded version of this excerpt) because within the six turns each of the above themes can easily be seen:

Steve: The book I read, *When Marian Sang*, it's about this girl who's really good at singing but she can't sing wherever she wants, like

the average white person would be able to do even though she was one of the best singers in the world she wasn't able to. I think it's kinda injustice how back then they couldn't just sing like they want like whenever they want to in public that I think. I like how she, made people, or made people hope that, or she showed people that black people can do the same thing as white people.

Jeff: Yeah that's it, back then but not now, back then it was like even if you were an African American or a Mexican or someone who came from a different country and your were really good at something like you were a really good lawyer you know a lot about politics maybe you're good at sports maybe your good at all this stuff but you wouldn't be able to do it because people favor who lives in the country already. Which isn't right because someone, someone could make you a lot of money but you just don't like them so you don't hire them. So it's kinda wrong.

Tim: I think that, this is just kind of a comment about what we could do based on what Steve said was in that book, I think kind of the perseverance is what keeps prejudice from being really, really bad. Because when you think about it there will probably always be at least one person that's prejudice against someone in the way that Jeff said but if as long as there are people that aren't prejudice and actively trying to be not prejudice there won't be like, people won't be put back into slavery and everything.

Jeff: Like and it's all about believing that you can still do it. Like Dr. Martin Luther King got arrested like 50 times but he always got back out of jail and did the same thing over again. That's why people heard him.

Carl: Like you said before, people who come to the country they don't get favored. I don't understand back in the 1800's through the Civil War and slavery, when they were coming over they said that America was to be the land of tolerance and to honor all people's rights but what I don't get is that only white men got rights, no body else got anything. They were considered inferior and they still kept saying that we are in the right we get all the equal rights.

Jeff: It's like all about, it's about them just trying to get people to come over because they had so many jobs they needed to have people who, it's basically a lie. They say we're the land of tolerance, so if you come over here you'll have rights and lots of money and they come over and they have no choice to go back. So they have to stay and they get taken advantage of.

In this excerpt the boys brought up several of the critical literacy concepts. Steve began by talking about how the character represented hope and Jeff returned to the idea of hope when he referred to the Dr. Martin Luther King. Steve and Jeff also discussed the



injustice of discriminating against those who are different. Tim brought up the idea of perseverance and Jeff extended that notion. Carl and Jeff then challenged the status quo, arguing that United States does not honor all people. They then began to see an alternative perspective of immigration.

The group also used several different type of talk. Beginning with Tim's turn, the boys worked together to scale the ladder of abstraction. Tim offers a general idea that "perseverance is what keeps prejudice from being really, really bad." Jeff provides a more concrete example with his comment about Dr. Martin Luther King. Carl offers a more a general example and then Jeff provides more general statement, "It's basically a lie." The discussion is also multi-valued in that the students attempt to see other sides to familiar issues. Carl wonders, "what I don't get is that only white men got rights, no body else got anything." The boys used tentative language that suggests their ideas are unformed and open to change, another characteristics of multi-valued exploration. Several instances in the above transcript also suggest that the boys were questioning the map they held. The example just stated from Carl, suggests that the literature suggests a new map for Carl and he is trying to make sense of it.

The above excerpt is a student-led discussion. In this discussion Jeff offers a brief hypothetical situation at the beginning when he says, "it was like even if you were an African American or a Mexican or someone who came from a different country ...but you wouldn't be able to do it because people favor who lives in the country already." Recall this hypothetical talk was unique to student-led discussions. This group was one of the few student-led discussions in which there was not a lot inequality in turn taking; however Jeff had three turns compared to the others who each had one turn.

## 5) Summary

In attempting to determine the nature of critical talk, it seemed most obvious to look at the topic or content. However, by including the type of talk and the participation that occurred in the discussions, additional layers of depth can be added to the definition. The type of talk and participation patterns represented in the critical talk transcripts helped to illustrate how Pierce and the students engaged in the discussions. This engagement is important because there were times when one student mentioned a critical topic, but the discussion was “not quite there” as critical. I asked the students in the post interview about critical talk. They responded with honest remarks that were echoed by their classmates. Devon explained:

I was thinking that it makes a good discussion when like everybody's really into the discussion and they are debating over like what, they are debating on what things, like, I think if the discussion when everybody has a different point view it makes it challenging for everybody. And yeah I think that is a good discussion.

Aisha concurred stating, “actually letting everyone have a turn so that everyone can express their opinions.” While their comments point out elements that were necessary for critical talk, they were not sufficient; everyone taking a turn is not a guarantee that the talk will be critical. However, the students suggested aspects of critical talk that are often overlooked. When teachers focus entirely on the content and do not recognize the type of talk the students are using or whether or not a student is, as Aisha calls it “hogging the conversation” they may be missing layers of dialogue.

### *What are the characteristics of critical talk?*

I answered the previous question, *how is critical talk identified*, by describing the attributes of critical talk that would be visibly apparent to a teacher in her classroom. In

determining the characteristics of critical talk, I examined the attributes that were less noticeable signs that students were engaging in these interactions. To find these internal characteristics, I examined the post interviews with the students and their literacy journals they kept throughout the semester. Two characteristics and one anomaly of critical talk emerged from the data. The two characteristics include 1) transformation and 2) new perspectives. The anomaly that emerged was silent participation.

### *1) Transformation*

*Students felt that participating in critical talk changed them.* One of the goals of critical literacy is to transform students (Freire & Macedo, 1987). A limitation of this study is that the transformation may not occur within the third quarter collection of data. A particular literature discussion may have a lasting impression on a student; however, that student may not have been able to articulate it nor be consciously aware of it. There were several examples of students who felt as if they were changed by the discussions. One example is Carl who wrote in his journal, "I changed personally...sometimes circumstances force us to do things we don't like and I apply that to the world and why there is war." Though I would argue this was more of a new perspective, Carl felt like it transformed his world view. He was not just aware of another way to look at the world, but changed his belief about war. Tina, too, felt like she was transformed by the discussions, she wrote the "discussion kind of helped me be braver in more pressuring situations ...that sounds SO corny, doesn't it?" Tina, a leader in the class, was biracial and well aware of the negative stereotypes placed upon her by others. During one whole class discussion in which Pierce engaged the class in brainstorming on the white board different minority groups affected by a particular event in immigration history, it was

Tina who interrupted the discussion saying, “I just realized. I’m part of every minority up there.” Tina will face these “pressuring situations” in the future and was able to draw strength from the discussions. Jean, too, found the discussions changed her. In her journal she wrote that she believed the discussions “changed me because now I realize that I would do anything for my family. I know that if I was ever stuck in a life or death situation they would put themselves at risk to help me. Still imagine the courage it takes to be willing to sacrifice yourself for them.”

However the most dramatic transformation occurred in Fiona. Fiona participated in the *Loser* literature discussion group. Recall they discussed in-depth the main character, Zinkoff. At the end of the discussion, Fiona and Charis had this exchange:

Fiona: And I’m not saying this in a funny way, I really mean this. I think that some of these people in this school need to act that. Like be positive because...

Charis: I agree with.

Fiona: And I even say myself for real

This was a brief foray into recognizing a need for action, yet Fiona continued to process this discussion and take action herself. In the post interview more than two months later, Fiona had this to say about her transformation, “I think that book was changing me a lot because my attitude changed. I start thinking kinda positive than thinking negative a lot. And plus I got more friends like that.” This transformation was visible to everyone, even Pierce who remarked that she saw a noticeable difference in how Fiona treated others in the class.

## 2) *New Perspectives*

*Students felt that they gained new perspectives from participating in critical talk.*

Another characteristic of critical talk is gaining of new understandings. Several students

articulated the new understanding they gained from the discussions in their journals. Tina wrote in her journal, “it made me realize how fortunate we are and stuff and that we shouldn’t take anything for granted.” From her discussions, she felt that she now saw her life through a new lens and appreciated her privileged life more. Jean also wrote in her journal about her new understanding:

These stories remind us that this country was based on different people coming here to be free of oppression. It’s not so much the destination as much as the journey...it doesn’t matter where you are or what you come from as long as you work to understand why it’s so important to get there. Still why do we often feel the need to move, why is it so important to get out? The answer is simple: because sometimes you just need to. At heart were all the little bird wanting to be free. Sometimes we just need to soar away. It’s just a chance we have to take and wonder. Is it worth it? What’s it worth? What will we risk for it? Sometimes everything. It’s just something we have to do. For our family and ourselves.

This excerpt illustrates Jean’s assimilation of the discussions, her new appreciation for taking action, and her recognition of the value she places on her family and herself.

Another example of a journal entry that suggested the critical talk helped the students gain new perspectives was from Charis. Recall Charis participated in the literature discussion on the book *Loser*. She wrote:

[it] changed me in the sense I thought people could be mean to some but now could you be mean to Zinkoff? Growing up with a sister who didn’t get enough air as a baby lets me see “slower” people. So I really didn’t understand other perspectives, I never really knew other insight. People in the group really helped me see that.

These examples best represent the journal entries of students sharing their new perspectives gained through discussions. In the post interview, Tim said, “Nothing majorly changed, like nothing changed my life or anything, but I guess a lot of the discussions changed the way I thought about the book from other people telling me what they thought about it.” Tim recognized that he wasn’t necessarily transformed by the

discussions, but he valued the new perspectives he gained. Evan, too, described the new perspectives he gained from the discussions. He said in his post interview, “I can now see some things in the book that I couldn’t see without the group.”

### 3) *Silent Participation*

There was an anomaly that presented itself in the data. When observing groups and reviewing my notes, I found that there were three times when turn taking among group members appeared unequal to the point in which some students talked minimally. This led me to question whether these students were engaged in the discussion or felt silenced. I followed one such anomaly, Devon, through the transcripts and asked him about his participation in the post interview. I found that though Devon appears rarely in the transcripts as an active participant he was silently engaged in the discussion.

*Students may silently participate in critical talk.* Silent participation created an anomaly for me that was difficult to document. Intuitively I felt there were students who benefited from the discussions but neither their talk nor their journal necessarily showed it. I began looking through the work and interviews of those students who were not as vocal in the discussions. I found Devon who rarely participated verbally.

I specifically asked Devon about his participation in the post interview in April. I told Devon I noticed that in some groups he talked more frequently than in others and I wanted him to talk to me about that. Devon explained:

It depends on what type of topics we are talking about because if it’s a topic that I really can’t say anything about it, I won’t really talk. But if it’s a topic that I can really get hold of, or I have a whole lot of things on my mind to say I will talk a whole lot.

I followed-up by asking Devon if it mattered who was in his group. I noticed that in the *Loser* literature discussion group he talked more than in the *Behind the Mountains*

literature discussion group. Devon explained, “it can be anybody and I will have a discussion on them. Discussion or like the topic that I have a whole lot to say about.” Devon was a bright and soft-spoken student. Because he didn’t talk as much as other students, my first impression was that he was not engaged in the discussions. However, as I returned to the data and reread the transcripts from the groups Devon participated in, I noticed that his comments, though few, were often pushing his group members to think of other perspectives or question their budding understanding. In the ten selected transcripts Devon participated in two: *Behind the Mountains* and *Losers*. Devon verbally participated three times in the *Behind the Mountain* discussion and thirteen times in the *Loser* discussion. In both, Devon’s verbal participation ranked in the bottom 15% of the turns taken. However he offered thoughtful questions and comments. For example, in the *Behind the Mountains* excerpt, Devon asked the group, “Well say her dad wasn’t in New York and he was in Haiti, and like during the time of the bombing. Do you think that they would have left? Or do you think they would have stayed?” In the *Loser* discussion, Devon responded to the group’s inquiry into why Zinkoff’s peers treat him poorly. Devon said:

But they don’t, see the reason why they do that is because they aren’t around him everyday like his parents. Like his parents know like why he acts like that, but the kids don’t and so that’s the reason why they talk about him.

Though Devon did not talk frequently, he contributed to and participated in the discussion offering thoughtful questions and insightful comments.

### *Summary*

When students participated in critical talk they were engaging in longer stretches of dialogue beyond the text; articulating, reflecting, and/or inquiring into personal,

communal, and/or societal beliefs; gaining new perspectives; and changing. Through ten selected transcripts, several themes emerged. First, students explored critical literacy concepts. Some of the concepts explored included multiple perspectives; recognition of a need for action, hope, and perseverance; recognition of injustices; reflection or articulation of societal values; challenges to status quo, and exploration of alternative realities.

Several types of talk also emerged as students engaged in critical talk. First, students worked together to scale the ladder of abstraction. This traversing between concrete and abstract language allowed the students to gain greater understanding of the critical literacy concepts. Second, the students worked together to recalibrate their maps to the new territories. This occurred as they shared new ideas or learned new information from texts. The last type of talk that occurred was the use of two-valued versus multi-valued orientations. The students' talk often moved from one to the other as issues were discussed and new understandings led students to see that many of the controversial issues have multiple sides.

The participation in the groups also varied between those that were teacher-led and those that were student-led. When Pierce was an active participant, turn taking was more equitable, less negative interruptions occurred, and students used more formal, explicit language. When Pierce was not an active participant, the students asked more questions, used more informal language, and posed more hypothetical situations. Other characteristics of critical talk were less obvious. Some students changed or were changed by these discussions. After the discussions, several students admitted to changing an aspect of their life due to the talk. Others gained a new understanding of particular issues.



Though several students said they weren't changed by the discussions, they did say they had a new appreciation for other's viewpoints or a new perspective on a topic. Finally, participation need not be vocal. Though students appeared quiet they still gained from the dialogue. Their participation was more as an active listener and less as a vocal participant.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following brief overview of this study includes the purpose, procedures, and findings. It also discusses the major insights drawn from the study and offers suggestions for further research.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to examine the talk that occurred during literature discussions that pushed students to become more critical. The following questions guided this study:

1. How does the teacher enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk? What teaching strategies foster engagement in critical talk?
2. What is the nature of critical talk in this literacy-social studies middle school classroom? How is critical talk identified? What are its characteristics?

### Procedures

This naturalistic, qualitative study uses techniques borrowed from grounded theory to examine three types of data: student and teacher interviews; transcripts and observational field notes of student-led and teacher-led discussions; and student and teacher artifacts including journals, curriculum materials, and student work. Two phases of data analysis occurred in order to better answer the above questions. The first phase explored Kathryn Mitchell Pierce's teaching decisions as she enacted, nurtured, and sustained critical talk; the second phase examined in depth ten selected transcripts in order to describe the nature of these discussions. I employed several additional data

analysis tools. I used data briefs to help organize and provide initial analysis of the 81 transcripts. A dual chronology documented the data collection and analysis as well as recorded my thought process and evolving theory. Peer debriefings continuously informed the budding theory as I shared findings at all stages of the research with participants and colleagues, as well as presenting the findings in several different forums including critical friends groups, conferences, and graduate classes.

### Findings

The two sets of questions that guided this study focused my attention to not only what critical talk looked like in a classroom, but how Pierce was able to facilitate those discussions. The following overview first describes Pierce's teaching as it was influential in informing how critical talk was defined and then summarizes the nature of those discussions.

*Teacher knowledge, processing time, various forms of scaffolding, and oral rubrics emerged from the data as themes to address the question of how a teacher facilitates critical talk prompted by literature.*

Four themes emerged from the data. The theme *teacher knowledge* included Pierce's knowledge of students and learning, children's literature, and both the social studies and literacy contents. Pierce also provided *processing time* in both her curriculum and daily lesson pacing as well as with individual students. This deliberate pace emphasized Pierce's value of deep discussions. *Various forms of scaffolding* also emerged as a theme from the data. Pierce deliberately constructed the curriculum, the daily lessons, and the critical literacy concepts to build upon one another. Finally, the theme *oral rubric* describes Pierce's use of directions, explicit stating of talk

expectations, and feedback. Through the oral rubric, Pierce made informed moment-by-moment teaching decisions such as when to join a group, when to redirect a group, and when to leave a group on their own. These decisions were made based on careful, informed observation of student talk and enabled her to nurture and sustain the critical talk.

*Critical talk adds another layer to the discussion of literature study by further delineating the type of talk used by students to extend beyond the text.*

In determining the nature of the critical talk that occurred in Pierce's classroom several themes emerged. First I created a definition to describe those discussions deemed critical:

Critical talk is longer stretches of talk in which students leave the text to articulate, reflect, and/or inquire into personal, communal, or societal beliefs; these discussions may shed light on a belief or provide a new lens in which to view a belief.

This definition helped to distinguish these discussions from others that occurred in the classroom during literature study discussions.

Additional information about the nature of those discussions emerged as I examined the data through multiple lenses of general semantics, content analysis, and discourse analysis. Critical talk often included exploring critical literacy concepts such as multiple perspectives; recognition of a need for action, hope, and perseverance; recognition of an injustice; reflection or articulation of societal values; and challenges to the status quo and exploration of alternative realities. The students also wrestled with issues such as *different vs. same, ignorance, and America*.

Second, by applying various analytical lenses such as content analysis, general semantics, and discourse analysis, patterns of distinct types of talk emerged in the selected discussions. The ladder of abstraction, often used for evaluation of thinking, appeared in the discussions as a visible sign the students were working through the critical literacy concepts. For example, some groups scaled the ladder of abstraction together, clarifying and providing more concrete examples when the discussion was too abstract or moving beyond personal, concrete examples and drawing larger, more general ideas and understandings. This traversing enabled students to avoid dead-leveling and to build a deeper understanding of the issues. The students also attempted to recalibrate their maps (perceptions of reality) to the territory (commonly agreed upon reality) they were seeing in the texts and hearing in the discussions. Many times the students were exposed to new ideas that they had not considered prior to reading a picture book in a text set or discussing a character in a literature discussion. This new information, at times, challenged existing maps students held. The new information needed to be accommodated or assimilated into their existing understanding of the particular phenomenon. Also, the students moved between two-valued and multi-valued orientation. The talk generally was initiated by a two-valued statement or question and as the students explored the issue they saw multiple sides to that issue. Occasionally the talk ended in a two-valued statement as students reflected upon their own beliefs and then articulated that belief in a two-valued statement.

I also examined the transcripts for the nature of engagement or participation that occurred. Pierce actively participated in four of the ten selected excerpts. Her participation in the discussions included five patterns of discourse: 1) prompting, 2)

rephrasing, 3) questioning, 4) sharing information, and 5) facilitating procedural aspects. In examining the six student-led discussions, several differences appeared. First in student-led discussions less equality in student participation occurred. With Pierce present, the potential decreased that one student would “hog,” as Aisha called it, the discussion. Students also used more informal language when Pierce was not present in the discussions. This included not only slang and loaded terminology, but also personal pronouns and hypothetical situations. There were less interruptions of student talk when Pierce was present. Though interruptions still occurred, in student-led discussions the interruption often cut off the participating student and changed the subject; in comparison to teacher-led discussions where the interruptions often helped clarify or provide a word or phrase to a student building upon that student’s thought. Last during discussions in which Pierce was present, students did not ask questions. However, in student-led discussions, students were more likely to ask questions.

The ten selected transcripts and supplemental data suggested two additional characteristics of critical talk that may be less apparent to teachers and one anomaly that offered additional insight. The two characteristics included 1) transformation and 2) new perspectives; while the anomaly was silent participation. First, students recognized that the critical talk changed them personally. The most dramatic example was Fiona who found in herself some of the negative characteristics of the antagonists in the book and made a conscious effort to change her attitude towards others. This transformation was not only self-proclaimed but commented on by Pierce as well. Several students also found that through the critical talk, they were able to gain a new perspective or understanding of an issue. As the discussions and texts shed light onto existing beliefs,

several students found that they adjusted their belief or recognized that others may view things differently. Interestingly some students had deep levels of participation even without outward signs of participation. Devon was the best example of this. He was often a quiet participant, but in talking with him and examining his responses in the discussions, he engaged quite deeply in the discussions. His responses, though low in quantity, were high in quality and suggested that he was engaged in the discussion though he was not talking frequently.

### Discussion

The students in this study were either socioeconomically and/or educationally privileged students. This is a somewhat unique context for critical literacy research. Much of the past critical literacy research has focused on educating oppressed populations in order to improve their situation. However, recently there has been more research on using critical literacy with middle and upper middle class students (Foss, 2002; Sweeny, 1999). There are unique challenges that occur when working with students who benefit from the current economical and social milieu. Students often find it more difficult to challenge the status quo, they struggle to understand and have empathy for oppressed individuals/groups, and they tend to deny their own powerlessness. Thus Pierce's teaching may look different in a classroom that has a different student population. However, there are aspects of Pierce's teaching and the student responses that may provide a new lens for teachers in differing classrooms to view their own practices and student responses.

Similar to typical literature discussions, Pierce's role varied as to how she enacted, nurtured, and sustained critical talk. The four themes that emerged from the

data—knowledge, time, scaffolding, and oral rubric—offer a unique way to envision the teacher’s role. It extends the role of the teacher beyond specific tasks by including the underlying characteristics of how the teacher engages students in these discussions. Yes, Pierce performed the roles of facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener that Short et al. describe (1999). However because of the extensive knowledge Pierce possessed, the time she allotted, the deliberate scaffolding of the concepts, and her use of informal assessment to guide her students and her moves, she was able to extend the roles of the teacher in literature discussions as she extended her students’ discussions. This study teased out a new layer of understanding about the complex role Pierce took on in this context. It unpacks statements like, “students discussed...” and “the teacher engaged students in literature discussions about...” Pierce’s everyday teaching strategies took on new meaning as we took her knowledge to a conscious level during data collection and analysis.

*Pierce’s extensive knowledge underlies her effectiveness.*

It seems obvious to state; however, Pierce’s extensive knowledge had an immense impact on the resulting themes. Each theme often returns to the extent of Pierce’s knowledge of students, curriculum, and the content. For example, Pierce provided time for individual students to work through their ideas orally during whole class discussions. This differed greatly from the way her teacher intern addressed incorrect responses during whole class discussions. When a student provided an incorrect answer, the teacher intern would respond with, “That’s interesting” and then move on to another student. Pierce, however, treated incorrect answers differently using her knowledge as a classroom teacher, of the content, and of students. When a student made a seemingly



incorrect response, Pierce's knowledge of the content enabled her not to become anxious but instead use it as insight into where a particular student was in their understanding of the content. She also was comfortable offering additional books to read to guide the student to a stronger understanding. This ability to focus on the student rather than the response comes from not only her experience in the classroom, but her knowledge of how talk can be used as a window into the student's mind. This is one example of how Pierce's knowledge impacted each theme. However, each theme returns to Pierce's extensive knowledge of children's literature, her students, and the content. The following discussion illustrates how the other three themes and the context worked together in Pierce's classroom to enact, nurture, and sustain critical talk.

*Pierce provided students with large amounts of time.*

Though this seems like an easy thing to do as a teacher, creating the time for students to engage with critical issues is often overlooked in the testing craze that recently has taken over classrooms. It takes time to sustain deep discussions, it takes time to nurture exploration of critical literacy concepts, and it takes time to build a classroom climate that will encourage and allow both to be enacted. Pierce's deliberate pacing whether it be the curriculum, the daily lesson planning, or with an individual student, illustrated to the students that she was devoted to creating opportunities for all of their voices to be heard as well as the time for them to explore larger issues. Pierce was able to provide that time partially because she had created a curriculum map that guided her through the year. This map helped her to build upon each curricular engagement. Thus as Pierce went through the year, she was cognizant of how each experience fit into the larger picture, the whole year. This organizer helped to focus her experiences based on what her

immediate and long range purposes were. Pierce was not doing random lessons. Each lesson fit into a larger schema and was used to scaffold deeper ideas. This scaffolding helped Pierce carve out considerable amounts of time, often a half hour or more, for students to explore the difficult ideas through talk. This meant that Pierce protected substantial amounts of time for students to engage in dialogue, to write, and to read texts. This time gave the students a chance to be exposed to new ideas from texts or peers; to ponder and explore those new ideas; and then to reflect personally, often in writing, about how these issues impact them.

Seven of the ten transcripts selected as critical talk, occurred after the students had been given several class periods prior to talk about the texts. This suggests that the potential for critical talk increases when students are given extended periods of time to engage in this type of discourse as well as extended periods of time to talk about one particular novel or text set. Pierce's knowledge of the content and her students enabled her to structure curricular engagements in a way that enabled students to spend time wrestling with difficult ideas and deeper issues.

Pierce did not have the intense pressures to teach to the test that many schools across the nation face. Her school district consistently scores high on the MAP, a state standardized test. Therefore the administrators and teachers in the district did not feel that they were in need of turning their curriculum into a test-prep curriculum. Without having to spend large amounts of time teaching to the test, Pierce could teach for understanding. Recall the literacy and social studies curricula described in chapter four. Each component was designed to offer continual and deepening invitations into the content, with understanding as the ultimate goal as opposed to coverage. This district philosophy

suggests that the test-prep curriculum currently mandated by policy makers for implementation in low performing schools may not be the correct choice. My research suggests that curricular engagements that require students to think critically and extend their understanding not only provide stronger learning for students, but may also help them “pass the test.”

*Pierce watched and listened to her students.*

This informal assessment helped provide her with evidence as to whether the students were ready to move on to the next lesson. Though teachers use assessment, many view it as a summative evaluation for a grade. Instead Pierce walked around, sat with groups, read their journals, and took notes on what occurred. This made it possible for Pierce to provide instant feedback to the students, nurturing and sustaining the discussions. It also enabled her to see where the students were in comparison to where she wanted them to be in the overall view of the year. She was not doing literature discussion groups because she knew they were a good thing to do in her class; she did them to provide a place for students to have meaningful discussions that scaffolded the critical literacy concepts she invited them to explore and fostered engagement of those concepts. This reaffirms Baker and Freebody’s (2001) belief of the role of talk in a critical literacy classroom, in which they write, “teachers do not rely on formal tests to infer how good students are at literacy; they hear this competence minute by minute in exchanges” (p. 67).

Pierce’s use of the oral rubric was effective for several reasons. First it provided the students with a clear set of expectations. She gave directions for not only what the students should be doing in their discussions but how they should be using talk. This

enabled the students to make the most of the time given to them. Students were not wasting their half hour of discussion time talking about off-task topics like who won the basketball game or who likes who. Instead the students had a clear set of expectations for their time. Pierce, then, used feedback as a way to help students learn to monitor their time. This modeled for the students an effective way to use talk as a tool for learning as well as made sure that students used the large amounts of time for content learning. The oral rubric was also used as Pierce scaffolded the activities and critical literacy concepts she wanted the students to explore. She provided reminders of past comments and questions which aided the students to push further than they had in their previous discussions. Again, the oral rubric helped make the talk more concrete and thus enabled the students to build on their past discussions.

*Pierce purposefully chose engagements that would help build upon student knowledge.*

Scaffolding, also, seemed to permeate the other themes. Again, Pierce's deep understanding of curriculum, students, talk, and literature provided the foundation for her work in the classroom. However, she also was able to use time in a way that would scaffold deeper discussions. She led students to continually build on the previous discussions by making time for them to revisit discussions and topics. She valued this time and built it into her overall structure. Pierce's explicitness on the type of talk she expected, (i.e. her use of an oral rubric), also scaffolded the discourse she wanted to see enacted in the classroom. The overarching theme, *All Men are Created Equal*, was another form of scaffolding. The students returned to this yearlong theme as they explored new novels, units, and concepts. Through the overarching theme, Pierce sustained engagement in the critical talk.

The means that Pierce used to engage, nurture, and sustain critical talk were apparent. However, much more difficult was the deconstruction of critical talk. Though the lenses provided support in breaking down the specifics that occurred in the discussions, it was necessary to rebuild those pieces to determine the nature of the talk.

*Critical talk is situated along a continuum.*

I began this research in an effort to examine critical conversations in a middle school classroom. However, as I collected, analyzed, and shared the data I began to have a better understanding of critical conversations. It was my new understanding that impacted the study. From discussions with peers and scholars in the field, I was able to see that the discussions I observed, tape-recorded, and transcribed were not the critical conversations of Harste (1999), Bomer and Bomer (2001), and Smith (2001). However, I knew that the talk I was seeing was more critical than most middle school literature study discussions I had been a part of or read about. Therefore I needed to place these discussions in a larger frame. The idea of a continuum was explored several months prior in one of my many peer debriefings as I was trying to place the discussions I observed with those I was familiar with as a language arts teacher and those that occurred in Pierce's classroom that were not selected as being "critical." I returned to the continuum idea (see Figure 2) as a way to visually represent where critical talk fell in comparison to not only those discussions that are not critical but still effective literature discussions, but also in terms of where it falls in comparison to critical conversations..



Figure 2. Extended continuum in which the data is situated within the literature and other types of talk.

The continuum provides a unique way to understand the different types of discussions that occurred in the classroom. On the far left of the continuum is *social talk*. This talk usually included discussions about the school play, basketball, new movies, and other topics that did not pertain to the particular text. The social talk did help to foster trust and create community within the group. Without strong rapport, critical talk is difficult for a group to achieve. As the students move to social talk about the book, (i.e. “What page are you on?” or “How much did you read last night?”) they begin to move toward *fundamental book talk*. Fundamental book talk is when students talked about the story in terms of structure, literary elements, and characters. It is also when students clarify plot and work together to understand confusing portions; it is the more literal interpretation of the text (Hillocks & Ludlow, 1984). To the right of fundamental book talk is *socio-interpretive text talk*. This includes the discussions that students made connections to social issues in order to interpret or get deeper into the book. Socio-interpretive text talk often touches on critical literacy concepts, but the talk is text-bound and the social concepts are used to understand the book. To the right of socio-interpretive text talk is where I placed *critical talk*. Bomer and Bomer (2001) write, “early attempts at being critical often tend to be oversimplified opinions or complaints rather than a more complex analysis of a social problem” (p. 117). In critical talk students begin to recognize

and at times complain about the injustices they see in the world, explore critical literacy concepts such as hope, perseverance, multiple perspectives, alternative realities, and challenging status quo. Critical talk also extends Bomer and Bomer. In critical talk students reflect upon themselves and society, articulate their beliefs, and enter the critical discourse required for critical conversations. *Critical conversations*, which I have placed to the right of critical talk on the continuum, are those times when students engage in discussions that interrogate the systematic causes of those issues discussed in critical talk. For critical conversations, students need to go further than recognizing the injustice. They must dig deeper to investigate the system contributing to that reoccurring injustice.

It is important to note that like all continuums the types of talk are not pre-determined phases, nor specific steps. Instead, as the discussions slide back and forth they may include some of the characteristics of each discussion type on the continuum. I drew from Rosenblatt's (1991) description of her own continuum representing the aesthetic and efferent stances in reading response, in which she argues that to think of these two stances as binary opposites is unproductive. Instead she suggests that readers should "think of it [a text] as written for a particular *predominant* attitude or stance" (p. 445). Not only are the stances placed on a continuum where text can be read for information and still be enjoyed, but a reader's stance can move during the reading (Rosenblatt, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1995). A discussion also can move along the continuum.

The other facet I liked about the continuum is that there is no visual hierarchy. Neither end is considered more or less important. The book, the participants, and the purpose determines what type of talk is used during a literature discussion. Thus it is not necessary to make critical talk or critical conversations the goal. There are times when it

is appropriate to have a literature discussion about the aesthetic literary devices used in order to help students learn to use those in their own writing or to have students connect to a piece of text in order to help them experience a more humanistic view of a particular time period. This is not a comprehensive list of the reasons why a teacher may choose one type of talk over another, but hopefully emphasizes that it is the choosing that is important. The continuum provides teachers and researchers a way to view literature study discussion groups and make a conscious choice as to the type of talk they invite students to use.

To illustrate how students' talk moves along the continuum consider the literature discussion group *Behind the Mountains*. The entire transcript of this discussion is included in Appendix A. I returned to this transcript to illustrate the number of turns and the chronology of the students' talk. This is then superimposed upon the continuum to better illustrate how students' talk ebbs and flows, dipping into the different types of talk and returning. This is only one example of the fluid motion along the continuum.



## Critical Conversation

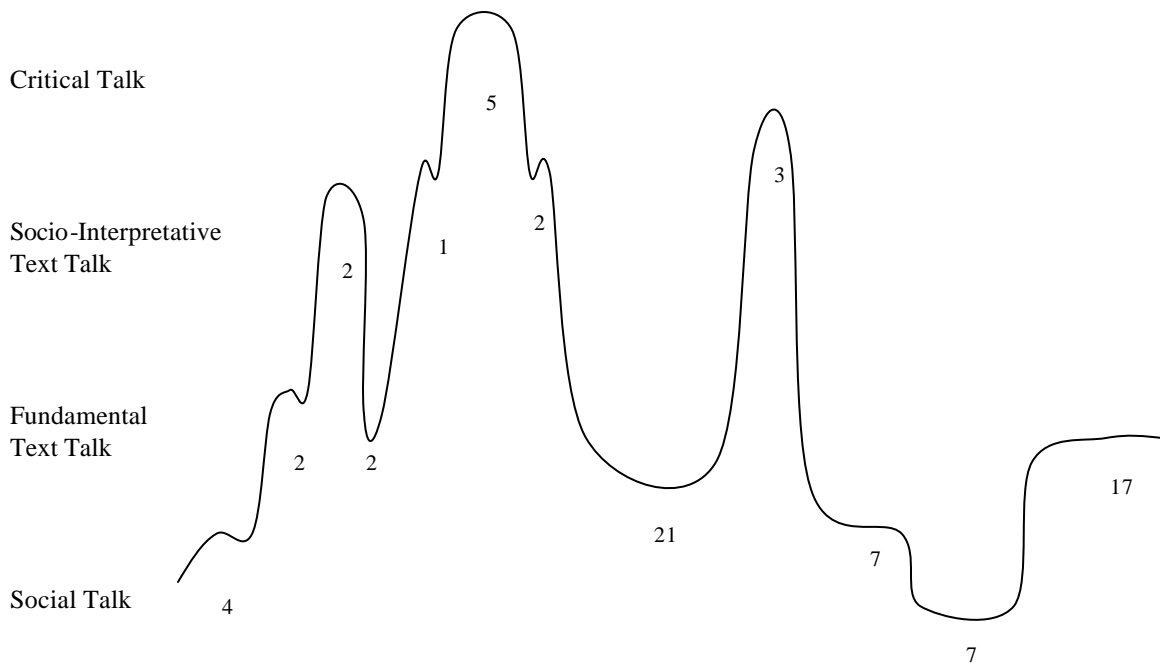


Figure 3. Tracking a Novel Discussion. This figure illustrates how one group of students in the *Behind the Mountains* novel discussion traveled along the continuum. The numbers represent the number of turns that were coded in each category.

*The role that a teacher takes impacts the critical talk that occurs.*

The other topic that arose during the in-depth analysis of the ten selected transcripts is the role of the teacher. Möller (2002) suggests that the role of the teacher in engaging students in discussion about critical literacy concepts was one of four functions: to open spaces for students to share, provide encouragement for student contributions, to clarify unfamiliar events or ways of thinking, and support and comfort students who reveal their pain and suffering. My data supports and extends Möller's findings. Pierce's function within the literature discussions groups extended the students' discussions. As stated above, she was dedicated to providing a safe environment for students to talk. Also when Pierce actively participated in the discussions, she facilitated the procedural aspects

in order to protect the space. She provided encouragement to students. This encouragement often came by rephrasing their thoughts and prompting them to dig further. She clarified unfamiliar events or ways of thinking by sharing information with them and offering thoughtful questions. She also supported and comforted students who found discomfort in the discussions. Recall how she encouraged students to move into those difficult discussions and provided support for those who truly struggled with those emotions. The data also supported findings from Short et al. (1999). They suggested that literature discussion groups with teachers present discussed more topics, while groups without a teacher present spent more time working through the details of the story. Pierce actively participated in four of the ten discussions chosen. Due to Pierce's presence the discussions were different. There was more equality in turn taking, students had longer turns with less negative interruptions, and more formal language was used by the students. However, like Short et al. (1999), the student-led discussions were also productive in a different manner. The students in this study still explored critical literacy concepts, but they also created alternative realities and posed more questions than in teacher-led discussions.

### Implications

Critical talk is one more piece of the puzzle called critical literacy. A difference between critical talk and critical conversations that emerged may be due to the extent of teacher involvement. Karen Smith (2004) said of critical conversations:

If you don't forefront these issues than you're just going to continue to have literature discussions that are more personal rather than stepping outside and critiquing. So in one way with literature studies as I did them for a long time and still do them, I ask kids to step in the story world and live in it and express that sense of it, but now with critical literacy you

almost ask kids to step outside the world and look at it from certain perspectives.

She went on to say that she felt:

I don't think kids do it naturally. I think it's rare that kids do naturally. At least the ones I've worked with. I don't find teacher do it naturally... You know it's a skill. It's a way of discussing. It is a form of discourse and I think it's maybe learned.

Other scholars agree with Smith suggesting that in order for students to get critical a teacher must “forefront” the issues to the students. Lewis (1999) argues that by allowing student choice and leadership without direction, teachers are inadvertently maintaining status quo. Students need support and encouragement in order “to read against the grain, to examine or resist” the text (p. 188). This underlying philosophy of how critical conversations are directed by the teacher is different than Pierce's underlying philosophy. Recall how Pierce described her role in facilitating critical conversations:

One of my roles is to create obviously the physical environment. To collect books that I think merit the conversation, that can support good, on-going, deep, reflective conversations. So create a safe social climate, where kids feel comfortable talking about and explore ideas, to provide the time to talk about the ideas, and to make sure that the ideas that we're discussing are meaningful to them and from my adult perspective...my role is saying, okay here's what they consider to be valuable and important and here's my sense of as an adult with more worldly experience, here are some other things that I consider to be significant and of importance and making sure that our topics of conversation fall in between that tension between the two. And then to have the talk be meaningful because it's connected to a wider study so we are not talking just for the sake of talking about the books, we're not talking about the books just for the sake of understanding the books, but for the purpose of letting the talk help us use the books to think new ideas.

Pierce's philosophy of education fits more closely to a constructivist theory of learning.

Constructivist theory is based on the work of Dewey, Piaget, and Bruner among others.

There are four main tenets of constructivism:

- Students learn more when they are actively engaged in their own learning.
- By investigating and discovering for themselves, by creating and re-creating, and by interacting with the environment, students build their own knowledge structures.
- Learning actively leads to an ability to think critically and to solve problems.
- Through an active learning approach, students learn content and process as the same time. (Marlowe & Page, 1998, p. 16)

Pierce's constructivist philosophy guided her actions in the classroom. She did not front-load critical literacy concepts that she wanted the students to attend to in the texts by directly teaching these concepts and then helping students to find them in the text. Instead she offered invitations that helped students consider critical ideas, but did not explicitly teach those ideas. This allowed the students to investigate and discover on their own within a carefully-constructed learning environment that was specifically designed to encourage exploration of particular issues such as justice and equity. This validates other studies in which teachers provided the space and offered invitations for students to choose the topics they were most interested in exploring. For example, Noll (1994) examined literature study groups in a seventh grade class and found that when students chose their own social issues to investigate it led to a powerful experience. And Rogers (2002) found that by changing her interaction to less teacher-direction, the students become more critical of the text.

### Classroom Implications

Several classroom implications can be drawn from this research. First, the amount of time Pierce provided her students enabled them to get much deeper. She was dedicated to this idea and thus made it a priority to carve out as much time in the schedule and the curriculum as she could to allow students the occasion to grapple with critical ideas. With the high-stakes testing climate, many teachers feel the pressure to cover curriculum

material and teach to the test. Pierce, too, at times felt the pressure of curricular coverage. As in every district, teachers are responsible for teaching students the required information in order to progress to the next grade level. However, Pierce took the required curriculum and engaged students differently than most teachers may have. First, Pierce used a curriculum map to guide her daily lesson planning decisions. By knowing the end goal and the amount of time needed for particular engagements, Pierce created leeway to extend individual activities or experiences. The curriculum map allowed Pierce to no longer view certain engagements as time constraints, but instead to show how they would fit together and extend her students' understanding. Also by focusing on the big issues in social studies rather than specific details, she was able to provide the students with the time needed to truly understand those issues and engage in meaningful talk about them.

Second, Pierce scaffolded the critical literacy concepts in which she wanted her students to engage. Smith (2001) writes, "engaging in critical conversation is skillful work." This skillful work does not often occur spontaneously. Pierce wanted her students to wrestle with critical ideas, therefore she built into her curriculum specific themes that students might choose to address. This particular class latched onto the idea of multiple perspectives and looking for whose voice was not being heard in a particular text. However, other classes Pierce has taught have chosen to explore other critical literacy concepts such as *That's not right and I'm going to do something about it*, *systems*, and *Civil Rights then and now*. Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) write, "the discourse in these classrooms is therefore less predictable and repeatable because it is 'negotiated' and jointly determined—in character, scope, and direction—by both teachers and students as

teachers pick up on, elaborate, and question what students say” (p. 6). Regardless of the critical concept, Pierce provided multiple ways for the students to access the ideas as well as multiple engagements with those ideas. Each engagement led the students to a deeper understanding of the concept.

Last, Pierce’s explicitness of the type of talk she expected from the students through her clear directions and feedback provided a framework for the students of the type of discourse needed to engage in critical talk. Freire and Macedo (1987) write, “they [students] need to comprehend the world that involves talk about the world” (p. 50). However, teachers are aware that getting students to talk about their world is not as easy as it sounds. One of the ways that Pierce was able to elicit effective discussions about students’ worlds was through her explicit directions. Even in the third quarter when many teachers assume students know the appropriate way to talk in a group, Pierce continued to remind the students of the type of talk she expected them to be using. By adding this small component to her directions, Pierce made it clear to the students how they should be using talk. In a sense, she was teaching and modeling the discourse of critical talk. By not helping students learn the discourse needed to participate in democratic dialogue, teachers are doing students a disservice.

From the findings of this research I offer the following suggestions to classroom teachers:

- Become familiar with children’s literature. This includes not only young adult literature but also picture books and nonfiction texts that represent alternative views as well as mainstream perspectives. Teachers should also be familiar with the contemporary review of the literature used in the classroom to be more informed on how others view the text, particularly those texts about minority cultures.

- Inquire into contemporary social theory. In order to better facilitate discussion about race, class, gender, etc. teachers must be familiar with the current events and debates that surround those issues. They must be able to help students understand real life situations that exemplify the social theory in which they are wrestling.
- Generate an overarching broad concept to tie units of study together. It should offer the students multiple entry points into the theme as well as interdisciplinary connections.
- Create a graphic organizer that lays out the entire year. This organizer should chart the content coverage and expected products as well as provide initial time frames for units to be covered.
- Set aside large blocks of time for students to talk together. These blocks of time should be a regular structure in the classroom and should have students working in the same group for more than one discussion.
- Use the continuum to be aware of the different types of talk students can use in literature discussions. If teachers become aware of the options for talk within literature study they can better help students use that talk in more effective ways.
- Be explicit about the type of talk students are to engage in. This teaching can be done through modeling, encouraging metacognition, or through direct instruction.
- Participate actively in the literature discussions. The teacher does not have to be in all literature discussions; however if she wants the discussions to become more critical, her presence will increase the potential.

#### Implications for Teacher Education

There are two implications for teacher education. The first deals with reflection on practice. Freire (1998) writes, “Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise, theory becomes simply ‘blah, blah, blah,’ and practice, pure activism” (p. 30). This became apparent to me as I tried to fit what I saw occurring in practice to my understanding of critical literacy theory. Through the process I was able to gain a better understanding of both critical literature discussions and critical literacy. This notion of reflection on practice allowed me to better see what

Pierce was doing in her own classroom that was different, unique, and more effective. Reflection occurred in two ways. First I was able to reflect on Pierce's teaching decisions in comparison to her teacher intern and the student teachers I was working with in other contexts. The second was reflection on my own teaching as I worked with undergraduates in their pre-service coursework. These examples of practice helped to illuminate to me how the theory of critical literacy can be applied and played out in a classroom environment. Morgan (1997) reminds teachers that "no one exemplifies a discourse in a 'pure' form, for no such purity exists in practice" (p. 36). Thus when looking for critical conversations we must be open to the full extent of that talk, recognizing that no pure form will exist. Critical talk is one aspect of critical pedagogy in practice and perhaps a necessary step in constructivist classrooms.

The second implication for teacher research is the application of the ladder of abstraction as a way to look at literature discussions. Using the ladder of abstraction as a lens to view these discussions provides teachers with a window into the talk as well as a tool to help determine how to help their students move toward deeper discussions. Similar to learning miscue analysis, once teachers become proficient at using the ladder of abstraction as a lens, they will hear discussions differently and be able to provide the right kind of support at the right time.

In using the ladder of abstraction, teachers cannot focus merely on small portions of the discussion or an individual's comments, but larger moves made by the whole group. Bakhtin (1981) describes that when examining small portions of genre, "he [the critic] transposes a symphonic (orchestrated) theme onto the piano keyboard" (p. 263). This applies to discussions as well. When focusing on what the students are saying line



by line, teachers lose much of the richness in the discussion. However, when a large portion of the discussion is examined, depth appears that might not have appeared previously. This notion corresponds directly to the idea of applying general semantics, particularly the ladder of abstraction, to transcribed discussions. Though there were times when the students scaled the ladder of abstraction individually, the majority of the critical talk showed students working together to scale the ladder. By scaling the ladder of abstraction and avoiding dead-leveling at any one level, students' discussions include detailed examples that help make the issue more real and closer to their world. While moving up the ladder help the students generalize, categorizes, and begin to see themes and patterns, lower levels help students to be more multi-valued in their orientation. The lower levels remind students of the differences and exceptions that exist in all situations. Moving up the ladder is necessary for students to see the systemic causes of those same issues. Moving between concrete and abstract language helps students connect specific examples to larger world issues. As teachers step back and listen to discussions, we need to see the talk like Bakhtin suggests as a symphony in which multiple instruments are creating the final product. Larger moves within the discussions need to be examined as the students and teacher together create new meanings.

From the findings of this research I offer the following suggestions to teacher education:

- Encourage teachers to reflect on their practice in regards to their own learning, talk, and critical literacy. Reflection on practice is essential.
- Create opportunities for teachers to participate in collaborative action research. When two or more teachers are reading literature, observing a phenomenon, and talking together the possibilities for growth are limitless. Teachers need opportunities to expand their professional knowledge by working with one another. This includes observing in each

other's classrooms, articulating philosophy and practice, and nudging one another. In this way teachers gain valuable knowledge.

- Invite teachers to tape, transcribe, and examine larger stretches of student talk. Talk is a valuable tool in student learning; thus it should be required content covered in undergraduate education. Pre-service and graduate teachers need to be aware of the potential of talk and understand the lenses that can be applied in examining talk.
- Teach the ladder of abstraction as a lens teachers can use to better understand the talk that occurs in the classroom. The ladder can provide a structure for teachers to facilitate deeper discussion by helping them recognize when dead-leveling occurs.

### Implications for Further Research

This study attempts to shed light on the issue of critical literacy, literature study, and talk. However, my hope is that it sparks additional research in these areas as well.

The excerpts in this study are excellent examples of critical talk. The students only briefly touched on systemic causes behind the societal injustices they discussed. One implication for further research would be to examine those times when students have longer critical conversations. How does it look in a sixth grade classroom? Can it occur in a student-led discussion or must a teacher be present? Is it possible for young children in pre-kindergarten and primary grades to hold critical conversations? How do their conversations differ from those conversations among students in later grades?

Additionally, one area of study could examine critical talk beyond the discussions about literature. What does critical talk look like in a science or math classroom? How does it differ when students are talking about labs or experiential learning as opposed to those discussions prompted by texts? More research also needs to be done concerning students of privilege become critically literate. Students who benefit from the current

economic milieu often struggle with critical talk. What are the unique needs of those students and how does the critical talk differ between privileged and oppressed students?

Finally, Vasquez (2003) writes, “there is no one-size-fits-all critical literacy....we need to construct different critical literacies depending on what work needs to be done in certain settings, contexts, or communities, and that it needs to be negotiated using the cultural and linguistic resources to which children have had access” (p. 56). One invitation into critical literacy is through critical talk. After all Freire (1970/1993) writes, “only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (pp. 73-74).

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Appendix A  
Selected Critical Talk Transcripts

March 5, 2004

Students vary per process session

Group 2 processing and whole class conversation

Evan: I think that in some ways we can save the world. Because there are different ways that children think different than adults. I'll give you an example. If a butcher is 5 feet wide and 6 feet tall what does he weigh?

Jean: I don't know how much does he weigh?

Evan: He weighs meat. See not how much he weighs but what does he weigh.

Ethan: Oh yeah

Evan: Most people think about that but most adults don't.

Jean: It's a joke.

Tiff: I got it.

Ethan: He's a butcher. He cuts meat. You know like salami, turkey, whatever. And he goes he's 5 feet wide and 6 feet tall what does he weigh.

Tiff: That's like almost as tall as me.

They talk at once about the joke.

Carl: Children are more open-minded than adults. They strictly think that it has to be along the lines, like philosophy and science.

Tiff: Not really.

Carl: Us kids we can come up with stuff spontaneously.

Jean: Did you know if you want to be the president you have to be over 35?

Evan: Kids are better at thinking outside of the box.

Tiff: Yeah because you have to have experience.

Carl: Adults have experience, but we have open-mindedness.

They talk at once.

Evan: I think adults would be more open-minded because like a lot of kids basically ? their parents give them or like what teachers say.

Ethan: Like most of us we just like listen to the joke we don't really think about it. Some people would like really think about, "What does this joke mean?"

They talk at once. One conversation it talking about how the government doesn't always tell the people the whole story.

Evan: If kids were allowed to vote, we could definitely change the world. If kids were allowed to run, we could change it a lot more.

Tiff: Yeah I know.

Jean: But that's Candyland.

Evan: But seriously if we didn't have moms or dads...  
Carl: We need adults because of guidance.  
Tiff: Yeah  
Evan: Guidance but not dependence.  
Carl: Yeah  
Jean: People write songs about it. Who gets to make the law? Who gets to be president?  
Who gets to decide you know what the cafeteria is serving?  
Evan: They don't realize that maybe we have opinions.  
Carl: They need to be choosing what the cafeteria is serving by who's eating the food.

They talk at once.

Evan: Listen adults they vote on acts that have to deal with our schools. Right?  
Tiff: Yeah but I mean...  
Evan: If we were able to vote I think it would be very different, I bet.

They talk at once.

Jean: You know what happened? A couple of years ago when they were electing  
presidents they did Kids Vote quote unquote.  
Ethan: Oh yeah I remember.  
Jean: We voted for Al Gore.

They talk at once.

Tiff: Didn't like 89% voted for Al Gore and like 9% got Bush?

They talk at once.

Evan: That's because the majority of the votes came from private schools. They are rich  
and their republican.

167-224

KMP brings the groups back together and has the presenters call on people from the  
audience to share what they discussed. The presenters called on the following students to  
share:

Jen: Well our group we talked a lot about political power. Like you know you have to  
be 35 to be president you know you have to be a certain age to run for congress  
and we also talk a lot about how a couple of years ago the Kids Vote where we  
got to choose and they picked Al Gore and if they listened to the kids maybe  
things would be different.

March 8, 2004  
Text Set Discussion  
Two Cultures/Two Worlds

Steve: Well like all the books have a lot of conflict maybe.

Tim: Have a lot of what?

Steve: Conflict inside themselves. Like in this book, like, no one else thinks she is having much conflict that she's just gonna pick a name out of the jar and that's your new name.

Jeff: Like when it's not you?

Steve: But inside herself she's just having a lot of conflict inside herself.

205-

KMP interrupts to let the camera crew give specific directions to the students.

Steve: In all of the books they are having a conflict inside themselves like in a lot of other books I read their having conflicts with friends and they don't have friendship. But in this basically the whole book she has friends but inside herself she is kinda arguing what if she should get a new name, keep her name...

Jeff: In lots of books it's all like let's say someone is having a conflict and you're sitting there watching the person go through. You think, "Oh it's really easy, why are they having such a time?" Like picking a name, people would be like, "Oh why don't you pick this one it's my name? It's really cool." It's hard. Lots of times it's harder than you think, than it looks like it is. Let's say you watch someone playing like a sport or something and like, "Oh that looks really easy." But then you go out and try it and it's not at all.

Tim: Especially like, if you have ever tried to catch a pingpong ball it looks so easy, but it's impossible.

Jeff: Yeah

Tim: And also I've noticed a common theme among these books. It seems like whenever someone comes to a new country they kinda have to reinvent themselves and they're like new people when you immigrate. For instance she had to choose a new name. Like this one is about Native American tribes kinda blending in with the culture and finding their places in it. And this was about kinda the same thing as that.

Steve: Also in all the books they are kinda complaining and like also inside themselves like in this book she's kinda, she doesn't really think that she has any really good names. But she just doesn't know what to do and she's not really blaming herself, but there isn't really anyone to blame but herself.

Jeff: Well, think about who it would be harder for a parent or a kid?

Tim: A kid because, I don't know. Maybe a parent because...

Jeff: Because they lived in the country their whole life.

Tim: Yeah because a lot of times you actually see that. Because if the whole family immigrates to America from let's say like Germany the kid usually learns English...

Carl: quicker than..

Tim: And develops an English accent faster than the parents do.

Carl: because the parents have...

Tim: The parents have lived in Germany and spoken in German for so long

Jeff: Yeah

Tim: Or wherever, it's just like almost a complete life change or ...

Jeff: It would be a lot harder for the parents. Try, what would be harder, let's say you're four years old and you barely know how to speak?

Carl: Then it's really easy. Say you're like 9 or 10?

Jeff: Yeah.

Carl: And you've lived in that place all your life.

Jeff: It gets a little harder.

Carl: It's a little bit more emotional once you reach that sort of age.

Jeff: Especially if you have lots of friends.

Tim: Yeah.

Jeff: If you have lots of friends it's kinda equal. Because for the parents it's hard to learn a new language if you've lived in one place your whole life and if you're a kid and you have like great friends and then you have to move and you have to make new ones.

Tim: Yeah you kind have to or like you were like really successful socially or one of the most popular people in the school then you kinda have to start over from scratch when you get there.

Jeff: And maybe the way you act in one school was cool and the way you act in another school is like mean and lame

Steve: So when you're a kid you basically have to inter-, you basically interact more. It's not as hard to learn a new language but...

Carl: Emotionally it's a little harder.

Tim: When you think about it, kids are still developing themselves socially so they just have to like, it's like they're going on a smooth path and they just take a complete detour to a different road. Because parents who immigrate to a new country probably don't interact as much with other people as kids.

Jeff: Yeah.

Tim: Because kids are like, the whole purpose of childhood is like...

Jeff: It's kinda like a mountain that's in your path and you can either, there's a hole that goes all the way through it and it would be a lot quicker or there's a path that goes all the way around it. It's kinda like you are on the way going right through the mountain the easy way. Then you move so you have to go all the way around.

Steve: With that path closed.

Carl: Basically.

March 9, 2004 B  
Text Set Discussion  
Fitting In

Charis: My book was about, like, who was, like, supposed to be here. It's like the question, is America for Americans or, but I have to say that America can't be for



only Americans because they're so many types of Americans like there's Jewish American, Christian American, Catholic American, African American, Asian American, I could keep going forever.

Ray: Yeah there's not just Americans.

Charis: I know, because if there'd be just Americans it would be like one percent population...

Ray: Yeah isn't it like the big boiling pot or something?

Beth: Yeah

Charis: The mixing pot.

Evan: I think in the United States there should be no such thing as minority because I think the whole point of the United States is that everybody is a minority.

Charis: Well...

Evan: Everybody should be a small group that makes one big group.

Ray: Yeah, because Americans are basically the Anglo-Europeans.

Charis: Yeah

Beth: But if you say that every group is a minority it also does, like if you say that every group, there's supposed to be different small groups in one whole big group, that would also bring out some...

Charis: Conflict

Beth: Yeah conflict

Ray: So basically...

Beth: Because you say little groups inside a big group so that would make the little groups like...

Evan: But that's not what I mean, the little groups like let's say that when people were immigrating to America, let's say there were two million from Eastern Europe.

Charis: Okay.

Evan: They came to the United States as one small group and they just, and then when they came to American there was no longer one small group it was one big group with everybody else.

Charis: Well, see I think what people are trying to say if you, America, like became only Americans and no body was like, not only Americans but if everybody was no body was a minority, like, there was no such word, just everybody is a minority. That would cause a lot of conflict. In today we do not need any more conflict against our own people. We don't need anymore...

Beth: I think we should see it more as one big group instead of more like minorities.

Ray: Because no one really originated here except for maybe Native Americans.

Evan: They came over. One of the biggest theories for them because of the shape of some of their faces that they came over like there was a land bridge between Alaska and Russia.

Charis: There's a theory that Native Americans because they were so into nature came out of trees and land. And I know this is like, I read this somewhere. That people believe that Native Americans came from the river and the stream because they were so into the nature and the people of their land.

Evan: One of the theories in science right now is that it was people how the people in Africa got there.

Charis: How did they get there?

Evan: On Africa there were a lot of people and then some people went over but there was only one woman that went over and they crossed into, they crossed into Yemen.

Charis: What's that? Who?

Evan: They spread throughout the world. There was this one woman who like ? the rest of the world. So everybody, there's a part of the DNA that's the same as yours and the same as yours and it's not going to be the same as yours.

Charis: Why?

Evan: Because you came from a different blood line. We all came from the same person probably.

KMP: Okay, so can you take this back to immigration then? What are some of the issues about immigration that this is making sense for you? How does this connect? How does this help you understand why people left, what they encountered when they got here and what could have been handled differently when people got here to make a difference? Or when people move to any new place? It doesn't have to be to this country, it could be any other country. How does this help you think about it differently?

Charis: I have a question for all of you.

282-341

Camera people interrupt because they need to change the tape.

Evan: I'm trying to connect it by saying that immigration...

KMP: Hang on.

They talk about waiting until the camera people were ready. They talk in an Irish accent about Lucky Charms. Even though they were not supposed to continue to talk, the following conversation took place while the camera crew was changing batteries.

Charis: Do you actually think we all came from the same person? Well that you did and I didn't. We came from different people.

Ray: It has to start from one person. It never started or never happened.

Charis: Who do you think belongs in America?

Ray: No one. Except for Americans because everyone saw it as a good opportunity because even from the beginning.

Charis: But that's just...

Ray: I think...

Camera people are talking. The group was quiet.

341-411

Charis: My question was to all of you what is like, what if like slavery never happened and they didn't see America as their opportunity as like the best place to come to get new land, new job opportunities, what would happen?

Evan: Well one obvious thing would be very different because ?

Charis: Like how?

Evan: Well, well our class would be so affected. Because like if all these different cultures hadn't come to the United States this class would not be like this because this conversation would never happen. But if it did you would all be from the side of Anglo- Europeans and that would be bad.

Ray: I think every culture, well every part had its, every country that saw this America as a good opportunity to get a job or something.

KMP: But what about the people that have come and that hasn't been true? A number of people have come here to look for a better life and what they found was not the American dream the way they dreamed it. Why do you think that is and why do you think that still happens today? Go ahead and talk in your group and I'll come back.

Beth: Well I think part of the reason that people don't get the so called American Dream is because that there really is...

Charis: Is no.

Beth: Yeah, there really is no American Dream because you know, and like people keep, I mean every country tries to say they are like really really good and so what they say on shows is obviously going to be like, "Oh we're really great and stuff," but you, and like then people go like to a different country and they left people behind and they are obviously not going to say, "Oh no, this is horrible."

Charis: It's really hard to go back after you leave your country.

Beth: Right.

Charis: And like, I don't think there's any American Dream because the American Dream because America's not perfect and there wasn't like a dream nothing bad happens in a dream as you like stuff doesn't happen in dreams it's more like a nightmare. People don't, it's the difference between a dream and a nightmare and if it's a dream it's supposed to be perfect. America's not perfect so if you come over here expecting the American Dream then I don't think you're gonna, I think you're gonna be like greatly dissatisfied.

Beth: But I mean also like if you're like living somewhere and its like horrible, I mean a lot of things would seem like a lot better. But and like I think if people just like have it in their, if they like, if they're like in their other country and its like really bad they think well it can't be any worse than this. And so then they'll go.

Charis: That's what some of the Hispanics thought when they came over here. Because there was this, it was the sinking floats act, what was that? It was like the sink or float, if you could swim, I don't know what it's called, but it was like if you could make it by swimming over and get to land then you can stay if you can't then you got to go. It's something about Cubans and I don't think that's right.

Evan: I think it's human nature. Immigration is human nature.

Ray: Yeah

411-427

The camera people interrupt to get another shot of Charis saying "I don't think that's right at all."

Charis:I don't think that's right at all.

Evan: It's human nature to think that the grass will be greener on the other side and people will always immigrate. People will always move and people will always be jealous of the people on the other side of the hill because the grass is greener. It's human nature.

Ray: There's always going to be someone that's better than someone.

427-to end of Side A

The camera people left and the group talked about the camera people. They read their textset silently.

## **Side B**

000-017

Charis:Because those are our people. Those are our ancestors who brought us here or were forced to come here either way. Because not just African Americans...

Evan: I think that we should...

The camera people ask the groups to be quiet and not talk.

Evan: I think we should change places.

Ray: Where?

Charis:Me and you?

Evan: No ?. If all people were a slave for 2 weeks.

Charis:I think you should, I think people should switch like people. You hear what I am saying, like be somebody else's shoes for just like a week or two. And so you could learn about a person. Not just because to see what they go through, but learn another person's perspective on how stuff is so that maybe you could like, you could just like learn other people's perspective on life and slavery and just *stuff*.

March 9, 2004 B

Text Set Discussion

Journeys

KMP: I'm going to pick up on something that Adam said about how sometimes Jin uses a word or a phrase that might be different than the one that Adam uses. And Adam tries really hard to figure out what Jin means by what you're saying when you say that. And usually we can figure out what one another means. But sometimes that may lead somebody to believe that you're not participating or that you're not part of the group or that you're not able to be part of the group because the language is what's in the way. And I'm wondering how you guys think about that and how you can connect that back to immigration and how, what's the responsibility of

the sort of the receiving culture for welcoming newcomers in terms of language and getting past language differences to look at personalities.

Adam: Yeah because like in my household, if Jin came up to my house and my mom said like, "Would you like some Kool-aid?" and he said, "yeah" my mom would think that was inappropriate because we have to say, "Yes, may I please have some kool-aid." We have to answer back in a sentence. We can't just say like, "yeah."

KMP: So she might think that he's being rude or inappropriate when he's really just using his language the best that he can.

Jin: You know what the different thing is that in other countries you can use the S word that some people use like, my neighbor has a friend from south ?? and whenever he does something wrong he says it over and over again and you know in my country you can also use shut up like that I've used it before like when I came to United States like ? does he doesn't know that's inappropriate when you don't want somebody to talk to you you don't say shut up to them instead, "Oh okay could you please stop talking because I'm not feeling better." That's what you say in the United States in other countries you can say that. Other differences is like in the United States when you say "go away" to people that is maybe it's like "I don't like you at all."

KMP: So sometimes your words send a message that you didn't really intend.

Jin: Yeah and sometimes in my country the basic rule to make friend is that you have to be working hard like try your best in your studies that's instead they don't need you to be really nice to them and being so appropriate but ? not like kill them and get their head and cut them off. But you have to study well, that's all they need.

Tiff: I think that by the way people talk they are like persecuted sometimes. Like people would sometimes they would ask me how come I don't talk black or whatever you know quote unquote, but most people don't actually take the time to actually realize that you know I'm half. My dad's Caucasian and so I grew up in like the suburbs so people just wonder how come I don't talk the same way most other African American people talk.

Jean: I think it's kinda like *My Fair Lady* where she was judged. Back then you were judged on how you spoke and that would determine what job you could get and you know what you can do. I think that still sorta affected.

KMP: Can you expand on that a little bit? I've heard references to that in fact, I've read books and things about that what kinda of language you use determines how other people view you either in terms of status or how smart you are or what your potential is. And I think you just challenged that a little bit. You said I may look black but I don't speak black and people shouldn't try to guess who I am just by the way I speak or guess what my culture is just by the way I speak and you were saying that's true with *My Fair Lady* that just by the way she spoke there were limits on what she could do in society.

Jean: So if you didn't really speak English, here you won't be able to get as good a job like you wouldn't necessarily work at restaurant which is like better pay than like you know sweeping up a shop. So it just determines how much you know and how clearly you speak.

Tiff: So I mean if you talked in a really thick different kind of accent it could be Chinese, Asian, maybe even sometimes it could even be a black accent but like

shops they just won't take people who look or sound um different than from what they really want the customers to see or speak.

KMP: Why do you think that is?

Tiff: I don't know. It's just like people are trying too hard to be accepted in you know in society and people are setting limits on what you can look like and what you can talk like so that they can have a better reputation.

KMP: Kelly, you haven't had a lot to say yet.

Jin interrupts and KMP tells him to hang on and listen to Kelly.

Kelly: Well in different parts of the country and everything you have to like you have to do certain things to be accepted. Like for example where Jin is from you can do different things but they won't be accepted here.

Adam: Me, like I come from New York and I lived on a reservation so now since I came here everything's way different because now I live in an apartment and I actually have to like stay around because when I was in New York I could just go all around the reservation and it wouldn't matter so now when I come here I can only go up and down my street. So, I have to stay a little bit closer. I don't have more room. So it's a little bit different and when I come to school everybody like because I dress like a little different everybody thinks that that's not normal and just because like everybody looks at me and they think I am just black but they don't understand about being Native American.

Jin: You know, like, I have noticed a lot of things when I come to other country. Every country is different type of country. Like United States is the immigration country and my country is a country with a longer history.

March 9, 2004 B

Text Set Discussion

Two Cultures/Two Worlds

Steve: The book I read, *When Marian Sang*, it's about this girl who's really good at singing but she can't sing wherever she wants, like the average white person would be able to do even though she was one of the best singers in the world she wasn't able to. I think it's kinda injustice how back then they couldn't just sing like they want like whenever they want to in public that I think. I like how she, made people, or made people hope that, or she showed people that black people can do the same thing as white people.

Jeff: Yeah that's it, back then but not now, back then it was like even if you were an African American or a Mexican or someone who came from a different country and your were really good at something like you were a really good lawyer you know a lot about politics maybe you're good at sports maybe your good at all this stuff but you wouldn't be able to do it because people favor who lives in the country already. Which isn't right because someone, someone could make you a lot of money but you just don't like them so you don't hire them. So it's kinda wrong.

- Tim: I think that, this is just kind of a comment about what we could do based on what Sam said was in that book, I think kind of the perseverance is what keeps prejudice from being really, really bad. Because when you think about it there will probably always be at least one person that's prejudice against someone in the way that Jordan said but if as long as there are people that aren't prejudice and actively trying to be not prejudice there won't be like, people won't be put back into slavery and everything.
- Jeff: Like and it's all about believing that you can still do it. Like Dr. Martin Luther King got arrested like 50 times but he always got back out of jail and did the same thing over again. That's why people heard him.
- Carl: Like you said before, people who come to the country they don't get favored. I don't understand back in the 1800's through the Civil War and slavery, when they were coming over they said that America was to be the land of tolerance and to honor all people's rights but what I don't get is that only white men got rights, no body else got anything. They were considered inferior and they still kept saying that we are in the right we get all the equal rights.
- Jeff: It's like all about, it's about them just trying to get people to come over because they had so many jobs they needed to have people who, it's basically a lie. They say we're the land of tolerance, so if you come over here you'll have rights and lots of money and they come over and they have no choice to go back. So they have to stay and they get taken advantage of.

March 22, 2004

Literature Discussions

*Behind the Mountains*

Entire transcript is included here with talk continuum coded.

000-059

KMP is giving directions to camera people and students. The camera people are getting situated around the classroom. The camera comes to this group first. KMP asks them if they are ready and suggests they go through their comp books to help them prepare to talk.

PBS: Just let us know when you think you're ready to start talking okay?

Jean: I'm ready

Aisha: What are we going to talk about Politics?

Jean: yeah

Aiasha: oh okay

The camera crew gives more directions to the class about whispering while they are taping. Andrea and the PBS people talk about how sensitive the microphone is.

Social Talk
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- Jean: I think the main themes in this book are really politics because it's all about whether you stay or go. Because you know it really depended who became president. Yeah because she might not have left if it would have been someone else.
- Tiff: Well I mean her dad is in America basically it was the reason she was going and I guess it was just because it just because like the former president was exiled or whatever. You know I just think that it wouldn't really matter if the president or if there was ?
- Jean: Well like now there's all these problems going on there and who was elected and all the political riots. But it might not have been the same
- Aisha: But they had to go because of the bombings and the killings of the younger kids and older kids are whatever like a lot of people died because of like the election and I don't why people just kill other innocent people that are not even part of the election. It's kinda stupid.
- Tiff: It's like making stance. They are trying to make a statement and no one's listening to them if they're just doing what's reasonable like talking or giving speeches or something. And that's probably the easiest way to get someone to actually listen to you. Not really but in like politics kinda of thing.
- Jean: Yeah they threaten it to try to get more votes from people. But um still like I don't think they should have left so quickly. I think her father should have come back because that's making like the whole family leave behind what they've always known. I don't think she really wanted to move to New York.
- Devon: Well say her dad wasn't in New York and he was in Haiti, and like during the time of the bombing do you think that they would have left? Or do you think they would have stayed?
- Tiff: It's basically people in New York after 9-11 it's like should I go because of the World Trade Center or should I just stay in my home place. It's basically like that.
- Aisha: yeah but for example I wanted to move to New York when I'm older and when I have kids and stuff. Some people think I might be crazy because some people like all Islam or whatever
- Jean: Arabs
- Aisha: Arabs or whatever they think they're bad and like all Arabs are bad and stuff like. I don't think, It's just like I know that

Fundamental  
Text Talk

Socio-  
Interpretive Text  
Talk

Fundamental  
Text Talk

Socio-  
Interpretive Text  
Talk

Critical Talk



everybody they're in their own world, they have their own problems and everything like that. It's just that the person who went into the Trade Center they might have really bad problems or something like that.

Tiff: And they were trying to make a statement.

Aisha: So yeah, couldn't they like, I know they couldn't like speak to the president or something like that so they had to do something very bad to be, to stand out.

Jean: Yeah but they pretty much abandoned their home just because of one problem. Like isn't it supposed to be that if you have pride for you country you'd stick it out. I mean they are always telling soldiers you know you may die but you'll die with honor because you died for your country. But it's like they just fled whenever there was a problem.

Aisha: yeah and some of them are recognized but not all of them are.

Jean: Yeah like her dad as soon as the crops failed he just like he didn't go into the city to try to find work, he went to New York. He didn't try to find anything closer.

Tiff: Yeah but it seemed like they all wanted to go. And I mean they waited 5 years for her dad to send for them.

Aisha: And it's the same way with the other girl, she had to wait for 9 years just to get to New York and then her father died like 2 months ago. That one girl

Jean: Oh her friend

Aisha: Yeah

Tiff: Terese.

Aisha: No not Teresa

Jean: Her New York friend

Aisha: Her New York friends. I can't pronounce her name or anything like that, she had to wait 9 years just to come and then 2 months later, her father died. And then the landlord threatened her.

Jean: It's like you don't know anyone there. At least she probably had other family back in her own country.

Aisha: in Haiti

Jean: Yeah

Aisha: And then the other boy Greg or whatever his name was

Tiff: Gary

Aisha: Gary, he had to be sent back to Haiti because he was getting into so much trouble and I was like he must have been there for a very long time just to get in trouble or something like that so.

Jean: Yeah why would parents send their kid back to live with their grandparents? Why wouldn't they try to work it out with them?

Critical Talk

Socio-  
Interpretive Text  
Talk

Fundamental  
Text Talk

Aisha: yeah, but she did work it out with him but I think she didn't know what to do. Maybe she punished him so many times that he didn't care so

Tiff: No I think the mother of Gary they said in the book that she didn't like have enough money to take care of him and she was trying to find some a better job that gets more money and so she had to send him back to Haiti with his grandparents because he wasn't living exactly the way he should.

Jean: That's sorta like Therese. She moved from that little village to become a servant to those people because they promised a better school, and you knew they wouldn't give it to her, but it was her only real chance.

Aisha: Yeah, so she had to take it. Yeah but the same thing happened to Celine's aunt.

Jean: Yeah

Aisha: It's the same thing happened to her, so yeah.

Devon: I have a question. What if they book was written in earlier times, what do you think would have happened? Like instead of based on present time, what if it was written in older times?

Tiff: I think that they would have more trouble getting into America because like in the 1800 and stuff a whole ton of people passed through Ellis Island which is where she would probably have to pass through.

Devon: uhhh.

Tiff: But Ellis Island isn't really an immigration place any more I don't think, and so she would have to just go straight up, she could have gone right to Florida or something but she'd have to go straight up to Ellis Island and waste a whole ton of time and then she'd go to New York. But I mean she just took a plane now but then she would have to take a boat and it would take longer and longer and longer...

Aisha: Wait a minute. I thought they had trains.

Tiff: It's an ocean. And Haiti's an island.

Aisha: Oh okay. I'm thinking about something else.

Tiff: Yeah, it would have been harder to get their papers because they're was more sickness back then and medicare and worse.

Aisha: More disease

Tiff: yeah more diseases and now there is medicare and

Aisha: Everything

Tiff: Yeah there not a lot of diseases that are totally really bad or really contagious. And yeah it would be easier now.

KMP: I heard you asking the question about how she would get to hear about like where Haiti is in relationship to this

Fundamental  
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country. So you guys might want to look it up in here and get a picture so that you might have a really clear idea of where she's coming from. Okay? [KMP hands the group and Atlas]

Tiff: I have my own  
 KMP: Oh you do? Cool.  
 Aisha: She made it  
 KMP: Where did you get that?  
 Tiff: Um, I drew it.  
 KMP: Awesome  
 Tiff: I was trying to demonstrate something to George and I just kinda.  
 Aisha: Yeah it would take a very long time  
 Tiff: Yeah because I mean Haiti is right under  
 Aisha: It's right here  
 Tiff: Haiti is right...  
 KMP: Why don't you go to a page on North or Central America so you can...  
 Tiff: It would be right under Cuba, well not right right under Cuba.  
 Aisha: It's like by the what's the name  
 KMP: Oh use the index.  
 Tiff: It kinda connects though. And she would probably go to Florida maybe if she was taking a boat instead of a plane or she might have just gone to Florida and then taken a plane up to New York or she just might have taken a plane over the sea. I mean if it was in the 1800s she would have taken a boat.  
 Jean: In the 1800's she might illegally go up there.  
 Tiff: Yeah  
 Aisha: But it would take a very very long time to get there. So.  
 KMP: Why do you say that?  
 Aisha: Because like back then, what Tyler said, it would take a longer time just to get from Haiti to New York. It's off the page though but...  
 KMP: Well remember though that their were immigration ports several places in the country and still are. That New York Ellis Island was the largest particularly for people coming from Europe. People coming from Asia came to the West Coast particularly through Angel Island. And we'll need to look when you guys go to the library you can check and see what are the main places where people came in through Florida. Because there are immigration offices and customs officials and stuff in Florida for people particularly for people coming in from the Caribbean.

Fundamental  
Text Talk

Social Talk

Fundamental  
Text Talk

Aisha: But they could just run to Florida and they could just took a train or back then they could have took a train to get to New York. It would be a lot easier and take less time.

KMP: That's right. So use the map to help you and then look at the interview with the author to see if she talks about any of that, to see if she answers any of your questions.

Aisha: Okay

February 6, 2004

Cinderella Books

Whole class discussion.

*KMP draws the class together and asks the students to brainstorm the "cultural values that are being promoted in Disney versus some of the other ones."*

Jean: Well we don't really celebrate like hurting yourself here. Like amputation, but we do understand that people are always trying to be the best. They are always trying to win. Like they are always trying to be different so they are willing to do pretty much anything. They are always trying to be on top.

KMP: Okay, now some people believe that body piercing like earrings and belly button rings and eyebrow rings are a form of physical abuse that would be comparable in the intent of the women cutting off their toes or their heels. That women have, according to some views, that women have always been willing to endure physical pain in order to meet a male's standard of beauty. Okay. So does the Ashenputtel version encourage that?

Class: Yes

KMP: Does the Disney version encourage it?

Class: No

Tiff: Yeah but the Disney version goes on about how beautiful blondes are. They are always more successful than the ugly ones...

KMP: This won't work if we have 16 conversations. We need to have one right now. You have had a lot of time to talk in partners, a lot of time to talk in small groups, now it's the whole class time, which means one person at a time talks. Tim?

Tim: The Disney one is kinda promoting the American value of what beauty is and kinda if you are beautiful that you are kind which is something that I don't really believe in that if you are ugly that you are evil, so yeah, but it still kinda like a basic American value.

KMP: So promoting a particular image or a particular action? That if you are beautiful therefore you must be kind. If you are ugly therefore you must be unkind, like the ugly step-sisters. Okay, what else? Mark?

Mark: They are very blunt. They are basically saying that if you are tall and blonde and beautiful for females, then you are going to go places. And for men it's you're tall, you're dark, you're handsome.

KMP: Sure and do we believe that? I mean is that a commonly held belief or is it limited to just Disney?

Mark: I think in this case it is just limited to Disney, because not everyone believes that.

KMP: Are there still some people that would believe that?

Mark: Yeah.

KMP: Okay.

Mark: Yeah, there are still some people who think that racism is okay. Or ...

KMP: Yeah. Tiff?

Tina: Yeah, it's kinda like what Tim said also with getting ?? Yeah like so the main character is usually scrawny.

KMP: Or slender, not scrawny.

Tina: Yeah.

KMP: Is that a value system that is still in place?

Tina: Yeah.

KMP: Okay, Evan?

Evan: I think the Disney version endorses beauty over smarts.

KMP: Ahh, beauty over smarts. Women have, I think, for a long time rebelled against the notion that you should be beautiful first and then not be too smart because you certainly wouldn't want to be smarter than your husband. That would be dangerous and threatening to your husband. Okay? Jeff?

Jeff: In some of the books I've read, like in, I think it's just something from a long time ago. If you think about it now, they usually don't hold balls to find people to marry. I think that is something that just used to happen. Like in almost all of

them they are holding a dance to find someone to marry or something like that. And some people believe that that is not right, that you should pick who you want and that you need to know them longer than that. Something like that. So I think that is part of culture, too, from a long time ago.

KMP: Okay so you say that if what you are looking for is just physical attributes in a mate, then a ball is just as fine because you can just parade them right past and you can pick out the one you want. But if you are looking for somebody who has the personality you want then you need more time with that person to develop a relationship and figure out if they have the personality that is going to match with what you have in mind. Okay. We have like one minute left. Would you tell your neighbor one thing that you agree with the Disney version, with their cultural values and one thing you disagree with. Tell someone at your table.

February 26, 2004  
Literature Discussion Groups  
*Losers*

000-208

They talk/play with the tape recorder.

Fiona: What are some relationships you had with Zinkoff?

Charis: I don't know.

Jin: You don't know?

The entire time Devon is humming into the microphone.

Charis and Fiona have a private conversation about how they relate specially leaving out details so the others can't follow. Fiona tries to bring in Devon and Jin. They talk about a note.

Jin: Why do you think he is good hearted?

Fiona: My relationship to Zinkoff is that I have annoying sister just like him.

Charis: He's not annoying. He doesn't understand what he doing.

Fiona: He is annoying. He is really annoying.

They reprimand Jin.

Charis: I have a question. Why do you think the kids are so mean or ignorant?

Jin: Well because...

Fiona: They not ignorant.

Devon: Yes they are.

Charis: Do you know what ignorant means?

Fiona: Yes I do.

Jin talks over Charis and Fiona. They are arguing over the definition of the word ignorant.

Devon: You do not know something but you can be taught it.

Charis: Yes, ignorant means you don't know, don't mean nothing about mean. It's just black people started saying ignorant was a bad thing. Ignorant can be a bad thing if you don't learn. But ignorant it just means you don't know. Get it? The people at his school just don't know about him so much that they start talking about him and some call him a loser.

Devon: But they don't, see the reason why they do that is because they aren't around him everyday like his parents. Like his parents know like why he acts likes that, but the kids don't and so that's the reason why they talk about him.

Jin: Yeah.

Charis: Yeah, they don't understand why he can't run ...

Fiona: But didn't he tell them, or his parents or something? You all saying it like he dumb.

Charis: I'm not saying that, but I don't think that...

Devon: He's not as a smart. His brain didn't develop like the other kids like as fast as the other kids that's why.

Charis: Yeah I don't think. He don't probably even know what's wrong him. He just know, he just think he like everybody else. He don't really get that he's not like everybody. He think he just like everybody. Remember in the book he say he just want to be normal?

Fiona: Yeah.

Charis: So he kinda think that he like everybody else. He don't think he different. Nobody really think they different. Everybody think that they the same. So nobody, so he can't tell people I'm different.

Fiona: Everybody do not think they the same.

Charis: A lot of people do, girl.

Fiona: Girl, no.

Charis: Yes they do. A lot of people be like you all the same. In this book they was, he was kinda relating, he was saying I'm like you, I'm like you, and you're like me.

They talk about the recorder. They reprimand Jin. Jin then tells them that they shouldn't be playing.

Jin: Okay I have something to share. Charis, when you say people are mean to him...

Charis: No just mean. Why are they ignorant? Do you know what ignorant means? Ignorant means to not know something. Ignorant means to not know. If you are ignorant you do not know. So do you think they do not know about him?

Fiona: I think some of them do.

Charis: No let Jin, please.

Fiona: I think some of them do.

Charis: But a lot of them don't, girl. Only like two people in the whole damn book understood about him.

Sean: This is like ?

Devon: When I first come to this book, it's like when I first come to this school, people talk about me because they don't know anything about me. That's what she's trying to say.

Charis: Yeah

Jin: That's what happens to me everyday.

Fiona: No, because like if you think about it some of the people do know because if they went through they should know.

Charis: Girl, what are you talking about? Through what?

Fiona: Through like what he going through. Like you know, how most they talking about him because he act retarded mostly?

Charis: I wish you would stop and use my word. He cannot help what he has, girl.

Fiona: I'm not. You making it seem like I am. I'm not saying he is retarded.

Charis: You just said acting retarded. What's the difference?

Fiona: He's not acting retarded, he's acting stupid.

They continue to argue over whether Fiona should call him retarded. They reprimand Jin.

Devon: I can tell when somebody is retarded, but they little kids they can't really tell like if somebody is...

Charis: He has a mind like a really, really small person. Like a young person so he don't really understand that he different than everybody else. He just think that he the same. He really don't understand that he's not like the same. I think he has like ADD or ADHD

Devon: Like when you, you don't know that, like when I was little I didn't know ?? I used to think that they were real.

Fiona: Like we could meet them one day. But then as you grow up you learn more.

Charis: But it's kinda him, he kinda like never grows up. He's stays like small for a long time. But he can't really...he can't really help it though. It's not like he, when you got old when you matured you didn't say "I'm gonna mature now" you just did it, didn't you? He don't have, he don't understand that ...

They talk at once

Charis: You mature as you get older but he doesn't. He doesn't really understand.

Fiona: He stays, he acts just like a little kid, like he can't grow up at least one time he just stay right there.

Devon: Charis, he a little kid.

Charis: He is.

Fiona: He's not really a little kid, you all. He's really not.

Charis: Yes he is. In his mind he is.

Fiona: Yeah in his mind, but outside him thought he's not.

Charis: Yeah but do you know what downs syndrome is?

Fiona: No.

Charis: Downs syndrome is where you act really like you act 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 years old. I know people like this so it's not made up. Who act like he is a certain age. ??



They talk about lip gloss.

Fiona: He got something wrong with him.

Charis: He does have something wrong with him, but he can't help it. He didn't say, "Oh I want to be..."

Fiona: He's odd. He's really odd though.

Charis: He's not odd. He can't help what he is.

Fiona: He is.

Charis: He's different. Everybody's different. If we all the same then we'd all be like little robots. And we would be like "everybody must act the same." But he's not. Everybody's different and he's just more different than what we are used to that's all.

Fiona: No he really different than what we used to.

Charis: I know, but he can't.

Devon: Same thing, more different, really different, same thing.

Jin: Charis, why do you think he is different from other kids like, but he also have some habits that other kids have and he also mistakes that other kids make or sometimes he acts so funny to be friends with other people...

Devon: It's just like ? when you first get potty trained you just started potty training but sometimes you do pee on yourself. You know what I am saying?

Charis: You have to understand what he is saying. It's like sometimes he act like everybody and he tries to but sometimes he just being himself. He don't understand that he's like, he's just being himself.

Devon: You ? making that mistake. Like when they first go to school they don't know like the rules of school so they act the way they act at home. They act the way at home like they act at school, that's...

Charis: That's how it is. I understand what he's saying. I get what he's saying. Zinkoff he acts the same everywhere. He don't change, like you know, some people act ghetto around certain people right? And then some people they go around certain people, I'm not saying you, I ain't saying nobody, I'm just saying, you know some people.

Fiona: I know some body that did that, but go ahead.

Devon: I know some people, too.

Fiona: You can be in public and you act you running around he don't know it but he just doing it to be doing it because he think everybody because he sees everybody else sitting talking that he should be doing what just like everybody else.

Charis: Yeah, but remember that word he used, remember he said, "Yahoo." Remember? He said no body else says that so I shouldn't say it.

Fiona: That's was ??

Charis: But then he says it more in the book. He says, "No body else says yahoo so why should I say yahoo. I shouldn't say it because that's not in anymore." But then once he gets really happy he says it but he doesn't understand that it's not in or whatever.

Fiona: Yeah but mostly if you think about it, what he mostly trying to do is trying to fit in really. I really think that ...

Charis: Who doesn't try to fit in though?

Devon: Yeah.

Fiona: Well no, because some people do because some people do try.

Devon: In the soccer game, in the beginning of the book, everybody was mad because they lost but he was happy so, so he like so he saw them crying and so he takes off his shoes and throwing it and he's ripping up grass and everything so...

Charis: I think he was a good sport I don't think he understands that he was supposed to be mad about it.

Fiona: He got a positive attitude.

Charis: Yeah.

Fiona: A really positive attitude.

Charis: He don't think that, like, you supposed to be mad.

Fiona: Like you said, you know when you said he gets mad sometimes? He always happy. When I got through with this book, I found some changes that he was, I think, he was sad in the inside but he didn't show it outside because most of people mostly show it outside then inside.

Charis: He was just happy, like Devon said like, that he was happy at the soccer he was just happy that that team won. "I'm so happy for you." He didn't understand like his other team mates were ripping up grass throwing temper tantrums and stuff.

Fiona: Yeah and I think that's why everybody called him loser because he thinks too positive. He don't never think negative.

They talk at once.

Fiona: It's like if sees something bad happening he will put it in a good way for everybody else to see.

Charis: He'll try to make it. He'll try to be the best he can for everyone. Did you get to the end of the book where they found the little girl? Well, I don't think he made it that far.

Jin: When you say he make some changes though, but sometimes he's like. I put his ? outside of his house. And then some people took it away, I think that it some kind of stupid mistake.

Charis: Well, I don't think what he tried to do was stupid. I would think that he was like, he wasn't trying to show off he was, like, happy he won. He was like, "We won so let's be happy."

Fiona: Yeah, and I think he did because he wanted to show everybody that it doesn't really matter if you win or lose you should still be happy because it was a game ?

Charis: He took it as a game. And a lot of people here, a lot of people at Chesire do not take stuff as a game. That's something he really is good at. He don't take the game too seriously

They talk at once.

Fiona: He would make it positive.

Charis: He didn't get why people were like that and like throwing temper tantrums but he was going to do it too because he ??

Jin: You know like Zinkoff is a little bit different.

Charis: What do you mean?

Jin: Like he has a baby friend. And like for me I think a baby friend is so stupid like sometimes it...

They talk about Claudia. Charis explains about the little girl.

209-253

KMP interrupts the class to give them new directions.

Charis thinks they should talk about how they should share about his personality. Fiona wants to talk about how everybody should be positive.

Jin: Charis, I thought what you say, you say Zinkoff is the loser of this school?

Charis: I don't think he's a loser.

Jin: Sometimes he looks like a loser, but not always.

Charis: He's not, let me tell you something about people who were born with an upside valve. They are survivors. Everyday they live is a blessing. Because people who are born who throw up a lot could really die because they do not get enough nutrition to live. So believe me, he's not a loser. He's a survivor. He's a really positive person to be that positive and to have what he has, he is a really positive person.

Fiona: And I'm not saying this in a funny way, I really mean this, I think that some of these people in this school need to act that. Like be positive because...

Charis: I agree with.

Fiona: And I even say myself, for real.

Charis: But you can't, and let me tell you a fault. I'm not going to say that Zinkoff is the most brilliant person. But sometimes he need to understand it, that not everybody is going to be positive 24 hours a day. He need to understand that though.

Fiona: You know though that's his thing.

Charis: But he loves to be positive, but sometimes he tries to explain to other people that you need to be positive like 24 hours a day and not everybody is going to be positive all day. He like that smile 24 hours a day and he don't get that not everybody is going to be like...

KMP interrupts the class to have the class write a quick summary and the life lessons in their lit. comp. book.

March 8, 2004

Text Set Discussion

War and Peace

**Side B**

000-046

Andrea is still talking about the plot of her book.

Fiona: Do you think he be just doing it because he's jealous of that person? Because she's a different color?

Aisha: I don't think he's jealous of her. It's just that I don't really think he's jealous of her because most Caucasian people, like back then, thought that they were better than anybody else.

Emily: Yeah.

Aisha: Because they try to make the Chinese people act like them or the Native Americans, the African Americans, whatever. Any culture they see. They wanted the culture to change to their way...

Emily: So he just wants to treat her badly and to be mean to her.

Aisha: ...instead of their regular culture.

Fiona: Are you saying that they wanted all them to be just the same and they don't want anyone to be all different and stuff?

Emily: Yeah.

Aisha: Yeah, it would be boring like that because, like for example, like, what if, like for example, everybody here, in here, is Christian? And it's really boring because like everybody else knows the same God and it's one God and then all the sudden someone else comes in here and they're a different culture. It's like a Jew or somebody.

Emily: So it's sorta about two cultures fighting against each other and wanting to be one?

Aisha: Yeah or like another person comes and like or something like that and they say I don't like your culture or something like and they like be really snobby about it and stuff like that.

Fiona: I don't get how you say they don't like the culture. I mean what's wrong with it that makes them think that?

Aisha: No.

Fiona: Like all of them, like, in that book, I don't know what the town called but I know all of them have something alike. I mean all can't just, because I really think that everyone gonna have to be different. Because if you all think like the whole entire world was the same and then that would be boring because you would both be the same and you'd be like "oh yeah I just that." At first you would think it was all cool, but then when you think about it you can't have your personality that you think you are. And then that person has the same personality and you want your own personality. You know what I am saying?

Emily: If the whole entire world lived the same and thought the same would there probably be any wars.

Aisha: There wouldn't be any conflicts. There wouldn't be any wars. There wouldn't be any crimes. There wouldn't be nothing. So there would be nothing to fight about, there would be no war right now.

Fiona: Well yes it will. If they're fighting on two different things like...

Aisha: No.

Emily: No, if they all believed the same.

Aisha: Yeah.

Fiona: Oh.

Aisha: Yeah, if they all believed the same thing there would be no conflicts, no crimes, no nothing, and no lawyers.

Emily: Tina, what was your book about?

Aisha: And there would be no judges, no nothing.

Tina: My book was about, it was just about ?? people helped during when slavery was a big issue.

Fiona: When you say people, what kind of people? Like what's their culture?

Tina: One's like African American and how they were treated and stuff and what they did to help.

Fiona: So it was kinda like persp—I can't say the word.

Emily: Perspective?

Fiona: Yeah, perspective.

They talk about how it should be in a different crate because it was about perspectives.

047-058

Aisha: I don't get how, I know that some people can be like really selfish sometimes, but he's like being really selfish because he doesn't really know about what's going on in the world because people are dying there and like people only got one life on this earth. So I mean he don't get it.

Fiona: Actually you have two.

Aisha: I believe one. You can believe two that's okay.

Fiona: Because we was talking about that in church. She said that when you die it's like your soul is mostly resting and then when Jesus come down to get you and then he take all the people that been nice and stuff like that up and then people who have been selfish down.

Aisha: Oh like you know like...

Fiona: So you get two lives one to rest and then other ??

Aisha: You know how like Ancient Egyptians how they weigh your heart?

Fiona: Yeah.

Aisha: It's like if it's lighter than a feather you go up and if it's like heavier than a feather you go down.

058-074

KMP interrupts the class and has them share their initial ideas about immigration.

They talk at once.

Emily: It's hard to fit in and it's all about finding your place in the right town with the right people and making friends.

They talk at once.

Aisha: You're trying to find friends that are going to be good to you and then you find like other people that are not even your friends.

Tina: You have to trust.

Fiona: Some people, if you think about it most friends they be like, "Oh yeah." They try to act like your friend, but then they turn back on you. So you really can't find like a friend that, "Oh like you're gonna be my pal because every things gonna like at least one time."

Tina: It's like some people try to be your friend but when it comes to either me or you it's...

075-109

KMP interrupts for production directions. They ask the groups to talk quieter. The class is now whispering

Emily: So people making war with other cultures ??

Fiona: What you were saying because everybody it's like not one person ?? you know everybody gonna like worry. When you were saying you disagree when you was talking about the friends part because everybody's gonna lie like it's just not gonna be like the only person.

Aisha: Wait a minute. What part are you talking about?

Fiona: When you said you were like, I think it was you or it was one of you all. You going to have to find, finding your friends and that's going to be like ...

Aisha: I think that was Tina.

They talk at once.

Tina: What I was trying to say is that in like in some ?? some people will try to pretend like your friend but really they think about themselves before they think about you.

Fiona: Well that's some people. That's just like mean people.

Fiona and Emily are talking but Aisha is talking over them.

Aisha: For example like when the Chinese came over here back then. The Caucasian people they didn't really, they thought they were like weird because they eat different food, they drink tea. But they, and they judged them because of their eyes and how they put their braids in.

March 9, 2004

Text Set Discussion

Two Cultures/ Two Worlds

Tim: Well my connections were that I noticed that almost every book in our basket shows the good and bad sides of the relationship between two cultures and two worlds. Excerpt for *America Is* which is just a kinda strange book. And I've also

noticed you do not have to be coming to a new land to become a minority through conflicts in your home land. Because I found from our study of immigration and our study of Native lands and these books that Native Americans were the natives to America and yet when the Caucasian people came they became a minority even though they were the first ones there.

Jeff: And what I thought the books that I read, it was more about the culture of the people and not about where they lived. Like I read one, this one right here. It was about a boy and his friend was American and lived in Mexico, but it didn't really talk about how they lived in Mexico it just talked about how he had a friend that no one else was his friend because he was from another country. So I think that the books talk more culture than where they lived.

Carl: Every time they do one of these books they always do it from a discriminated person's point of view. And you know they talk about how bad the white people were when they came. I was wondering what the white people feel about this? Did they really think they were doing something bad?

Jeff: That's the weird thing. They did it because they thought it was right.

Carl: Yeah, I know. They thought that they were doing the Indians a favor.

Tim: And they thought like African Americans were evil at first during slavery.

Jeff: Yeah.

Carl: And also the so called great civilization with more technology and possibly with a greater faith in like Christianity usually dominated another culture.

Jeff: Yeah like, Tim, when we had that big discussion, I thought this class was so stupid and if we didn't think, if we were still having that conversation we would still be fighting about it because we think something's right and something's wrong. So usually if you think that one thing is right, like they thought that blacks were not equal to Caucasians so they were like, "Oh well they shouldn't be treated like us so they are going to be our slaves and we think that's right so we going go through with it." ? So they think it's right and they don't know if it's wrong or not. Because no one tells them it's wrong.

Steve: I found out that in *America Is* it only shows the positive things it doesn't show all the problems going on, which there is just as many problems as all the good things going on and that in all the books someone's having trouble with something. Like in that book *How my Parents Learned to Eat*, there are two people trying to learn the other person's culture so I think that kinda makes the reader want to go on because if everything was happy they would think the book was kinda boring.

Tim: Yeah everything needs to have a problem or else there's no point in it really.

KMP: Did all the books that you found have a problem in it?

Tim: Well almost they were just poems and that was just kind of a statement about something. But even them most of them were a statement about some kind of problem so.

Steve: Every book or *America Is* it doesn't really have a conflict it just like what I said it only shows the important things or the good things about the book it just doesn't show anything bad so there's no ? so it doesn't really spark the reader so they really want to continue on they want to choose a different book. Yeah that's why other books are so popular like *Lord of the Rings* like...

Carl: There's a great conflict between two worlds, I don't know...

KMP: Within a single world?

Carl: I don't want to say two worlds, but two cultures, two ideas.

Jeff: They want their own world.

Carl: What's right and who wants dominance.

Tim: The constant theme among these books, too, is that it's always two cultures in one area. And each of them thinking that it's kind of their birth right. But not necessarily an area but some sort of material thing and the that's the whole conflict in most of the books.

KMP: I've been thinking about what you said about how the *America Is* book presents only the really positive views about America, it sort of a rather patriotic book. And for me this one presents a different point of view. It reminds us that other people might tell the story about what America is a little differently. Have you had a chance to look at this one yet?

Steve: Yes, I think it does show a few bad things, but it supports it with something good. So something bad and something good. So it shows the positive and negative things so there's kind of more a view so you can tell what more than one person is thinking.

KMP: And that's kind of the point of the books. It's to try to have all the books show you different ideas because one single book isn't going to capture everything.

Tim: Unless it is one of the books where like it has several chapters from different point of view.

KMP: And we're going to look at some when we move into our novels because you guys raised that issue. A couple of different novels that are available do. Each chapter is written by a different character in the story.

Jeff: Oh like *Seedfolks*.

KMP: Yes.

Tim: Or a *View from Saturday*.

KMP: Right.

Carl: A book like that, only each chapter trades off between two people.

KMP: Do you remember the name of it?

Carl: Uh, ? something..

KMP: If you think about it bring it in because I would like to look at it. Because we are kind of looking for books that show different perspectives.

Jeff: Like in *Seedfolk*...

Carl: It's up until the half part when the two people meet then it goes to both of their point of views.

KMP: So at the beginning, the chapters are written between two characters?

Carl: The first half, just trading off.

Steve: Well, um...

Jeff: In *Seedfolk*...

KMP: I'd like to leave you guys with a question. Hold that thought. I'd like to leave you with a question to think about why would authors choose to have a book show different perspectives by having each character tell a different part of the story or why do you think it's important as we look at immigration that we look at



multiple perspectives? Some of it's an obvious answer and some I want you to push deeper.

# School District of Bennington

*Director of Assessment and Planning - Janna K. Smith, Ph.D.*

December 19, 2003

Ms. Jennifer L. Wilson  
c/o Cheshire Middle School

Dear Jennifer,

On behalf of the School District of Bennington, I am pleased to approve the participation of Bennington students and teachers in your doctoral dissertation research in classrooms of Dr. Kathryn Mitchell Pierce at Cheshire Middle School. Members of the district Research Review Team found your proposal to be thoughtful and thorough and are anxious to hear of your results.

Best of luck as you engage in this research project. We look forward to hearing about its progress, the associated outcomes relative to our Student Achievement goal, and the summary of your findings at the conclusion of the project. If you have further questions or concerns in the meantime, or if I can support your research in any way, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Janna K. Smith, Ph.D.  
Director of Professional Development  
and Assessment

cc: MaryAnn Goldberg  
Kathryn Mitchell Pierce  
Research Review Team  
Jim Lockhart

Appendix C  
Student Assent Letter

This consent form is to grant permission for you, \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the research project designed by Ms. Wilson at the University of Missouri. I am interested in how students your age talk about books in groups and the kinds of things you find interesting in the books you read. To do this I will observe in class, talk with you about your work.

I understand the following:

- My part in the research is to participate in regular literature discussion groups already occurring in my language arts-social studies classroom. My conversations will be tape recorded and transcribed.
- I may also be interviewed. This interview will be a part of the class and will occur in a group setting. I may be asked to elaborate on an idea or discuss my thoughts about a particular comment made. During this time I will be able to correct any comments that may have been transcribed incorrectly.
- I will participate during my normal language arts-social studies class time, so I will not miss other classes. I will be met one-on-one, in a small group, and as a whole class with an adult. There are no risks or discomforts to me outside of normal school reading and writing.
- I will remain unidentified. In any publication of results, false names will be used.
- My participation is voluntary, and I can refuse to participate at any time receive no penalty. I can also discontinue at any time. My choice to participate will not affect my grade and will not open or close any academic opportunities for me. If I have any questions about the research I can contact Ms. Wilson (573-882-2114) or any questions about human subject research I can contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of MO-Columbia (573-882-9585).

I hereby give my permission to take part in the classroom-based research conducted by Jennifer Wilson from the University of Missouri outlined above.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix D  
Parent Informed Consent

This consent form is to grant permission for your child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in a research project. I'll be looking at the kinds of things students discuss when they meet in their literature groups. To do this I will observe in class, talk with students about their work, and talk regularly with Dr. Pierce about her plans and her insights into the students' work. The project is sponsored by the University of Missouri-Columbia under the supervision of Carol Gilles, Ph.D. The University of Missouri Institutional Review Board has approved the project.

**I understand the following:**

- My child's part in the research is to participate in activities already occurring in his/her language arts-social studies classroom. My child's conversation will be tape recorded and transcribed in order to help Dr. Pierce and me in learning more about the issues that seem important to students as they discuss their books and make connections between the books they read and the things they are learning.
- My child may also be interviewed after the unit of study. This interview will be a part of the class and will occur in a group setting. My child may be asked to elaborate on an idea or discuss his/her thoughts about a particular comment made. During this time my child will be able to correct any comments that may have been transcribed incorrectly.
- The children will participate during their normal language arts class time. I will be studying the kinds of the things the students are doing in the class as a regular part of their work. There are no risks or discomforts to the students outside of normal class work.
- The student's anonymity will be maintained. In any publication of results, false names will be used.
- Participation is voluntary. By choosing to participate or not to participate will in no way affect your child academically. No opportunities will be opened or closed based on your child's participation in this research. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Participants may discontinue at any time. If there are any questions regarding human subject research please feel free to contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of MO-Columbia (573-882-9585). With questions regarding this particular research, please contact Jennifer Wilson (573-882-2114).

Please return the signed portion to Jennifer Wilson at Cheshire Middle School.  
.....

I hereby give my permission for my son/ daughter/ward \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in the classroom-based research conducted by Jennifer Wilson from University of Missouri outlined above.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E  
Faculty Informed Consent

This consent form is to grant permission for myself \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in a research project. The purpose of this research is to listen to group discussions about literature in order to discover the nature has in critical dialogue. The project is sponsored by the University of Missouri-Columbia under the supervision of Carol Gilles, Ph.D. The University of Missouri Institutional Review Board has approved the project.

**I understand the following:**

- My part in the research is to be interviewed during and after the study. I will provide additional insight into the particular students I work with on a regular basis.
- I will also be willing to review portions of the data in order to ensure that the data fairly and accurately represents the students in which I work.
- My anonymity will be maintained. In any publication of results, false names will be used.
- Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Participants may discontinue at any time. If there are any questions regarding human subject research please feel free to contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of MO-Columbia (573-882-9585). With questions regarding this particular research, please contact Jennifer Wilson (573-882-2114).

Please return the signed portion to Jennifer Wilson at Cheshire Middle School.  
.....

I hereby give my permission \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in the classroom-based research conducted by Jennifer Wilson from University of Missouri outlined above.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix F  
Sample Nud\*st Printout

Browsing Node '/Free Nodes/Perspectives' Page : 1 8 / 24 / 4 10:42:24

+++++  
+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: Fea3521

\*February 9, 2004

+++++  
[Fea3521 : 99 - 102 ]

Ethan: Let's say that, Let's say that Cinderella is telling the story and she is saying how she never talks back and how she is so beautiful and how the step-sisters are so mean, but if the step-sisters told the story they'd probably say the same thing about her. So what would it be like if she was like the evil one and the step-sisters were all the nice ones.

KMP: And like I said I do have a copy of a book in here where somebody did just that. They said what would happen if the step-sisters told the story. How would they view the same event? Like the wombat book. If the wombat is telling the story it looks one way if the humans are telling it's another way. How many of you have read...what's the one about the...John Schiezka's book bout the wolf and the three little pigs...

The class all talks and tells her the name.

KMP: The wolf is saying "I've been framed. I've been set up. It didn't happen that way at all." There's a lot of market in telling the other point of view. Okay so finding another point of view. The Cinderella stories that we all read have been told from the point of view of the Cinderella character. There are other characters whose stories haven't been told or whose perspective hasn't been represented. Think about the history of the United States, told, written mostly by white people. People of color, their story hasn't been fairly represented and certainly not through their own voices until more recently. Okay one more table. Jennifer?

...  
[Fea3521 : 216 - 219 ]

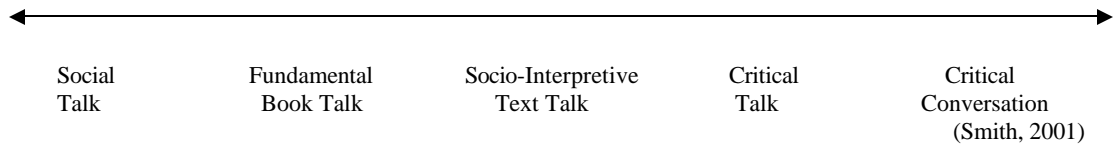
KMP: Was somebody else point of view told her not just the Cinderella characters point of view?

Class: the cook

Tiff: The cook's point of view because she told you how she felt about everything.

KMP: Yeah she was more transparent in the things that bothered her. Okay. How far would this Raisel character go to win the hand of the Rabbi?

Appendix G  
Conditional Matrix



Appendix H  
Sample of Data Briefs

Transcript	Content
<p>2-6: Cinderella (Fiona &amp; Aisha)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading the book together</li> <li>• Excerpts from the talk while they are reading</li> <li>• Talk about how unfair it was that one girl did all the chores</li> <li>• Began to work to fill out chart on characteristics</li> </ul>
<p>2-9: Cinderella (Tiff, Tina, &amp; Mark)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making agenda for Cinderella</li> <li>• They choose to talk about:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-how the story would change if Cinderella wasn't pretty</li> <li>-the point of view of the different characters</li> <li>-they offer questions that don't get picked up such as how the prince could tell if she was "the one," what if there was more than one prince, what would happen if Cinderella's mom lived, what if the glass slipper broke, do they always have a moral (this leads to a mini-discussion),</li> </ul> </li> <li>• They discuss what open-ended questions are</li> <li>• They discuss the plot summaries of the various Cinderella's they read</li> <li>• They talk about how funny it would be if the story didn't end happily ever after; they provide silly scenarios.</li> <li>• They discuss similarities among the books</li> <li>• They talk about the plot of the read aloud KMP is doing</li> <li>• They briefly discuss if love is forever and how divorce fits into this idea.</li> </ul>
<p>2-9: Cinderella (Fiona, Ethan, Carl, Jin, and whole class)</p> <p><i>Good example of Colin and Felicia working at understanding</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KMP directions for agenda and talk ½ way through the transcript</li> <li>• The group is argumentative and doesn't finish the assignment</li> </ul> <p><b>Whole Class:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are no mixed-cultures in any of the versions, exterior vs. interior beauty, if the prince and Cinderella were a different race, love based on looks, enslaved Cinderella, perspective of the step-sisters, and how far do you go to be a queen</li> <li>• Second round-exterior beauty, extremes in life, all the books have morals, conflict between good and evil, the use of magic, does the prince always have to be rich (I think they are trying to get to the idea of power)</li> <li>• After read aloud-goes through each characteristics named above and checks it with the read aloud</li> </ul> <p><b>1<sup>st</sup> Break up discussion:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The group gave brief plot summaries of their versions as they do this some are comparing to Disney as they give the summary</li> <li>• They talk about "sugar-coated" stories</li> </ul>



Appendix I  
Sample Dual Chronology

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 5. Shared initial thoughts with colleagues (Gilles, Dickenson, and Pierce also colleagues at the Qualitative Research Conference) | At this point (3/29) we developed a working definition of critical conversation. It is as follows:<br><i>Critical conversations are those times when students question, reflect, and/or articulate personal beliefs.</i>   |
| 6. Read through data and created data briefs  | This validated the initial patterns I saw, thus I began coding for perspectives and critical conversations.  |
| 7. Coded transcripts for critical conversations   | After the data briefs and the reading through and perspective to code for perspective and CC, I moved to the next definition: <i>Critical conversations are longer stretches of talk in which students articulate, reflect and/or inquire into personal, communal, or societal beliefs. These conversations may shed light on a belief or provide a new lens in which to view a belief.</i> Also looked at this point at which students were involved in the perspective conversations and the CC. |
| 8. Shared initial findings with colleagues (critical friends group in Columbia)   | I shared with the group, the revised working definition, we examined one transcript, and we discussed the students I was interested in following. They helped create questions to ask the class as well as suggested returning to the literature to see how CC are defined not through language but through use. Also may change the term CC, need to return to the literature to define dialogue, conversation, discussion, etc.  |

Appendix J  
Sample of Chart

<b>Transcript</b>	<b>CT</b>	<b>Perspectives</b>
2-6: Cinderella (Jeff & Ethan)		
2-6: Cinderella (Fiona & Aisha)		
2:6: Cinderella (whole class)	X	
2-9: Cinderella (Tiff, Tina, & Mark)		X
2-9: Cinderella (Fiona, Ethan, Carl, Jin, and whole class)	X	X
2-10: 2 Worlds		
2-10: Friends	X	
2-11: 2 Worlds		
2-17: Sm. Grp.		
2-17: Whole Class	X	
2-18: Book Talk (KMP)		X
2-20: Holes		
2-20: Outcast		
2-20: Wreckers	X	
2-20: Wringers		
2-24: Holes	-	
2-24: Outcast	-	
2-24: Wreckers	-	
2-24: Wringers	-	X
2-25: Holes		
2-25: Outcast	-	
2-25: Wreckers	-	X
2-25: Losers	-	
2-25: Calvary		
2-25: Women		
2-25: African Am.		
2-25: Interview (KMP)		X
2-25: Silent		
2-26: Silent		
2-26: Dolphins	X	
2-26: Holes	-	
2-26: Outcast	-	

Appendix K  
Example of Hand-Coded Transcript

Steve: The book I read, *When Marian Sang*, it's about this girl who's really good at singing but she can't sing wherever she wants, like the average white person would be able to do even though she was one of the best singers in the world she wasn't able to. I think it's kinda injustice how back then they couldn't just sing like they want like whenever they want to in public that I think. I like how she, made people, or made people hope that, or she showed people that black people can do the same thing as white people.

Jeff: Yeah that's it, back then but not now, back then it was like even if you were an African American or a Mexican or someone who came from a different country and your were really good at something like you were a really good lawyer you know a lot about politics maybe you're good at sports maybe your good at all this stuff but you wouldn't be able to do it because people favor who lives in the country already. Which isn't right because someone, someone could make you a lot of money but you just don't like them so you don't hire them. So it's kinda wrong.

Tim: I think that, this is just kind of a comment about what we could do based on what Sam said was in that book, I think kind of the perseverance is what keeps prejudice from being really, really bad. Because when you think about it there will probably always be at least one person that's prejudice against someone in the way that Jordan said but if as long as there are people that aren't prejudice and actively trying to be not prejudice there won't be like, people won't be put back into slavery and everything.

Jeff: Like and it's all about believing that you can still do it. Like Dr. Martin Luther King got arrested like 50 times but he always got back out of jail and did the same thing over again. That's why people heard him.

Carl: Like you said before, people who come to the country they don't get favored. I don't understand back in the 1800's through the Civil War and slavery, when they were coming over they said that America was to be the land of tolerance and to honor all people's rights but what I don't get is that only white men got rights, no body else got anything. They were considered inferior and they still kept saying that we are in the right we get all the equal rights.

Jeff: It's like all about, it's about them just trying to get people to come over because they had so many jobs they needed to have people who, it's basically a lie. They say we're the land of tolerance, so if you come over here you'll have rights and lots of money and they come over and they have no choice to go back. So they have to stay and they get taken advantage of.

Hope

Recognizing an injustice

revoicing

Recognizing an injustice

Map not matching territory

Lens of privilege

politeness

Perseverance

Hope

Working to scale the ladder of abstraction

politeness

Hope

politeness

Challenging Status Quo

Questioning the map taught or learned

Seeing Alternative Perspectives

	Turns
Steve	1
Jeff	3
Tim	1
Carl	1

Tentative language use-- hedging

Longer stretches of talk where each person has the space to travel the ladder

Appendix L  
Karen Smith Interview Protocol

1. You seem to be the first person I found that uses the term *critical conversations*. Talk to us about how you came up with that term, who influenced your work, and how you defined it.
2. Has that definition changed, if so how?
3. What is the teacher's role in facilitating critical conversations?
4. What do you think the role of critical conversations should be in the classroom?
5. What are your initial thoughts about our definition?

Appendix M  
Student/Teacher Interview Protocol

**Open-ended Student Interview Protocol\***

1. How do you think your literature study went?
2. What do you think are your group's strengths?
3. If you had more time to talk, what else would you have liked to talk about?
4. What do you notice most about the talk that occurred within your group?
5. Do you see any patterns? If yes, why would do you think you did \_\_\_\_\_?
6. I'm going to tell you some things I saw and I want you to tell me if you agree with what I saw...

**Open-ended Teacher Interview Protocol\***

1. Tell me about today. What did you see happening?
2. What do you think your main focus was one today?
3. What adjustments did you have to make to your original plans and why?
4. Can you tell me more about (a particular student)?
5. What do you plan to do for the next class?

\* These were semi-structured interviews and these questions served as a guide for the interview not a strict format in which the interview followed.

Appendix N  
Kathryn Mitchell Pierce's Written Response to Research

This collaborative inquiry project has been a powerful professional development experience for me as a classroom teacher. There were two significant aspects of the professional development work related to this project: 1) the opportunity to work collaboratively with a colleague *in* the classroom, where both of us were focused on the students' learning and on the teaching decisions that could best support that learning, and 2) the opportunity to integrate teaching, learning, mentoring, interning, documenting and researching in one setting – creating a professional learning laboratory or extended professional learning community. I will elaborate on both of these aspects of our work in this first section.

Working Collaboratively with a Colleague in the Classroom

Rarely do teachers have the opportunity to work closely with a colleague in the same room, other than in team teaching or student teaching situations. The work that Jennifer and I did shared many features with both team teaching and student teaching, yet was unique. Team teachers often work closely in one setting with a shared group of students. Jennifer and I certainly did that. The extended amount of time she was able to spend in the classroom made it possible for her to be an integral part of our classroom – to function in ways similar to a team teacher. In our conversations, we could talk about individual children and their learning, share ideas for how best to support the next step in the learning for the class or an individual, debrief experiences that had not gone well or as well as anticipated, and celebrate those significant learning milestones that are only visible to those intimately involved in the learning context. In addition, what brought the

two of us together was a shared interest in critical talk in literature discussions about books that raise issues of equity and social justice.

While I, as the contract teacher, had primary responsibility for the actual day-to-day teaching, my work was informed and enriched by Jennifer's investment in the students' learning. Jennifer, as the doctoral student, had primary responsibility for ensuring that the doctoral research was completed, but I believe her research was informed and enriched by the perspectives, questions and insights that I offered as the classroom teacher and as a fellow researcher.

Student teachers enter a classroom setting in order to study closely what the classroom teacher does, and to gain experience in teaching by emulating, to a certain extent, the cooperating teacher. Like a student teacher, Jennifer entered our classroom setting in order to look closely at the work I did as a teacher and to better understand my "teaching moves." The goal, however, was not for Jennifer to learn to emulate my work but for the two of us to figure out and describe, in detail, that work. Much of what an experienced teacher does in the day-to-day life of the classroom is intuitive or reflective of established routines that may no longer be conscious decisions. Jennifer's presence, along with her insightful questions, forced me to raise my teaching decisions to a conscious level and to examine them. Good student teachers, with their newcomers' questions, can also invite experienced teachers to examine their work. Jennifer's extensive experience in teaching middle school and working with literature study made her questions even more powerful for my own learning. To a student teacher, the work of an experienced mentor can look magical at times. Jennifer's own experiences allowed her to cut through the surface moves I made as a teacher and focus our conversations on the

theoretical and pedagogical foundation for those decisions. I have found few professional development experiences more powerful than this opportunity to view my own work through the eyes of a knowledgeable colleague who shares my commitment to literature discussions, small group talk, and teaching for equity and social justice.

### Working in a Professional Learning Community

The close collaboration that Jennifer and I had throughout this project was enriched by the professional learning community in which we both operated. At one significant level, our work was informed and enriched by our collaboration with my long-time colleague and collaborator, Carol Gilles – Jennifer’s doctoral advisor, and a fellow classroom teacher, Jean Dickinson. Jennifer’s dissertation provided the focus of this, our latest shared project: Jean and Carol decided to conduct a parallel study in Jean’s classroom. Because we have a history of researching, writing, presenting and learning together, Jennifer’s project allowed us to take another step toward answering our professional questions about literature study in particular, and about teaching in general. Our conversations often rolled from topic to topic as we talked about students, great young adult literature, the political context of our teaching, colleagues in our buildings who may or may not share some of our teaching questions and values, and strategies for figuring out what our students were up to in their learning. Outside observers might at times feel that we “chicken-walked” around topics and spent considerable time off-topic. Yet our talk always cycled back, informed by our “chicken walks”, to the research questions themselves. Being engaged in a parallel study provided Jennifer and I with opportunities to share research, teaching and literature with others who were vitally interested in our work.



Our professional learning community was enriched further by my responsibility for mentoring my teammate, Amanda and two Truman University interns working in our classroom during this study. Both Amanda and the interns, brought with them extensive professional preparation for their work, including impressive academic backgrounds. Seeing my teaching moves through their questions and articulating my curricular plans for their benefit, forced me to look closely at aspects of my work that I often took for granted. In addition, their fresh ideas challenged me to consider new options in my work.

Spending the better part of a year engaged in intense professional conversations with these bright women fueled my own passion for the work. There was a sense that we were all part of something important and generative, something that *we* were doing that would impact our teaching in the future. Having WNET Channel 13 from New York documenting the very work that we were invested in studying made our efforts seem even more important. This model – student teacher/interns, new teachers, experienced teachers, new researchers, experienced researchers, university faculty working together in professional inquiry – has tremendous potential for supporting the professional development of all participants, and ultimately for supporting the learning of the students in our classrooms.

I feel fortunate to have had this opportunity to work closely with others, to have been engaged in a shared inquiry with others who understand and accept the theoretical and pedagogical foundation for the work I do in the classroom. My own learning was accelerated and deepened by the contributions of this larger group. In the next section I summarize some of the key insights related to literature discussion groups that I have

## learned or reconfirmed through this collaborative project. A Deeper Understanding of Literature Groups

I have been interested in literature discussion groups as a curricular structure for over fifteen years. For part of that time, I had to content myself with studying literature groups in other people's classrooms and, in a modified form, in the college classes I was teaching. For the past twelve years I have enjoyed being able to study literature groups in my own classroom context – first in a multiage primary classroom and, more recently, in a middle school classroom. My own teacher-research questions in the past have focused on a variety of related topics:

- How can we document reading comprehension in literature discussion groups?
- What evidence are we looking for that students are growing or making progress in their reading comprehension through their participation in literature discussion groups?
- What is the purpose of reading, of reading in school, of school reading instruction?
- How can I support literature discussions among students who are not yet independent in reading?
- How can I mediate and mitigate the power of peer relationships as they influence literature discussion groups?
- How can I create a supportive classroom context and curricular context for generative literature discussions of content area topics?
- How can I involve students in self-evaluation of their work in literature discussion groups in such a way that I am encouraging them to take greater ownership of the success of these groups?
- How can I support students' reflection on critical ideas – and concepts from our content area curriculum, insights into literature and human nature, issues of equity and social justice?

At first my questions focused on helping others accept what I was coming to understand – showing others that students benefit from reading literature books rather than textbooks, that talking with others about the ideas that are important is as powerful or moreso than participating in a teacher-dominated discussion about a shared reading, that

students are increasingly able to handle complex material at a sophisticated level. Later my inquiries focused on my own questions about what was essential in my teaching, and on how to use literature to spark conversations about topics that matter to students and have the potential to change the world for the better. The discussion that follows is a summary of the key insights I came to during this collaborative study. I am indebted to Jennifer and our extended professional learning community, for their support of my learning.

*Great books are those that support deep and repeated readings, spark generative conversations about topics that matter in our world, and resonate with the questions and issues of concern to the students.* Most of this statement is not really new information, but the last part – “resonate with the questions and issues of concern to the students” – was even more important with this middle school group than it had been with the elementary students I had worked with in the past. Issues such as *fitting in*, *finding my place*, *being accepted*, and *friends* were powerfully motivating to the students. They were able to link almost any book we read to at least one of these issues. Books that satisfied the students’ need to explore these issues *and* connected to concepts essential in our curriculum, were the most successful books. The Immigration books that we discussed during the most intense part of the data collection for Jennifer’s dissertation met this standard. They informed our study of immigration by sharing details about the lives of immigrants while at the same time highlighting issues of being accepted, learning to fit in, and struggling with family issues.

*Social dynamics have a significant impact on whose ideas are validated in literature discussions.* Again, this isn’t particularly new information. Roxanne Henkin,

for example, has documented the power of peer relations in writers' discussions. Through the extensive transcripts that Jennifer created for this study, I was able to freeze-frame conversations, to listen in on conversations that I missed in the classroom, and to follow individual students' contributions to discussions across time, groups and books. At the elementary level, where I was able to be with the students for most of their school day including recess supervision, I had easier access to the social ins and outs of their lives. In addition, elementary students are much more forthcoming with their social dilemmas. It was easier for me to see how social patterns were influencing who could gain access to the floor in a literature group, whose ideas were pursued or ignored, and who could control the direction of a group discussion with a single whispered comment.

A significant difference at the middle school level was the limited access to the students' social lives – at a time when these social lives have taken on greater significance. Only through peripheral conversations with students and other teachers would I become aware of a friendship dispute or social altercation that occurred, say, in math class that played itself out later in our literacy/social studies class, or the accidental/intentional physical encounter during passing time between classes that resulted in acerbic responses to a student's contributions during a subsequent literature discussion. The transcripts allowed me to see some of this social jockeying, particularly for the groups I hadn't been able to get to during class to listen in on their conversations. Our daily conversations as a teaching team (with the other members of our 6<sup>th</sup> grade/south team) and the weekly conversations with our grade level counselor helped to fill in some of the missing information. This remains a topic for further study for me.

*The core values students bring from home, and are working at constructing for themselves, influence the content and process of our literature discussions.* I believe strongly in teaching toward a more democratic way of life (Edelsky,1999) and intentionally select curricular structures and teaching materials that will help me do this. I value being open to other viewpoints, being willing to listen to others' ideas, and being accepting of the reality that others will have ideas and values that differ from your own. Literature discussion groups seem to exemplify these values – students are encouraged to seriously consider others' ideas while defending their own, to be listening with the intent to understand and to be persuaded, to accept and even celebrate the power of coming together with others whose ideas differ from your own. Working with Jennifer on this research, I came face-to-face with the dilemma of how to respond to a student whose core values rejected multiple interpretations, discouraged accepting others from different backgrounds, and took an “us vs. them” perspective toward characters in the books or fellow classmates. In short, this study helped me pose the following questions: “How do I act to value all voices in literature discussions if one of those voices does not value all voices?” and “What if this student had represented the views of a majority of students rather than the views of a small minority?”

*Sometimes it has to get rowdy to get good.* I value having an orderly and caring classroom, even though I'm not always successful in creating it. I value productive talk that is focused on key issues, big ideas, and new insights and have little patience for social chatter except when students are doing something nearly mindless like coloring in the background on a poster. Further, my experiences have taught me that many behavior issues can be avoided by creating a fairly quiet and clearly structured classroom that

permits students the freedom to do what they need to do when they need to do it in order to complete the work. When multiple literature discussions are taking place simultaneously, I'm more likely to speak up about the noise-level of a particular group. When a table group gets loud, I tend to remind them to use "voices that are only as big as your table." When most of the class is loud, to the point of having to get louder to be heard above the din, I tend to pull students back for a brief redirecting chat. I might remind them of the three things they are to be focused on or the two things they need to have accomplished by now (Jennifer refers to this as providing a verbal rubric). If, on the other hand, students seem to be struggling with the task, I tend to clarify and answer questions before sending them back to work.

However, the transcripts that Jennifer created showed me the downside to my efforts to create a quiet, well-run classroom. In her initial reading of the transcripts, Jennifer found that when I would stop them and say something to get them quieter or more focused, often students were on the verge of something wonderful. As they came closer to a climax in their own discussions – a new insight or revelation, students would get louder in their excitement and enthusiasm. Jennifer's observations have me rethinking my tolerance level for noise. I still believe that students can attend to ideas and think better when the noise level is low enough to be heard at their own table without having to raise their voices. On the other hand, the excitement of learning brings with it a certain desire to "shout out the news." I'm seeking a balance between the two, while simultaneously working to ensure that more of the talk is the generative, exploratory talk I believe leads to learning.

*Critical talk requires that students move fluidly between concrete and abstract, is premised on the ability to create metaphors and construct new relationships among familiar concepts, and is more likely to occur when students have the opportunity to connect their own lives to a shared focus (a shared reading or shared inquiry).*

Jennifer's use of the *ladder of abstraction* (Hayakawa, 1964/1991) helped us better understand what the students were doing cognitively and socially in their discussion groups. In 1990 and 1991, Carol Gilles, Jean Dickinson and I had an opportunity to work closely with Douglas Barnes as part of our interest in the study of talk, particularly the talk of literature discussion groups. Barnes' work had been influential in shaping our own work, in large part because of his explication of the difference between *exploratory talk* and *presentational talk* (Barnes, 1975/1992). Barnes visited classrooms, listened to our tapes and read our transcripts, and helped us refine our questions and our strategies for studying talk. He challenged us to begin "unpacking" the terms we used to describe classroom events. For example, he asked us to take terms such as "the students decided" and to provide a detailed description of the process the students used to "decide" and to highlight the role that talk played in this "decision." Since that time, Carol and I have been wrestling with ways of "unpacking" the category of *exploratory talk* – to construct thick descriptions of what that talk looks like and what it does. Jennifer's introduction of Hayakawa's *ladder of abstraction* has made a significant contribution to our efforts at "working at understanding" (Barnes, 1975/1992) the exploratory talk we find in literature discussion groups. In addition, this perspective/construct supports our ongoing efforts to find ways of describing how students' talk becomes more sophisticated in literature discussion groups. Hayakawa's work, as applied here by Jennifer, will be influential as I

continue to work at understanding what students are doing in their literature discussion groups, how I might better support their learning of the strategy and the content of their discussions, and how I might document and share their learning with others.

*Talk is cheap: actions speak louder than words.* These clichés capture yet another struggle or ongoing inquiry that characterizes my own search for ways to structure a more supportive, more effective learning environment for students. I believe in the incredible power of talk to change the world. As Margaret Mead reminds us, significant conversations among small groups of individuals *can* change the world. In fact, she says, it's the only thing that does. When students are engaged in talking about the issues that face them and others around the world, they are learning to use talk for democratic purposes. They are learning to identify injustices, to speak for those who have been silenced by self-perpetuating systems, to persuade those with power to act for change, to invite others to join them in an effort to make a difference.

In the classroom this year, I feel we made significant progress in learning how to use talk to raise and explore sensitive issues about race, gender, body image, friendship, and acceptance by others. We spent the fall semester getting to know one another (in 6<sup>th</sup> grade students feed in from three elementary schools and a number of private schools, in addition to the new students that move into the district each year), establishing routines for talking, learning and living together in our classroom, exploring the power of good literature to spark conversations, investigating the significant connections between history and contemporary issues, and creating a classroom learning environment in which students could feel safe asking questions and raising sensitive issues. This is not to say that many of these students hadn't experienced something similar in their elementary



careers – I know many of them did. But this was a new group of students, in a new (for them) school, engaged with a new curriculum and, for most of them, learning to adjust to a departmentalized schedule with changing faces in each of their classes. We all had to learn how to create such a safe learning environment all over again. Having spent more than a decade in a multiage/multi-year classroom in which two-thirds of the students returned each year, I had to learn new strategies this year in middle school for building the classroom environment and establishing the classroom routines from scratch each year. I was impatient to do these things more quickly, knowing we had only 9 months together.

By January, when Jennifer's dissertation research began, we had built the classroom community and established routines. I think this shows in the ways the students talked – even when they knew that they were being taped and that we were listening to these tapes closely. Having had the luxury of reading transcribed tapes from most of their literature discussions during the third quarter of the school year, I can say that I'm pleased with the progress they made in learning to use talk to support their own and others' learning, and to raise questions and issues. However, in the ideal world, this talk should lead to action – to intentional changes in their behavior, to conscious efforts to *do* something to make something better. We didn't get there during third quarter, nor did we get there as a group during fourth quarter. There were individual and small group actions that were not related directly to our work in class, but it's difficult to know whether our talk and the ideas we explored encouraged or sparked these actions, or whether the students would have gone that route anyway. I suspect much of the impact of what we did together this year will not be realized – by the students or the adults working with them – until down the road. For

example, when students once again pick up U.S. History as juniors in high school, I suspect they'll be prepared to look for patterns of power and injustice, to ask questions about how others might relate the history of a given time or place, to wonder what might have been if someone/some group had or had not chosen to speak up about an injustice or a better way. I hope, when they approach a new book in one of their future English classes that the students from this year will have even more sophisticated ways of making connections to their own lives, of questioning what the author wants them to understand about life and human nature, and of soliciting others' ideas in order to better understand their own responses to, and understanding of the book.

### Conclusions

Having the opportunity to reflect on my teaching and read Jennifer's account of it has been generative and satisfying to me. It is my hope that those who read our work will seriously consider creating a similar collaborative inquiry experience. I believe this model has potential for supporting quality professional development, while nurturing student learning. I also believe more than ever before that creating, nurturing and sustaining critical talk in the classroom is instrumental in forming educated and democratic citizens, who know and care about social justice and who are committed to working as agents for change.

Appendix O

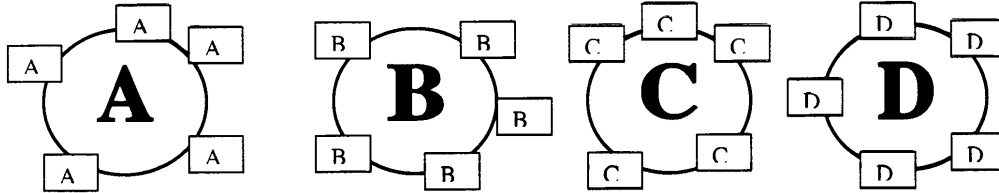
Sample Curriculum Map

Social Studies content	1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter	3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter
History Focus	Expansion: -Lewis and Clark -Jeffersonian  America  -Jacksonian Politics	Civil War -Pre-Civil War -Reconstruction	-Vanishing Frontier -Immigration	-Transformation (Industrialization) -1904 World's Fair
Key Concepts	-Democracy -Manifest Destiny -Branches of Government -States' vs Federal Rights	-Compromise -Debate -Secession -Abolitionists -Antebellum -Segregation -Emancipation	-Displacement -Assimilation -Economic Expansion -Homestead	-Monopoly -Industry -Economic Progress -Urbanization -Preservation
Major Product	Deep maps Times lines	Civil War Commemorative Magazine	-Immigrant Journals -Native Cultures: The and Now	-Biography research report/display boards
Current Events	Newspapers, internet, radio, TV	Political cartoons	Then and Now comparisons	Commemorative events
Social Studies tools and strategies	-Maps -Time lines -Primary Sources	-Diaries, Journals, Letters -Political Cartoons	-Interviews -Diaries, Journals, Letters	-Interviews -Diaries, Journals, Letters -Documentaries
Geography skills	-Latitude and Longitude -Physical Regions of the US	-Political Regions of the US (NE, S, Midwest, etc.) -Location	-Scale and Proportion/Ratio -Relationship b/w culture and geography	-Population shift in the US -relationship between economics and culture/product
Map Skills	Physical maps <b>Deep Maps:</b> -Expansion -Lewis and Clark Trail	Political Maps <b>Deep Maps:</b> -Major Events (battles and movements) -Slave and Free States -Rise of factories and mills (shifting economy in N and S)	Population and Precipitation Maps <b>Deep Maps:</b> -Native American lands -Waves of immigrants and where they were from -Population patterns -Changes in land use	Product Maps <b>Deep Maps:</b> -Growth of industrial communities -Changes in land use

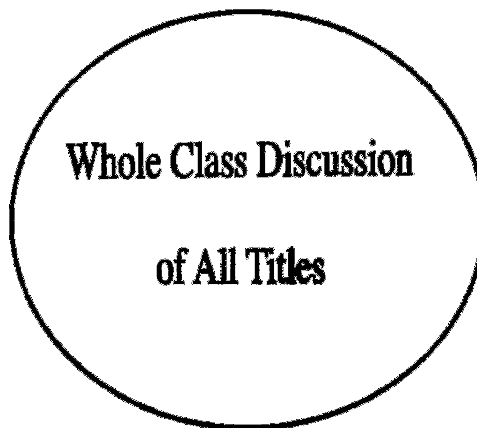
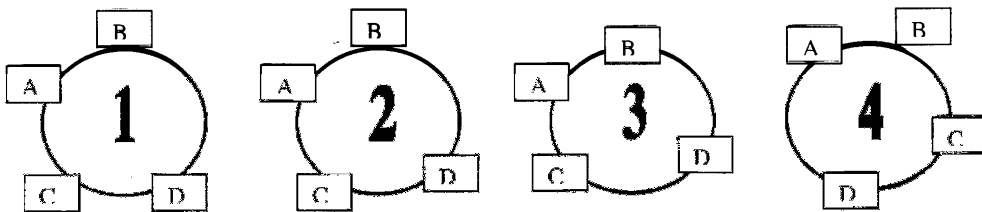
\*Created by Pierce, 2003-2004

# *Mega Text Sets*

## Small Group Discussions of Different Titles



## Jigsaw Group Discussions of Mixed Titles



## VITA

Jennifer L. Wilson grew up in St. Louis, Missouri where she completed her elementary and secondary education. She received her B.S. in Elementary Education with a Minor in Dance from Millikin University in 1996, her M.Ed. in Reading Education from Illinois State University in 2000, and her Ph.D. in Literacy from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2004. Jennifer taught as a middle school language arts and social studies teacher for five years. She worked as an independent consultant for several school districts around Missouri as well as taught undergraduate courses at the University of Missouri-Columbia and Stephens College. She is currently working at the University of Missouri-Columbia as a Research Assistant to Dr. Carol Gilles and teaching three undergraduate courses. Jennifer spends her time babysitting her two year old nephew and visiting her mother and father at their bed and breakfast outside of Herman, Missouri.