

# **Critical Literacy in the Elementary Classroom**

by

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The goal of education differs for many, but working at a school where the impacts and intersectionality of poverty and racism are acute, education can only have one true aim, which is to empower. This qualitative study examined my own experience as a fifth grade ESL integrated teacher in an urban elementary setting implementing critical literacy through examining, discussing, and questioning texts using an Improvement Science framework. Students recorded their conversations around these texts to discuss issues of bias, equality, and equity. Students also reflected on their conversations, confidence levels, and set goals for themselves to better their own discussions, which culminated in developing two action projects to better their school and community.

The findings of this qualitative study resulted in three emerging themes. 1.) Students understand bias, which resulted in re-structuring my study to be less about teaching the concept of bias and more about building students' self-perceptions as changemakers. 2.) Students emerge as drivers of change, not only did they create change but empowered others, students and community members, to participate. 3.) Students have nuanced desires and beliefs of the world, these included: a desire for justice, a belief that people and animals deserve to live good lives, and a desire for a better world.

These findings provide considerations for teachers, school leaders, and policy makers to take under advisement in the needs of urban, resource-poor communities and elementary-aged students.

Conclusions drawn from this research suggest that critical literacy has an essential place in the elementary classroom, especially as part of helping students develop their critical awareness, developing a culture of hope, and empowering young people to create the change they seek.

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## Preface

I would like to thank my dissertation committee for the support, encouragement, and time that they dedicated to helping me build and complete my study. Their belief in me and the importance of my study allowed me to push through moments of uncertainty and reminded me to listen to my students and be open to where this experience might take me.

I would also like to thank my students who inspire me to be a better educator for them. This dissertation would not be possible without them, and I hope it is ultimately in service of them to show the thriving brilliance of our young students, especially our students of color. Believe in yourself. Continue to pursue excellence. Cause good trouble. This is for you.

There are also so many educators who have had a tremendous impact on my teaching as well as my life. Here are just a few of them: Erin, Cassie, Ashley, Sarah, Jess, Anna, Jamie, Angelee, Jessie, Gretchen, Angel, and Anne. The world may never thank you for all that you do, but I am so proud to have known and worked with you. You make a difference!

Of course, I cannot extend enough gratitude to my husband, Cody, who has, from day one, believed in me and encouraged me to apply for this program. Through new jobs, moving to a new state, and the added hardships and pressures of living through a pandemic, you have always been by my side and your support has never wavered. You ensured our household was up and running and that I was fed and watered all while continuing to be the backbone of support I rely on every day. I can never truly put into words what you have given me. I hope I can one day provide you the gift you have given me, and I cannot wait to see what our next chapters in life hold.

## **1.0 Introduction**

In Chapter one, I present a problem of practice and provide a contextual background of my setting as well as my own background. In doing so, I also examine root causes of my problem of practice to formulate ways to approach finding solutions. Finally, I present my inquiry approach and research questions that guide my study.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

The pursuit of equity is an essential American story, but so too are the regular encounters with issues of racism, sexism, transphobia, xenophobia, and poverty (to name a few). With non-stop access to technology and therefore information, children are much more aware of issues pertaining to social justice. It is my belief that students are ready and eager to know more and discuss issues, especially those pertinent to them. It is crucial that students begin learning how to interpret the many mixed messages that they interact with, which if left unchecked perpetuate mistruths about their own identities and roles in their own lives. Empowering students to learn these skills can have “a positive impact on learners’ autonomy, their cognitive abilities, intellectual growth, raised awareness and better understanding of the world, democracy, power distribution, social circumstances, responsibility, and alternatives” (Blixen & Pennell, 2020, p. 2).

As a current elementary school teacher, I want to facilitate conversations about current equity issues in my fifth-grade classroom that empower students and give them avenues to enact change. In order to facilitate these conversations I sought to learn more about the field of critical

literacy in order to further develop my teaching pedagogy so that I help students deconstruct “truths” that are presented to them, both inside and outside of the classroom, and then help develop counternarratives to counteract these so-called “truths.” However, there are challenges and barriers to attempting this. For one, the country is at odds with the concept of Critical Race Theory, which derives partly from the same social theory that critical literacy is also a part of, known as Critical Theory. Florida and Arizona have just gone as far as to ban Critical Race Theory from the classroom, (Calvan, 2021; Office of the Governor Doug Ducey, 2021) which poses risks to my own study. Additionally, by nature, critical literacy is at odds with the public education system: “Critical literacies are, by definition, historical works in progress. There is no correct or universal model” (Luke, 2012, p. 9). Critical literacy is not a prescribed curriculum, which leaves me with the complex task of trying to stay true to this pedagogy, while also trying to make it fit into the box of the elementary classroom setting.

## **1.2 Organizational System Description**

In order to understand my problem of practice, it’s important to understand the context of where I work. I am a fifth-grade ESL integrated teacher at Sunshine Valley Elementary School, a Title I public school located in the northeast part of the United States. This school is part of a larger district, which was taken over in November 2019 by the state’s governing system and placed on a Turnaround Action Plan (TAP) (*Turnaround action plan*, n.d.) in response to a report created by the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy in May 2019. This report’s primary finding was that the district:

is overburdened with multiple, overlapping sources of governance and bureaucracy with no clear domains of authority and very little scope for transformative change. The resulting structures paralyze action, stifle innovation, and create dysfunction and inconsistency across the district. In the face of the current governance structure, stakeholders understandably expressed little to no hope for serious reform. (Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, 2019, p. 3)

These findings showcase a district that is failing its stakeholders and speaks volumes about the state of public education in the United States. Of course, those living in these poor, urban areas continue to suffer the impact when systems fail and further perpetuate stereotypes about the residents who are majority Latinx, Hispanic, and Black.

My specific school, Sunshine Valley Elementary, resides in the southside of the city in an urban setting with an enrollment of 401 students for the 2020-2021 school year. Racially, our student population is predominantly Hispanic at 67.1%, followed by Black at 18.2%, multi-racial at 5.2%, Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander at 4.5%, white at 4.5%, and American Indian or Alaska Native at 0.5% (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2020). Economically, 93% are considered economically disadvantaged because they qualify for free and reduced priced lunch. Academically, students have historically performed low on state accountability assessments. In 2021, 6.3% of the 3rd-5th grade students achieved a level 3- Meeting expectations and 0% achieved a level 4- Exceeding expectations on the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) in English Language Arts. The RICAS math assessment data for 2021 was suppressed by the state because more than 95% of students did not meet expectations (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2021) meaning that this data is not publicly accessible. This data supports that children are adversely impacted by poverty.

To further understand the setting of my problem of practice I used empathy interviews (Perry et al., 2020) and daily reflections to determine current perceptions of social justice education. In doing so, I found there were mixed reactions from staff. One teacher discussed the lack of a social studies curriculum as a barrier that hinders students from asking questions about the world around them and makes it difficult for natural conversations about social issues in the classroom. However, this specific teacher stated this meant she just had to be very intentional with classroom discussions and the books she used in her classroom. This matches with my own experience— as a new teacher to the district, I have not been told of any social studies curriculum and there is no built-in time within our schedules to provide social studies instruction or meet the state’s social studies standards. Instead, it is intimated that it is being taught as part of ELA, yet materials and topics have not been provided. Administration has also stated that the focus of teachers should be on the ELA specific skills and not on understanding social studies content (or science, which is also ‘integrated’ with ELA). In addition, when interviewing one of the school’s academic coaches, they stated they wouldn’t want their own kids to be exposed to current day issues because of their child’s young age (3<sup>rd</sup> grade) and sensitivity. This speaks to the larger climate around social justice education and the questions surrounding the appropriate time for these kinds of topics to be addressed and who should be addressing them. Yet, it must not be understated that choosing not to teach about current-day issues is also an explicit stance.

Finally, staff mentioned time being a large issue. Current academic scores place this school as one of the worst achieving in the state (*Best elementary schools rankings*, 2021). This speaks to the larger issue of academic gaps, which require intensive academic interventions, coupled with social-emotional interventions for students dealing with the repercussions of poverty make finding time for anything additional incredibly difficult. On top of that mounting pressures from

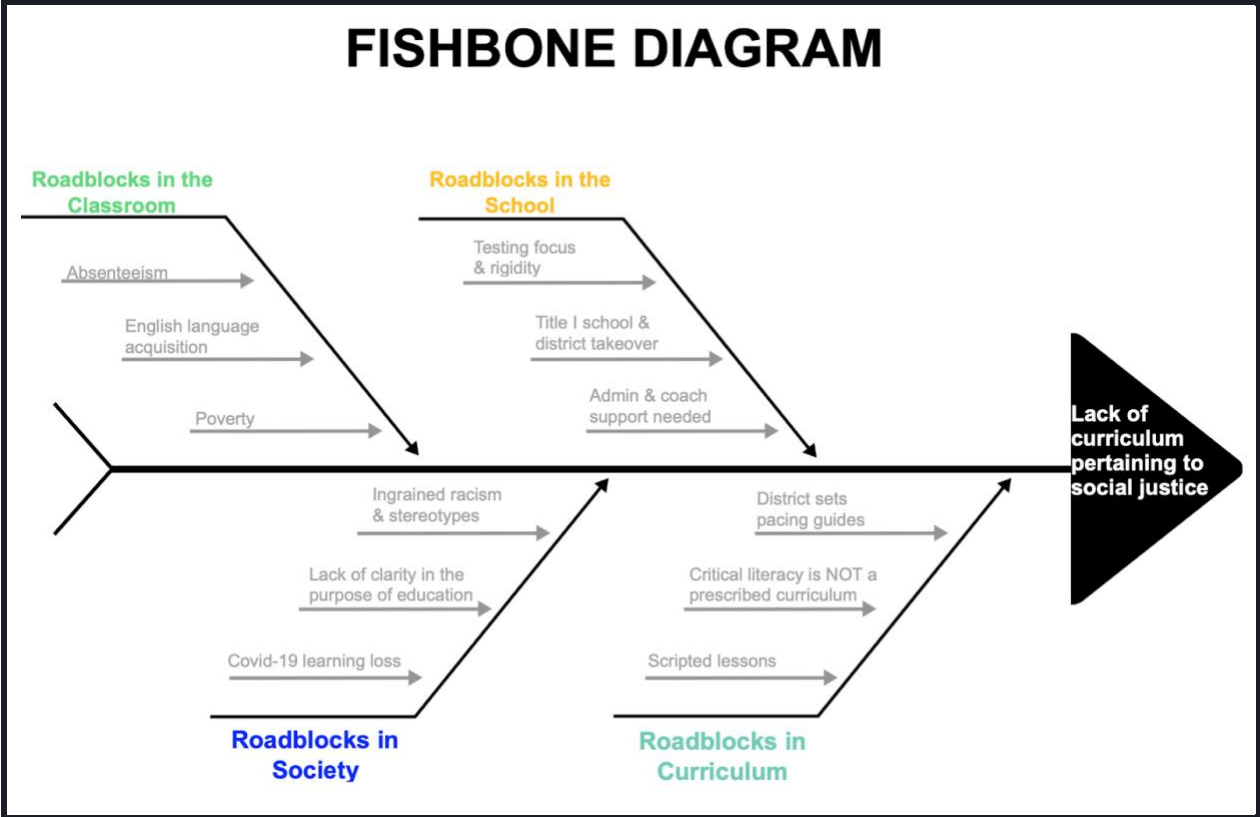


administration result in unachievable expectations placed both on teachers and students. In October 2022 the superintendent sent out a memo meant only for elementary and middle school principals, but quickly was disseminated to staff stating: “we have established a goal of 1.5 years of growth annually for each elementary and middle school individually.” Constraints of time and pressure limit teacher autonomy and innovation.

### **1.3 Fishbone “Root Cause” Analysis**

What makes problems of practice tricky is how deeply they can be ingrained into a culture or climate, which makes finding solutions difficult (Bryk et al., 2015). To determine a point of entry into my problem of practice I created an Ishikawa fishbone diagram (Ishikawa & Loftus, 1990) which details the many obstacles pertaining to social justice education in the elementary classroom. See Figure 1.

In creating this fishbone diagram to better understand my question of how to facilitate conversations around issues of equity in my fifth-grade classroom, I began to wonder about: (1) how I can develop lessons and units involving critical literacy that preserve the intentions of critical literacy while also meeting the Common Core Standards and (2) the impact of incorporating critical literacy into my teaching practice and my students’ learning. But ultimately, my problem of practice derives from my lack of knowledge or training regarding the complex topic of social justice education and when asking myself why this is, I have realized there is a lack of overall curriculum requirements pertaining to social justice expected in the elementary classroom setting.



**Figure 1 Fishbone Diagram**

Figure 1 showcases my Fishbone Diagram that I have used to document where I see both the overarching issues pertaining to this lack of social justice curriculum as well as more specific issues. The main roadblocks can be found from the hyper local, such as my classroom and school, to the more broad, such as society at large.

Examining our society as whole, it’s hard to ignore that we live in an inherently racist, sexist, ableist, xenophobic, homophobic, and transphobic system. That automatically puts the society we live in at odds with the desire to educate our youth about it (Janks, 2014; Jewett & Smith, 2003). This can be seen specifically in the outcry from school boards and states at the idea of implementing critical race theory. As of Fall 2022, 36 states had introduced legislation in attempts to limit teaching about race, bias, and racism (“CRT map,” 2022). As of September 2022, seven states were successful in passing legislation—Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, New

Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Tennessee—though this is continually changing (“States,” 2022 ). This ongoing legislative battle shows another issue impacting public education, which is that there is not a clearly defined and agreed upon purpose for education. Some may say it is to prepare our students for the job market while others may say it is to better the society they have been brought into (Labaree, 1997). Without a clear purpose established at the societal level, it makes it common and easy for mass outrage to occur when discussing outcomes of the education process, as seen in the debate around the implementation of critical race theory in classrooms.

Another crucial impact on schooling at the national level has been COVID-19. The result of massive outbreaks of the Coronavirus led districts to pivot to online models March of 2020, which disproportionately impacted poorer communities that had limited access to the internet. The result of this unprecedented time was uncertainty, especially when pertaining to how much learning occurred. This has resulted in an increase in pressure to resume “back-to-normal” status while simultaneously accounting for potential learning gaps that have manifested or widened. This does not leave much room for adding or changing prescribed curriculums.

Current curriculum expectations pose an additional problem. The emphasis in fifth grade is reading and math. Upon entering this school year, the timeline for all unit assessments had already been set by the district which showcases the tight timeline given for teaching curriculum that lacks much room for reteaching or any other adjustment. Our district also provides curriculum maps that assign a specific number of days for each unit. This pacing does not provide time for building connections to the outside world. In addition, when researching critical literacy as a possible avenue for helping students discuss pertinent equity issues, I realized critical literacy is at odds with the public education system because critical literacy is by design not formulaic, making it more complex than the average prescribed curriculum. Critical literacy is more of an approach

than a set of learning standards. Unfortunately, the district I work for prefers scripted lessons rather than providing trust and freedom for teachers to explore what might work best for their classroom.

Then there are the roadblocks posed by both my school and the classroom in which I work. Working in a Title I school, we are given additional resources to assist our students to make projected outcomes which results in added pressure to ensure students make End of Year (EOY) benchmarks. This establishes a culture of teaching to the test, which is regularly referred to at grade-level planning meetings when discussing what should and should not be taught. This does not leave room for social justice education. In addition, we spend a lot of time scaffolding and ensuring students have resources to access the curriculum in English. Most of my students are bilingual and range in their fluency with English – this requires additional time to prepare as well as teach. Poverty also affects our school in a multitude of ways. For example, we spend the first 10 to 15 minutes ensuring all students have breakfast. This is seen as instructional time, but it simply cannot be, because our students need nutrition to fuel themselves for their day. In addition, we do not have the funds other PTAs have that could be a source of additional funding for new projects within the school. Finally, we deal with absenteeism, which impacts learning and results in trying to make up the lost time. This school year four students missed more than 20% of school days, seven students missed 10-19.9% of school days, and four students missed 5-9.9% of school days. These issues all compound and result in a system that appears stagnant to change.

Ultimately, there are many roadblocks that pave the way to social justice instruction and my goal of trying to hold conversations around equity to empower my students. Systems are in place and are working as intended for this continual outcome to occur. However, I believe there is power in being a teacher and that my students bring many assets to the table, such as their resiliency, that do provide hope for creating positive change within my current practice.

## **1.4 Inquiry Overview**

My dissertation in practice follows my journey as I seek to implement social justice education in the form of increasing student conversation around social issues using a critical literacy framework. To do so, I used improvement science and implemented a series of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles in order to create change. In order to guide this process, I sought to find out the following:

1. Do students know what bias is and how to recognize it?
2. What confidence levels do students bring with them in using interrogative questioning methods to develop conversation?
3. How does having the language of questioning aid in deeper conversations about current day issues?
4. How do I ensure my own biases do not interfere with students' developing their own perspectives?

### **1.4.1 Researcher Positionality**

In proceeding with my work as a researcher and educator, it is important to identify my own background, experience, and history that impacts my perspective. I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, married, able-bodied woman. I was raised in a Christian household in a predominantly white suburban middle-class area where I was privileged to have opportunities to travel, complete after school hobbies, and take advanced classes in high school. I realize these are not opportunities that everybody is given in life and that they are very much based on the happenstance of where I was raised, my skin color, and the financial status of my parents.

My interest in social justice education is the result of many things. For one, my paternal grandparents are immigrants and refugees of Poland who were exiled and persecuted for being Polish during World War II. At a young age, this made an impression on me. For one, it made me conscious of the importance of protecting people, regardless of where they were born. Secondly, it impressed upon me the immense social and psychological pressure to reach “American Dream” success levels. I am also a survivor of domestic abuse, which led me to research trauma-based teaching practices and gave me firsthand experience with understanding the impact of PTSD and depression, as well as how to navigate a rigid and complicated healthcare system.

My experience as an educator has also informed my belief in the power of social justice education. Over the course of the previous seven years I have worked in a variety of rural, suburban, and urban elementary school settings within monocultural and multicultural buildings in both wealthy and poor districts— I spent three years in a rural Upstate New York district that was predominately white, but economically diverse. I then spent four years teaching in Northern Virginia, three of which were in a wealthy city with a high population of immigrants and English Language Learners. I then spent the fourth year in a neighboring district in a suburban Title I school that was predominately Hispanic/Latinx and about 80% of the population received a free or reduced-rate lunch.—These experiences, when juxtaposed, impressed upon me the impact of economic segregation on educational outcomes. Ultimately, my desire to be a teacher comes from a strong conviction in the power of education to dismantle systems of oppression. It is from this belief that I sought a dissertation in practice in which I could provide ways for my students to see themselves within these oppressive institutions and give them ways to make change.

### **1.4.2 Significance of Study**

The purpose of this study is to empower. Students of color and poverty are marginalized by society as a whole and within the structure of public education. In order to combat stereotypes, mistruths, and biases that proliferate about and around my students it is crucial that students be able to interpret the world and make informed opinions for themselves. While I am not as naive as to believe that one study will eradicate these societal issues, I believe working towards student-led conversations is one step to improve students' ability to think critically.

### **1.4.3 Dissertation Overview**

The remaining dissertation chapters detail the processes and reflections I underwent in setting up and completing my study. In chapter two, I discuss the literature that serves as a basis for my study. In chapter three, I detail the processes I undertook to complete my study. In chapter four, I explain the explicit classroom choices made as part of this study. In chapter five, I report on the findings from my study, specifically highlighting three prominent themes that emerged from student discussions as well as reflections. Finally, in chapter six, I explain the implications of my study.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

In Chapter two, I present the basis of my study through reviewing the pre-existing research and literature that both define critical literacy and present ways to apply critical literacy in the K-12 setting, specifically focusing on the elementary classroom. I also lay out the improvement science process I follow as part of my study.

### **2.1 Purpose of Literature Review**

The purpose of my review of literature is to understand the development and rationale behind critical literacy as a pedagogy as well as specific approaches and practices that have already been implemented in the elementary classroom setting. In my literature review I sought out to understand:

1. How critical literacy has been understood.
2. Important principles of critical literacy that can be implemented in the elementary classroom setting.

In what follows, I first describe the evolving definitions of critical literacy followed by current theoretical frameworks for understanding critical literacy. I end by detailing recurring themes from the literature that detail ways of practicing critical literacy in the classroom.



## **2.2 Critical Literacy Understandings**

### **2.2.1 Defining Critical Literacy**

Paulo Freire is often credited as a forefather of the concept of critical literacy in that he viewed reading to be a transactional activity where students' backgrounds impact what is taken away from a text and that texts are defined by the context in which the text is developed (Freire, 1985). However, critical literacy can also be seen as having roots in the 1964 Freedom Summer movement when "freedom schools" were developed to cater specifically to Black American students' lived experiences and where students were taught to question normalized practices in the United States (Perlstein, 2002). Critical literacy is now defined as a way of interacting with texts (both traditional and nontraditional kinds) that emphasizes acknowledging that all texts have biases and then using a questioning stance to interrogate the text's meaning and what it says about the society the text emerges from (Campano et al., 2013; Luke, 2012; Stevens & Bean, 2007). The final step of critical literacy is then enacting social justice in response to what is learned or uncovered from the questioning process (Behrman, 2006; Campano et al., 2013; Luke, 2012).

### **2.2.2 Frameworks of Critical Literacy**

Because critical literacy is an approach to analyzing texts and not an instructional curriculum, authors have posited several frameworks to understand and enact critical literacy. Paulo Freire's (1987) cyclical framework involves reading the word (reading the text), then reading the world (deconstructing with the context the text exists within), then transforming it (reconstructing/taking action) therefore coming full circle and starting back at reading the word.

By starting with “reading the word” and following it up with “reading the world,” Freire’s cycle showcases his belief that texts provide insight into the world around us.

Hilary Janks (2000, 2013, 2014) frames her vision of critical literacy with a cyclical redesign chart similar to that of Freire’s. Janks’ chart begins with a construct or design, there is a process to deconstruct it, and then a redesign/reconstruction, thereby restarting the critical literacy process as necessary. Janks also argues for there being four orientations to critical literacy – domination, access, diversity, and design – that are all interdependent. *Domination* is about understanding how language is used to perpetuate power; *diversity* is about understanding language as a way to be more inclusive of others; *access* is about understanding language as a way to partake in dominant or marginalized discourse; and *design* is about understanding how language and semiotics are presented and then reconstructing them (Behrman, 2006; Janks, 2000, 2013, 2014). Her argument for the interdependence of all orientations when reading a text highlights the importance of the integrity of critical analysis.

In a different type of framework from that of Freire and Janks, Freebody and Luke (1990) define critical literacy as one essential part of becoming a reader. Their view is that reading requires these four roles: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst. *Code breaker* equates to developing alphabetic awareness. *Text participant* means being able to make inferences and connections, and using background knowledge to make meaning. *Text user* means understanding surrounding context in order to know how to process the text. *Text analyst* means developing an awareness of bias in all texts by examining the language and ideas (Freebody & Luke, 1990). In examining these roles it can be seen that the role of text analyst is that of employing critical literacy: to develop an awareness of biases in all texts by examining the language and ideas present. This framework emphasizes the importance of critical literacy, not as a side project or just

for “gifted” students, but as an essential and crucial skill for all students to learn in order to be considered a fluent reader.

Finally, Lewison et al. (2002) developed four dimensions of critical literacy as a result of synthesizing varying definitions of critical literacy found in thirty years of literature on the subject. These dimensions are: “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on the sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice,” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382). This framework provides a more specific definition for what lessons or projects would need to contain in order to be seen as critical literacy in action, as seen in the work of Labadie et al. (2012) where the authors use this framework as a way to design their practice of book introductions. This framework allows for a simplification of what it means to implement critical literacy, which can often appear very complex, depending on the source.

These frameworks, while differing, offer a starting point in how to begin implementing critical literacy in the classroom. For one, they all align in that they argue for an in-depth analysis of texts for biases. Also, Freire (1985), Janks (2014), and Lewison et al. (2002) all move from analysis to argue for an additional step whereby understandings taken from the text about the world are then acted on by the readers to make a change or reframe perspectives. Finally, many of these frameworks are complementary in that they can be used together to ensure critical literacy’s ideological positioning remains intact while confronting the many bureaucratic policies that control the classroom environment. For instance, taking on Freebody and Luke’s philosophy of reading provides a rationale for including critical literacy in the classroom, while Lewison et al. provide specific outcomes resulting from critical literacy.

### **2.2.3 Principles of Critical Literacy That can be Implemented in the Elementary Setting**

In order to develop a study promoting critical literacy, I examined literature to find practices that could be implemented in the elementary setting. Some of these practices are good overall teaching practices, such as developing student buy-in, while others entail more specific planning.

#### **2.2.3.1 Instructional Approaches**

Through reviewing relevant research on teachers implementing critical literacy in the K-12 classroom setting, I have identified four dimensions of teaching critical literacy: (1) building student buy-in, (2) supporting students' questioning of texts (deconstructing), (3) supporting students' rethinking of texts (reconstructing), and (4) supporting students to enact change.

#### **2.2.3.2 Student Buy-In**

While implementation of critical literacy is very dependent on the teacher, students, and classroom environment, one thing that all teachers can do is build a strong classroom culture. Luke (2012) finds that establishing democratic conditions—such as creating a classroom climate that makes students feel comfortable in taking risks as well as ensuring all of students' voices and opinions are valued and heard—can help foster students' comfort, willingness to take risks, and ability to engage in authentic discussions around sociocultural issues. This connects to the findings of Campano et al. (2013), who uses the label of an ethics of care when describing teachers who engaged in using critical literacy in their classroom. The result was the development of a school culture that promoted students engaging critically with both texts and the world. This school culture ultimately allowed students to engage in critical literacies that the authors label as organic

because they were connected to students' own background and history. Therefore, in order for students to take ownership of their learning, a classroom culture must be carefully designed to create an environment that envelops a culture of care along with democratic conditions to be both a safe, nurturing place as well as one that holds all students to high expectations, so that the real work of critical literacy can begin.

The second part of developing student buy-in is connecting critical literacy work to students' lived realities. It is up to the teacher to first understand their students' backgrounds and interests in order to ensure students see relevancy to the subject matter. According to Janks (2014), the first prerequisite to implementing critical literacy is for teachers to develop connections between students' lives and the world. So, too, does Behrman (2006) emphasize the importance of student choice by listing the support for student-choice research projects as one of the top six practices implemented in classrooms, as reflected in a literature review of articles pertaining to classroom practices. By connecting to the material, teachers can meet students where they are in their understanding of their world and build an entryway to creating new and meaningful insights. Without student buy-in, critical literacy cannot genuinely occur because it would just be reinforcing the same hierarchical beliefs that teachers contain knowledge and students do not, which is antithetical to a critical literacy stance. Therefore, connecting the topic of texts to students' passions and backgrounds shows learning as something meaningful and purposeful to them.

### **2.2.3.3 Supporting Students' Questioning Texts (Deconstructing)**

As the definition of critical literacy shows, questioning is crucial to understanding texts and their complexities more thoroughly. Luke (2012) centers his understanding of critical literacy around the following questions he suggests are at the core of what it means to enact critical literacy:

“What is ‘truth?’ How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? Who should have access to which images and words, texts, and discourses? For what purposes?” (p. 4). This same centrality to the meaning of critical literacy is seen when Lewison et al. (2002) defines one dimension of their framework – disrupting the commonplace – with the example of asking questions of the texts, such as ‘How is this text trying to position me?’” (p. 383). Again, questioning is seen as central to practicing critical literacy. Then, there are specific practices researchers have studied that entail questioning, such as having critical conversations with children’s books using the questions: “Who benefits?” and “Whose voice is heard or not heard?” (Jewett & Smith, 2013) as well as book introductions with pointed prompts (Labadie et al., 2012). While some articles refer to specific contexts in which to use questioning, still others more broadly provide questions to use with any text. Stevens and Bean (2007) offer the following questions as a place to start students’ inquiry journey:

Who/what is represented in this text? Who/what is absent or not represented? What is the author trying to accomplish with this text? For whom stands to benefit/be hurt from this text? How is language used in specific ways to convey ideas in this text? How do other texts/authors represent this idea? How could this text be rewritten to convey a different idea/representation? (p. 11)

In these questions, critical literacy is shown as a way to go from literal comprehension to a more in-depth, inferential comprehension where texts can be deconstructed and from their deconstructions, stronger understandings can be gained.

#### **2.2.3.4 Supporting Students’ Research (Reconstructing)**

Where questioning is seen as deconstructing texts, which is part of both Freire’s and Jank’s cyclical frameworks of critical literacy, research can therefore be seen as the reconstruction

process. Stevens and Bean (2007) suggest that providing additional and alternate texts to compare and contrast an original text with is part of the deconstruction and reconstruction process, which ultimately empowers students. So, too, does Behrman (2006) suggest the importance of researching a topic by reading widely, with three of the top six classroom practices listed being: “(1) reading supplementary texts, (2) reading multiple texts, (3) reading from a resistant perspective” (p. 482). All three practices stress the importance of giving students a breadth of readings so that they can compare and contrast their understandings from each text and then make their own educated conclusions.

In specific implementation practices, research is also highlighted. In Young’s (2009) classroom critical inquiry project on homophobia, students use research as a way of broadening their perspectives and understandings. In Campano et al.’s (2013) study, students were positioned as historians to research and uncover the important African Americans from their community as a way of challenging their history books. Ultimately, research puts power into the hands of students so that they can contest, confirm, or rewrite understandings that texts perpetuate.

#### **2.2.3.5 Supporting Students to Enact Change**

As seen in the frameworks of critical literacy, this is not meant to be purely an academic endeavor, but is supposed to develop hope in the form of acting on what is learned from deconstructing a text. The last step in Lewison et al.’s (2002) framework is taking action and promoting social justice. This can take many forms: It can be the act of research itself, as in the case of Campano et al. (2013); proposals to government officials on how to create statewide change (Behrman, 2006); efforts to raise awareness around a cause through school-wide conversations (Young, 2009); and/or the creation of posters and engagement in cyberactivism (Janks, 2014). By taking action, students are shown the power of learning as well as their own collective power to

make a positive difference. Janks (2014) identifies taking action as crucial because it goes beyond identifying problems within our world and asks for students to see themselves as capable and positive changemakers. In this way, critical literacy is not just about a way to read, interpret, or question, but rather a form of activism that situates students and their contexts at the center of their own learning.

#### **2.2.4 Synthesis**

My review of the literature has helped me to strengthen my understanding of what critical literacy is and isn't. At first examination, the link between a literacy practice and social justice action was not apparent to me. However, learning from the frameworks developed, I was able to see that critical literacy is more than just reading texts and leading discussions; it is what propels students to action. Yet, at the same time, I was also convinced by the literature that critical literacy is core to the process of learning to read. While I realize I have implemented critical literacy practices into my teaching inadvertently, I did not use the process routinely or frame it as part of what readers should be doing regularly. I believe by beginning to do so, students will be more prepared to be independent and critical thinkers and thereby make teaching critical literacy a necessity, rather than a "side project" or enrichment. Ultimately, all of the critical literacy frameworks will inform my practice going forward because they provide structure on how to implement critical literacy without limiting the freedom needed to be reactive to the needs of my students and authentic to my own teaching practice, all while meeting the standards set by the state of Rhode Island and my own school.

In addition, my review has provided several keyways to begin implementation of critical literacy into my fifth-grade classroom: (1) Building student buy-in, (2) Supporting students'



questioning of texts (Deconstructing), (3) Supporting students' research (Reconstructing), and (4) Supporting students to enact change (Behrman, 2006; Campano et al., 2013; Luke, 2012; Stevens & Bean, 2007). At the beginning of my research process I found trying to formulate specific practices a daunting process because critical literacy is specifically designed as to not be forced into some formulaic process that is copied and replicated in all classrooms. On one hand, this makes sense because each classroom dynamic is different and therefore has to be taken into consideration, but at the same time it put me in the difficult position of trying to discern what critical literacy could look like in a hypothetical classroom of students that I had not met yet. However, in identifying the four basic practices that could be universally implemented, I had leeway to begin the application process in ways that best fit my students and my own teaching practice.

### **3.0 Methodology and Method**

In Chapter three, I explain the ways in which I had the ability to make an impact on my problem of practice through reviewing my driver diagram (Bryk et. al, 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; WeTeachNYC, 2018) (figure 1.2) that I used to determine my first change idea. I then describe the intervention I undertook, the demographics of my classroom, and the ways I measured the impact of my intervention on my students' ability to hold conversations. Finally, I lay out the specific steps of my intervention through describing the initial PDSA cycle I undertook.

#### **3.1 Improvement Science Process**

In order to create change in my setting, I used the process known as improvement science. Improvement science originated in the healthcare setting, but has since also been used in educational settings (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The premise is an intentional slowing down that focuses on understanding problems prior to jumping into enacting changes (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Perry et. al, 2020; WeTeachNYC, 2018) Figure 1 shows my thinking about the root causes of a lack of social justice education focus in elementary schools. From there, Figure 2 shows a breakdown of areas I have control over and a series of smaller changes that could impact the larger system to build in social justice practices in the form of conversation using critical literacy.

The next steps in the improvement science journey become the process or cycle of improvement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Perry et. al, 2020). Known as PDSA cycles, the steps of Plan-Do-Study-Act refer to deciding what change to make, making the small change, studying the

impact, and then reflecting on next steps, thereby starting a new PDSA cycle. The goal is to complete multiple PDSA cycles in order to make change, but also ensure the change is having the intended impact.

### **3.2 Theory of Improvement**

While teaching in an inner-city school where current day issues permeate into the classrooms, I have not been prepared or trained to hold complex discussions around equity in my classroom. In order to change this, I used the framework of critical literacy to empower students to be able to discuss issues that are important to them and create action projects that empower students to be the impetus for change.

To create this change I looked at ways to improve my teaching practice so that students were able to both examine issues from multiple perspectives and have the language to discuss their findings and understandings. Both require practice with language, in asking questions of texts and articulating takeaways. As most of my students are English Language Learners, I expected this work to require scaffolds to assist in acquiring and practicing the language of analysis.

To know whether or not this change is an improvement, I analyzed and coded students' recorded discussions for both discussion skills as well as depth of conversation. I anticipated the ultimate outcome would be their desire to brainstorm and find meaningful ways to make change in regard to their issue.

### 3.3 Driver Diagram

The instructional goals of my study were for students to make progress towards being able to analyze texts (texts referring to the generic term for any message students encounter, whether it be as formal as an article given in school or as informal as a billboard passed by on the street) and for them to be able to discuss texts' biases as well as being able to articulate their own thoughts and feelings. I capture this sentiment with an aim statement, which is part of the improvement science process: by the end of the 2024-2025 school year, 80% of my students will be able to discuss issues that matter to them using a critical literacy framework. Through the research process, this goal evolved into focusing on student empowerment through student activism projects. In chapter five, I reflect on this change further and provide a rationale for this decision making.

Being that I am a teacher with a small sphere of influence, I have a small list of primary drivers (Bryk et. al, 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; WeTeachNYC, 2018), which include: my role as a teacher, the curriculum and materials I utilize, and the connections to the community. These drivers place me in a position where I am very close to my problem of practice and can ultimately see the directly see the impact of any of these drivers.

When examining each of these primary drivers, the secondary drivers specify areas in which change can occur. For example, the language and critical thinking skills that I teach my students, which would enable them to be able to participate in critical literacy, are in my control. Other secondary drivers include the accessibility and relevance of the curriculum materials, which is also something that I have a degree of control over that would impact the engagement levels in participating in critical literacy. Finally, agents of change in the community would aid in

developing relationships outside of the school that could foster developing an action plan that is typically associated with the final step of critical literacy.

This leads me to the multiple ways I considered creating change in my own classroom. The first two that connect directly to my teaching practice are developing a questioning stance and developing the language to participate in conversation and debate. Using the questions developed by Stevens and Bean (2007) are examples of the questions needed in critical literacy to position students to be critically aware of the power of texts. By introducing these questions into the classroom and using them regularly and repeatedly, I would be able to see the immediate impact as they became part of the classroom vernacular.

To develop the language of conversation in the past I have used questions such as: “I am wondering...” “Can you say that in a different way?” “I noticed...” “I have a connection...” “I agree with...” “I’d like to add on to...” and “I have a different idea...” However, even trying to push for implementation in regular conversation is difficult, so developing ways to mature authentic conversation has been the focus of this change through regular practice of discussions. In this study authentic conversation meant giving students choice in who they discuss topics with and privacy in recording their conversations so they were not overly influenced by my presence.

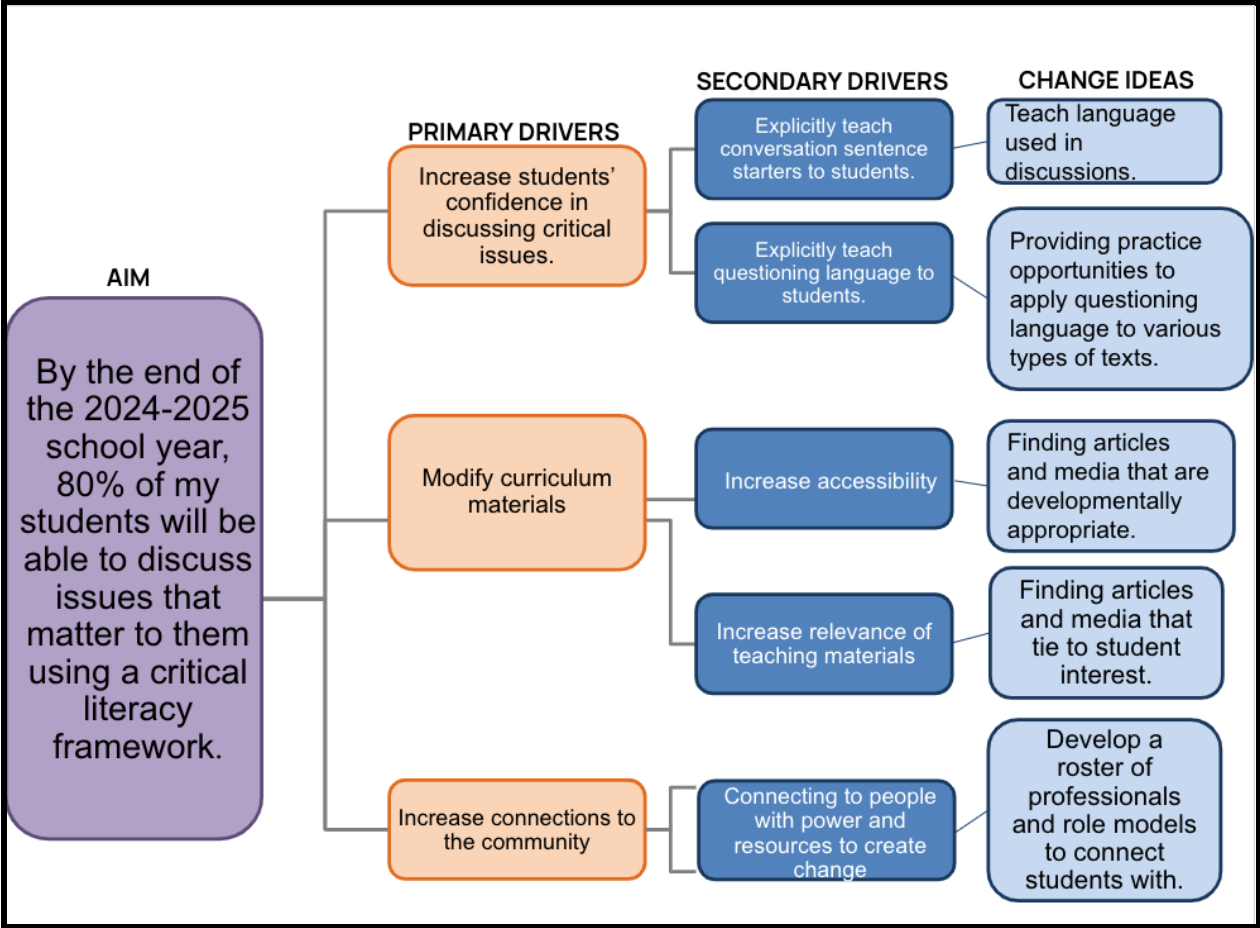


Figure 2 Driver Diagram

3.4 Systems Measures

In order to create real and lasting change, measures must be taken throughout the improvement science process. In order to ensure my change worked, I put forth the following process measures: developed a survey to measure students' confidence in conversations, transcribed and analyzed student recorded and led discussions, provided time for self-reflection both for myself and my own students.

One potential driver measure that allowed me to see how the change to my teaching practice is going is through weekly reflections. Weekly reflections were used to measure students' confidence and was a place for students to identify skills they felt successful with as well as ones they wanted to improve upon. My own reflections allowed me to reflect and react in real time and to make adjustments to my teaching. They were also used to check-in with students' metacognition, to see if they are noticing growth within themselves. In order to determine if I was making progress towards my aim, my outcome measure was the use of coding transcriptions of students' recorded conversations which gave me qualitative data to assess students' ability to hold conversations about equity issues.

Finally, I believe both my use of a confidence rating and student reflection as balancing measures allowed me to assess the impact of this intervention on my students. Both tools also allowed me to check-in on my students' feelings about the process to ensure student well-being was regularly taken into consideration as part of the larger system I was attempting to make changes within.

In order to meet my aim of all students being able to use critical literacy to discuss issues that matter to them, I needed to equip students with skills to employ, and practice using, critical literacy by practicing the language of questioning and discussion. To create this change within my classroom necessitated regular checks and balances of my teaching, student progress, student metacognition and the ability to step back and allow students to guide their own learning. While the idea of empowerment is a hard concept to measure, I believe my goal of implementing critical literacy to ensure students have the skills and language to be critical of the world around them will be one step to empowering them to be critical of their world, while also seeking solutions to better the problems they notice and uncover.

### 3.5 Intervention

In my previous attempts to foster student-led conversation, students were woefully underprepared, so conversation felt forced and lacked a natural flow. In order to create change so that students can meet my goal of having discussions around issues that matter to them, I must begin with an incremental approach. The first change idea I examined is to directly teach students discussion language and thereby provide more opportunities to practice utilizing this language to aid in engaging in authentic discussions with their peers. This would be over the course of a unit of study in class, so there would be multiple opportunities for students to have a chance to practice, make mistakes, learn and grow.

To guide this process, I used the following inquiry question: What does authentic conversation look like for fifth graders? I believed this question would center the growth of my students to ensure that I made appropriate changes if my change idea did not result in a discussion that felt authentic to students' lived experiences and developmental stage.

To understand what happened through the process of this change idea I used the following questions: Do students understand what a discussion is? Do students have the means to participate in the conversation (i.e. background knowledge on topic, discussion language, confidence to enter conversations)? Do students have room for independence? These questions helped me prioritize student success when reflecting on my data by allowing me to assess where students are in mastering the ability to hold discussions with their peers. These three questions show a gradation in challenge and provided me with specific areas to provide remediation in, if needed.



### **3.6 Study Sample & Population**

The main people who participated in my intervention were my fifth-grade class for the 2022-2023 school year. Originally, I started this study with 21 students, 12 who identify as male and nine who identify as female. Racially, 13 students are Hispanic, four are Black, two are mixed race, one is Asian, and one is white. Eleven students are English Language Learners and three students have Individualized Education Plans.

My class size regularly changed throughout the school year, as is typical in this district and other districts with a high-level of both poverty and immigration. Two students with IEPs were moved to other classrooms/schools to better accommodate their needs. Three other students moved to other schools. Two newcomer students, meaning this was their first time in the country, also joined my class. Finally, the third fifth grade classroom in my school had a revolving door of teachers resulting in three students being permanently moved into my classroom and five others were often placed in the classroom when there was no one to cover that classroom. This was a regular challenge but is an all too real aspect of teaching that is important to highlight.

As seen by my data, my students come with diverse needs and strengths. The demographics of my class are important as their backgrounds, interests, and needs guided my instruction and helped determine the conversations that were centered.

## 3.7 Methods

### 3.7.1 Sources of Data

The process of developing my students' ability to hold and lead conversations with one another required multiple ways to collect data. The first was having students record their conversations. Students did this by pairing up into small groups, using Chromebooks, and the website Flip (formerly known as Flipgrid) an educational tool that many students were already familiar with. This allowed students to have the freedom to discuss things more naturally and openly without me being directly present, but also provided a source of accountability.

Another source was the use of student reflections. The first reflection was given during Morning Meeting weekly, where students were asked to write and/or draw a picture in response to a broad social justice reflection question, following Barbara Comber's own critical literacy research (Comber et al., 2001). The second reflection was given independently, where students were asked to reflect metacognitively on their own ability to engage in discussions with their peers. I asked: How confident are you in having a conversation with your classmates? What is one discussion skill you feel successful in? What is one discussion skill you are looking to get better at? The first question will have a scale of six emoji faces with frown meaning unconfident and a smiley face being very confident. This data allowed me to understand who is feeling successful and who is not and will allow me insight into which specific area of discussion students feel they need support. The third reflection was a group effort in which students reflected together in their small groups on how their conversation as a group went by answering what went well and what they can improve on. I believe the power of reflection is that it not only serves as a way for me to collect data but also reinforces my intervention and ultimate goal of building empowerment by

giving students the onus to reflect on their own strengths and areas of growth and then to act on them.

Before any reflection students were given scaffolded supports to help support my ELL students’ language development. These supports included reading the questions aloud and brainstorming some of the discussion skills we were working on, such as: sharing, listening, explaining, describing, asking questions, and including others in the conversation. These skills were listed on the board and each open- ended question had a sentence starter on the paper for ease of writing. The option to draw and/or write as well as the morning meeting question posed in multiple languages provided multiple ways for students to access and participate.

Finally, to collect more qualitative data, I journaled on my process of implementing these changes into my teaching. I completed a written reflection after each conversation to write down what I noticed as well as to provide action steps for myself as I became aware of areas needing improvement.

**Table 1 Data Collection**

<b>Sources of Data</b>	<b>Amount of Data Collected</b>
Student Transcriptions (Primary source)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 sessions</li> <li>• 3-5 groups with 3-5 students in each group</li> <li>• Conversations ranged from 2-10 minutes in length</li> </ul>
Student Reflections (Secondary source)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11 reflections</li> <li>• Recorded weekly</li> <li>• Self-reflection &amp; group reflection- each 1 page</li> <li>• Confidence scores entered into data sheet</li> </ul>
Personal Reflections (Secondary source)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 reflections</li> <li>• Ranging from a paragraph to a page in length</li> </ul>
Morning Meeting Questions (Secondary source)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 questions (1 given per week)</li> <li>• Students given space to draw or answer sentence prompt</li> <li>• 1 page in length</li> </ul>

### 3.7.2 Data Analysis

In order to make sense of the data gained from my data collection I used content analysis to identify important themes using both *a priori* coding and emergent data analysis (Miles et al., 2020) on the transcriptions of student conversation. For *a priori* coding, I looked for when students used the language we worked on developing in class: bias, equity, and equality. For emergent data analysis, I grouped student conversation based on whether the comments were critical or empathetic, from those two groups I then narrowed into specific themes. From the critical comments, I determined an underlining desire for justice. From the empathetic comments the two themes of people and animals deserving to live good lives and the desire for a better world came through. Student transcriptions were my primary source of data, as I wanted the project to be truly student-centered. However, I moderated this data collection by using emergent data analysis on my own reflections in order to guide the overall process of my project, coding my reflections into two types of thought: what was going well and what was not. This process helped me focus on my desire for student empowerment and helped me to act when I found students struggling to focus on the work or when the work wasn't honoring my students' perspectives.

While measuring growth in discussions is qualitative data, I also used my students' reflections on their confidence, turning the scale of emotional ranging faces into a scale of 1 to 6, with a frowny face equating to a 1, or unconfident, and a smiley face equating to a 6, or being very confident. I input students' weekly scores into a spreadsheet in order to assess students self-reported change in confidence.

### **3.7.3 Purpose of Intervention**

At the heart of any research endeavor is the goal of progress. I believe by centering my students' conversations and reflections, as the cornerstone of change, I am challenging those who do not see the power, empathy, and passion that elementary students have. It is also my intention to showcase the brilliance of students of color in hopes of championing their needs, beliefs, and desires. It is my hope that by striving for honest and thoughtful conversation, I can prepare students to be critically minded for the complex world around them.

### **3.7.4 Description of PDSA Cycle**

The focus of Improvement Science is to start small, using the resources within your locus of control to run a series of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles where data is readily collected and change (or lack thereof) is easily measured. In doing so, the goal is to scale up a successful change to improve systems in place (WeTeachNYC, 2018).

The change I wished to create for my classroom of fifth grade students was to be able to discuss real-world issues in light of continued controversy over the role of the public school teacher and continued pushback on exposing students to social issues. Therefore my aim was: by the end of the 2024-2025 school year, 80% of my students will be able to discuss issues that matter to them using a critical literacy framework. In order to begin working toward this aim, I am looking to begin my first PDSA cycle with a focus on one specific change to my teaching practice, which is to teach students how to engage with their peers in conversation, using questions about texts they experience both in the classroom and in their daily life.

The intervention I implemented consisted of a set of lessons focused on defining and finding bias that is located within every text and the questions students can use to interrogate texts they encounter. Lessons included defining terms, modeling, and practicing in small groups, using questions similar to those developed by Stevens and Bean's (2007) on texts and ultimately discussing their findings. In order to prepare for this first cycle, I created lessons and identified a variety of texts, such as articles, ads, and videos that students could practice with, but also remained open to feedback from students about their own interests and desires.

To guide my first PDSA cycle I planned with four questions in mind:

1. What do students know about bias and how to recognize it?
2. What confidence levels do students bring with them in using interrogative questioning methods to develop conversation?
3. To what extent does the language of questioning aid in deeper conversations about current day issues?
4. How do I ensure my own biases do not interfere with students' developing their own perspectives?

These questions allowed me to think critically about potential outcomes and to prepare for them. However, over the course of this study I found that my focus on teaching skills was not rooted in the true spirit of critical literacy and that my students were already aware of bias, which caused me to pivot my focus of my second PDSA cycle to focus on the following questions:

1. How do I center student empowerment in my teaching of critical literacy?
2. How do I develop student agency, so my students see themselves as changemakers?
3. How do I balance exposure to critical issues without overexposure or causing potential harm?

I then gathered data through qualitative means to assess the growth of my students in their discussions. One driver I utilized in achieving my aim was students' confidence levels. To find students' starting levels of confidence, I had students circle a face that best fit their own feeling of confidence pertaining to having conversations with their peers. This same scale was used weekly to record any change in confidence levels.

I also had students use the transcriptions I typed after each recorded conversation and use that as a basis for their group reflections on what was going well and what could be improved upon. Students could not only see what they said, but also view the percentage of the conversation they spoke for, and key terms that were used repeatedly throughout the conversation.

My regular use of reflection time also allowed me to pause and pivot when it was necessary in keep the overall goal of empowerment in mind. My reflections were often a place where I was able to set forward new ideas on how to make the next group conversations more successful in that all students were participating and engaging with the conversation topic.

## **4.0 Applied Intervention**

Teaching, by nature, is a reflective practice that evolves and changes from moment to moment. It, of course, begins and develops in careful planning, but even the most careful planner cannot account for the many unknown variables that teachers are presented with in the moment when with a classfull of students. In order to clearly present my findings, I first detail the process I underwent in my classroom. The following section profiles each weekly conversation students participated in, a brief rationale for the choices made, and the questions students used to discuss the text.

### **4.1 Week 1**

The first week of implementing critical literacy based classroom discussions began by asking students to define bias on a Post-It note. Only one student was able to define it, and they did so by describing a scenario. They stated a bias was when you choose your friend's side in an argument. No one else was able to come up with an answer, with students responding "idk" and "I don't know what a bias is." I then used a simple Youtube video about bias to introduce the concept, followed by a read aloud of the text "The Other Side" by Jacqueline Woodson (2014). I then asked the class to discuss if the characters have any bias. I finished the lesson by then having students write down their definition of bias.



Through this process, I reflected that it was hard to capture all voices through whole group discussions and decided next to use a smaller group discussion where I was no longer guiding and students would be able to express themselves more freely.

## 4.2 Week 2

In week two, I introduced advertisements. Together we viewed two video advertisements and answered the questions: What does this commercial want you to think? What message is the commercial sending? I then defined an overt message and implied message, with overt being exactly what is being seen and shown and implied being what is hinted at or conveyed without being explicitly stated. Together we examined a Coca-Cola Life ad and a McDonald's ad. Students then picked groups to work in as well as two advertisements to discuss. Ads that were given included an anti-smoking ad, Pepsi ad, Trix ad, Nike ad, Heinz ad, anti-pollution ad, Tabasco ad, Tostitos ad. I then asked students to record themselves on Flip for approximately five to ten minutes discussing the advertisements and going through the following critical literacy questions: What is happening in this ad? What does this ad want you to think? What is the **overt** message in this ad? What is the **implied** message in this ad? What is not in this ad? What is left out? What is this ad trying to accomplish? Who might benefit from this ad? Who might be hurt by this ad?

### **4.3 Week 3**

As a companion to week two, we continued looking at advertisements, this time focusing on the impact of photo alteration. I began the lesson by modeling what the small group conversations should look like by examining two side-by-side photos of Beyonce. One image is of her dressed up at a red carpet event and the other is from a L'Oréal ad. The noticeable difference is found in the contrasting skin tones depicted; In the L'Oréal ad, Beyonce's skin is whiter. Together, as a whole group, we discussed the questions: What do you notice in these pictures? What is missing from these pictures? What do you think the purpose is of altering these pictures? What do you think the creator believes about the topic? How do these ads make you feel? Why? If the author is trying to sell you something, what did they choose to put in the ad that makes you want to buy it? Students then chose groups to work in and picked an advertisement from preprepared images that included images from fast food campagins (such as Taco Bell, McDonalds, and Burger King) as well as cover photos from magazines and fashion advertisements (Ok Magazine, Ralph Lauren, Redbook) that were paired with a real/unedited photo to discuss those same questions. They again filmed themselves on Flip.

### **4.4 Week 4**

In week four, I introduced the concept of unconscious bias. Using UnboundEd's Anti-Bias Toolkit ("Anti-Bias Toolkit," n.d.), I modified the slides to be used for an elementary setting and discussed the impact of bias. To wrap up this mini-lesson, I asked the class: What questions can we ask to identify whether someone or something holds a bias? They came up with the following

questions: How does it make you feel? Are people being mistreated? What is being said about people? How does it affect people? Using these questions the class came up with, I showed them the viral video of the confrontation between Amy Cooper, a white woman, and Christian Cooper (unrelated), a Black man, in Central Park, giving some limited context that Christian noticed Amy's dog was unleashed in a park that required dogs to be on leash at all times and that Christian was asking her to abide by the park's rules. Students used their co-created questions to determine whether there was a bias and what it was in this video.

#### **4.5 Week 5**

In week five, I opened the conversation up to a situation that came up in my classroom when a student came back into the room from being with another teacher and I told them they could skip the exit ticket since they missed the lesson. A student accused me of being biased. In reaction to this, I had students discuss the previous questions from week four to determine whether or not this was the case. The recorded conversations tended to veer off course and, in response, I held a debrief to clarify some misconceptions about the scenario and also what bias is and isn't. Through this process, I realized students didn't understand the concept of equity, in that I don't give every student the same things because they don't all require the same things to learn and grow. Once I framed it by giving the example of me teaching letter sounds to every fifth grader, when only some students need that, students started to understand the difference between a bias and equity.

#### **4.6 Week 6**

In week six, I followed up on our conversations around what is really ‘fair’ by having students examine a photo rendering an example of the differences between equity and equality. The most popular example is people trying to see over a fence, but others included trying to reach for fruit and riding a bicycle. Groups picked an image that resonated with them and then discussed what they saw and were asked to come up with their own definitions of bias, equality, and equity based on their understanding of the image.

#### **4.7 Week 7**

I consider week seven to be the turning point in this project that I labeled as “Conversation Corner” in my classroom schedule. This is when I shifted the focus to be on empowering my students rather than introducing what bias is. Every Thursday during Morning Meeting, students were asked to write and/or draw a picture in response to a reflection question (see Appendix A.2.3), following Barbara Comber’s own critical literacy research (Comber et al., 2001). These questions were used in hope of understanding my students’ perspectives and drawing inspiration for our Conversation Corners. The answers to one particular question spurred my push for a focus on empowerment, which was: Do you think you can make a difference in the world? Out of 13 completed responses, nine of them were answered in the negative. I found this response greatly upsetting and therefore began centering Conversation Corners around reading articles about students making a difference and battling bias in their own communities to showcase the power they do have.

Week seven, students listened as I read the Newsela article “India’s street kids rarely make headlines - so they write their own” about a newspaper created by unhoused Indian children (Qadri, 2022). Please see Appendix A.3 for additional details on the articles chosen to empower students. Students then recorded their conversations on Flip answering the questions: What inequity did these kids fight? How did these kids fight injustice? What biases might these kids have faced? What does it mean to empower?

#### **4.8 Week 8**

Continuing in the same vein as week seven, in week eight I read aloud the Newsela article, “Kids wrote please to help unwanted shelter pups find homes; it worked” (Page, 2022). Students recorded their responses to the questions: What were your thoughts about the article? What questions might you ask these students? How did these kids fight injustice? What biases might the dogs have faced? How can kids make a difference?

#### **4.9 Week 9**

In week nine, I read aloud the Newsela article, “‘Believe in yourself hotline’: Free hotline features inspiring pep talks from kindergartners” (Jimenez Moya, 2022). Students recorded themselves answering the questions: What were your thoughts about the article? What questions

might you ask these students? How did these kids fight injustice?/ What problem in the world did these kids try to fix? How can kids make a difference?

#### **4.10 Week 10**

In week 10, I read the Newsela article, “Summer camps aim to eliminate racial bias in artificial intelligence” (Wong, 2018). Students recorded themselves answering the questions: What were your thoughts about the article? What questions might you ask these students? What biases were addressed in this article? What problem in the world did these kids try to fix? How can kids make a difference?

#### **4.11 Week 11**

Finally, in week 11, I asserted that students **CAN** change the world by reviewing some of the articles we have read. I then asked students to reflect on the problems at our school and in our community to come up with problems and potential solutions. Students recorded themselves discussing the following questions: What are some problems where we go to school/live? What could we do to fix it? How doable is your fix?

#### **4.12 Week 12+**

Week 12 on, students then decided on two crucial projects that needed our attention: bullying and dog waste around the school yard. The anti-bullying group went on to draft storyboard scripts on how to handle bullying scenarios in conjunction with our school counselor, while the clean-up crew created posters with assistance from the art teacher and wrote advocacy letters to ask for donations of dog waste bags from pet supply companies.

## 5.0 Findings

Critical literacy is a process to uncover the hidden and not-so-hidden biases that are in the everyday texts we encounter in life. But ultimately, it is a process rooted in self-empowerment, giving the reader the agency to make meaning that spurs a desire to make change (Janks, 2014; Lewison et al., 2002). Through using a critical literacy framework in my own classroom, three themes came forward: 1.) students understand bias, 2.) students emerge as drivers of change, and 3.) students have nuanced beliefs and desires of the world. This final theme I have broken into three additional findings that demark students' thoughts and perceptions about their world: 1.) a desire for justice, 2.) a belief that people and animals deserve to live good lives, and 3.) a desire for a better world.

These themes changed the way I proceeded in my own study, changed my perspective on the usage of critical literacy, and provided ample support for the need to focus on empowerment in the elementary classroom, especially in minority communities. These findings came from personal and student reflections as well as using *a priori* coding and emergent data analysis of transcriptions of student conversation.

### 5.1 Theme #1: Students Understand Bias

Entering this study, I picked critical literacy as a framework to engage in social justice teaching practices in response to the current political climate, where claims of “fake news” and a biased media had an impact on both the 2016 and 2020 United States presidential elections



(“Election Misinformation,” 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2022). This led me to believe there was a lack of this type of education in our schools. However, this premise was more nuanced, as I quickly found out in my own teaching experience, prompting further self-reflection as an educator.

While my week one lesson proved my students didn’t intrinsically know the word bias, as shown in the entrance ticket, weeks two through six showcased they did have essential understandings of bias and the way it works and hurt people of color.

In week three (see section 4.3 for additional context), students examined ads with and without photo alteration. Through using *a priori* coding, I looked for students identifying why these ads were altered. From there, I coded for common words and terms. The most common terms being: ‘buy it’ and ‘more money.’ Students were able to easily link these ads to consumerism as all conversational groups were able to identify that the purpose of the ad was to convince them to buy something. The next most popular sentiment from my coding was that the corporation or business behind the ad was looking to make money off them. Finally, students were asked to express their feelings about what they were uncovering through the exercise. Words like “angry,” “fake,” “not fair,” and “lying” were used to express distrust of the corporation for the use of photo alteration, with one student making the connection that putting fewer ingredients on their tacos than advertised actually saves them money and allows them to make more of a profit off of them.

In week four (see section 4.4 for additional context), students reacted to the viral video clip of Amy Cooper, a white woman, calling the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man, for what she claims was a threat against her life in Central Park. The video Christian Cooper records shows no such threat and instead shows continued calm interactions as Amy Cooper becomes more and more frantic while calling the police. Further context detailed that Christian Cooper was asking

her to put the dog on leash, as dictated by the park's rules (How 2 Lives Collided in Central Park, Rattling the Nation, 2020).

I found students were very adept at identifying the bias in this clip. Three out of the four groups used the word *racist* to label Amy Cooper's actions. Two of the four groups labeled her a "Karen," a term used negatively to describe, typically, a white woman who complains or is otherwise using their privilege to demand special treatment, often at the detriment of others. As Helen Lewis (2020) describes it, "The target of Karen's entitled anger is typically presumed to be a racial minority or a working-class person, and so she is executing a covert maneuver: using her white femininity to present herself as a victim, when she is really the aggressor." This term accurately describes what the students were able to pick up on based on Amy Cooper's decision to call the police on Christian Cooper. Other recurring words students used were "abusing," "harassing," "threatening," and "lying." Students were also outraged by the way Amy Cooper handled her dog during the matter, with every group pointing out that in her rush to call the police, she was also choking and harming her dog.

Some particularly poignant moments that showcased a greater understanding of the implications in this one incident is when one student remarked that it probably wasn't the only time she has done something racist before. Another student stated Amy Cooper was "telling on herself," an expression meaning she was making apparent her own racism in her actions. Probably the most poignant moment occurred in the interaction within a group, in which one student, someone typically very reserved and quiet, called out the rest of the group for being more worried about the dog than the Black man. The student provoked their thinking by asking them questions, asking repeatedly whether they only cared about the welfare of the dog.

At this point in the research, I was already beginning to find students were able to find and label bias. As part of this process of introducing the term bias, I also began writing down when I heard discussions around bias outside of the specific recorded time. One such time was in mid-December, when a student shouted out that I was being biased for not making a student take an exit ticket when they had been with another teacher and missed the lesson.

At first, I tried using this as a basis of conversation, where students were asked if it was biased, using the questions they came up with previously. In my reflection from that time, I wrote, “Upon reviewing the transcripts, I found that some students were still struggling with the definition of bias as they continued to belabor the point that it wasn’t fair and that it was the class that was ‘mistreated.’” While other students were able to look past their own feelings and understand that “it didn’t impact them what the student was getting and didn’t fall into the category of mistreatment.” It was from this confusion around fairness and bias that I decided to do a whole class debrief so that groups could hear each other's thoughts and I could clarify that fair doesn’t always mean equal. I showed them an image of equity and equality, which sparked students’ interest. By following the conversation in my classroom, I was able to tease out that students had strong feelings about what was fair and sometimes that meant a conflation between the terms unfair and bias. Following their lead, I had the next conversation focus on those two terms, ‘equity’ and ‘equality.’

Using content analysis, I found students were wrestling with the two meanings of fairness. One, in which everyone gets exactly the same things, as in equality, and the other in which everyone gets what they need to succeed, as in equity. The word ‘fair’ was brought up in each of the four group’s conversations. All groups were able to get to a point where they could see how equity was “more fair” (in the words of a student). Only one group had some disagreement, with

a student pushing back on the other's assertion that the picture of equality was fair by asking what the point was of having everything the same since, in the image, certain people *needed* different amounts of boxes to see over the fence. Another group pointed out the duality in fairness describing equality as both fair and not fair simultaneously because in the image everyone received the same bike, but only one of the people was actually capable of riding it. This same group was able to use the word bias and apply it, saying that there was a bias present to only provide one type of bike and assume it would work for all people. The final group developed working definitions of each word, stating that equality was the same while equity was fair for everyone. So, while, students did need some clarification on the nuances of bias and the conflation of bias with equity, students were still able to make sense of these complex terms through examining representations of the words and through discussion. Even the original misinterpretation of bias was crucial as it provided a natural moment of reflection and introspection to realize the need to both build understanding of the terms equity and equality and to understand the differences between equity, equality, and bias thus allowing for students to have more meaningful conversations around topics of social justice.

Ultimately, while bias is one part of critical literacy, I also found myself reflecting on this process and trying to find a balance between exposing students to bias and over-exposing them. So, while students did a tremendous job in recognizing bias when discussing Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper, I began to wonder about the impact of repeatedly exposing them to images/videos/stories of people of color being mistreated. In my written reflection, I struggled with knowing what to expose my students to. On February 1st, I wrote:

I am also struggling with whether to discuss what happened to Tyre Nichols or not. It is very present right now with the police footage being released and it now being officially Black History Month. I decided to change to looking more at the positives of students

making a difference when it seemed like students were very aware of bias and the hardships they face. So, I am balancing a lot right now...what empowerment means. Does it mean to look at the darkness and address it or find the light in the tunnel?

Being a white teacher of students of color meant that reflection was crucial. While as a white student growing up, I may not have seen bias as readily because of my white privilege, it became apparent to me when my students were not afforded the same luxury. It was because of this, and one particular Morning Meeting reflection, that spurred a change in my approach and view of the type of empowerment I sought.

## **5.2 Theme #2: Students Emerge as Drivers of Change**

As a teacher, I must continually be a reflective practitioner, learning from my students' words, work, and actions. Through this study, one specific reflection led to a turning point in my study, as I realized the need for critical hope. "*Critical hope* reflects the ability to realistically assess one's environment through the lens of equity and justice while also envisioning the possibility of a better future," (Bishundat et. al., 2018, p. 91). Edelsky (1994) also states that the three steps needed for educating for democracy are critique, hope, and education (p. 254). This concept of critical hope became a centerpiece in my research, both something I sought and something that fueled my research process.

As part of the beginning of this study, every Thursday during Morning Meeting students were asked a reflective social justice question posed in their home languages: English, Spanish, Kurdish, and Swahili. One such question was: Do you think you can make a difference in the world? A box was provided to draw an image, and a sentence stem at the bottom of the paper read:

I think I \_\_\_\_ make a difference in the world because \_\_\_\_\_. The response to this reflection question was not what I anticipated, it being largely negative. Nine out of the 13 completed reflections stated they thought they could not make a difference in the world. Some reasons given were: they are too young, it's hard to do, they don't know what difference to make, and have no ability to control other people. One image drawn was a person calling out for help and another person responding "no."

Reviewing these responses spurred me to action. In previous schools I worked in, I found students had causes they were passionate about and ready to advocate for. One student at one of my previous schools had a monthly silent protest in response to climate change. Another student created their own lip balm from bee's honey and was beginning to sell it. Yet another student challenged others to defend their homophobia, or still another student collected chestnuts from their backyard and found there was a growing marketplace for them. But these were wealthier and whiter communities, and I began to reflect on the environment my current students were a part of. It was only this past February when my students were outside at the playground that we heard the gunshots of a drive-by shooting and had to go into a secure building status (Rozas, 2023). In April, a second grader was stabbed by their uncle at their home residence (Doiron, 2023). These events made me realize my students were inundated with news about violence and harm happening to Black and brown bodies and that my project, while created in hopes of empowering, could also be doing the exact opposite and causing harm by, again, showing people of color being impacted by systemic injustices such as racism and poverty. In doing so, I was potentially reinforcing those ideas for my students who were already aware of the lived reality of being a person of color in the United States. Carol Edelsky (1999) speaks to this same concern in her work on critical whole language practice, stating: "When students start to see inequities, critical teachers want them to

care about those inequities, to *feel* the unfairness, to *want* to do something about it. Critical whole language teachers do not want students to become apathetic, cynical, hopeless—to conclude that there is nothing they can do; that’s just the way it is.” (p. 29). This revelation resulted in me changing the focus of my work, and instead of reading for bias, we began reading articles about students, like themselves, confronting biases and creating change in their communities. My theory was that if they were exposed to young people creating change, they too would see the power they themselves hold and begin to embark on their own change projects within their community.

The first article students were exposed to detailed how Indian children living on the street created their own newspaper to report on issues that mattered to them, which then grew to have an audience of 10,000 readers (Qadri, 2022). Students’ response to the question about empowerment showed early understandings about the power of hope. One group thought the students would feel good about themselves for creating this newspaper because they now had a way to make money and feed one another. Another student in this group also thought that their good work should be rewarded in better treatment from their community, because they were helping people. A second group reflected more internally about the feeling of empowerment, believing “your heart feels good.” These students’ ability to find value in helping others, whether it is through finding new ways to support themselves or by feeling pride, showed an essential understanding that hope can benefit communities in multiple ways.

By reading about students helping their community, students, in their conversations, oriented themselves as changemakers. When students were asked what questions they might ask the students they were reading about, their questions showcased a critical hope mindset of looking for the logistics in completing this work. In week eight, questions were posed, such as: How did they do it? Did they do it alone or did they not? How do they feel after doing that? In week nine,

when my students read about how kindergarteners set up a hotline with the intention to cheer up callers (Jimenez Moya, 2022), my students asked about how they had the confidence to do this, why they started this project, and what they would do if they saw someone sad. In week 10, when reading about a summer camp for minority groups interested in eliminating racial bias from AI (Wong, 2018), one group wondered how they were going to make a difference while another asked why they started it. Through this exercise of conversation both about and as though they were with these students, my students showed a desire to create their own change in the logistical type questions.

Sometimes, rather than asking questions, students provided commentary that also showed a desire for and appreciation of community change work. In week eight, words like “generous,” “nice,” “kind,” and “grateful,” were used to describe the group of students they were reading about and their feelings about them. In week 10, one group offered a pep talk, saying they should keep up the work so that they can create an AI that has less bias. Another group responded as if they were a Black teacher and stated they would tell white kids to learn not to be biased. These types of comments also reinforce the need for critical hope showing students see the importance of this kind of work.

Finally, in week 10, after reading about issues other students addressed in their own communities, I asked my students to discuss problems where they live and go to school and think about ways to address them. Every group brought up interpersonal conflict between students. Four out of the five groups used the term “bullying” and another three used the word “drama” to describe these conflicts. Three recurring aspects of this conflict that were brought up repeatedly were swearing, fighting, and making fun of how someone dresses. What was interesting from a teacher perspective was that many of the students who were able to readily speak about these problems



were often those who participated in this type of behavior. This spoke to a couple of possibilities, one being that students were able to recognize it around them as a problem but not able to take accountability for their own actions and/or that students felt that in order to protect themselves from violent words and actions their only option was to partake in them to keep themselves safe.

Students offered varying solutions from the easily actionable to the more abstract. Solutions students provided were: writing cards to address issues with others, having safety patrol (a fifth grade role in the school) take a role in patrolling the hallway and bathroom during the day, creating a podcast linked to school counselors, speaking to teachers or parents. There were also more intangible solutions offered such as “just let people live and do whatever they want,” “think before you’re gonna do something because something bad can happen,” and “no spreading rumors, no talking about peoples’ clothes.” What this articulated to me is something that I have also felt as a teacher. It is hard to control other peoples’ actions, especially when this behavior feels pervasive. I have had many conversations with my students about thinking before speaking or not feeding into a back-and-forth with someone, but ultimately there are larger, looming pressures like: parent feedback to fight back/stand your ground, peer pressure to appear strong and tough, and the normal emotional changes happening to students who are at the pubescent state, which makes it hard to regulate emotions (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). However, regardless of how prevalent this behavior is and who in my classroom partakes, the ability for all groups to articulate these challenges takes some reflection on what they see as an issue and holds a small grain of hope for a space that is not like that. One group ended their conversation with a proclamation that they can fix our elementary school with the rest of the group agreeing, demonstrating a shift in thinking about their own agency when it pertains to issues around them. In my own reflection from March

about this stage, at first I was disheartened that the problems brought up were so narrowly focused, but as I examined that data I began to have a change of heart:

I initially wanted students to pick a broader issue that they noticed and felt a bit disappointed when every group discussed bullying as an issue. But then I began to reflect that this is important. Their feeling of safety is paramount, and they crave it too. So, really, it is the perfect issue for them to address as they both have been impacted by it and participate in it. It is this that eventually escalates to violence, which they see around them, such as the drive-by shooting that occurred outside our school in February. So, really this issue isn't small. It is linked to so much and carries great meaning.

From this discussion, I began my last pivot within my study, which was to help them act on hope for a better environment. I presented three issues, two from their discussions and one from personal discussions with students out at recess and at dismissal: 1.) bullying, 2.) not having a lot of clothes, and 3.) litter and dog feces around the school. As a whole group we brainstormed solutions, such as creating instructional videos/skits about bullying, having a clothing drive, and creating posters and/or letters to remind our community to clean up and to acquire dog waste bags and other materials to help keep the outdoor area clean. I then had students write which solution they wanted to be a part of on a Post-It note. I sorted this information into two distinct groups: the anti-bullying campaign and the clean up our school campaign. It is important to note my role as the teacher in setting up and helping to establish these working groups. While my goal was always to empower, it was also important to ensure students had the structure they needed to feel successful.

To help organize these groups I reached out to other staff members to find more time in the day to complete these projects with the added pressures of end of year standardized tests

looming. Our school art teacher provided additional time in art class to help students create dynamic posters. Our school counselor worked with the anti-bullying campaign. Students had already developed story boards in two smaller groups; they then recorded the videos in the counselor's office who helped polish and record their storylines. I also utilized lunch time to invite students to work on a shared Google Doc to write letters to both pet supply companies and our district's own Equity and Belonging Office to ask for funds or donations. These projects culminated in getting a \$500 grant to purchase a proper dog waste station, posters in both English and Spanish about throwing away dog waste, and the creation of two polished slideshow presentations that were presented to younger grade classrooms to watch and discuss the impacts of bullying and ways bystanders can help.

Hope is an illustrious goal in any life or setting, but especially when the intersection of poverty and racism result in a community that is consistently impacted by and faced with violence from the streets to the school hallways. I do not believe one project is something that irradiates the impacts of all the traumas my school's community continues to persevere through, but I do believe that projects such as these begin planting the seeds of hope where students can begin talking about the real issues they face and start envisioning themselves as the drivers of change. Through doing this work in my own classroom, my students started to call out, after listening to an article being read, that they could do what the students they were reading about were doing. These seedlings of hope also emerged when students were able to come up with ideas for change in the school, such as stopping bullying by writing cards to solve issues between people, having the school's safety patrol ensure safe passage to the bathroom, and creating a podcast to share issues with the school's counselors. Hope is hard to articulate, but through my students' actions I saw this element emerge.

### 5.3 Theme #3: Students Have Nuanced Desires and Beliefs of the World

Throughout my coding, I often examined student transcriptions within context, reviewing themes within each week around the given topic and then extrapolating and connecting those themes. However, in examining the body of work students produced as a whole, I was able to find new insights about how students viewed critical issues in the world.

Using *a priori* coding, I examined all transcripts for insightful comments, which in this instance meant they were able to make connections to themselves or the world, critically analyze, or otherwise interact with the text and their peers. From there, I sorted them into several types of comments, those that were critical and those that were empathetic. In doing so, three themes emerged: 1.) a desire for justice, 2.) a belief that people and animals deserve to live good lives, and 3.) a desire for a better world.

As mentioned previously, students with minoritized backgrounds have a breadth of experience around bias and prejudice, whether from personal experiences or a cultivated awareness required to survive (Bonnie et al., 2015; Coll & Lamberty, 1996). In their critical remarks about issues they read, students expressed a desire for justice. In their conversations a frequent sentiment was that experiences were unfair. This comment was made when analyzing ads that used deceptive alterations to sell their products, it was used again when discussing the unfairness of Indian children living on the streets (Qadri, 2022), and again when discussing how AI could not detect Black faces and erroneously identified them as gorillas (Wong, 2018). Students were also able to use the language of bias to call attention to more inequity: “I think this is biased because they could detect white people’s face more than Black people’s face. And it’s messed up how they think that they’re monkeys,” “But people are being biased, biased to the dog because they’re saying that those dogs are ugly, those dogs can’t get adopted because they’ve got injured legs and that they’re

ugly and things like that,” “I think this one is biased because only the girl has the same size as her. And all of the others doesn’t have all the same size,” and “the scientists that made AI and helped generate it were probably racist because it only recognized white people.” Their ability to label and name the injustices they read about shows their desire for change that creates a more equitable world.

Students also overwhelmingly expressed a deep connection to life around them that demonstrated a belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to thrive. Students connected deeply to the Indian children they read about (Qadri, 2022). One student explained that you shouldn’t make fun of people who are homeless because you could also become homeless. This understanding shows a recognition of how delicately balanced life can be that anyone could also be in that same situation. Another sentiment was that young people shouldn’t have to live that way: “They didn’t get what they needed. And it wasn’t fair for them to live like that because they were young kids,” and “it’s not fair, it’s not fair to them they’re just young kids. They don’t belong/want to be on the street.” These comments show my students’ empathy for others but also show a belief that it shouldn’t be this way and that no child should be without a home. Similarly, when discussing the children who used their writing to get unadoptable dogs adopted (Page, 2022), students shared the sentiment that dogs also deserved a home stating that the article was cool because the dogs didn’t deserve to live in an animal shelter and that it was unfair because it takes such a long time for dogs to get adopted. In both of these discussions, students show an understanding that life can be unfair, but also that it doesn’t have to be that way and in doing showcase elements of hope in stating the possibilities.

Ultimately, by examining students’ empathetic, insightful comments, students showcased an expectation that needs be met for people and animals to lead happy lives that then fed into a

larger belief that the world needs to be a better, safer place. When discussing how kids can make a difference in the article regarding a summer camp tackling bias in AI (Wong, 2018), one group stated that they can make a difference by creating technology without bias, stopping racism, and stopping bias. Another group discussed that they could make the world more peaceful and less racist so that we can be a happy community without racism and terrorism. These fifth graders demonstrate both an understanding that the world is not perfect as it is, and that work has to be done in order to better everyone's outcomes.

In examining students' thoughts, both critical and empathetic, three themes became present, but when examined as a whole, it showcases seedlings of hope. Desiring justice is a call to do better. A belief that people and animals deserve to live good lives is setting an expectation of deserved treatment and belief in the possibility that everyone will have a chance to have that good life. And, finally, a desire for a better world is often the foundation for our passions that make us pursue certain careers or follow certain dreams. Students' nuanced desires and beliefs speak to the ways in which they perceive their environment and their own positionality within it.

## **6.0 Conclusions**

This section is broken into five parts and serves as a place of reflection on ways my research can be used by teachers, education administrators, policymakers, and future researchers. To conclude this dissertation, I provide ways in which my research add to and support current literature findings on critical literacy.

### **6.1 Recommendations for Teachers**

This study explored the impact of implementing critical literacy as a teaching practice into the elementary classroom. While this process was in service to students, much of this study depended on the reflective nature of teaching. It is for this reason I offer the following considerations for teachers seeking to implement critical literacy or otherwise promote social justice education.

#### **6.1.1 Reflection**

In both chapter four and five I describe significant turning points within my study, which would not have happened had I not made the time and space to reflect on my own experiences, questions, and observations. My own self-reflections were paramount as a balancing measure to ensure the focus was always in service of empowering students, so when I feared I was adding to or creating a burden for my students of color to carry, I was able to change my approach to focus

on reading more empowering texts. In addition, when looking to complete the critical literacy cycle by having students enact change (Behrman, 2006; Campano et al., 2013; Janks, 2014; Lewison et al., 2002; Young, 2009) I was able to both reflect on what my students spoke about in recorded conversation, but also take into consideration conversations that happened on the playground and at pick-up to cultivate options for students to consider in their activism projects.

In order to reflect, setting aside time at the end of the lesson, end of the day, or whenever time can be carved out allows for a space for natural concerns, questions, and noticings to come to the surface. I used Google Docs as an easily accessible spot that I could reach from both at school and at home, but anywhere can be a good place to write and record regular reflections, such as a physical notebook, oral recordings on a cellphone, a daily planner, etc. While the time writing is part of the reflection, reviewing those reflections to notice reoccurring patterns can also add to the impact of this reflection time and space.

### **6.1.2 Following Student Leads**

In reading current research on critical literacy, one of my findings was the importance of developing student buy-in (Behrman, 2006; Campano et al., 2013; Janks, 2014; Luke, 2012). I did this in my study in three ways: by offering choice, responding to student actions, and responding to student desires. Teachers seeking to implement critical literacy practices in their own classroom should find authentic ways to listen to student voices and follow the leads students proffer.

A natural way to build buy-in is through offering choice. In my own study this looked like offering choice in which advertisements students discussed; groups chose ads that looked interesting to them, which created a sense of excitement and agency. This was one way to engage students in the conversations.



Another way I developed student buy-in was by reflecting on ideas presented by students and using their ideas as next steps. For instance, when students were beginning to understand the term bias, they used it to describe many things, including my own decisions. This showed me that there was more education that was needed. By responding to the actions of my students, I was also able to engage them in critical literacy work.

Finally, students also actively asked to do certain activities. After debriefing about what bias meant and showing an image of the differences between equity and equality, students asked if they could talk about that image. While, I didn't have time in that exact moment, I used their request to set-up the next Conversation Corner around equity and equality and provided many different renditions of the images that I initially showcased, allowing them to pick the image they wanted to discuss.

Critical literacy needs to have an authenticity to students otherwise the purpose of critical literacy becomes obscured. Therefore, adjusting your own teaching practices to support the natural interests and curiosities of your students will be more powerful than trying to adhere strictly to an initial concept or plan.

### **6.1.3 Accountability**

In order to set-up a culture of having open communication between students, I needed to create ways to hold students accountable for their conversations, while also balancing this by giving students spaces where they felt comfortable to express themselves. While the word "accountability" has a myriad of meanings, especially in public education, in using it I am referring to the similar idea of "accountable talk" wherein students are given structures to ensure conversation is engaging and has a level of depth (Resnick et al., 2018). I would recommend

putting into place some accountability factors so that students feel supported, safe, and are able to stay on task when asked to have a small group discussion.

An accountability measure I set out from the beginning to use was weekly reflections, both individual and group. This provided a time to review expectations on what conversations should and should not look like and was a time to discuss what went well and what did not. Together we would brainstorm a list of what skills were needed to have a productive conversation. This scaffolded students in writing their reflections. Students listed skills, such as: talking, listening, sharing, explaining, describing, asking questions, including others, answering, cooperating, speaking louder, sharing the airspace, and disagreeing respectfully. Students completed this individually and then would meet with their groups from the previous week to discuss how things went as a group.

As part of my reflective process, I realized that students could use another tool to help themselves be reflective on their group dynamic. I also realized that the many transcripts I was typing up after each recorded conversation shouldn't just be used for myself, tucked away for purely academic research purposes. After a few Conversation Corners, I began printing out the transcripts for each group to review after they individually, self-reflected. The site I used for transcriptions, Otter, also had a feature which gave a percentage number for how much of the conversation a person spoke. This tool ended up helping students see whether they were dominating conversation, not sharing enough, or participating and listening equally.

A part of the reflection was a confidence measure, which allowed me to map students' confidence levels in participating in conversations. These were not always an upward curving scale, but it did accurately reflect the ebbs and flows of each week's conversation. Sometimes students were unfocused, distracted, or otherwise struggling to have productive conversations. One

example of this is when a student tried using a silly voice when speaking that got students distracted and off-task. When I noticed this type of behavior, I would often check in when the group completed their reflection to ensure students could see in their transcripts what I had noticed. This often accounted for when students ranked themselves lower on their confidence abilities; however, their ability to see that they had room to grow also showed their ability to reflect and take accountability for their own actions.

Accountability was a crucial aspect to my study and while these measures were not groundbreaking in providing insights on empowerment, it was vital to helping students focus on the task at hand and see themselves as responsible for their input. Not every conversation students completed was always focused or ran perfectly smooth, but because of these reflections I was able to hold students' accountable for their role in the conversation.

#### **6.1.4 Good Trouble**

There are substantial and mounting pressures on teachers, some of which I mention being obstacles in my own journey to create change: prescribed curriculums, standardized state testing, lack of resources, lack of time, and lack of support, to name a few. By nature, creating change is controversial because systems are designed to get results that reinforce that system and the status quo therefore change is not easy. However, that does not mean change is not meaningful or warranted. While a classroom teacher's scope of influence can, at times, feel small, it can be powerful for the students that are directly impacted. Seeking ways to ensure students' voices are heard, humanity recognized, and hope cultivated is crucial and necessary. Therefore, teachers who aim to make education a liberatory practice should prepare to engage in "good trouble," as they may expect to face pushback or discomfort among those who benefit from the system as it is.

One way to get into “good trouble” includes finding and making ways to include critical conversations in your classroom by finding ties to your state or local standards. In my own classroom, with a large majority of English Language Learners, I was easily able to tie my work to both Common Core Standards as well as WIDA’s Speaking and Listening Standards (“*Common Core*,” 2010; “*WIDA*,” 2020). Critical literacy does have a natural spot in English Language Arts curriculums, if the space is looked for and created. Freebody and Luke (1990) state the fourth component of learning to read is becoming a text analyst, again, a natural spot to use the critical literacy framework to help students learn how to read by working on reading texts for bias. Don’t be afraid to incorporate empowering teaching practices where you can.

## **6.2 Recommendations for School Administrators**

Just as there are tremendous pressures on teachers, so, too, are there pressures on administrators, such as raising student test scores, remediating the impact of the pandemic, and supporting not only students and teachers, but also the community at large in which the school resides. That being stated, there are ways in which critical literacy work and the larger umbrella of social justice education can support school-wide engagement in learning and building community.

### **6.2.1 Creating Equity Teams**

One of the ways I became engaged as an educator in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work was through the school districts I worked in developing teams of teachers, administrators, parents, and students dedicated to looking at the school’s data and policies to help support building

more equitable practices. However, in the four districts I have worked in, all have been in various states of this process; some have not even started, others have plans to start in the next few years, still others have developed teams, but are checking boxes, while others are years into this work being established.

To begin DEI work, there needs to be support both financially and administratively for schools to have active, open, and honest conversations about how race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and other identities impact our society and thereby our students. If we do not make the spaces to actively have these conversations, then we are not creating spaces to do the hard work of changing past practices and establishing more equitable futures. In creating equity teams, administrators are also opening lines of communication with families to show their input matters and that this work takes partnership.

In creating equity teams, it also signals that innovation and creativity are welcomed as teaching practices. This study often felt like it had to be hidden or the work wasn't important because it wasn't about raising test scores, but students cannot learn where they do not feel safe, supported, and heard. Work that seeks to do that, should be supported and can be supported when equity teams promote teaching that sees students for their identities and cultures and embraces their natural curiosities.

### **6.2.2 Critical Competencies**

There is a growing sentiment in this country that students need to be shielded from the realities of our country's history and of perspectives that differ from our own. In the 2021-2022 school year alone there were 2,352 books banned (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). In doing so, we negate students' agency and ability to critically think for themselves.

School administrators must push back on this type of censorship. Rather than limiting sources of information, investing in education, such as critical literacy, will develop students' abilities to engage critically with texts around them. Provide students with the tools to be critically competent in a diverse and complex world, rather than hide, ignore, or repress lived realities.

### **6.3 Recommendations for Policy Makers**

The classroom is not separate from the outside world. Social issues, traumas, prejudices, ideologies, hopes, and dreams all permeate into the classroom. To pretend otherwise is foolish. Therefore, policymakers hold much power and influence over future generations. They have the power to actively better situations for families impacted by generational poverty and trauma and also the power to exacerbate these effects through either inaction or actively limiting and taking away supports for public education. Below are my recommendations for realizing the power education can have.

#### **6.3.1 Eliminating School Segregation**

It is well documented that racial segregation is still alive and well in the United States through housing policies and the ways schools are funded, in part through property taxes (Clotfelter, 1999; Rosiek, 2019; Thompson Dorsey, 2013). As documented in my own study, violence pervaded this school where more than 90% of students qualify for free-and-reduced lunch and more than 90% of the population is students of color (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2021). These demographics do not match up with our country as whole, where the 2020 American

Census reports that 61.6% of our country comprises white people, 12.4% Black, 10.2% multi-racial, 6% Asian, 1.1% American Indian and Alaska Native, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (Jones et al., 2021). As the 1954 ruling of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case proved (n.d.), segregation negatively impacts students. We are not setting students up for success when zip codes are indicative of whether or not a student will thrive. To combat this, policy makers can create incentives for developers to build affordable housing, re-examine and re-structure school funding policies to increase equity, and support measures such as free breakfast and lunch programs. While this does not guarantee the elimination of segregation, this is a start.

### **6.3.2 Critical Race Theory and Book Bans**

Part of the impetus to embark on this study was the sudden mass outrage around the topic of Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Alexander et al. (n.d.), as of 2022 there have been 240 measures passed to eliminate or prevent the use of CRT. As seen in my own findings, students of color are aware of bias and the way their skin color is perceived. To ban CRT is to pretend my students' lived experiences are not lenses through which they view most of the world already. Colorblindness, or the idea that one cannot and should not see race, ignores the harm that centuries of racist policies have done. Race is a construct, and to understand what race is, the harmful divisions it's created, and the lasting impact racism has had on our country, CRT offers one frame of reference to carefully deconstruct, examine, and critique.

CRT is not a curriculum just as critical literacy is not. Instead, it is the act of using a racial lens to focus on critical thinking. This overlaps with critical literacy in that both try to honor the knowledge people of color have. While my study's focus was on using a critical literacy framework, it did involve examining the outside world through a racial perspective because my

students naturally have that frame of reference being from a racial minority. As I found in my study, my students brought into the classroom some essential understandings of bias. While my specific school district has not stated any anti-CRT sentiment, there was a bill introduced in the state's legislature in 2021 to:

prohibit the teaching of divisive concepts and would mandate that any contract, grant or training program entered into by the state or any municipality include provisions prohibiting teaching divisive concepts and prohibit making any individual feel discomfort, guilty, anguish or any distress on account of their race or sex. (An Act Relating to Education– Curriculum, 2021)

Most recently, the education committee recommended further study be done. The bill has not been terminated, which means it could be revisited in the future.

Just as banning CRT is a way of avoiding accountability, so, too, is book banning. Of the 2,352 books banned from 2021-2022, 41% were books that addressed the LGBTQIA+ community and 21% were books that addressed the topic of racism (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). A bill was presented in April, 2023 to the state's House lawmakers with the intent to make public and charter school libraries liable for providing access to "obscene" or "indecent" materials including "any cartoon, drawing, comic book, print, depiction or animation" (Nunes, 2023; Russo, 2023). If passed, school librarians could face up to two years in prison and a \$1,000 fine (Nunes, 2023; Russo, 2023). While this bill may appear to be about the safety of minors, these types of laws have been used to ban books about sexuality and gender, specifically aimed at the LGBTQIA+ community. Exclusionary measures, such as these, do not protect students, but instead encourage a continual denial of others' lived experiences creating the space for further harm against marginalized communities like the one I work in. I urge policy makers to critically examine such



policies being presented and veto, overturn, or otherwise prevent these harmful bills at both the state and local level from passing.

## **6.4 Recommendations for Future Study**

There is so much potential in studying critical literacy in the classroom space. In reflecting on this past school year's study, I see room where I could have done things differently, such as having students actively reflect on their ability to make a difference in their community multiple times throughout the study. I think making this a more directly measured item would be an interesting way to see students' growth and empowerment. I also see opportunities in creating future studies that could examine the large-scale impact, the long-term impact, white students' approach, and younger students' ability to engage in activism.

### **6.4.1 Large-Scale Findings**

This study showcased insights from one fifth grade classroom engaging regularly with a critical literacy framework. In order to substantiate these findings, a potential large-scale study could be done to examine multiple elementary classrooms engaging in critical literacy and civic action projects. This study could provide further information on the readiness and ability of students to engage in conversations about complex, societal issues. This could also illuminate the dynamic of classrooms as activism spaces.

### **6.4.2 Race Perspective**

One particular finding through this study was that students of color are acutely aware of bias. In order to delve further into this finding, a comparative study could be conducted to see the difference of perceptions of bias in classrooms with predominantly white students versus classrooms with predominantly students of color. This study could illuminate further complexities of growing up in a racialized and segregated schooling system (Thompson Dorsey, 2013; Rosiek, 2019) and would support the body of research produced by Jeane Copenhaver (2001), Wanda Brooks (2006), and Cynthia Tyson (1999) that showcases that students bring in and use their cultural perspective as a way to interact with texts.

### **6.4.3 Age Perspective**

All students who were a part of this study were fifth graders and the age range was from 10-12 years old from the beginning until the end of the study. Future studies could focus on engaging younger students in critical literacy and the impact of doing so, such as seen in the work of Barbara Comber (2001), Terre Sychterz (2002), and Vivian Vasquez (2004). This study could be in service of developing a school-wide curriculum that incorporates social justice education and/or critical literacy cycles. It could also add to the literature in showing what age-appropriate activism looks like.

#### **6.4.4 Longevity**

This study followed the natural course of one academic year, however a future study could follow the long-term impacts of being a part of a district whose classrooms engage in regular critical literacy work throughout the K-12 experience. This study could elaborate on the effect of long-term critical literacy work on student outcomes. This type of study could also be used to compare and contrast outcomes to districts that do not incorporate this type of education to, again, see the effects a critical literacy education have on students' self-perceptions, future careers, and literacy.

### **6.5 Implications for Theory**

Research around the origins and understandings of Critical Literacy were instrumental in designing this study. Throughout this study I found ways in which my own interpretations of Critical Literacy were reinforced and simultaneously disproven, but I ultimately found that the driving force of Critical Literacy in the classroom must always be our students' interests, perspectives, and passions.

#### **6.5.1 Reinforcing the Need for Student Buy-in & Action Projects**

The importance of student buy-in to the process of critical literacy is found plainly in the literature (Behrman, 2006; Campano et al., 2013; Luke, 2012; Janks, 2014). I believe my own study reinforces these findings as students showcased their perceptions of the world and where

they saw a need for change in their own community. In order to empower, students must find purpose in what they are reading, examining, questioning, and ultimately doing. Therefore, student buy-in also requires action. Originally, while I hoped that was where this study would end up, I wasn't sure. There were many mounting pressures that made me feel there wasn't time or space for an action-oriented project. But I realize now, that telling students they can create change is not the same as being the change. To truly inhabit critical literacy practices, such as those described by Lewison et al. (2002) and Janks (2014), students must see themselves as capable of disrupting and enacting change. Even when my students stated they weren't able to make a difference, I took them through the process to show them they can.

### **6.5.2 Tabula Rasa**

In my study, I describe a turning point when I realized my students already came to school with an understanding of bias. While they may not have known the word 'bias,' they did understand what bias looked and sounded like. However, my own interpretation, or misinterpretation, of critical literacy literature was that this was a skill that students needed to be taught. In doing so, I found I shed the dominant paradigm and discourse of teaching and assessing skills in favor of centering students' concerns, knowledges, and curiosities. As a teacher with this newfound experience, I now seek ways to share this work with my colleagues inviting them to create similar spaces for creativity and inspiration drawn from their own students. While there are not always spaces provided naturally in the public school setting, I can open my classroom door to invite conversation and find other like-minded teachers who need support in teacher-research action projects. This work also spurs me to find or create literature that explicitly names that students come in with their own knowledge of bias in order to further reinforce the idea that

students are not a ‘tabula rasa,’ or a blank slate, and this ultimately proves that avoiding topics at schools does not shield students from the outside reality. Education is more than what we teach in school.

## Appendix A Student Work

### Appendix A.1 Student Advocacy Letters

Dear Petco,

We are fifth grade students at [Redacted school name] in [Redacted city]. We are writing because we need doggy bags for our school. We have a lot of dog poop on our school property. When we try to walk to dismissal we can't walk on the yard because of this problem. We are reaching out to ask for doggy waste bags and anything else, like poop scoopers and gloves, that could help us solve this MAJOR problem. Thank you for considering helping our school.

Sincerely,

[Redacted student names]

Dear [Name Redacted]:

We are writing to you because we need your help. Dogs keep leaving waste on our school grounds. This is a problem because people are stepping on it and it can spread disease. We think we can fix this problem by using gloves, doggy bags, and poop scoopers. We're hoping you can help us get these items for our school please. [Redacted School Name] needs your help.

Sincerely,

[Redacted student names]

Appendix A.2 Student Posters

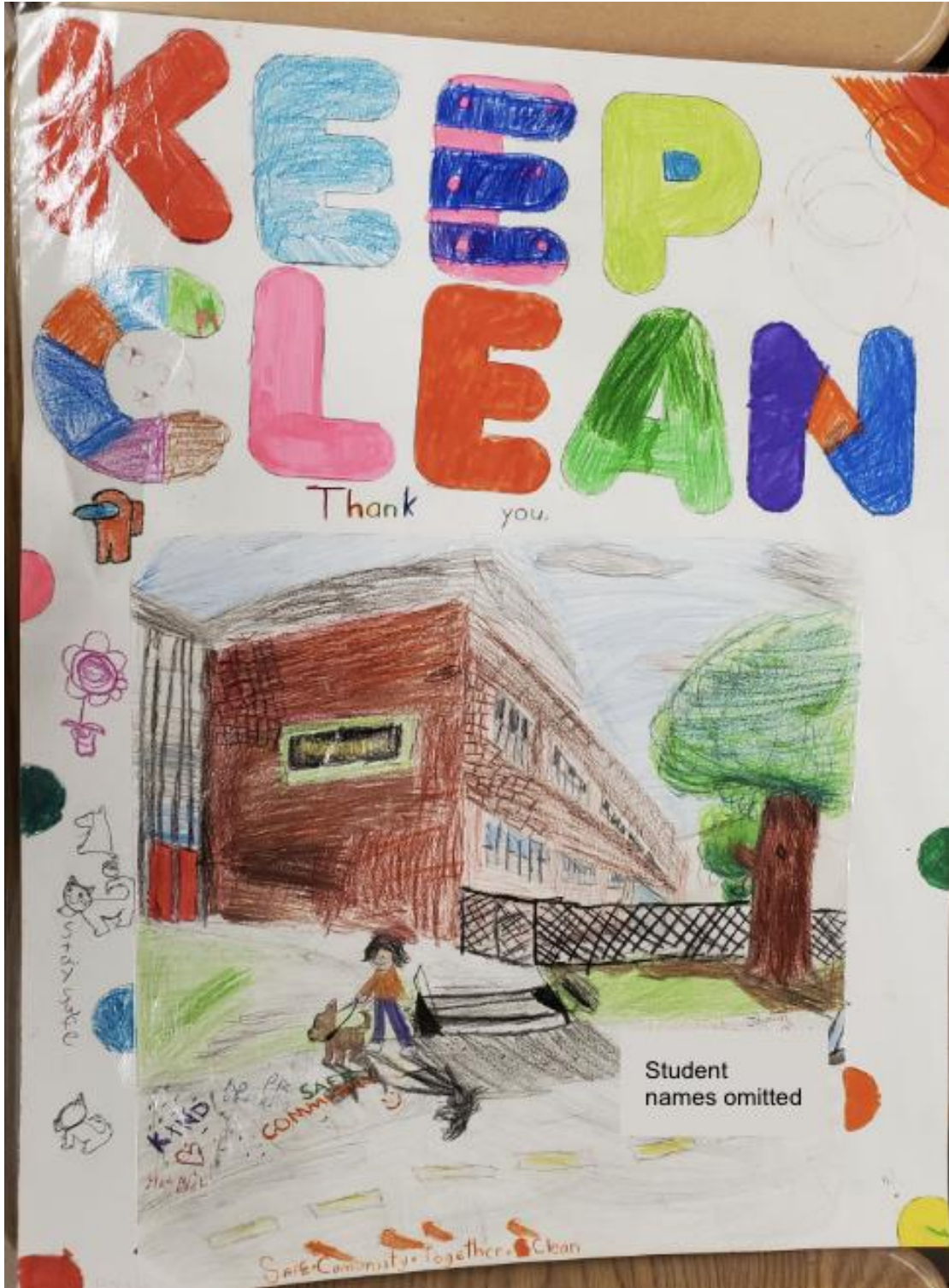


Figure 3 Student Poster 1

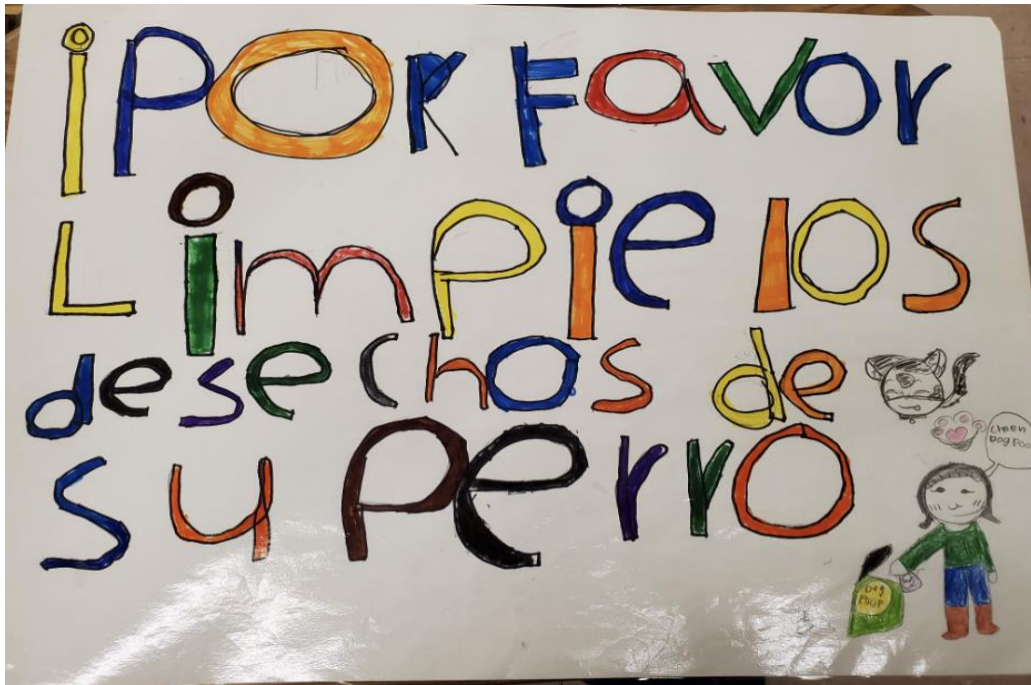


Figure 4 Student Poster 2

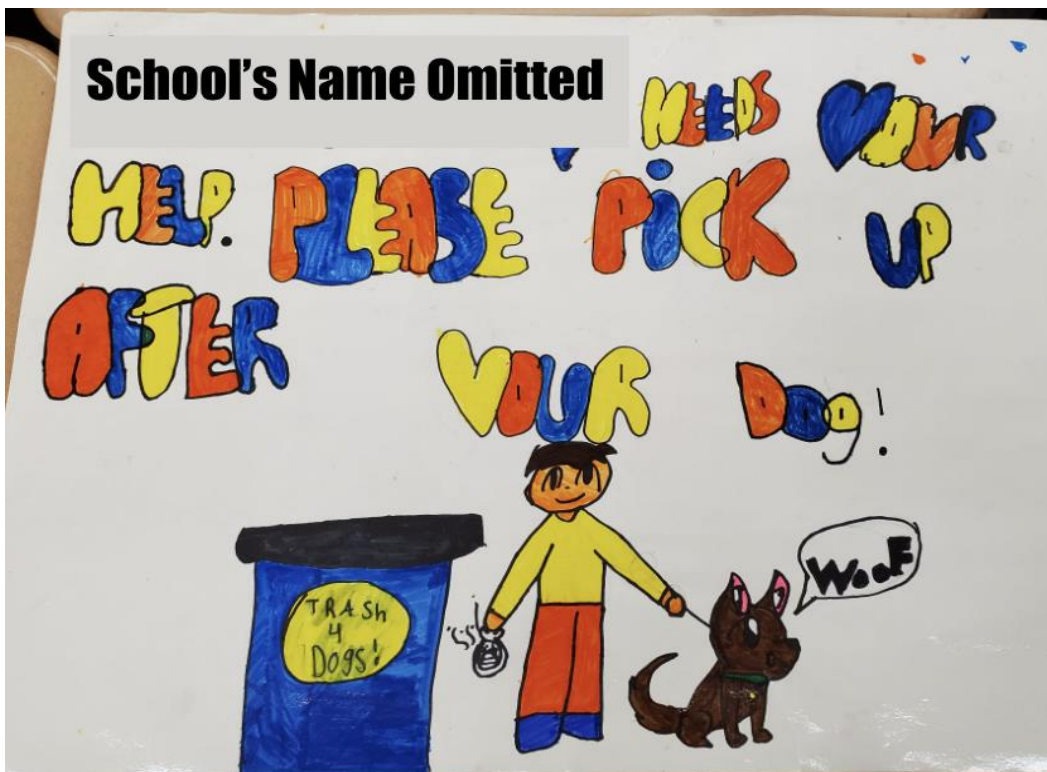


Figure 5 Student Poster 3



Appendix A.3 Student Storyboards



Figure 6 Student Storyboard 1

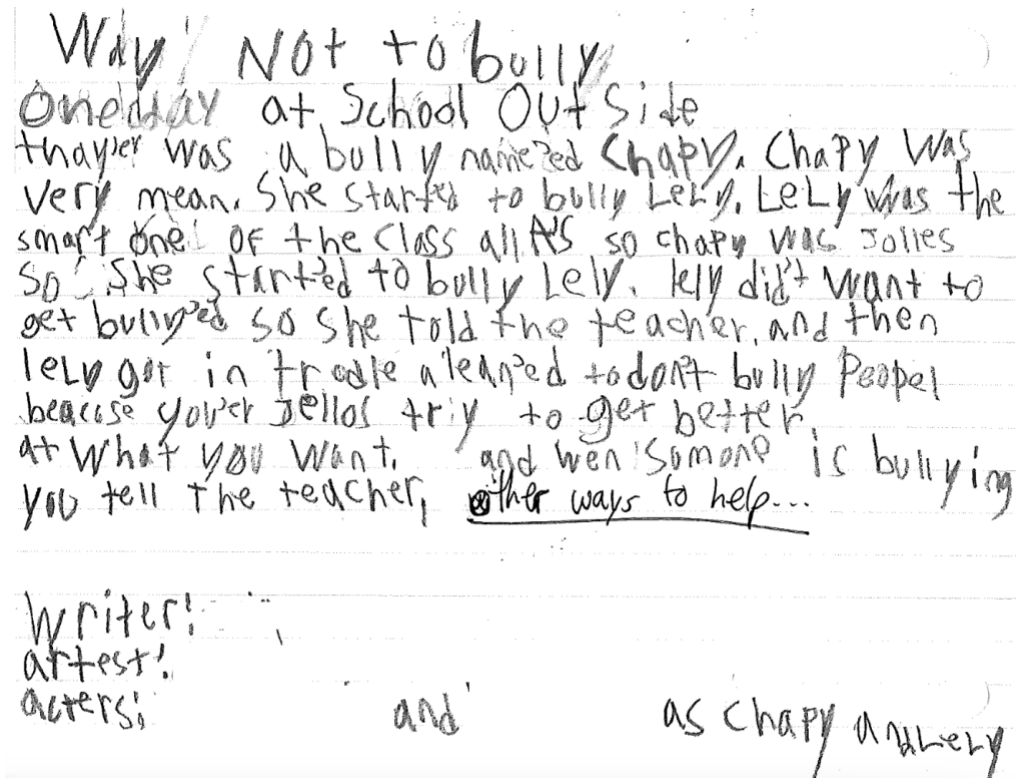


Figure 7 Student Storyboard 2

## Appendix B Reflection Templates

### Appendix B.1 Independent Self-Reflection Sheet

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1.) How **confident** are you in having a conversation with your classmates?



2.) What is one discussion skill you feel **successful** in?

I feel successful in \_\_\_\_\_.

3.) What is one discussion skill you are looking to **get better** at?

I am looking to get better at \_\_\_\_\_.

Figure 8 Student Reflection Template

Appendix B.2 Group Reflection Sheet

**Conversation Corner #1 Group Debrief:**

Names: \_\_\_\_\_

What went well:

What we can improve on:

Figure 9 Group Reflection Template

### Appendix B.3 Morning Meeting Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you think you can make a difference in the world?**  
¿Crees que puedes hacer una diferencia en el mundo?  
Unafikiri unaweza kuleta mabadiliko katika ulimwengu?  
Ma hûn difikirin ku hûn dikarin di cîhanê de cûdahiyek çêbikin?

I think I \_\_\_\_\_ make a difference in the world because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Figure 10 Morning Meeting Reflection 1

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What would you change about our school?**  
¿Qué cambiarías de nuestra escuela?  
Ungebadilisha nini kuhusu shule yetu?  
Hûn ê li ser dibistana me çi biguherînin?

One thing I would change about our school is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Figure 11 Morning Meeting Reflection 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What makes you really happy, worried, or angry?**  
 ¿Qué te hace realmente feliz, triste o enojado/a?  
 Ni nini kinachokufanya uwe na furaha, huzuni, au hasira kweli?  
 Çi we bi rastî dilşad, xemgîn, an hêrs dike?

One thing that makes me very \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

**Figure 12 Morning Meeting Reflection 3**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

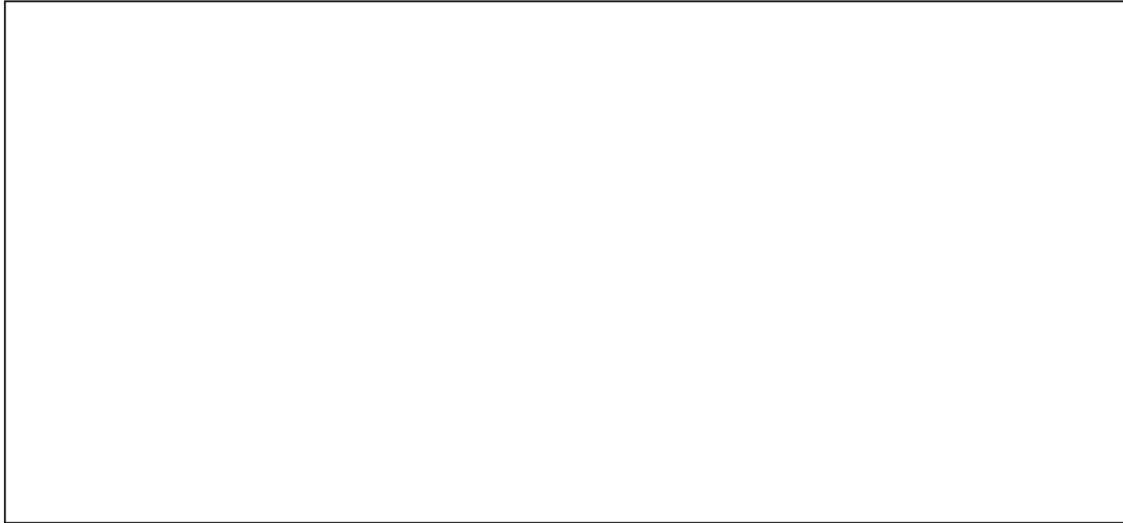
**What would you change about our world?**  
 ¿Qué cambiarías de nuestro mundo?  
 Ungebadilisha nini kuhusu ulimwengu wetu?  
 Hûn ê li ser cîhana me çî biguherînin?

One thing I would change about our world is \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

**Figure 13 Morning Meeting Reflection 4**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What is the best thing in your life?**  
¿Qué es lo mejor de tu vida?  
Ni jambo gani lililo bora zaidi maishani mwako?  
Di jiyana te de ya herî baş çî ye?



The best thing in my life is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

**Figure 14 Morning Meeting Reflection 5**

## Appendix B.4 Student Empowerment Article List

**Table 2 Student Empowerment Articles**

Text	Author	Summary
“India’s street kids rarely make headlines – so they write their own”	By Haziq Qadri, Christian Science Monitor, adapted by Newsela staff on 12/22/22	Children living in India and experiencing homelessness created a newspaper called Balaknama that now has over 10,000 readers and covers matters that are often overlooked.
“Kids wrote pleas to help unwanted shelter pups find homes; it worked”	By Sydney Page, The Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 04/18/22	Second graders wrote persuasive letters tailored to 24 dogs at an animal shelter in Virginia that were overlooked because of their age and/or their health condition to help convince people to adopt.
““Believe in yourself”: Free hotline features inspiring pep talks from kindergartners”	By Maria Jimenez Moya, USA TODAY, adapted by Newsela staff on 03/29/22	A California elementary school developed a hotline that can be called to hear words of encouragement, pep talks, and laughter by elementary schoolers.
“Summer camps aim to eliminate racial bias in artificial intelligence”	By Ashley Wong, USA Today, USA TODAY, adapted by Newsela staff on 9/6/18	AI4All is a summer camp program meant to engage women, racial minorities, and low-income students in AI courses working on combatting bias, and other projects aimed at harnessing AI to help people.

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