

## **Abstract**

Title of Dissertation: "IT'S BEEN A LONG JOURNEY":  
EXPLORING THE IDENTITIES AND  
PEDAGOGY OF SECONDARY CRITICAL  
LITERACY EDUCATORS  
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Critical literacy—which I define briefly here as a lens that assumes no text is neutral and therefore an important goal of reading and writing is to evaluate and critique the power and perspectives that all texts contain—has been continuously well-theorized over the past half-century but is less frequently taught or studied in practice, especially in the United States. To help bridge this gap and to contribute to the conversation that identifies critical literacy as an invaluable approach to literacy education, this dissertation study is a qualitative multiple case study that investigated the teacher identities and pedagogies of five high school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers who self-identified as critical literacy educators.

Using critical literacy theory to frame my understanding of teachers' pedagogy and taking a sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, I sought to answer the following three questions: (1) How do critical literacy educators' lived experiences inform their critical literacy teacher identities? (2) How do critical literacy educators' identities inform their critical literacy pedagogy? and (3) What supports and/or challenges do critical literacy educators face when implementing

critical literacy pedagogy, and how do they navigate challenges? To answer these questions I administered a survey to, collected teaching artifacts from, and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with each of my five participants. Analyses of these data indicated that participants' critical literacy identities are largely the product of a variety of methods of self-selected professional development, and are deeply connected to social justice beliefs. To enact these identities and beliefs into practice, participants employed a number of student-centered classroom strategies to build students' capacities to consider multiple perspectives and counternarrative stories, critique power in texts, and move towards taking social justice action. Finally, when enacting their critical literacy pedagogies, participants felt most supported by curricular freedom and self-selected professional development, and encountered the most challenges when it came to normative education elements that reflected dominant ideals such as suggested canonical texts and standardized testing requirements. The findings from this study have implications for critical literacy research, literacy teacher education, and K-12 schools, and include the importance of teaching critical literacy in theory *and* in practice across pre- and in-service teacher training, re-thinking the relationship between current standards and curriculum and critical literacy, and considering the value of curricular freedom in achieving critical literacy goals in K-12 classrooms.

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LITERACY EDUCATORS

by

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This will be a copyright page upon submission to ProQuest  
(How exciting!)

## **Dedication**

For my mom, who has always been and will always be my compass.

&

For my teacher colleagues and students working tirelessly to thrive in K-12 classrooms  
everywhere: Y'all are the reason.

## Acknowledgements

There's a borderline-cliché African proverb that suggests it takes a village to raise a child. I don't know that the original purveyors of this proverb intended "child" to mean "32-year-old adult woman completing a PhD," but here we are. It is not lost on me how lucky I am to have a strong village that has raised me into someone with the opportunity to write an acknowledgement page for a doctoral dissertation. Unfortunately, the graduate school dissertation style guide advises that I should "avoid elaborate or fulsome language" in this section which is exactly what all of you deserve, so just know that that's the only reason I'm keeping it short (long form love letters to follow in the mail).

First thanks will always be to you, mom & Jillian, for continuing to raise, support, laugh with, and love me unconditionally. I am basically just the two of you smooshed together into one person, which makes me an extraordinarily lucky human. Jonah, you're a really close second place on this list of adoration for agreeing to spend a lifetime of love and adventure with me: thank you and you're welcome for everything that is to come.

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Rhiannon, Phil, Cassie, and Becca: thank you for believing in me, for doing the heavy friendship maintenance lifting when I've had to focus inward, and for the always perfectly timed visits, phone calls, and nudges of love.

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## A Prologue

On my first day of school as a teacher I had been 22 for three months, and was wearing the only “professional” dress I owned that my mom helped me pick out for the day. My students were ninth graders, decked out with done hair, fresh nails, and new Nikes to mark the individuality that their uniform polos and black pants worked hard to extinguish. We all looked at each other for a few long seconds before I said hello and began plunking down copies of a syllabus featuring several of the 9th grade album’s greatest hits: *Romeo & Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1597), *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1964), and some Poe poems, among others. That syllabus was a patchwork of curriculum and texts provided to me by the prior 9th grade ELA teacher, the district, the Common Core State Standards, and the meager, dusty offerings of a school book room whose average publishing age was—even if you disregarded the aggressive amount of Shakespeare—considerably older than me. In the months after spring break the syllabus featured lots of exam prep, and the whole thing gave off the distinct air of boredom mixed with just a touch of exam stress. —

That year, I quickly learned that building student relationships was the single most important part of my job. Not, unfortunately, for the right reasons, but because having all my kids like me was going to be the only way I could get them to do work. For the most part, they thought the books we read were boring (I agreed); I thought the papers they wrote were the textual equivalent of eating cardboard (they agreed), and the most fun we all had was during the “open mic” battles I hosted for extra credit before and after school, the discussions about life and politics and the news

we'd have on Fridays, and the projects and activities I cooked up to make the most boring parts of books seem just a hair more interesting. The rest of the time I leaned heavily on the fact that they would mostly do things because they liked me, because I made promises to play trivia or have snack-n-chats on Fridays, or because I'd bribe them with homemade brownies. Not exactly an exemplar of educational excellence.

Despite having been a Fellow in a Master's program specifically designed to prepare new educators for New York City public schools, it wasn't until my third year that I was lucky enough to stumble upon a series of culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice education workshops that introduced me to critical pedagogies and the idea of critical literacy (my program, by contrast, had handed me Doug Lemov's (2010) management-and-discipline-heavy handbook *Teach Like a Champion* as if it were a long lost Biblical text). Though these critical literacy workshop experiences were brief, they introduced me to a new way of thinking about my teaching and begged me to consider what my "teacher identity" was: what did I think and believe about teaching? Why did I teach what I taught? What kind of teacher did I want to be for my students? How could I bring that vision to life in my ELA classroom? My earliest answers to these heavy considerations were simple and shallowly contrived, but they served as the beginnings of my identity formation as a critical literacy educator.

It took time, experimentation, and lots of mistakes, and I still look back and cringe at most of what I asked my students to do. Even in the last year before leaving for my doctoral program I wasn't always requiring my students to be critical readers and writers or regularly tapping into their culture and their identities in meaningful

ways. Only now—with a PhD program’s worth of coursework largely focused on critical and multimodal literacy and urban education under my belt—do I think I could even begin to do my former students justice, and do I feel comfortable fully identifying as a critical literacy educator and teacher educator.

The story of my school and of my earliest experiences therein are a common narrative. My school, in the heart of a vibrant neighborhood in the middle of Brooklyn, is one of thousands of its kind: on paper it is urban, poorly funded, “diverse,” always on some kind of list (it remains on the state’s “struggling schools” list to this day), and always under multiple accountability and standardized testing microscopes. On the inside, though, it is teeming with students and staff replete with culture, languages, humor (so much witty sarcasm), hopes, ideas, energy, and unending simultaneous boredom and stress surrounding exams and the uninspired teaching exams often produce. My experiences, too, are shared by thousands of teachers like me: pedagogical choices made uncritically in service to test prep and Eurocentric curricula instead of to students because we just don’t know any better, but a willingness and desire—even if subconscious or not articulated as such—to be innovative, to do important social justice work, and to teach students well.

As I reflect on my own growth and my late-onset critical educator identity, I often wonder how I left my teacher preparation program so comprehensively unprepared. What would it have taken for me to be better and do better out of the gate, and why did I not receive that training? This has, over time, prompted several questions that have evolved into the focus of my academic interests and of this dissertation: What do critical and socially just literacy practices look like in the



classrooms of teachers who identify as critical educators, how did they come to teach this way, and what personal, classroom, and school factors allow this sort of pedagogy to take flight?

## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

### **Identifying the Problem**

#### **Critical Literacy and Why it Matters**

The problems, stated simply, are these: First, from a teaching standpoint, although critical literacy—an approach to the reading and creation of texts that centers examining and challenging power—is a valuable, arguably even necessary lens to approaching literacy education, teachers are seldom taught how to apply it (Lee, 2011). Our national standards and their aligned, standardized assessments and suggested texts lists do not require it, and it is not part of the preparation strategy in most colleges of education. This is harmful for all children, but particularly for children who hold marginalized identities as they not only need to learn how to be informed, engaged, critical citizens, but also have to fight every day for their stories and selves to be heard and seen. Second, from a research standpoint, our understanding of critical literacy largely exists only in theoretical, academic spaces. While theory is important, if this theory never jumps into practice, we never wind up addressing any of the challenges about which we are theorizing (White, 2009).

To put these problems into basic perspective, consider the following: In the 2016 US presidential election, Russian interference successfully relied on social media to influence political thinking (Mueller & US Dept. of Justice, 2019). In his first two years in office, Donald Trump made 8,158 false or misleading claims and then proceeded to be widely supported in running for a second term (Kessler et al., 2019). Currently, of the Common Core's 128 suggested texts for high schoolers, only 26 (20%) are by authors of color, 26 (20%) are by female authors, and 21 (16%) were

written in the 21st century, (National Governors Association, 2010). By comparison, the K-12 US student audience of these texts is about 54% students of color, 52% female, and 100% born in the 21st century) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). The skills necessary to see through fake posts on Facebook and Instagram, to interrogate a President's statements versus taking them at face value, and to evaluate what and why you are reading in school — and whose stories are being championed in that reading — are complex ones at the very least. They are skills requiring critical, analytical thinking, the ability to recognize power and the people who do and do not have it, and the understanding that some truth and some experiences are rendered invisible and need to be intentionally sought out.

K-12 students encounter each of the above text types—social media, mainstream news, and literature assigned and read at school—en masse on a daily basis across a variety of platforms. Accordingly, it is imperative that students be able to critically read and evaluate these and the barrage of other text types they constantly consume, whether asked to do so within the bounds of school or not. Unfortunately, that is not consistently the case today. For example, in a study in which students were asked to evaluate two different presidential candidacy announcements, only one quarter of the 9-12th grade participants were able to identify an authentic Fox News Facebook page by the verification (blue) checkmark, and nearly a third of participants actually argued that a *fake* Fox News post was more trustworthy (McGrew et al., 2019). In a follow-up study using a nationally representative sample of 8th-12th graders, Breakstone, et al. (2019) revealed that two thirds of students surveyed could not tell the difference between online news stories and advertisements, and 96% of

students didn't consider how the influence of a paid investor might impact the content and credibility of a website. Studies like these raise concerns about students' ability to be critical—or even aware—of the sources or the power interests working behind the literature they consume. It is true that a vast majority of our k-12 students are no doubt fluent across a range of social media platforms and able to read and understand texts. However, it is important not to conflate this fluency with criticality lest we forget that these skills need to be explicitly and continuously built.

This ability to discern power dynamics like the true from the false in news and the invested players and interests behind social media campaigns is only the tip of the critical literacy iceberg. Critical literacy requires the knowledge that no text is neutral, and the ability to read with the explicit purpose of critiquing who does and does not have power (Vasquez et al., 2019). Critical literacy is a lens through which texts are read and evaluated that aims to acknowledge and examine all of the viewpoints both represented and missing in a text, focus on sociopolitical issues, and disrupt commonplace and dominant narratives (Lewison et al., 2002). By this definition, critical literacy is not only an important tool in that possessing it allows our students to be more conscious and informed consumers of texts; being critically literate also requires students to be interrogative forces with the ability to “[meld] the social, political, and cultural debate and discussion with analysis of how texts and discourses work, where, with what consequences, and in whose interests” (Luke, 2012, p. 5).

Further, though all of our students, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), ability, or faith, need to be critically literate in order to enact change and challenge the dominant status quo, it is particularly important for students who hold

historically oppressed identities. Paolo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972/2000) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973) serve as the theoretical foundation of critical literacy understandings, conceptualized critical literacy as a form of sociopolitical awareness. He deemed this awareness necessary for the lowest and poorest classes to be able to understand their position within historically created power hierarchies in order to rebel against oppression and inequality (Freire, 1973, 2000). Understood in this way, though it is the responsibility of *everyone* to challenge and change inequity, critical literacy is an especially pertinent skill for students with non-dominant and historically marginalized and oppressed identities. Accordingly, critical literacy is closely tied to the goals of both racial justice (Prendergast, 2003) and social justice education, which “pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality, and encourages students to critically examine oppression...in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change” (Hackman, 2005, p. 104).

### **Where Are We Now?**

A lack of critical literacy and other social justice literacy pedagogies in classrooms stems from a normative literacy tradition (white, male, middle class, heteronormative, Christian) that is embedded within a larger racist and classist education system. Take, for example, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association, 2010). As of this writing, 35 states plus the District of Columbia and four US territories use the Common Core ELA standards as the guiding compass of literacy instruction, and 11 have rewritten or replaced them with their own “state standards,” with many of these “rewrites” entailing only very minor

changes (EdWeek.org, 2017). Further, as of 2019, all 50 states plus the District of Columbia use standardized assessments that align with the skills and content found in the Common Core, with 19 using either PARCC or Smarter Balanced tests which are both standardized exams that are directly affiliated with the standards (EdWeek.org, 2019). It is safe to say that a majority of the United States is relying on the CCSS as a guide for literacy instruction and assessment, so it is important to look at what the CCSS is actually district curriculum writers and teachers to teach. I mentioned a demographic breakdown of the recommended texts above, but it is worth mentioning and considering a second time here: only 20% of the suggested texts for ELA and history have authors of color, only 20% have female authors, and only 16% were written in the 21st century (CCSS, 2010) while the student population these texts are curated to serve is 54% students of color, 52% female, and 100% born and/or began schooling in the 2000's. Considering these stark differences in demographic makeup, it seems fair to conclude that representation was clearly not a consideration when curating content for literacy classrooms.

While terrible identity representation would be a huge issue in a conversation about culturally sustaining pedagogy (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014)—which relies on acknowledging and representing student cultures in texts—one might still try to argue that a well-rounded critical literacy lens can be meaningfully applied to any of the CCSS recommended texts. After all, a skilled teacher can use Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623) to talk about 21st century politics, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) has the potential to lead to important conversations about class (easier) or presence-through-absence of race (more

difficult). This is when a look at what the CCSS standards are asking for becomes pertinent. If the next unit in a teacher's required county curriculum includes Harper Lee's (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird*, are the standards at least guiding them to ask students why the Black characters in the book are all static devices used to highlight a young white girl's growth, or what it means to be reading and learning about race through the perspective of a white author? Unfortunately, the short answer is no.

The standards do an excellent job of asking for textual analysis, but stop short of demanding criticality. For example, the standards ask students to determine an author's point of view, but don't ask which views are missing, and why lack of representation might matter (CCSS, 2010). The standards ask for analysis of a cultural experience reflected in a piece of literature from outside the United States (which itself suggests a troubling assumption that very little non-US reading will be organically taking place), but do not ask for an understanding of the historical circumstances and power plays that prefaced that experience (CCSS, 2010). In our current age of hyper standardization and teacher accountability in which teachers' evaluations and students' promotion status are dependent on exam performance, if "the test" does not include something, oftentimes neither does the curriculum. With many tests being based either directly or loosely on the CCSS, a lack of criticality at the standards level contributes directly to a lack of criticality in the classroom. Of course, teachers can and do teach critical literacy and enact critical literacy pedagogy on their own, but some kind of critical literacy awareness or training is often necessary to support teachers to do so. So far, the research that exists on origins or supports for this awareness or what this training needs to look like is largely

theoretical, which continues to result in very little critical literacy pedagogy making its way into K-12 classrooms (Lee, 2011).

None of this is to say that the Common Core is the enemy, or that students should never be asked to read from the literary canon of widely accepted influential texts it largely recommends (alongside a conversation about what the “canon” is, the texts that are included and excluded, and who gets to decide what those texts are, of course). Both can and are utilized critically and beautifully by skilled teachers in classrooms every day. Rather, I use the Common Core as one example of the systemic and institutional priorities prevalent in literacy education. It is not just that the standards do not demand criticality and largely represent Eurocentric middle class male ideals, though that is indeed a problem. More important, though, is that they allow these dominant ideals—and therefore white supremacy, racism, and classism—to continue to perpetuate unchallenged. The institutional forces that brought us the CCSS are the same ones that make decisions about everything from what gets taught in teacher education, to what kinds of student capital are favored in standardized assessment reading passages, to the types of texts and technology afforded to teachers and students in schools. The ingrained racism and classism of these institutions continuously creates and reinforces barriers to equitable literacy practices such as teachers who think critical literacy is important but do not want to accidentally offend students by using it (Norris et al., 2012), teachers who alter their curricula in acquiescence to testing pressure (Anagnostopoulos, 2003), and teacher education programs and professional development that do not force pre- and in-service teachers



to name and interrogate racist, classist, and other -ist practices in their literacy instruction (Bartolomé, 2004).

In turn, this self-perpetuating cycle of dominant status quo continues to manifest as an opportunity gap between lower-SES students and students of color and their wealthier white peers. This gap is reflected across a range of education measures including test scores (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016) and college enrollment and persistence (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019), and has ripple effects that can be seen in things like wage gaps (Bayer & Charles, 2018) and incarceration rates (Alexander, 2020). Although an absence of critical literacy skills in curricula are one byproduct of this dominant cycle, working critical literacy into classrooms, alone, is not the solution to all of this inequity, or even all of literacy inequity. However, the critical consciousness gained from critical literacy skills requires a constant examination of power, representation, and interconnectedness that is invaluable for both teachers and students to be aware of, critique, and change the systems that govern their lives. Accordingly, this critical consciousness is an important step in guiding both teachers and students at all levels to learn about, promote, and fight for social and racial justice goals.

### **Research Questions**

As perpetuated institutional dominant norms prevent critical literacy from showing up in most teacher preparation programs, required curricula, and K-12 schools, critical literacy education is not a widely found approach in US classrooms. Currently, literacy teachers have to opt-in to teach critically versus being guided to do so in preparation programs or via prescribed curricula and standards. Fortunately,

there are teachers doing this important work, and understanding more about them, their identities, and their pedagogy is necessary to further our understanding of how to prepare critically literate teachers that enact critical literacy pedagogy in classrooms. Furthering these understandings is the focus of this dissertation, which centers around answering the following questions about *secondary (7-12) English Language Arts teachers who identify as critical literacy educators* (referred to as “critical literacy educators” in the questions below to reduce wordiness):

1. How do critical literacy educators’ lived experiences inform their critical literacy teacher identities?
2. How do critical literacy educators’ identities inform their critical literacy pedagogy?
3. What supports and/or challenges do critical literacy educators face when implementing critical literacy pedagogy, and how do they navigate challenges?

I focus on secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers in this dissertation for a few reasons: First, from a personal standpoint, I was a high school ELA teacher and humanities department chair, so I understand the content and pedagogy of and am most generally interested in ELA teachers and curriculum. As a result, my primary interests as a researcher overall involve this population. Further, from a critical literacy standpoint, although all courses should and do involve literacy, ELA classes do so the most as these classes are where the bulk of direct reading and writing instruction happens in schools. There are a few scholars taking up the potential of critical literacy across other content areas (e.g. Janks, 2014; Vasquez,

2017), but for the purposes of this dissertation I remain focused on secondary ELA educators.

### **Significance**

I argue that a study answering the above research questions is important for two main reasons: 1) it contributes to the currently underdeveloped knowledge base of how teacher identities that center critical literacy approaches come to be, and 2) it contributes to the movement of critical literacy conversations from theory into practice, adding to the important body of research aiming to understand critical literacy in practice. Knowing more about what positively influences teachers to adopt critical literacy identities and how they incorporate these identities in their classrooms has potential implications for teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning.

Additionally, this study is arguably most important for its secondhand k-12 student-facing implications. Our students are being educated in an increasingly complicated world. In the school year in which the data for this study were collected alone, US students watched a presidential election featuring two white 70-something male candidates—one of whom had publicly made racist, sexist, and xenophobic comments—but also saw the first Black and Asian American woman become Vice President. A large majority of them had school days in their kitchens thanks to a pandemic that disproportionately impacted African American, Latinx-Hispanic, and low-income individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). They read about, saw, and maybe even participated in protests addressing our nation's re-awakened racial consciousness and ongoing battle with racism. Each of these news items—along with the hundreds of others that are constantly arising, the constant

barrage of social media messages, the history classes, the books, the movies, the everything students read daily—contain power relationships, voices, and layers that impact our students. Critical literacy skills are an important way to make sure that students are prepared to read all of these text types critically and with an eye towards racial and social justice action, and the more we know about how to prepare teachers to do critical literacy work in classrooms, the more the work happens with students.

### **The State of the Field**

Currently, we know a little about what influences educators to adopt critical and social justice approaches to teaching, and how those approaches translate into pedagogy. This research tells us that our 80-85% white, native-English-speaking teaching force (Taie & Goldring, 2018) represent a vast spectrum of beliefs and abilities when it comes to social justice and other critical approaches to education. For example, at the extreme ends of the spectrum, some novice teachers enter their classrooms fully ready and able to enact critical practice (Jones & Enriquez, 2009), while others find the work entirely overwhelming and outside the bounds of their responsibility as educators (Pollock et al., 2016). More often, teachers fall somewhere in the middle, recognizing the value of critical work thanks to personal experiences or program preparation (e.g. Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Whitaker & Valtierra, 2018), but still feeling unprepared or unable to actually incorporate social justice and other critical pedagogies into practice (Ajayi, 2017; Çelik & Amaç, 2012). Across the board, these studies lack a more detailed understanding of the full range of influences acting on participants' teacher identities and how those identities translate to enacting critical social justice practice.

Dorman (2012) is one exception, utilizing case stories of three different “equity oriented” teachers to deeply explore teacher identities and how these identities translate into praxis. The study defined and explored identity broadly as I also aim to do, including an examination of participants’ biographical backgrounds; their decision to teach in urban schools; the teachers, events, and people that influenced their decision to teach; and how they view teaching for social justice. The study found that four central factors primarily influenced teachers’ use of critical pedagogy: 1. Their preparation in an urban teacher education program, 2. Their school contexts, 3. Their student populations, and 4. Their own biographies and histories, with “the identity element of personal history and biography [having] the strongest influence” (Dorman, 2012, p. 24). Behizadeh et al. (2019) examined one middle school teacher’s identity and praxis with similar results, and also found that curricular freedom was an important factor in the participant’s ability to employ critical pedagogy. This finding is also reflected in other studies of the possibilities of justice-oriented teaching (e.g. Singer & Shagoury, 2005).

### **The Role of This Study**

Overall, very few studies seek to explore the full spectrum of factors that encourage and inhibit teachers’ identities in tandem with how those identities translate to critical pedagogical thinking. None that I could identify do so specifically with critical literacy. This study fills this gap by deeply examining critical literacy educators’ full teacher identities, including background and history, preparation, school context, curricular requirements, in- and out- of-school perceived supports, perceived challenges, and approaches to navigating those challenges. The asset-based

approach to this study—working with educators who already do critical literacy work in order to understand how and why they do this work—will deepen an understanding of what backgrounds and experiences lead to educators who adopt critical literacy approaches in their practice, and what ongoing learning and supports can be provided to pre- and in- service teachers to help them become better critical literacy educators.

Further, my study seeks to understand not only these critical literacy teachers' identities and thinking about practice, but also how they go about attempting to enact their critical literacy beliefs in their classrooms. Critical literacy is an approach to social justice education that aims to use literacy to disrupt commonplace (dominant) narratives, interrogate multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, and promote social justice action (Lewison et al., 2002). These goals make critical literacy an important approach to educating all students, but a particularly significant lens to support the education of students who embody marginalized, historically underrepresented or invisible, and oppressed identities (Freire, 2000). Like other methods of doing social justice work in education, however, the significance of critical literacy is also met with a challenge: there are few models for how to 'do' it because it is a theoretical and practical attitude towards learning, texts, and the world that is contextually dependent and inherently non-prescriptive (Brannon et al., 2010; Vasquez et al., 2019). Currently, the body of critical literacy literature is quite large, but it is mostly theoretical with comparatively few studies examining theory in practice, and fewer still doing so specifically within the United States.

If we theoretically know that critical literacy skills are important for students to learn, and we also know that these skills are not being explicitly taught and

researched very frequently, we need to know why. The only way to guide teachers towards critical literacy pedagogy enactment is to help them understand what it is and how to do it, and in order to do *that* it is important to know more about those who identify as critical literacy educators and their pedagogy. There is a difference between creating a list of prescriptive “best practices” that aren’t actually best for anyone, and examining commonalities across the pedagogical choices of critical literacy educators. This study aims to do the latter in order to contribute to a more robust understanding of critical literacy in practice. Outcomes for this study include thorough descriptions of how self-identifying secondary critical literacy educators think about, plan, and enact critical literacy in their classrooms, how these educators’ teacher identities were shaped in ways that encourage such practice, and what supports and challenges these educators encountered in the process of enacting critical literacy pedagogy. Finally, I use these outcomes to make suggestions for future critical literacy research, secondary literacy educators and school administrators working in K-12 settings, and secondary literacy teacher educators working in teacher preparation programs.

### **Defining Terms**

#### **Text**

In the field of critical literacy and this study, a “text” is any communication that conveys meaning to the person examining it. By this definition, “texts” can include books, newspapers, and short stories as traditionally defined, as well as items like photographs, songs, Instagram posts, TED Talks, paintings, political cartoons, advertisements, TikTok dances, and even groups of protesters gathered with signs in the street.

This multimodal understanding of a “text” is significant to the goals of critical literacy education. Kress (2010) defines a “mode” as a socioculturally-specific semiotic resource that creates meaning and can be used to communicate, and argues that societies tend to have modal preferences for different things. In our current education system, the preferred literacy mode is written dominant United States English; to succeed and be deemed literate, students must master reading and writing in this mode (Metz, 2018). Critical literacy’s use of *multimodal* text forms expands beyond this dominant mode to incorporate a variety of text modes, including those that are localized and specific to students and their cultures (Cappello et al., 2019). The use of multimodal texts is important, as it both aids in increased visibility and representation of a variety of identities and also helps students access dominant text forms by bridging their understandings.

### **Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is defined slightly differently in almost every appearance it makes in a book or journal article. There are a few common threads throughout, as well as a few specific points of interest for my work, which I combine to create the following working definition of critical literacy for this dissertation. I define critical literacy as a lens for reading, interpreting, and creating texts that suggests that no text is neutral, no person is neutral, and therefore the reading of texts is never a neutral activity (Brannon et al., 2010; Lankshear et al., 1993; Vasquez et al., 2019). As a result, the goal of a critical literacy lens is to interrogate power and positioning in texts, and to use literacy to build towards social justice goals (Freire, 2000; Luke 2012).



## Critical Literacy Pedagogy

Critical literacy pedagogy is defined as classroom practice that consistently applies the above lens to all elements of literacy pedagogy (i.e., in everything from text selection to text analysis to class discussions to assessments are frequently created with the above tenets in mind). Critical literacy is a social justice pedagogy with a focus on texts and language, and shares social justice education’s goal of equipping students with the “critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns” (Bell, 2016, p. 4). Figure 1 highlights how critical literacy helps achieve each of the social justice education practices outlined in Bell (2016), with Bell’s characteristics of social justice practice in the left column and my characterizations of how critical literacy addresses each of these aims in the right column.

### Figure 1

*Critical literacy's alignment with Bell's (2016) social justice education practices*

Bell’s (2016) Social Justice Practice	Critical Literacy’s Role
Develop critical consciousness	Instill an understanding that no text or person is neutral, thus requiring an examination of situatedness and assumptions of each
Deconstruct binaries	Provide multiple representations of identities in order to complicate common dualities that help perpetuate oppression (i.e. “Black/white” and “gay/straight”)
Draw on counternarratives	Encourage the reading and writing of a variety of counternarratives
Analyze power	Require an interrogation of power and representation in texts
Look for interest convergence	Include considering motivations of the powerful and represented when interrogating power and representation in texts
Make global connections	Emphasize exploring sociopolitical context of texts and their authors

Build coalitions and solidarity	Create counternarratives and/or use literacy to deconstruct and reconstruct dominant narratives; use texts for social change
Follow the leadership of oppressed people	Give oppressed identities a voice through representation and counternarrative so that they may be followed
Be an accountable and responsible ally	Require dominant identities to be self-reflexive, and provide counternarratives to increase awareness and listening

### **Critical Literacy Teacher Identity**

My approach to “teacher identity” in this study will be further fleshed out in Chapter 2, but for the sake of summary here, I approach identity from a sociocultural standpoint. This creates a lens that views identity as an ever-evolving outcome of ongoing interactions between a variety of factors including teachers’ biographies, social identities, beliefs about teaching and education, and current teaching contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004; Olsen, 2008). In order to be a critical literacy educator, a teacher’s identity necessarily needs to value and prioritize critical literacy as both a lens and tool for both themselves and students.

### **Overview of Study and Chapters**

#### **Study Description**

The goal of this study is to better understand the identities of secondary ELA teachers who identify as critical literacy educators, to explore how they move these identities into pedagogical practice, and to know more about the supports and challenges they encounter when enacting critical literacy practice.

To answer these questions I conducted a qualitative multiple case study, with each individual case being one teacher’s critical literacy identity and thinking about classroom pedagogy in the fall and winter of 2020-2021. I recruited five high school ELA teachers who self-identified as critical literacy educators, sent them a

demographic introductory survey, and then conducted a series of three detailed interviews to better understand how their critical literacy teacher identities have been and continue to be shaped. These interviews contained questions about teachers' lives, education, teacher preparation, current context, and ongoing experiences in education. I also asked my participants to explain their pedagogical beliefs concerning critical literacy education and walk me through how they use critical literacy in their classrooms with specific examples. To supplement these interviews and to compensate for not conducting classroom observations due to COVID-19 restrictions, I also collected between 18 and 67 artifacts per participant in order to understand how participants' critical literacy identities inform their practice.

Data analysis involved both deductive and inductive coding across two cycles, was ongoing and iterative throughout the study, and was framed by theoretical understandings of critical literacy (Freire, 2000) and teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). In answer to research question one about participants' critical literacy teacher identities, I found that teacher preparation was not a common source of critical literacy learning. Rather, participants came to and continue this work via beliefs about social justice education, self-selected ongoing learning, and being in classrooms with their students. In terms of research question two regarding how these critical literacy identities translate into practice, I found that the characteristics of critical literacy pedagogy emerged largely through centering student relationships and voices in the classroom, through curating texts and supplemental classroom resources, and through curricular freedom. I also found that certain characteristics of critical literacy pedagogy appeared much more frequently than others, and that the ways participants

enacted their identities into practice was impacted by their perceived agency in their school spaces. Finally, in answer to research question three about pedagogical supports and challenges, I found that these existed for teachers on three levels: the personal level, the school level, and the institutional level. Supports mostly existed at the personal level and included self-directed things like curricular freedom and self-selected professional development. Alternately, challenges existed largely at the school and institutional level, and mainly included things that were beyond participants' control, like required or suggested curricula and standardized testing.

### **The Chapters**

In chapter two, I detail my theoretical approaches to critical literacy and teacher identity, and review extant literature surrounding these two concepts and critical literacy pedagogy. Chapter three is a detailed account of my methodology, data collection process, and an overview of my data analysis and the resulting codes and themes. In chapters four and five I lay out my findings from this study; chapter four includes cross-case findings for each participant, and chapter five brings these findings together in a discussion of cross-case themes as they address my three research questions. Finally, in chapter six, I discuss the limitations of this study as well as its implications for critical literacy scholarship, literacy teacher education, K-12 education, and future research.



## **CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framing & Literature Review**

A framing and review of myself: “I identify professionally as a critical literacy teacher, a teacher of teachers, and a teacher of teacher educators. I was not, however, born this way, nor did these identities spontaneously emerge the day I got my first high school or university teaching positions. Rather, these professional identities are composites of a lived and living history, a snippet of which I relayed in the prologue of this piece. Collectively, I am the daughter and sister of teachers, I went to public school in the rural south for 13 years, my teacher preparation program was a lateral-entry Master’s degree (a non-traditional approach with no education undergraduate preparation) in an urban teaching program, my first years in the classroom were in a “struggling school” in Brooklyn, my first two UMD TA positions were with critical teacher educators whose practice I admired, and my PhD coursework and interests found me in almost as many courses from the minority and urban education program as my own literacy track.

All of these experiences—as well as the contexts in which I’ve put myself and the people within those contexts—influence my professional identity, and the beliefs, values, and understandings I hold about teaching. In turn, my identity influences and informs the pedagogical and didactic choices I make in my classrooms, and my context provides a variety of supports I can leverage and challenges I must face in order to enact my identity and beliefs into practice. In this dissertation, I seek to understand these same processes in high school ELA critical literacy teachers: how have they come to embody a critical literacy teacher identity, how do they attempt to translate that identity in their classroom practice, and what supports and/or challenges

do they encounter on the road to this enactment? This chapter serves as a foundation for this exploration, and encompasses my theoretical framing and a review of the literature.

My framework for this study is a natural extension of the education autobiography I detail above: it combines approaches to identity and critical literacy in ways that help guide my understanding of my participants' identities, pedagogy, and pedagogical supports and challenges. After first explaining this lens, I then review the work of existing critical literacy and teacher identity scholars in order to orient my study's place in the greater conversation about critical literacy education, educators, and their practice.

## **Theoretical Framing**

### **Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is a theoretical framework in its own right, and is the first of two primary lenses I combine for this study. Critical literacy research has a rich history that theorizes, describes, and defines "critical literacy" slightly differently across publications and applications. To conceptualize my own approach to this study, I pull these existing theories into conversation and draw a throughline across their commonalities. These commonalities shape my critical literacy framing around two main perspectives: 1) nothing is neutral, and 2) the goal of literacy is to disrupt dominant norms making it a vehicle for social change.

At an epistemological level, critical literacy is grounded in the understanding that "what counts as knowledge is not natural or neutral; knowledge is always based on the discursive rules of a particular community, and is thus ideological" (Cervetti et

al., 2001, Comparing Examples section, Table 2). This creates a theoretical foundation that assumes that no text is neutral and no reader is neutral. Rather, texts and readers each have political foundations and are impacted by unequal power dynamics and a variety of perspectives, and it is the goal of the reader to be aware of this lack of neutrality in texts and read for/with/against it (Janks, 2014; Stevens & Stovall, 2011).

Critical literacy's insistence that nothing is neutral is derived largely from two major influences: critical social theory and Paulo Freire's pedagogical approaches (Cervetti et al., 2001). Critical social theory contends that "meanings are always contested (never givens), and are related to ongoing struggles in society for the possession of knowledge, power, status, and material resources" (Cervetti et al., 2001, Critical Literacy Approaches Section, para. 2). Further, these struggles are experienced inherently unequally because a white wealthy ruling class has always maintained control over social systems and institutions like education (Morgan, 1997). The implications of these critical social theoretical understandings of knowledge and power for literacy are twofold: one, they mean that texts produced and reproduced by the ruling class will always represent dominant ideologies; and two, accordingly, it is important to question the representations and ideologies that inherently exist in these texts. This means that questions about who constructed texts, for what purpose and in whose interest texts are created, and whose perspectives are present and absent become imperative through a critical literacy lens (Morgan, 1997).

Paulo Freire deepened this connection between critical social theory and literacy by centering language and literacy at the heart of social justice initiatives and



the liberation of oppressed peoples (Freire, 2000). Most critical literacy theorists consider Freirean pedagogy and theory to be the inception of critical literacy (i.e. Janks, 2013). Freire noted that the ruling classes' conceptions of knowledge and literacy is what holds value in schools, which means that the expectation of traditional school-provided literacy instruction is to uncritically reproduce dominant texts and language that continue to help concentrate power in the hands of that ruling class. To disrupt this cycle, Freire called for a critical approach to literacy that involved acknowledging that texts and language are not neutral, and harnessing the power of language and texts to re-shape worlds in ways that better serve people's needs and build towards liberation (Freire, 2000). The Freirean stance frames critical literacy as a means to critical consciousness-raising (2000), and positions critical literacy education "as part of a problem-posing education in which the relations between hegemony, power, and literacy are questioned" (Rogers, 2014; p. 242).

Freire's understanding of literacy as a liberating force for critical consciousness-raising underlies the role of critical literacy as a tool for social justice; in order to achieve social justice goals, critical literacy necessarily disrupts dominant norms. To do so in literacy classrooms, it seeks to both reveal and repeal structures of oppression inherent within traditional school curriculum (Giroux, 1987), and create curricular justice by changing what texts, literacies, and perspectives are made visible and valuable in classrooms (Comber, 2015). The process of creating curricular justice helps counter normative assumptions made about marginalized and oppressed populations in traditional texts (Wood & Jocius, 2013), and also guides students of color to both engage with and counter dominant ideologies (Morrell, 2008).

In sum, my critical literacy framing in this study centers on the ideas that neither texts nor people are neutral, that literacy education as an institution currently perpetuates Eurocentric dominant literacy forms, and that the goal of literacy education is to disrupt this perpetuation. This lens requires me to approach my study participants, their identities, and their teaching as the disrupters of dominant literacy ideology. This is also why the study as a whole assumes that participants will encounter pedagogical challenges: curricular justice requires revising and critiquing the normative assumptions and traditions of the very institution in which teachers are operating, which is a tricky business to say the least.

### **Teacher Identity**

“Teacher identity” fully emerged as a unique research area in the 1990s, and has been studied broadly ever since. In their seminal review of teacher identity literature, Beijaard et al. (2004) reviewed over a decade’s worth of teacher identity literature from 1988 to 2000, and concluded that, while a straightforward overarching “definition” of teacher identity was impossible, teacher professional identity has four common, essential features. First, teacher identities are in an ongoing state of development. As teachers continue to learn and grow and practice their profession, their identity consistently shapes and reshapes in ways that are not fixed or predictable. Second, teacher identity includes both the person (the teacher) and the context. Every teacher approaches the profession with a unique background, specific knowledge, and personal beliefs and expectations. These selves interact with the various contexts of school—including students and classrooms, professional relationships with peers, school mandates, and larger state policy mandates—to create

meaning and outcomes. Third, a teacher identity consists of a variety of sub-identities that generally harmonize and vary in their significance and centrality to the teacher's sense of identity. For example, a high school English teacher might identify as an author, a schoolteacher, and an activist, and all of these sub-identities will contribute to her teacher identity and pedagogy. Fourth, personal agency plays a central role in ongoing teacher identity; professionally developing is an active process, as is deciding how to move knowledge and beliefs into pedagogy (Beijaard et al., 2004).

I frame my understanding of identity development in this study using Beijaard et al.'s (2004) four essential characteristics applied specifically to teachers who identify as critical literacy educators. In order to understand my participants' critical literacy teacher identities, I will need to understand each of the Beijaard et al. (2004) characteristics in specific relation to critical literacy: from where did their critical literacy understandings come and how have those understandings evolved over time? How has their current context influenced their critical literacy identity? What other beliefs and teacher selves interact with and support their critical literacy identities? How does personal agency interact with contextual supports and limitations to influence instruction?

In addition to thinking about how teacher identities are formed, it is also important for me in this study to consider what teacher identity actually is and means, and how teacher identities inform the way teachers make choices in the classroom. In her work with literacy teachers' teacher identities, Betina Hsieh defines teacher identity in the same way I envision it for this study: as being composed of the perspectives, beliefs, approaches to teaching, and commitments that make a teacher

both distinct from other professional identities and a particular type of teacher distinct from other teachers (Hsieh, 2010; Hsieh, 2016).

An example of how Hsieh defines and studies teacher identity in a way that informs my own investigation is her 2016 case study focusing on the professional teacher identity formation of three preservice teachers. In this case study, Hsieh (2016) describes Sophia, a novice English teacher. As a young girl living in Costa Rica, Sophia loved reading in Spanish with her mother, and then, upon moving to California and being placed in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom, felt supported by patient and kind ESL teachers who helped her develop literacy in English. As an adult preservice teacher, Sophia's articulated model of good teaching included teachers with the same descriptors as her own childhood ESL teachers and she felt a strong pull to work with English language learners, which in turn ultimately led to her professional identity as an ESL teacher (Hsieh, 2016). In the case of Sophia, personal life experiences informed beliefs about teaching and about students, which in turn created a teacher identity. I aim to study the critical literacy identities of participants in this study similarly to the way Hsieh explored Sophia's identity: investigate experiences connected to beliefs about critical literacy in order to understand how participants' critical literacy teacher identities are formed, and then move one step further to explore how these identities inform classroom pedagogy.

### **Theoretical Approach to Critical Literacy Teacher Identities in Practice**

In this study I combine theoretical perspectives of critical literacy and teacher identity to frame my understanding of critical literacy teachers' identities, pedagogy, and pedagogical supports and challenges. Adding a critical literacy perspective to

understanding teachers' identities leads me to explore where in their histories they adopt disruptive, non-neutral beliefs about the role of literacy education. Further, critical literacy's emphasis on power, relationships, and perspective requires that I examine instances of participants' reflexivity, or the way they "question their own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions to strive to understand [their] complex roles in relation to others" and to their students (Bolton, 2010, p.13). In turn, a theoretical approach to teacher identity that views it as constantly shifting in response to context and agency-in-context will help me better explore teachers' critical literacy ideas and pedagogy as developmental works-in-progress that are constantly shaping and shaped by interactions with time and place.

## **Literature Review**

### **Researching Teacher Identities**

In terms of exploring the development of teacher identity formation, there is a general agreement that teacher professional identity is multifaceted and always evolving, but from there the teacher identity literature can otherwise be divided into three categories: literature that focuses on personal elements of teacher identity formation, literature that focuses on teacher preparation's impact on identity formation, and literature that focuses on the impact of teachers' local contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004). Literature centering personal factors' impact on professional identity include examining how factors like emotions (Nichols et al., 2017; Reio, 2005), resilience (Day, 2018; Pearce & Morrison, 2011), and biographical experiences (Oleson & Hora, 2013) contribute to identity development. Literature that focus on the impact of teacher preparation examine how attitudes and beliefs about

the profession emerge and develop (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Chong & Low, 2009), and the role that mentorship plays in initial professional identity development (Izadina, 2015; McIntyre & Hobson, 2016). Finally, literature that comments on the relationship between identity development and context includes both an examination of school-based factors (Proweller & Michener, 2004; Reeves, 2009) and also larger socio-political contexts like school reform mandates (Buchanan, 2015; Lasky, 2005).

Unlike many of the above studies that examine one specific aspect of teacher identity development, my aim in this study is to examine how the multiple facets of teacher identity—from biographical experiences to teacher preparation to current contexts—combine to create a critical literacy teacher identity and in turn inform critical literacy pedagogy. There are a few studies that consider all or most of the identity development constructs highlighted in Beijaard et al. (2004) and Beauchamp and Thomas (2009)—specifically understanding identity as constantly developing, as being influenced by context, as interacting with other sub-identities, and as involving agency—that serve as empirical foundations for my own study. Though such a study of critical literacy teachers’ identities does not yet exist, specifically, I outline three relevant studies below that investigate other kinds of teacher identities and explain how they inform or parallel my work.

***Proweller & Mitchener, 2004; Intersecting Factors***

In order to better understand how working with urban youth and having nontraditional backgrounds impacted new teachers’ identity development, Proweller and Mitchener (2004) studied the urban middle school science teacher identity development of 15 teacher interns in an alternative certification program. Similar to

my proposed study, this study theorizes teacher identity as “the interrelationship between biography, personhood, and experience,” and is interested in content-specific teacher identity development (p. 1045). As students in an alternative certification program, all of the study participants had prior degrees or careers related to science, a range of prior education and professional experiences, and a range of ages (24-57) that made for an interesting study of identity development. The researchers used a series of three 45-minute interviews, weekly seminars, and classroom observations to learn more about participants’ prior education experiences, prior professional lives, perceptions about schools and urban students, and ongoing experiences in their classrooms.

Proweller and Mitchener found that participants’ emerging urban middle school science teacher identities were “as much about who these beginning teachers are and the experiences they have had with science as it is about what they come to know and understand about their students” (2004, p. 1049). Specifically, the researchers found that all participants came to the program with preconceived ideas about teaching science and about teaching urban students based on their own prior life experiences. Then, as these participants interacted with their students and began trying to be science teachers, understandings about the real needs and realities of their students continued to shape their identities as middle school science teachers of urban students. For example, as he learned more about a local housing project in which many of his students lived that was slated for demolition, one participant, Larry, decided to tailor his environmental science class to help his students better understand aspects of the near future of their community, and what their responsibility might be.

These two influencing factors—the personal backgrounds and the student interactions—became inextricably linked as defining influences on the new teachers’ developing identities. Proweller and Mitchener make note of the specific relationship between biography and current context, pointing out that identity development seemed to be at an intersection of the new teachers’ experiences, the urban youth being served, and the required standards-based orientation to teaching that their curricular requirements mandated.

Though there are differences in subject matter between this study and my own and I am not limiting my study to new teachers, Proweller and Mitchener (2004) serves as an important model of investigating content-specific teacher identity development. The study explores participants’ lived science experiences as a critical factor of their science teacher identity development, and then works to deeply understand how ongoing contexts and teaching contribute to the evolution of that identity. This parallels my own approach to examining the intersection and interaction of multiple sources of identity development with critical literacy educators, with a focus on biography and current context. Proweller and Mitchener only briefly mention broader contextual factors like science curricular reform in their study which I will spend much more time on as I work to understand the challenges and supports associated with moving teacher identity into practice, but their approach to understanding content-area identity as an evolving, multifaceted thing is an important precursor to my work.

***Richardson & Alsup, 2015; The Significance of Context***



Similar to Proweller and Mitchener (2004), Richardson and Alsup (2015) examines a very specific type of teacher identity versus studying teacher identity more broadly. However, whereas Proweller and Mitchener focused on new teachers' identity development, Richardson and Alsup chose to examine the online teacher identity development of seven experienced teachers becoming online course instructors for the first time. Data were collected via a survey and two interviews at the beginning and end of the teaching semester, and the participants represented a diverse background with exposure to online instruction ranging from none, to being an online course participant, to being trained to implement online learning.

Richardson and Alsup approached their qualitative investigation of online teacher identity development using Beijaard et al. (2004) as a framework in a similar way that I do in this study: as a lens for approaching identity development and as a thematic comparison during data analysis. They discovered eight sub-themes specifically related to online teacher identity that mapped onto the Beijaard et al. (2004) essential identity characteristics, and concluded that online teacher identity development has specific characteristics that make it distinct from other types of teacher identity development. Specifically, Richardson and Alsup note that becoming an online instructor involves re-thinking or deconstructing and re-building previously held conceptions of what effective teaching and learning are; for example, most study participants noted that being an online instructor required reconsidering how to develop student relationships and how to effectively translate previously held beliefs about what it means to be a teacher—like the importance of humor and student interaction—into a new teaching context. Additionally, Richardson and Alsup note

the influence of institutional factors, specifically course control, on the teachers' online teacher identity development. All seven participants, even those with fully prescribed courses, felt that they had at least some control over their course and viewed both guidance from mentors and the ability to make changes as important factors in developing their online teacher identities and online teaching pedagogy.

Richardson and Alsup (2015) examines the impact of specific aspects of context, including curricular control and peer/mentor support, in the same way that I aim to investigate the contextual supports and challenges faced by critical literacy teachers. Additionally, Richardson and Alsup note that "if teacher identity is related to the core of the teacher in their particular context, one could say that it also impacts their decision-making" (p.158). This conclusion parallels a foundational assumption linking the three research questions of my study: that teacher identity is formed from a variety of factors, and then is filtered through the challenges and supports of a specific context to inform classroom decision-making and pedagogy.

***Olsen & Buchanan, 2017; Narrated Identities in Practice***

A final empirical study that parallels and informs my own is Olsen and Buchanan's (2017) investigation of the identities of 16 teacher educators from four universities. Similar to my own definition, Olsen and Buchanan operationalize teacher identity as a lens that includes "multiple parts of each teacher educator's biography, professional preparation, and career history" that in turn "shape(s) how each teacher educator underst(ands) and enact(s) his or her work" (p. 10). Like Richardson and Alsup (2015), Olsen and Buchanan conducted two semi-structured interviews per participant and collected program documents from each institution for

artifact analysis. They approached their investigation of teacher educator identity through a sociocultural lens, viewing professional identity development as a constantly evolving interaction between person and context. The study also used ecological systems theory which understands individuals as existing inside multiple interacting social systems to understand teacher educators' identity development across the contexts of k-12 schooling and higher education.

From the 16 study participants, Olsen and Buchanan selected two—Estela and Lucy—to narratively profile in detail as models of how “teacher educator identities are differently shaped, reinforced, and influenced by both the vagaries of a life and the competing worlds of k-12 schools and the university” (p. 20). The descriptive narratives of these two study participants serve as models for how I plan to profile my own teacher participant cases and reflect a detailed investigation into participants' biographies, thinking about teaching, teacher preparation, and current experiences as teacher educators. For example, when explaining the identity formation of Lucy, Olsen and Buchanan begin biographically, detailing at length about the educators in Lucy's family and her early perceptions of education, her k-12 teacher preparation and teaching career, and her Ph.D. and higher education experiences. The narrative then shifts into an explanation of how Lucy's current context, her hopes for receiving tenure, the limitations of her program's structure, and the broader constraints of the state licencing credentials that served as challenges to her attempts to translate her teacher educator teacher identity—in terms of her beliefs and pedagogical dispositions—into classroom practice with preservice teachers. Olsen and Buchanan ultimately conclude that teacher educator identity is actually the sum of four sub-

identities that combine to create a singular professional identity and influence pedagogical approaches to working with preservice teachers.

Olsen and Buchanan's study is a parallel to my own in several ways, including the examination of biography, teacher preparation, and career history to understand teacher identity, and the use of narrating participants' lives and experiences as a way to explore identity and report data. I plan to look more intensely at my participants' current context than Olsen and Buchanan did in order to more deeply explore how biography, preparation, and beliefs about teaching are filtered through context to inform pedagogy, but their connection between identity and pedagogy lays an important foundation for my own study. Additionally, the finding that teacher educator identity is a conglomeration of four sub-identities is an interesting possibility for my own investigation of critical literacy teacher identities.

### **Critical Literacy in Schools**

The deeply contextual, lens-based approach of critical literacy is both important for student literacy and for the overall goals of social justice, but can also be difficult to use and teach in k-12 in schools and in teacher preparation programs. First, because critical literacy is so localized and is a lens as opposed to a skill, there is not nor can there be a "how-to" guide to help students and teachers develop their lenses (Freire & Macedo, 2005). For new teachers in the preparation phase of their careers, this can be challenging and scary. Not only is the idea of teaching students to "develop a critical lens" an abstract idea in a time where there are so many concrete things to learn and do to prepare to teach, but it is also just difficult. Preparing teachers for critical literacy requires a significant amount of training and positioning,

which programs often do not include (Lewison et al., 2002). Then, when novice teachers go into classrooms where more traditional approaches to literacy are often in place, they do not have the opportunity to learn and apprentice with strong models because critical literacy is not ubiquitous in current k-12 classrooms and curricula. Further, critical literacy is not required or even mentioned in the Common Core (Moore et al., 2014), which is often what guides teacher preparation and planning due to its pervasiveness in schools and connection to many standardized tests.

Lewison et al. (2002) followed ten novice and newcomer teachers on their journey to becoming better critical literacy educators. These teachers received eight months of critical literacy professional development including workshops, study groups, and conference attendance on top of their teacher preparation, and newcomers—those with no prior knowledge about critical literacy education—were able to initiate critical conversations around books but unable to move towards disrupting commonplace beliefs (Lewison et al., 2002). For teachers without all of this extra support, the results are likely similar at best, if teachers ever encounter the idea of critical literacy in the first place. Further, doing critical literacy work in the classroom requires ongoing knowledge about the relationships between people, places, texts, and power, meaning that the work of a critical literacy educator is constantly changing and evolving (Comber, 2015). Again, this preparation and relevancy is part of what makes critical literacy education so exciting and valuable, but also what makes it so difficult to enact in classrooms (Dozier et al., 2006).

Further, as a result of standardization and high-stakes testing, “many districts and schools devote significant resources, time, and personnel to the

compartmentalized teaching and learning of literacy as a separate and distinct set of technical and functional knowledge” (Beaudry, 2015, p. 3). The response to pressure to perform well and produce results in this hyper-standardized era is often prescribed curricula that are aligned to standards, which can make critical literacy education difficult or at least seem difficult to teachers. Zacher-Pandya (2012) examined the results in one fourth grade classroom of a boxed curriculum specifically designed to teach critical literacy, and found that although the curriculum called for a more student-centered approach and the teacher attempted to make it happen, the scriptedness of the process led to students spending more time focusing on following directions and getting confused about which step in the plan they should be on than developing critical literacy skills. In a setting where student-centered approaches were not the norm, an abrupt transition led to a “pressure to conform to the cycle...[that] drained the process of any potential for the development of critical literacy skills, as the teacher and the students were more interested in following directions than they were in asking questions of and about texts” (Zacher-Pandya, 2012, p. 24). The results of this study confirm what several others and common sense all suggest: that critical literacy is important, but that the uptake is a learning curve that requires skill, training, and preparation for both teachers and students is crucial (Brannon et al., 2010; Lewison et al., 2002; Dozier et al., 2006). Unfortunately, though numerous research studies indicate that the time and attention required to introduce and prioritize critical literacy education is important and has the ability to counter standardization harm (Ávila, 2012; Ávila & Moore, 2012; Moore et al.,

2014), and should be an important initiative in schools (Brannon et al., 2010; Comber, 2015), schools still are not doing so.

The good news is that even in spaces where certain curricular elements are required (yes, including The canon), critical literacy is theoretically completely compatible. The four main tenets of critical literacy—social justice goals, the assumption that no text or person is neutral, that it is a lens and not a prescriptive approach, and that it disrupts commonplace narratives and interrogates multiple viewpoints (Clark & Whitney, 2009; Freire, 2000; Vasquez et al., 2019)—are applicable to any text or set of texts as long as teachers and students are willing and able to supplement with counternarratives, culturally responsive texts, and multi- and local literacy forms. Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) points out that critical literacy and traditional literacies are not mutually exclusive, and many critical literacy educators successfully combine the two. For example, it is possible to develop curricula that allow students to critique dominant discourses and texts alongside practicing traditional literacy skills using more traditional novels, or use traditional forms through a critical literacy lens like assigning a standard research paper with real-world use in order to affect social change (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014). Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) provides a table of questions to guide critical literacy pedagogy specifically with canonical texts, and uses John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937)—a traditional, canonical text found in high school curricula across the United States—as an example of how to guide students in challenging canonicity while reading from The canon and also addressing skills like literary elements.

Although critical literacy requires effort, training, and intention on behalf of schools, teachers, and students, it does *not* require the complete overhauling of curricular elements and resources like research papers, books and textbooks. In fact, critical literacy education's aim of interrogating the power and perspective in texts actually requires dominant texts and viewpoints to be available for interrogation, making it a very compatible approach to literacy to incorporate into practice. In order to understand and speak to power, students have to be able to access and read that power. It is like an extension of Audre Lorde's (1983) assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house": by giving students access to the master's tools (texts), but teaching them to critically evaluate and re-envision the techniques of those tools and the house itself, we can guide them down the path to disrupting and dismantling all of the houses. The lack of emphasis on critical literacy in most teachers' preparation and praxis is what makes this study's interest in better understanding how talented critical literacy educators' identities have developed over time so interesting. The more we can understand about what life and education experiences nourish an educator's tendency to be critical literacy educators, the better prepared we will be to help other educators do the same.

### **Critical Literacy Pedagogy**

Behrman (2006) conducted a literature review of classroom practices that support critical literacy in late elementary and secondary classrooms from 1999-2003 that serves as the most recent "state of the field" of critical literacy instruction (p. 491). Behrman's review returned 36 articles that were categorized based on student activity or task into the following six categories: reading supplementary texts, reading



multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing countertexts, conducting student-choice research projects, and taking social action (2006). These six categories serve as the foundational “critical literacy educator moves” that I used to identify critical literacy educators in my recruitment materials, and also formed a framework for my own literature review of more recent literature.

To think about my study’s examination of critical literacy teachers’ classroom practice, I conducted a review similar to Behrman (2006), but focused exclusively on classroom practices that support critical literacy in secondary classrooms because of this study’s focus on secondary educators. My review returned 20 pieces that reveal four main characteristics of critical literacy pedagogy (CLP). My final four categories include elements of all of Behrman’s original six findings with a couple of categories being condensed due to similarity, and are: (1) CLP incorporates supplementary/multiple texts, (2) CLP teaches the explicit practice of reading critically and resistantly, (3) CLP includes reading and creating counternarrative and resistance stories, and (4) CLP encourages students to think towards and take social justice action. My review also revealed the importance of community supports in the enactment of CLP. I discuss each of these first four categories immediately below, and review the findings surrounding educator supports in the final literature review section, “Enacting critical literacy identities in practice: Challenges and Supports.

### ***Supplemental and Multiple, Multicultural Texts***

Behrman’s (2006) first two characteristics of critical literacy in practice—the use of texts to supplement curricular requirements and the use of multiple texts to capture multiple perspectives—were also the most frequently utilized pedagogical

choices in my own review of recent literature. Supplementing and adding multiple texts to prescribed a curriculum, especially when that curriculum is canon and dominant-voice heavy, is an important way to both give students access to dominant literacies and texts while also providing them with multiple perspectives, counternarratives, and culturally relevant counterparts to help with the critical reading of dominant voices.

Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) call specifically for the inclusion of urban fiction and multicultural literature for curricular inclusion because these genres typically present diverse representations of the world and diverse students' lived realities. The article offers a number of examples of what these texts could look like in practice, including a novice teacher's use of *First Crossing*—a collection of first-person narratives about immigration from youth perspectives that touches on a variety of topics ranging from racism to self-image—alongside political cartoons and newspaper articles ranging from 1854 to the present to facilitate discussions about immigration and how immigrants have been treated throughout our country's history (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). Stevenson & Beck (2017) also make a case for multiple multicultural texts as a way to help students see themselves and their cultures in learning spaces. In a summer school program specifically designed to support migrant students of Mexican descent, students were asked to read and critique representation in young adult novels, over two dozen picture books, and a documentary (many of which were multilingual) that all represented the lives of migrant farmworkers before creating their own new counternarratives about migrancy (Stevenson & Beck, 2017). In both examples, reading multiple and multicultural

representations of identities allowed students to not only see themselves represented in classroom texts, but to also critique the provided representations, and use that critical reading to create new texts of their own that speak back to power and identity.

Pahl & Rowsell (2011) also make a case for including multiple texts, but extend the definition of text to include multimodal forms and a focus on “artifactual literacy” or literacy grounded in items and spaces that have meaning. The article offers up the critical-literacy-in-praxis example of mixing artifacts and multimodal forms as literacy supports for a group of “struggling” students as they read Homer’s *The Odyssey* (199AD). While the class was reading and dissecting the classic text, they were also creating and producing their own films about a journey which in turn helped them draw “meaning and relevance from a by-gone text like *The Odyssey* by harnessing parts of lived history and dispositions to the epic” (Pahl & Roswell, 2011, p. 144). Many critical literacy scholars point to the value of using media and other multimodal texts in the classroom (e.g. Ávila & Moore, 2012; Janks, 2013; Luke, 2012; Turner & Griffin, 2019), and Rogers (2002) additionally points out the value of using multiple relevant texts and media representations in order to ease students into critical literacy for the first time. Because identity is so central to critical literacy education but also so personal and sensitive, using a variety of relevant and relatable multimodal texts that are close to students lives without being students’ stories can be an important step in building students’ critical literacy lenses. (Rogers, 2002).

Finally, several articles point to multiple and multicultural texts as a way to balance the dominant narratives offered in traditional curricula. Critical literacy

teachers have supplemented Mark Twain with Tony Morrison to examine ideas about what it means to be “American” (Wolfe, 2010), used hip-hop and counternarratives to unpack race in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Martin, 2014), and paired *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* with media and articles about the Dakota access pipeline to better understand Indigenous perspectives (Behizadeh et al., 2019). What all of these teachers illustrate is that one of the key aspects of critical literacy education is interrogating power in texts, and supplementing dominant narratives with a variety of perspectives. In addition to having students read and write their own and their peers’ perspectives, the other best way to achieve these goals is to consciously seek out multiple voices and perspectives via a variety of texts and a variety of different representations within and across them.

### ***Reading Critically from a Resistant Perspective***

While it is important to present students with a variety of texts and voices, a variety of forms and functions does not, alone, equal critical literacy. Once students have been provided a variety of texts they must be taught to read the texts with criticality and resistance as a lens. In thinking through the pedagogical possibilities surrounding a critical literacy reading of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men (OMaM)*, Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) create a matrix of critical literacy-aligned guiding questions for each “traditional” dimension of literary study (canonicity, literary elements, assessments, etc) that help students read both with and against the text. For example, while reading *OMaM* and addressing canonicity, students might be guided to read with the text by considering why *OMaM* and other texts are deemed important for high schoolers to read and who gets to make such distinctions; when addressing

literary elements students might be guided to read against the text by considering how characters from historically marginalized populations are treated in the text and whether the plot and themes challenge or support normative ways of thinking (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014). The authors also point out that interrogating texts also requires students to sometimes “read against their own personal connections [and] to consider how aspects of their own identities—especially their own positions of power and privilege—factor into their experiences with a novel” and include questions to guide that interrogation (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 130). This method of creating a set of questions designed to guide students in a critical interrogation of texts is adaptable across texts and contexts, and is a good method to help students begin to read texts through a critical literacy lens.

Sun’s (2017) case study of a teacher’s experiences reading Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis* with an urban eighth grade class reveals a similar use of critical and interrogative questions designed to guide students’ thinking and reading. In the study, students discussed, wrote in reflective journals, and posted online their developing responses to questions about the portrayal of women, the representations of childhood, the politics, and the debates around torture and patriotism represented in the book; they were also asked to explicitly consider how the book challenged or expanded ideas that they had about things like women wearing veils and war. As students moved through the text, they were also asked to translate these questions and their critical thinking into written pieces investigating human rights and conflicts in their home countries or around the world in ways that “examined and questioned [students’ presumptions] through engagement with representations of otherness”

(Sun, 2017, p. 27). Questions that promote criticality and encourage students to interrogate different representations are always helpful as students continuously develop their critical reading lenses, and can be created for any text as long as the key assumptions that no text is neutral and power is always at play are kept in mind.

Camangian (2013) describes the process of motivating students to read texts and their worlds critically “arousing critical curiosity,” and, although they do not all have question protocols attached like Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) and Sun (2017), most studies of critical literacy explicitly involve the arousal of this critical curiosity as a necessary part of critical literacy education. In Enciso (2011) critical awareness formed the basis of students’ ability to use storytelling as an in-the-moment response to systems of power; Bender-Slack’s (2010) investigation of 22 novice secondary teachers’ enactment of social justice in ELA classrooms found that the majority of teachers’ primary concern was attending to inequalities of power in texts; the 11th grade student of focus in Ávila & Moore’s (2012) critically evaluated a timeline of MLK’s life in a local newspaper and an MLK speech before completing a letter-to-the-editor task. What all of these examples collectively indicate is that, as seems fairly obvious, in order to have a critical literacy lens students need to be able to be critical. Accordingly, it is teachers’ jobs to curate texts, discussions, activities, and assessments that help develop that critical approach.

### ***Counternarratives & Resistance Stories***

Counternarratives and resistance stories play an important role in critical literacy education, allowing students whose identities are not represented in master narratives to see previously invisible stories that match their own experiences, and

students from across identities to learn about other cultures and perspectives. Additionally, counternarratives help challenge their dominant counterparts that serve to dismiss, render invisible, or devalue certain identities (Goodman & Cocca, 2014). Reading counternarratives is an important way to bring traditionally silenced voices into the classroom. Traditional approaches to curriculum, especially curricular elements that involve history and literature, are steeped in dominant white, male, middle-class stories: we teach history from the point of view of the “winners” and we teach overwhelmingly white male authors and write in “standard” (read: “dominant Eurocentric”) English (Wolk, 2013). Bringing in counternarratives helps challenge these uni-dimensional stories by adding more voices, allowing the Indigenous, the enslaved, the female, the Spanish speaking, the LGBTQ+, the differently abled, and all of the other marginalized “others” to have a place at the table. Counternarratives also come in a variety of multiliterate genres and forms that themselves counter dominant standards: for example, oral histories, alternative news and media sources, bilingual and non-English texts, and students’ local literacy forms all hold voices and perspectives that simply do not show up in many curricular texts (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Janks, 2013; Stevenson & Beck, 2017). Having access to multiple voices and viewpoints not only allows students to see themselves in, feel more comfortable in, and feel more connected to school (Stevenson & Beck, 2017), but also provides them with points of reference to critique and critically engage with dominant texts and narratives in meaningful ways (Camangian, 2015).

In addition to reading counternarratives, creating counternarratives is a way for students to reclaim their voice and speak back to power and oppressive systems;

the creation is a way to for students to harness their “productive power” in response to dominant power and claim their voices (Janks, 2000). After working with two ELA classrooms full of 12- and 13-year old immigrant and non-immigrant youth to document their storytelling practices and cultural knowledge, Enciso (2011) concludes that “storytellers are responsive in the moment to orders of power, so that their tacit knowledge of social norms and relations can call forth their cultural knowledge and symbolic repertoires” (p. 38). Through the act of counternarrative telling, marginalized youth are able to use their own cultural and linguistic capital, the very lives they live and the spaces they occupy, to add their identities into the dominant institution that is school (Saunders, 2012). They are then able to sit these identities next to dominant texts to create a fuller, more accurate picture, and alongside other counternarratives to create community and strength.

Counternarratives can also be performed when students’ embodied critical literacies (dress and talk, for example) do not fit with the dominant expectations of school (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012).

### ***Critical Literacy for Social Justice Action***

In every popular definition of critical literacy—and in the extended definition used in this dissertation—creating space for students to challenge and take action in response to oppression is a necessity. Action is important to social justice education, and has played a central role in contemporary understandings of critical literacy education from the start, when Paulo Freire (2000) decided that critical literacy was the key not only to peasant farmers learning about their oppression, but to rising up and challenging their oppressors. Hilary Janks’ (2000) interdependent framework for



critical literacy education relies on the balance of domination, access, diversity, and design, with the “design” piece referring to what she calls “productive power” or students’ ability to generate new meaning and challenge and change existing discourse (p. 177). Although theoretical critical literacy almost unanimously includes calls to action, empirical critical literacy literature the “action” piece is a bit more difficult to find. This may be in part due to the fact that the particulars of social action, like all parts of critical literacy pedagogy, look different depending on the students, texts, time, politics, and cultures at play, making it harder to study. It may also be due to the fact that guiding students towards taking social justice action against dominant norms within the bounds of education—a system that is currently rooted in and perpetuating dominant norms—is tricky. This trickiness aside, examples do exist in both classrooms and in research.

The creation of counternarratives as detailed above was the most commonly cited type of critical literacy social justice actions described in the empirical literature (i.e. Behrman, 2006; Stevenson & Beck, 2017). In addition to counternarratives, a few other specific social justice action projects were found in my review of research on critical literacy pedagogy. For example, Ávila and Moore (2012) make an argument for the possibility of employing a critical literacy lens to pedagogy while also using Common Core standards by examining a letter to the editor activity in a Washington State classroom. To evidence their argument, they use the example of “Alexis,” who writes a beautiful letter to the *Seattle Times* editor critiquing a recently published timeline of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life. In her letter, Alexis addresses a handful of Common Core Standards and “move(s) past connection and into social

commentary,” and in doing so practices “literacy-in-action and arguably, the beginning of pushing for fairness of representation, an aspect of social justice” (Ávila and Moore, 2012, p. 31). Along the same lines of pushing for fairness of representation, Janks (2013) explores the critical literacy underpinnings of the student-led push for the inclusion of a Mexican American Studies curriculum in Arizona, and Bender-Slack (2010) describes political activism in the literacy classroom via the creation of editorial cartoons and protest letters. A couple of examples also extended outside the bounds of critique and into the bounds of international culture-sharing, such as the intercultural exchange letters detailed in Myers & Eberfors (2010). In short, although the forms look different across time, context, and class, tapping into students’ voices and power to speak back to dominant forms and oppression and to share knowledge, cultures, and stories is a key aspect of critical literacy theory that does show up in research investigating educators’ critical literacy pedagogy.

### **Enacting Critical Literacy Identities in Practice: Challenges and Supports**

Critical literacy scholars have repeatedly noted that current school curricula are normative, and that existing literacy initiatives do not examine ideologies or acknowledge the inherently political and politicized nature of texts (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002). The lack of a prescriptive “how to” guide for critical literacy education (Freire & Macedo, 2005) coupled with its absence from standards, curricula, and preparation programs (Brannon et al., 2010; Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002), results in a large burden of responsibility on teachers to take up and execute this important work in classrooms. This means that literacy teachers who want to

enact a critical literacy lens to their teaching have a lot of learning and unlearning about the dominant norms and teaching methods usually used to teach literacy (Zacher-Pandya, 2012), which is ongoing, rigorous, and time consuming work (Dozier et al., 2006).

Although we know that critical literacy has the ability to counter the harm induced by standardized measures (Ávila & Moore, 2012), many teachers are still operating within the confines of standardization, which has the potential to present challenges between what is expected and what teachers feel is actually best for their students. , but then may also face external challenges to their social justice goals even as they do the hard personal work of planning and enacting pedagogy. In a study of the social justice literacy teaching experiences of 22 secondary teachers in 15 different schools, Bender-Slack (2010) found that “participants reported recrimination from administrators, censor-ship from parents, and pressure from standardized tests and predetermined, rigid curriculums, causing them to negotiate their teaching of social justice within a number of power struggles” (p. 195). These findings, along with the known challenges of learning and un-learning entire ways of thinking and teaching, place the challenges to critical literacy across several contextual levels: at the personal level as teachers work to develop their own pedagogical tools, at the school level as they face administrative preferences, and at the broader systems level that leverages hurdles like prescribed curricula and standardized assessments.

On a positive note, critical literacy research does suggest that there are supports that can be put in place to help blossoming critical literacy educators on their pedagogical journeys. The earliest form of teacher support, of course, comes in the

form of preservice preparation. Saunders (2012) explores how novice student teachers' placements can foster the creation of critical literacy identities. Saunders spent several months of one school year in a "regular" class with a student teacher—Ms. Morgan, who had a stated commitment to equity and a "receptiveness to progressive teaching and critical theory"—who was placed with a cooperating teacher (Ms. Bacon) who had complementary ideals (2012, p. 19). These two teachers felt marginalized from the rest of the English department due to their teaching beliefs, with Ms. Bacon even musing to her students that perhaps their placement in the school building (away from everyone else on the third floor) was because she would not agree to teach what everyone else was teaching. However, despite what was happening elsewhere in the building, Ms. Morgan was able to practice critical literacy pedagogy and took over her classroom earlier than the other peers in her cohort in the same school because she had a like-minded and critically-oriented cooperating teacher (Saunders, 2012). Because cooperating teachers and other teacher preparation mentors can significantly impact the thinking and practice of their mentees (Clarke et al., 2014), Ms. Morgan's identity as a critical literacy educator was solidified and then reinforced under the mentorship of Ms. Bacon in ways that would have looked very different had she been placed with another mentor teacher even within the same school.

The coursework side of teacher preparation can also serve as a valuable site for critical literacy support, as evidenced in Wolfe (2010). The 14 preservice teachers of focus in this study were all instructed to plan and implement a unit focusing on critical and multicultural literacy in their student teaching placements, and with the

support of several classes, an instructor, guided reflection, and each other, all were able to successfully plan and (except one, who was denied implementation by a cooperating teacher) implement units featuring student identity negotiation, student ownership, critical perspectives, and resistant reading (Wolfe, 2010). Additionally, even when not required to use critical literacy the following semester, over half still included elements of critical literacy pedagogy in their teaching indicating that exposure and support help teachers successfully implement critical literacy lenses in their classrooms.

Finally, support is also important for in-service teachers to continue to evolve their critical literacy practice. Kathleen Riley created an adolescent literacy education study group consisting of five teachers from five different schools across one large urban area in order to create and better understand this kind of in-service support (2015). The group met bi-monthly for a year and used an inquiry process to talk about everything from beliefs and classroom vision to text selection to pedagogical choices, and throughout the process they were constantly working on their own positionality and identities (Riley, 2015). Like the preservice teachers in Wolfe (2010) and Ms. Bacon as a mentor in Saunders (2012), this literacy group created a space where like-minded educators could come together in collaboration and support of critical literacy practices. Given what we know about the significant impact of peers and teaching context on teacher identity, this support is important in helping teachers develop, refine, and implement their critical literacy beliefs into classroom practice. The repeated theme of peer- and school-based supports as being important to the translation of critical literacy teacher identity into pedagogy in the literature

underscores the importance of exploring participants' perceived supports and challenges to critical literacy pedagogy in my own study.

## **CHAPTER 3: Methodology**

This research was a qualitative multiple case study designed to explore the identities and pedagogy of five secondary English teachers who identify as critical literacy educators. It sought to answer the following questions about these five participants:

1. How do participants' lived experiences inform their critical literacy teacher identities?
2. How do participants' critical literacy teacher identities inform their critical literacy pedagogy?
3. What supports and/or challenges do participants face when implementing critical literacy pedagogy, and how do they navigate challenges?

### **Case Study**

Case study offers the opportunity to do “intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, p. 9-10), and is a good methodological choice for studies that ask questions designed to develop a deep understanding of how one or more individual cases illuminate a phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007). Collective or multi-case studies involve investigating multiple bounded cases to study a single phenomenon, which allows for the ability to look for patterns across cases and increase credibility (Barone, 2011). The phenomenon this study sought to deeply explore and illuminate is how some teachers come to be critical literacy educators, and I used a collection of individually bounded cases (self-identifying critical literacy educators in the 2020-2021 school year) to create this understanding.

In addition to boundedness, Merriam (1998) outlines four other necessary case study characteristics: case studies must have a particular focus, they must be richly descriptive, they must enrich understanding of the chosen focus, and they must be inductive. In this study, I focused on the teacher identities of self-identifying critical literacy educators, my approach to understanding teacher identity required rich, in-depth descriptions, and the data analysis process included inductive analysis. Case study has a significant history in literacy research dating back to the 1950's and is a demonstrably effective way to gain understanding of literacy practices, making it an appropriate choice for the study of critical literacy teacher identity and practice (Barone, 2011; Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

## **Participants**

### **Recruitment**

I used purposive criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) to recruit and select participants for this study. I sent a brief study description including study purpose and research questions, as well as the criteria for critical literacy teacher self-identification (explained in detail below) to people I know with current in-service secondary literacy teacher connections. This list included twelve former teacher colleagues, six doctoral peers, and two members of my dissertation committee. I also posted a study announcement in three relevant Facebook groups, including the DC Area Social Justice Educators, Teachers of ELA, and Secondary Social Studies Teachers Collaborative groups. Finally, I identified one potential participant through a multi-stage word-of-mouth process starting with a non-education friend. I recognized early on that my past experiences as a teacher and teacher mentor meant I might personally



know potential participants. To reduce the possibility of friends or former colleagues feeling compelled or pressured to participate, I made an early recruitment decision to not directly recruit any participants but to send everyone the same pre-recruitment materials asking for help identifying potential participants. Once potential participants were connected with me over email, I sent them the recruitment materials.

In this study, self-identification as a critical literacy educator was the predetermined criterion of importance for participation (Patton, 2002), and potential participants were provided with a definition and common traits of critical literacy education in order to self-select (the full recruitment email can be found in Appendix A). My participant-facing recruitment description of a critical literacy educator was “someone who values teaching students to read and write texts with the purpose of evaluating multiple perspectives and critiquing power.” This definition included two of the most important and recurrent key ideas in critical literacy scholarship: the first, understanding and interrogating power, has been central to the development of contemporary critical literacy research since Freire (2000); and the second, “evaluating multiple perspectives,” has the potential to include several important critical literacy ideals such as incorporating multicultural, multimodal, and counternarrative voices and texts (Behizadeh et al., 2019; Stevenson & Beck, 2017). The ‘common traits of critical literacy education’ I provided for participants to review drew from Behrman’s (2006) review of critical literacy classroom practices and include the use of supplemental, multimodal, and multicultural texts; the use of narratives and counternarratives; student choice in research projects; social action as

an instructional goal; and the presence of resistance and/or non-dominant perspectives.

In the recruitment communication I asked that potential participants agree that they hold both values mentioned in the definition and regularly (at least once a week) incorporate at least two of the common traits of critical literacy education in their classroom instruction. The purpose of these criteria was to ensure that participants shared the widely agreed upon values of critical literacy education, and to serve as a screen for teachers who occasionally do one or two critical literacy elements but do not consider critical literacy to be an integral part of their teacher identity (Wolk, 2003). Together, these definitions created a baseline for potential participants to gauge their fitness for the study; then, once participants were selected I asked them to elaborate on their reasons for self-selection and on their own definitions of critical literacy education in interviews. As this study was interested in secondary ELA teachers' critical literacy teacher identities, all secondary (seventh to 12th grade) literacy (English and/or social studies) educators who self-identified with the provided critical literacy educator definition and pedagogical requirements were eligible to participate in the study.

At the end of the recruiting process, I was connected with and emailed recruitment materials to 16 interested teachers. Of these 16 initial connections, three responded that they did not feel they were a good fit for the study based on the recruitment criteria, three responded that they did not have time to participate in a study, and one did not respond to my email. This left nine participants who self-identified as good participants for the study and returned a signed IRB forms.

Once data collection began there was some study attrition. Two of the nine initial IRB respondents never completed the initial survey and therefore did not begin the interview phase of the study, and one participant completed two of the three interviews before he stopped responding to emails in early December. This left me with a total of six study participants who completed the entire data collection process (signed IRB form, initial survey, three interviews, and the submission of teaching artifacts, compensation for participation). Of these six study participants, one was excluded from this dissertation due to lack of fitness in relation to the study criteria. After three interviews I determined that this participant, though clearly a hardworking educator and a kind human, neither actually identified as a critical literacy educator nor had discernible evidence of critical literacy pedagogy in her stories, descriptions of pedagogy, or submitted teaching artifacts. Some of the specific reasons for her exclusion include the fact that she mentioned participating because she wants “to participate in studies and help people...get their research done,” the fact that she found the study via someone whose opinion she respects and is “the type of person to be like, ‘you want me to do this, I’ll do it because I value what you’re saying,’” and because she viewed participation as an opportunity to learn, grow, and reflect (which is wonderful and I hope the study provided these opportunities for her, but does not make her a critical literacy educator). I finalized my decision to exclude this participant from the study after a conversation she and I had after the insurrection and attempted coup at the US Capital building on January 6, 2021. She mentioned not talking about the incident with her students because she felt it was “too controversial” and she did not feel comfortable having that conversation in her classroom, which I

decided was antithetical to the stance a critical literacy educator would take. Her removal from data analysis left five final study participants.

### **Participant Overview**

The five participants in this study are all female English teachers who were between the ages of 23 and 40 and who worked in urban high schools filled with majority minoritized student populations in five different cities across the United States at the time of data collection. Four of the five participants identify as white, and one identifies as Indo-Caribbean Asian.<sup>1</sup> All participants are native English speakers, with one participant being bilingual in Spanish, and another being bilingual in Patois. Four of the five participants were complete strangers to me before the recruitment process, and one was a friend and former colleague who self-identified with the study description when I sent it to her and asked if she knew any educators who might be qualified to participate. Table 1 provides a snapshot of each participants' basic demographic and teaching placement information at the time of data collection including age, race, their postsecondary path to teaching, number of years in the classroom, school location, school type (public/charter/private), the courses they teach, and whether they learned about critical literacy in their teacher preparation. Participant introductions are otherwise brief here because chapter four, "Intra-Case Findings," offers an extended dive into each individual participant.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, here, that there was an attempt to recruit a diverse set of teachers for this study, and that the participant who did not finish data collection was a male who self-identified as mixed-race, and a female who identified as Latina. While it would have been potentially insightful to have more racial, cultural, and gender diversity in this study, the final sample is also (though accidentally

**Table 1***Participant Demographic and Teaching Information at the time of data collection*

	Chloe	Amelia	Ellen	Ayana	Sofia
Age	23	29	31	32	40
Race	White	White	White	Asian (Indo-Caribbean)	White
Post Secondary Education/ Path to Teaching	Education bachelor's	Education bachelor's; education master's	Education bachelor's; education master's	English bachelor's; English master's; Education master's	English & gender studies bachelor's; education master's, English master's
Years in the Classroom	1	7	8	8	16
School Location	Lower Midwest	Northeast	Mid-Atlantic	Northeast	Mid-Atlantic
School Type	Urban Fine Arts Charter School (9-12)	Urban Public Middle/High School (7-12)	Urban Public High School (9-12)	Urban Public High School (9-12)	Urban Public High School (9-12)
2020-2021 School Year Courses	9th & 10th grade ELA	9th grade ELA, 7th grade literacy skills	9th/10th ELA for ELL students, Social justice elective (9-12)	11th grade AP language	AP seminar, AP research, AP language (10-12)
Learned about Critical literacy in initial teacher preparation?	Yes	No	No	No	No

**Positionality**

I am a white female educator, a former high school teacher, and a writer, which are all aspects of my identity that impact this study and have already popped up at various points throughout this proposal. The entirety of my doctoral purpose centered upon learning how I could have been a better teacher for my former students—especially considering my position as a white teacher working with only

minoritized students—and in turn thinking about how I can take that knowledge and create better, more responsive literacy educators for future students as a teacher educator. I strongly believe that critical literacy is an important approach to high school literacy pedagogy, and I also believe that many teachers would be better, more critical and socially just educators if they were better prepared and knew how (if I were not hanging strongly on to this hope there would be no purpose in conducting this research). As a teacher, much of my best and most progressive learning came from other teachers working within and against structural barriers to do critical and social justice literacy work. Accordingly, the underlying beliefs and goals of this study were born of my own learning experiences: critical literacy educators are out and practicing, and we need to find them and learn from them.

There is debate about the correct balance of insider/outsider status as a qualitative researcher, and what constitutes the preferred amount of closeness (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer Buckle argue that there is a “space between (that) challenges the dichotomy of insider versus outsider status,” and it is in this in-between space that I believe I lived in this study (2009, p. 60). On one hand, I approached the study with the insider perspective of someone who was recently in the classroom. Along with that kind of insider status came both the knowledge to ask about and the ability to commiserate with factors like the impact of standards and standardized testing, as well as preconceived notions given my experience with those factors. Being a former urban literacy teacher also gave me an instant point of interpersonal connection with all of my participants, and it showed up throughout the interview process in a variety of ways. It seemed like participants felt

comfortable critiquing education as a whole, discussing challenges with administrators and colleagues, and talking through pedagogy because they felt like I would understand; I believe data collection, specifically surrounding pedagogical challenges, would have looked different if I had never been in a classroom, or if I had been an administrator.

The flip side of the space between insider/outsider status is the fact that having experience with or “holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). My participants’ and my shared identities as high school educators—or in one case, former colleagues—meant that sometimes participants assumed common experiences and understandings. For example, in interview three Amelia referred to being in “survival mode” as a first year teacher and then said, “you know what I mean!” Similarly, in interview two, Ayana—a former colleague of mine—referenced an administrator we both knew, and then said “well you know what it was like.” Such incidents occurred at least once per interview, and I had to be vigilant about identifying them and seeking clarification on participants’ statements.

In order to check these biases that came from my “in between-ness,” I took three specific steps throughout data collection: (1) I included multiple data sources and member checking from participants, as member checking is a way to help guard against issues of vulnerability and inaccuracy, especially when representing participants’ identities (Seidman, 2006). (2) I asked scholar peers to review my interview protocols for presumptive or assumptive elements in order to help avoid what Yin (2018) refers to as “bias due to poorly articulated questions” (p. 157), and

performed cognitive interviews for my survey tool (Willis, 1999). (3) I kept an ongoing researcher journal for analytic memoing where I noted my observations and thoughts for ongoing review and reflection. I memoed constantly throughout the data collection and analysis process, with memos reflecting on my relationship with participants, data, the topic, the process, and emerging themes and patterns being particularly helpful for identifying bias (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Setting**

The setting of my data collection—virtual Zoom meetings—was inconsequential to the study. The setting of my participants’ schools, however, was not, and deserves a brief note. All of my study participants were urban high school ELA teachers at the time of data collection, and all had plans to remain so. Only two suburban educators responded to this study (and no rural), and neither of these potential participants wound up participating. This could be due in part to my recruitment process—many, but not all, of the social networks I tapped into for recruitment mostly held connections in urban and suburban areas—but could also be due in part to the type of educator that critical literacy as a pedagogical choice and/or teacher identity attracts. Either way, my recruitment process resulted in five participants who teach in five different urban schools, with all five schools serving students populations that are either entirely or majority low-SES and represent minoritized racial and cultural identities.

Because context is an important factor when thinking about teacher identity *and* critical literacy pedagogy (Beijaard et al., 2004; Olsen, 2008), it was important for me to remember throughout data collection, analysis, and presentation that I was



working with participants who were in urban schools with multilingual, multicultural, and multiracial students. My participants' teaching settings impacted not only what critical literacy pedagogy they enacted, ranging from the text perspectives represented, to the assignments they gave, to the ways they encouraged students to enact power in action. For example, Chloe was able to give her students the option of creating counter-narrative texts because they are students who represent non-dominant identities, and Ellen was able to encourage her students to lobby the district superintendent for a required social justice elective course because of their perspectives as students who would be represented in the course. A study of critical literacy educators featuring teachers who only or primarily worked with white students from mostly high-SES backgrounds would likely look very different from this one because of the discrepancy in participants' teaching contexts, and is something I mention in the implications for future research in Chapter 6.

### **Reciprocity and Potential Benefits**

There were no direct benefits to participants of this study. I did, however, compensate each participant with a \$100 gift card as a thank you for their participation (\$25 per completed interview, and \$25 for curating and submitting artifacts).<sup>2</sup> As a former teacher I can attest to being overworked and underpaid, and so it was very important to me to provide a tangible benefit of participation to honor the time, attention, and energy participants gave to my research over the course of the study.

### **Consent, Confidentiality, and Potential Risks**

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<sup>2</sup> The participant who completed the data collection process but was not a viable candidate for inclusion also received full compensation, and the participant who ceased participation after the second interview was compensated \$50 for his first two interviews.

There was minimal to no known risk involved in participation in this study. Because of the possibility that some participants might have felt uncomfortable talking about topics like race or their administrators, I both included in the consent form and reiterated at the start of each interview that participants were at liberty to not answer any questions they did not want to answer, or to stop participating at any time. Participation consent was obtained via an IRB-approved consent form, and participants had the freedom to rescind their participation at any point during the study (which one did by ceasing to respond to emails).

To protect participant confidentiality, all electronically signed consent forms are stored in a password protected electronic drive and will be destroyed after the IRB-required ten years; there were no paper consent forms. All data, including interview audio, interview transcripts, all teaching artifacts including student work, email correspondences, and researcher notes/analytic memoing is stored in a password protected electronic drive. Finally, to protect the identity and anonymity of my participants, pseudonyms were used for all participant names, their school names, their cities, their students when applicable, and any potentially identifying names of organizations in this dissertation, and will also be used in any publications or presentations resulting from this work.

### **Methods and Data Collection**

This research used a multiple-case study methodology, and pulled from three sources of data: a survey, interviews, and teacher artifacts. Three of the most prolific case study methodologists—Yin (2018), Merriam (1998), and Stake (1995)—approach the defining and understanding of case study in slightly different ways, yet

all three agree that interviews are a cornerstone case study data source. Having two primary sources of data (interviews, and artifacts) informed by an initial participant survey also ensured that I had enough quantity and variety of data for triangulation and thick description and, therefore, increased validity (Merriam, 1998).

Once teachers agreed to participate in this study and signed the IRB consent form, I emailed them a basic demographic and background GoogleForm survey. This survey can be found in [Appendix B](#), and it served to inform some of the questions I asked in the semi-structured interviews (for example, at the beginning of interview one I quoted participants' provided definition of critical literacy from the survey and asked them to expand or further explain that definition). After I received participants' surveys, data collection occurred in four stages: (1) an initial interview focusing on background and identity development, (2) a second interview focusing on current context and its role in critical literacy beliefs, (3) artifact collection and analysis, and (4) a follow up interview focusing on pedagogy and pedagogical choices. I further explain each of these phases of data collection below.

One of the major perks of doing a multi-case study versus a single-case was the ability to adjust and improve data collection throughout the process based on notes, noticing's, and emerging patterns (Yin, 2018). In order to do this, and to help make both data collection and analysis iterative across cases, throughout the entirety of data collection and analysis I consistently wrote analytic memos to reflect on and process the data, informed by the bulleted list of analytic memo reflection items in Saldaña (2016, p. 53). This list included items such as how I personally related to the participants, emergent patterns and themes I was noticing, possible emerging answers

to the research questions, and any problems or personal dilemmas I was having with the study. These memos helped me process my own relationship to the data, make connections across sources and other memos, and identify problems or new approaches (like adding a new interview question) that needed considering (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout the interviews I took field notes about my thinking and about non-verbal elements like participants' Zoom backgrounds, moods, and body language. These notes further helped me process my thinking, and also helped contribute to the thick description necessary for case studies (Montero & Washington, 2011; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). All interviews were recorded both for transcription purposes and so that I could focus more on writing field-notes and planning follow up questions while interviewing. A summary and description/rationale of each of my data sources is found in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Summary, description, and rationale of data sources*

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
Survey	30 multiple choice and five short answer questions, administered electronically via Google Forms	To collect basic demographic information about participants, their past education experiences, and basic beliefs about critical literacy and teaching
Interview 1	A one-hour, semi-structured conversation that took place over Zoom	To learn about participants' biographies, education histories, and beliefs about/reasons for teaching literacy
Interview 2	A one-hour, semi-structured conversation that took place over Zoom	To learn about participants' current school contexts and thinking about pedagogy
Interview 3	A one-hour, semi-structured conversation that took place over Zoom	To learn about participants critical literacy pedagogy and their perceptions of critical literacy supports/challenges
Artifacts	Lesson/unit plans, student work samples, and teaching materials (i.e. powerpoints/discussion guides, etc)	To serve as further evidence of participants' pedagogy, and to provide me (researcher) pedagogical examples to follow up on/ask

	submitted by participants as evidence of their critical literacy pedagogy between interviews 2 & 3	participants to more deeply explain
Member Checks	Each member received access to all of their raw data, transcribed interviews, and their personal Chapter 4 “Intra-Case” subsection (the section written about them)	Member checks allowed each participant to see and provide feedback on how I was portraying her identity and pedagogy and what conclusions I drew from analyzing our conversations,
Researcher Memos	Journaling and notes taken after all the initial surveys were collected, immediately following the conclusion of each interview, while I reviewed participant artifacts, and throughout data analysis.	Memoing consistently throughout this study allowed me to continuously refine my data collection tools (particularly the semi-structured interviews); keep track of my thoughts, wonderings, and noticings; and note emerging patterns/trends/themes within and across participants

### **Initial Survey**

The initial survey consisted of 30 multiple-response and five short-response questions (see Appendix B), and was designed to provide me with basic demographic data of my participants, as well as a general and demographic overview of their families, education experiences, teacher preparation, and current job placement. For each of the institution subcategories (schools/programs attended and current job placement), the survey requested information about the size and perceived diversity of the subcategory/institution. The purpose of the initial survey was to provide me with basic information about participants’ identities and education experiences, and to give me a starting place for questions and follow-ups in the semi-structured interviews.

To refine my survey tool I solicited educator feedback and conducted cognitive interviews (Willis, 1999). After drafting the initial survey, I sent copies of it along with the research questions and goals of the study to eight currently practicing ELA and social studies teachers who I thought might self-identify as educators ‘who

value teaching students to read and write texts with the purpose of evaluating multiple perspectives and critiquing power' for feedback (I only sent the definition and not the list of pedagogical traits for the purposes of gathering data collection tool feedback). Five of the eight responded, identified with the same critical literacy descriptor that was used to recruit participants, and suggested content and clarity edits; for example, I initially had one open ended survey question that read 'List or briefly describe the people or experiences that most influence(d) your teaching,' and one reviewer responded that I should make two questions for both parts because if she were taking the survey she would be more thorough if asked about past and current influences separately. Another reviewer had questions about standards: initially in question 25 I only asked about whether or not participants are required to reference/use the Common Core in their placements, and she responded that she is actually beholden to two separate set of standards and that I might get a better response if I added in other options. In total, I made 12 adjustments to the initial survey based on these recommendations.

Following the round of recommendations I conducted cognitive interviews with the survey tool with one current and two former educators. I used the steps from Willis' (1999) "how to" guide for cognitive interviews including asking participants to read and interpret the meaning of questions as well as explain their interpretation of certain key words like "diversity." The cognitive interviews resulted in several phrasing changes and the addition of an interview question about how participants were thinking about "diversity" in the survey when they were answering questions

about it. All of the survey adjustments I made are reflected in the final initial survey and interview protocols found in Appendices B and C.

## **Interviews**

The primary way I sought to understand my participants' backgrounds and critical literacy teacher identities was through interviews, as the goal of interviewing is "understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Methodologically speaking, interviews were the best and most important data collection tool for me for an obvious reason: teachers' lived experiences, biography, teacher preparation, and current context socioculturally inform their teacher identities, and the only way I had to access to these experiences and stories was through interview.

### ***Interview Purposes and Content***

My three-interview process was guided by Seidman's (2006) "in-depth, phenomenologically based interviews" that use open ended questions that guide participants to reconstruct their life experiences and the meaning those experiences hold (p. 15). This specific interviewing process uses a series of three separate interviews to explore participants' experiences with a specific topic: interview one largely investigates life history, interview two concentrates on present lived teaching experiences, and interview three is a reflexive connection between past experiences and current context (Seidman, 2006). In this study, the "specific topic" was critical literacy identities and pedagogy, and I used the series of interviews to explore how teachers' critical literacy identities were developed, how they thought about enacting their critical literacy identities into practice, and how they navigated barriers and

supports to critical literacy pedagogy in the classroom. The creation of my identity-focused interview questions was guided by the essential features of teacher identity from the Beijaard et al. (2004) review of teacher identity (identity as constantly evolving, dependent upon person and context, consisting of sub-identities, and requiring agency), as well as the topics covered in Bartolomé's (2004) interviews with critical educators (life journeys that led to teaching, views about and experiences with students representing non-dominant identities, personal school experiences as students, experiences with non-White people growing up, conceptions of effective teaching, and conceptions of student learning). I also referenced the questions found in Richardson and Alsup's (2015) study of online teacher identity because this study directly parallels my own and also uses Beijaard et al. (2004) as a framework for understanding identity and for data analysis.

In order to collect as much detailed data from participants as possible, I intentionally used Seidman's (2006) qualitative interview techniques of listen more/talk less, follow up but do not interrupt, ask for reconstruction and not remembering, ask for details, explore laughter, and allow silence. Listening more allowed me as an interviewer to be present in three ways: listening for understanding and for seeing where I wanted to ask for more detail, listening for instances of "public voice" where participants were using guarded language and I wanted to push to hear the "inner voice's" less guarded explanations, and listening to keep the interview focused, energetic, and timely (Seidman, 2006). These three levels of listening contributed to an ability to ask specific follow-up questions to gently draw out inner voice thoughts and seek more detail when needed, as well as the chance to recognize



places where I could ask participants to reconstruct memories with concrete details and perspective instead of just remembering general facts or outlines. Finally, as with teaching, wait time is everything, and allowing participants significant time to think about their responses and be the ones to break the silence sometimes led to information that would not have surfaced if I had always been quick to jump in with follow-ups or clarifications.

All interviews were semi-structured to allow for thoroughness and follow-up questions, and lasted between 54 and 72 minutes in length. I spent the first interview with each participant understanding their own definitions of critical literacy, and eliciting stories about their families, communities, and formative education experiences. The interview questions common across all participants addressed a handful of formative literacy identity topics drawn from Olsen's (2008) identity construction diagram and Bartolomé (2004), including teachers' secondary literacy experiences, literacy teacher preparation, reasons for teaching, and experiences with critical conversations. I also asked specific questions of each participant based on their initial survey responses. For example, for participants who reported reading almost entirely canonical texts in high school on the initial survey, I will asked them to recall their ELA experiences: what did they read in class? What assignments did they do? Do any specific memories from class stand out? Finally, at the end of each initial interview I specifically re-stated my research purpose of wanting to understand the identity construction of talented critical literacy educators. After doing so, I asked participants to share anything in their life biography that influenced their identity that did not come up as a result of the questions I asked. The goal of the first interview

was to better understand participants' thinking about critical literacy, their critical literacy biographies, and the factors that were most influential in the development of their critical literacy teacher identities.

The second interviews centered on details of teachers' current lived experiences with critical literacy (Seidman, 2006). In these interviews I asked participants to share stories about how they came to teach in their current schools, their students, their administration, their beliefs about good teaching, and how made teaching decisions. I also asked each teacher about if/how they were addressing certain sociopolitical topics through a critical literacy (i.e., the 2020 election, the Black Lives Matter Protests, the January 6 insurrection at the US Capital, etc.) and how COVID-19 was impacting their teaching. To close each second interview I asked participants to verbally reconstruct at least one recent lesson or unit in which they felt like a particularly strong critical literacy teacher. Again in this round of interviews, a set of common questions formed the outline (see Appendix C) but I also included unique questions per participant from surveys and initial interviews. The purpose of the second interview was to gain an understanding of how critical literacy educators felt about and functioned as educators in their current contexts.

The third interview took place after I read through and memo-ed about participants' provided artifacts. This interview revolved around asking participants to describe/talk about their provided artifacts and reflexively connect their critical literacy identities to their current and future practice. For each participant, interview three opened with a question about how they understood critical literacy's role in their teaching. I then asked specific follow-up questions about their artifacts, and

about how their school contexts influenced their ability to enact their teacher identities into pedagogical practice. In this interview I asked participants to make sense of how their lived literacy experiences and critical literacy identities have gotten them where they are as educators (Seidman, 2006). During this reflective process I asked participants about the supports and challenges to critical literacy pedagogy that they have encountered, and how they navigate the challenges.

Finally, in terms of curating interview questions, it is important to note that I intentionally chose to not directly ask participants about the potentially power-carrying aspects of their identities like race, and/or how they viewed the impact of these identities on their relationships with their students. I made this choice in an effort to see if and how these identities came up organically in participants' thinking, and in an effort to reduce the possibility of artificial reflexivity (i.e. a participant considering the impact of pieces of their teacher identity like race only because I ask and not because such reflexive thinking actually organically impacts their identity development and/or curricular choices). Such direct questions definitely have a place in research surrounding critical literacy teacher identities, but fell beyond the scope of this particular study which sought to understand the conscious development of self-identifying critical literacy educators' identities and pedagogy.

### ***Interview Process Feedback and Revision***

After drafting the initial interview protocols, I sent copies of them along with the research questions and goals of the study to eight currently practicing ELA and social studies teachers who I thought might self-identify as educators 'who value teaching students to read and write texts with the purpose of evaluating multiple

perspectives and critiquing power' for feedback. (I only sent the definition and not the list of pedagogical traits for the purposes of gathering data collection tool feedback.) Five of the eight responded, identified with the same critical literacy descriptor that were used to recruit participants, and suggested content and clarity edits; for example, interview #2 initially contained a question asking participants to 'tell me about your first group of students,' and a reviewer suggested I be more specific and ask about their first ELA classes. She indicated that for her, the answer to those two questions would be different, and the latter would be more helpful given the research questions and the information I was hoping to gather. Another reviewer noted that I used the word "diversity" quite a bit and wondered "whether or not a personal understanding of diversity would skew your results. For example, if I'm defining diversity as *X* and answering your questions with that definition, but 5 other participants define it as *R* and answer with that definition in mind, it seems like there might be some discrepancies in your results" (Anonymous Reviewer Email Communication).

Accordingly, I added in a space in interview one to ask participants to define diversity in relation to their survey responses. In total, I made six adjustments to interview questions based on recommendations. The adjustments I made are reflected in the final initial survey and interview protocols found in Appendices B and C.

### **Observations**

Though originally involved in my conception of this study, I did not conduct observations for a few reasons related to COVID-19. First, all of my participants were conducting remote instruction due to the pandemic throughout data collection except for one (Chloe was in her classroom after a day of in-person teaching during our first

interview; however, the following week her school moved fully remote). I considered observing teachers in whatever mode they were conducting their online sessions (i.e., participating in Zoom classes or Google classroom sessions), but in the end I felt that this would cause undue stress on both the teachers and students who were all already dealing with the social, emotional, and academic stress from a less-than-ideal and far-cry-from-normal school year.

To compensate for no observations, I decided to extend the length of my interviews to allow for more time for descriptions of and conversations about pedagogy, and to collect more artifacts as evidence and triangulation data to answer RQ's two and three concerning teachers' perceptions of their critical literacy pedagogy and barriers/supports to implementation.

### **Artifacts**

Artifacts add a data source that helps with triangulation and validity, especially in the absence of observation data. In literacy-based research, artifacts usually mean physical evidence of literacy instruction, learning, and practice, and I collected them as further evidence of participants' critical literacy instruction (Purcell-Gates, 2011). I asked participants to share at least two units of teaching that they felt was indicative of their critical literacy pedagogy. To accompany those units, I also asked them to share as many lesson plans and class materials with anonymized student work samples from the units as they felt comfortable. I read and wrote analytic memos about participants' artifacts prior to interview three in order to ask follow up questions about the artifacts.

### **Member Checks**

After each participants' individual case findings subsection was complete (their full, final subsection found in chapter four) I shared a folder with them that included all of the raw data, transcripts, my notes and memos from our conversations, and their participant writeup with analysis for member checking. Member checking is the act of taking data—in this case transcribed interviews and interpretation of artifacts—back to participants for confirmation of accuracy and credibility (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In his member checking process for interviews, Seidman (2006) shared with participants any material that involved them with the specific purpose of checking to see whether or not it made them feel vulnerable or inaccurately presented. I followed this precedent in my own member checking process because this study sought to understand and portray participants' identities and pedagogy which are very personal things (Seidman, 2006). Further, the accuracy of my analysis and conclusions depended on the accuracy of my recounting of participants' identities and pedagogy, so I wanted to be sure I was capturing these faithfully.

Unsurprisingly, no participants gave feedback on the raw data, and none chose to redact or change any of their interview responses. All five participants, however, read their individual case writeups and either commented in the document or emailed me afterward. After reading her writeup, Ellen left a couple of document comments correcting a few details from two events that I had misunderstood and accidentally conflated, and then sent me an email thanking me for the writeup and offering me further details about one of her narrative assignments that she thought would be useful to include. Similarly, Amelia read her writeup and sent me an email agreeing with the findings and offering another conversation/situation between her and her

colleagues and her administration that she thought would help further evidence some of the findings. Ayana, Chloe, and Sofia also emailed to confirm the accuracy of their narratives and the corresponding analysis, and did not offer any revisions or further supporting documents/information.

## **Data Management and Analysis**

### **Management**

All signed IRB consent forms, field notes and memos, interview recordings, interview transcripts, and artifacts were collected/taken electronically. All electronic consent forms, data, and notes were then stored in a password protected GoogleDrive account. I used a password protected folder in NVivo (a coding software program) to store and work on data analysis and coding. In this dissertation and in any publications/presentations resulting from this study, all identifying information including participant names, school names, cities, and potentially location-identifying programs will have pseudonyms or parenthetical descriptors in lieu of names to protect the identities and privacy of participants.

### **Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing and iterative across data sources, and began with my own analytic memoing after each interview. Because each interview in a participants' three-interview process built on the previous interview (in terms of follow up questions), I transcribed each interview as soon as possible and began analysis immediately (all were completed within a week of the interview taking place). All transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo where I conducted my coding because of the software's data organization, thematic sorting/viewing, and

visualization tools. Artifacts and memos were also uploaded into NVivo to allow for the grouping and highlighting of themes across sources throughout analysis. I used the constant comparative method in order to help identify and develop patterns throughout the data collection and analysis process versus all at once at the end (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Before coding each interview, I read through the full transcript at least twice to get a feel for the participants and the stories they were telling (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). After these initial readings, my data analysis process proceeded in three phases across two cycles: cycle one included a first, deductive analysis pass of each individual case followed by a second, inductive analysis pass of all cases to look for patterns and themes both within and across participants (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). The second cycle consisted of axial coding and thematic collapsing to identify connections between participants' critical literacy identities, pedagogy, and pedagogical challenges across cases (Saldaña, 2016). A final code deck from the three phase process is found in Appendix D.

For the first round of coding I used deductive codes derived from my frameworks and research questions to be able to collect relevant aspects of data together. I chose to begin with deductive coding as a way to sort my data into categories pertaining the “big ideas” of my research questions—critical literacy identity, critical literacy pedagogy, and pedagogical supports/challenges—and also as a way to ensure that my analytical process was being guided by my theoretical approaches to critical literacy and identity and not by my own perceptions of these terms or my interactions with participants. These codes included the four



characteristics of teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004), the four common traits of critical literacy pedagogy derived from Behrman (2006) and my own follow-up literature review, and the codes “pedagogical challenges” and “pedagogical supports” in order to address research question three. This resulted in 11 deductive codes. I used all 11 deductive codes to analyze the five short-answer questions on the initial survey, the interview transcripts, and my researcher memos, and I used the critical literacy pedagogy codes on participants’ artifacts. I did not analyze participants’ member checking.

In the second round of coding, I used structural inductive coding and theming the data to look for patterns and themes within each of the larger deductive codes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Saldaña, 2016). For example, the “supports” and “challenges” deductive parent codes gained sub codes of “individual level,” “school level,” and “institution level.” I also intentionally added two deductive codes borrowed from critical discourse analysis—“grammatical agency” and “framing agency”—under the “navigating pedagogical challenges” parent deductive code after realizing that the way my participants talked about experiencing and navigating pedagogical challenges nearly always involved power dynamics and school-level positioning (Souto-Manning, 2019). I inductively coded the short-response portions of the survey, all interview data, my researcher memos, and all participants’ provided artifacts. The inductive round of coding resulted in 47 new codes across the 11 parent deductive codes. Finally, I used axial coding to “strategically reassemble” the codes and themes from the first two rounds of coding using my research questions and frameworks as a guide (Saldaña, 2016, p. 244). These final reassembled categorical

themes were then used to outline the subsections of Chapter 5, my cross-case findings.

## CHAPTER 4: Intra-Case Findings

In this chapter I present findings for all three research questions by individual study participant. Each participant has their own sub-chapter, and the sub-chapters are ordered by participants' years spent in a classroom (with the most novice teacher being first, and the most senior teacher being last). Each participant sub-chapter is organized into a series of sections featuring narratives collectively curated to demonstrate the development of that participants' teacher identity and beliefs over time in their own words (answering RQ1: "how do participants' lived experiences inform their literacy teacher identities?") Each narrative is accompanied by my analytical perspective, as well as pedagogical examples of critical literacy in practice that are reflective of the teacher identity demonstrated in the corresponding narrative (answering RQ2: "how do participants' literacy teacher identities inform their literacy pedagogy?"). I frame and discuss participants' pedagogy through the lens of the critical literacy pedagogy categories established in my literature review. These categories indicate that enacting critical literacy pedagogy includes: 1) presenting multiple and contradictory perspectives, 2) teaches reading critically and with a resistant perspective with an eye towards power and the power dynamics within sociopolitical issues, 3) reading and creating counternarrative, resistance, and multimodal texts, and 4) encourages students to think about action and to use literacy to exercise their voices/power to meet social justice goals. Finally, each participant's sub-chapter concludes with a section specifically highlighting that participants' experiences with pedagogical supports and challenges (answering RQ3: "what

supports and/or challenges do participants face when implementing critical literacy pedagogy, and how do they navigate any challenges?).

It was important to me to try to represent my participants' stories, pedagogical thinking, and identities in their own words in order to help readers get to know them. Accordingly, the data in this chapter are largely presented in block quotes followed by researcher commentary rather than in smaller quotes interspersed throughout, as I felt this format did a better job of presenting my participants' authentic voices and identities. In order to protect my participants and their students, all names of people, schools, school districts, and cities have been either anonymized or removed.

### **Chloe**

*“Critical literacy is a form of critical reading to ask the reader to specifically consider a text’s place in the world, power dynamics, and socio political issues. It encourages the reader to engage in practice to help create a more just society”*

-Chloe

When I logged in to talk to Chloe for the first time she had just wrapped up a day of teaching 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students and was sitting in her classroom, which would have been perfectly normal had it not been early November, 2020, in the middle of the Coronavirus pandemic. While most parts of the United States were fully entrenched in pandemic-induced remote instruction, Chloe was in a place that found her sitting behind her teacher desk after teaching students in-person on a Tuesday afternoon. I immediately had dozens of questions as my brain attempted to reconcile the idea of a place that both produced and supported a self-identifying critical literacy educator (a more progressive idea) but also kept schools open despite public health officials' recommendations during a global pandemic (a more conservative practice).

Given my immediate curiosity about context, we started off by talking about Chloe's environment.

Chloe grew up in what she describes as a homogeneous, rural area of the same state where she still currently lives and works. As a child, her neighborhood, local town, and schools were all nearly completely white, working or middle class, and conservative Christian; there was little in the ways of progressive thinking or diversity. At home, however, progressive thinking was celebrated. Chloe, a white woman, was surrounded by a family that engendered a love of education, learning, and thinking. She describes her parents as having "that white liberal aesthetic," and being very "progressive and politically engaged." She laughed while explaining that their decision to remain where they live is an ongoing mystery to her.

Both of Chloe's parents are highly educated: her mother has a master's degree in counseling and is a licensed professional counselor, and her father holds a doctorate in psychology; both parents were or are teachers/professors. One byproduct of two such highly educated and progressive parents was a household that emphasized education and critical thinking. Accordingly, Chloe was raised in an environment where her family encouraged her to talk about social issues and politics, to think about how to make positive change in the world, to be able to name and recognize power and systemic oppression, and to stand up for herself and for what she believes in. This focus in thinking critically with an eye towards elements of justice laid an important groundwork for Chloe's beliefs about teaching and learning. The rest of Chloe's sub-chapter below is constructed around recounting of some of her formative high school teacher interactions having such a progressive foundation

in such a conservative place, explaining where and how she found critical literacy, and highlighting her pedagogical challenges as a novice educator.

### **Teach Others How You Wish You Were Taught: Identity in Opposition**

Unfortunately, Chloe did not find the same emphasis on critical thinking in her high school, which she described at different points throughout our conversations as being “not great,” providing “no opportunities for critical thinking...or productive disagreement” and “hostile” towards her curiosity:

[I had] some discontentment with the content and the delivery of the content. English was the Classic texts—you know, *Huck Finn* (Twain, 1884) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and *Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925)—and just felt very forced and very much like you have to read this because these are the great things. **And I was like, “why are all these things by white men?” And the teacher was like “we don't talk about that. It's because they're the best.”** And I remember reading [*To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960)] and I was like, “why are we reading this?” And my teacher had like, very much made it about race, said the N-word, the whole thing. So I was like, “hey, number one, that's not cool. Number two, **why are we reading a book by a white person about race?”** And the teacher was like “**this is a Classic book that is well received.**” **And just, there were a lot of dead ends with questions that I had.** So I really grew to hate English in high school, but [my classes] were *all* bad. My biology teacher did not believe in climate change or evolution and would not teach it. Um, and then **my high school government teacher was horribly racist, just very much like, all Democrats are poor and Black**

**and uneducated.** I remember I wrote that in my notes and I took it home because he had it on a PowerPoint and I showed it to my mom and my mom called the principal and the principal was like (imitating a sigh) “what are you going to do?” It was not great (Interview, Nov. 10, 2020).

In this story about her high school experiences, a couple of Chloe’s beliefs about learning and literacy began to manifest. One of these beliefs, stemming directly from the emphasis that her family placed on critical thinking and aspects of power, is that representation matters. As a high schooler Chloe made unprompted evaluations of the literature she was being assigned, and took note of representation problems like reading “a book by a white person about race.” The second, more learned-through-bad-experience belief is that it is important for students to have the skills to critique ideas and texts, and the space to voice those critiques.

Across recountings of her own K-12 learning experiences, Chloe recalled frequently vocalizing the critical thinking she was trained to do at home in the classroom, and being just as frequently silenced. In these recreations of interactions, Chloe consistently shared her use of agency to voice her opinions despite knowing that they would be met with either silence or open hostility. Her attempts to question her learning and voice critiques in class were generally met with “a lot of dead ends” from her teachers, who themselves were usually positioned as perpetrators of hegemonic academic traditions (“we don’t talk about [why we read those books], it’s because they are the best.”) Even when Chloe attempted to circumvent the system by going through her parents—trusted adults that she hoped might be able to wield some power in the face of flagrantly harmful teaching—her attempts were eventually again

thwarted by institutional gatekeeping, this time in the form of an apathetic principal (“what are you going to do?”).

After Chloe relayed a handful of the most egregious of her high school literacy and learning experiences, I stopped to directly ask her if she thought any of these experiences translated into her current teacher identity. Her response was both reflexive and emphatic:

I knew that I deserved more than that. And our students deserve more than that. And, you know, **not only did I personally disagree with lots of the things my teachers are saying, but also there were no opportunities for critical thinking or growth or, you know, productive disagreement.** Um, and so I think just one of the things that influences my class is that, like, especially in that government class I was always very outspoken and like many days went home crying because the teacher made me feel so bad, you know? **And so for me, even in my class when I have students who probably believe differently than I do or might be at a different place, I never want to make them feel uncomfortable or ostracized for those beliefs. So. That's probably the biggest thing is just the feeling of safety in a classroom that was so often lacking for my high school. And the emphasis on critical thinking and social issues that are important moving forward** (Interview, Nov. 10, 2020).

In reflecting on her K-12 experiences, Chloe recognized her own lack of support in classrooms to learn how to think critically and have “productive disagreement,” and flipped this recognition into a priority for her own classroom: to



create an environment with an “emphasis on critical thinking and social issues” where her students feel comfortable having and sharing thoughts. She acknowledged that she will always have students who “believe differently” and think differently than she does, and she noted keeping a deliberate emphasis on fostering a classroom environment that empowers these students instead of suppressing their voices.

As an English teacher whose least favorite subject in high school was English, Chloe held some specific beliefs about representation in text, what students should be reading, and how they should be encouraged to interact with this reading, especially in a diverse school like the one she chose to work in.<sup>3</sup> Chloe’s own interactions with an entirely white, nearly-entirely-male canonical English curriculum whose purpose nobody could explain to her translated into a personal mission to make her classroom a place where a variety of voices are represented. Chloe noted that she “really tries not to choose any white authors if [she] can help it,” (Interview, Nov. 19, 2020) because most of the other English teachers in the school are “very canonical,” so later in her ninth grade students’ education “they’re going to get a lot of white authors” (Interview, Nov. 19, 2020). As a teacher, Chloe reported being able to exert some curricular agency, positioning herself as the one who can diversify her students’ literary experiences by representing a variety of voices in her classroom.

Chloe spoke of text selection as a very active and intentional application of critical literacy, explaining that “if I have to spend time on something that’s Eurocentric white centered, then I try to kind of even that out with one or two other things that are resistance perspectives or a BIPOC voice” (Interview, Nov. 10, 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> The district demographic profile of Chloe’s school in the 2020-2021 school year indicates that it is 38% white, 27% African American, 19% Hispanic, 9% two or more races, 3% Asian, and 4% Indigenous American, with 60% of students receiving free lunch.

Representing a variety of identities and counternarrative stories is an important tenet of critical literacy (Behrman, 2006), and is a charge that Chloe actively accepts in her classroom. An example of this pedagogy in practice is the text and assignment pairings she chose to do when reading *The Odyssey* (Homer, 199AD) (an administrative recommendation) with her 9th grade students. Though she was not thrilled about teaching *The Odyssey* (Homer, 199AD) and admits she would not have personally chosen it, Chloe did her best to make the text experience relevant and critical for her students. She drew thematic connections to contemporary social events, and had her students discuss whether Syrian refugees were on contemporary Odysseys; she also made connections to Indigenous American oral stories and gave her students the options of creating and performing their own oral counternarratives. The use of diverse and multimodal supplemental texts for both readings and assignments is a regular theme across all of Chloe's teaching units (both past and future), reflecting an intentional desire to give her students what she felt was most lacking in her own K-12 experience.

### **Teaching the Learning: Finding and Propagating Critical Literacy**

The shift in the mood and tone of our conversation was palpable as we transitioned from talking about high school to talking about Chloe's undergraduate experiences and teacher preparation. Unlike most of the other four participants in this study, Chloe's path to education took a more traditional undergraduate teacher education program route. Chloe described her university as being "awesome," and consisting of valuable learning experiences in all the areas that her K-12 experiences failed her. Where her high school English teacher had handed her *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and told her not to ask questions, her English and education professors worked with a social justice focus, handing her young adult literature and encouraging her to accept and value a variety of linguistic traditions in her classroom. The racist government teacher who made her cry because she was too outspoken was replaced with a political science department who taught her about the school to prison pipeline. It was in this equity-oriented, progressive preparation space that Chloe accidentally stumbled upon critical literacy:

So at my university we have a University Honors Program and through that we get to have the option of either doing a couple of honors projects or a yearlong honors thesis that you do one-on-one with a faculty mentor. And so I knew I wanted to do that one, but I had no idea what I wanted to do it on. And so I went to one of my favorite professors and just kind of was like **“you know, I'm interested in education and civic engagement and, you know, disrupting white supremacy and those kinds of things.”** And she was like, “okay, you need to go to Dr. Dorsey, and she's going to teach you about critical pedagogy and you're going to love it.” And I was like, “OK yeah!” **And so she just changed my whole world [because] it's not something...critical literacy and critical pedagogy are not included in my typical education program.** It was just something I got to do as a bonus through my honors program, **but it ended up being very intense.** I learned so much through it and yeah, just completely...I remember I had...**I was already an education major and I had a drafted philosophy education. And after I completed my thesis I went back and read my philosophy of education**

**and I was like, oh, none of that is correct anymore. I will be rewriting that**  
(Interview, Nov. 10, 2020).

Chloe—the only participant in this study to receive any kind of formal education about or preparation to do critical literacy work—found the discipline on complete accident after being referred to the faculty member who would soon become her undergraduate thesis advisor. Chloe mentioned her thesis advisor frequently in our conversations, crediting the young professor with introducing her to critical literacy, changing her perception of literacy education, and serving as an ongoing teaching support past whom Chloe continued to run teaching ideas and questions when she moved into the classroom. In terms of the change in teaching philosophy learning about critical literacy and the undergraduate thesis process generated, Chloe describes it in Freirean (2000) terms:

Originally it was very much that kind of classic ‘teaching is love, I want to make every student feel understood.’ And, you know, I still want to do that, **but I think after I did my thesis I went back and I was like, why am I cutting students short? And so now my teaching philosophy is very much focused on like, education is the tunnel to the world. And if we're not showing the connection between what's going on outside and, you know, what's happening in a classroom, then [we're failing].** And also I think I never thought of, like, the whole banking model before. Which is crazy, because it was absolutely my whole high school experience was the banking model of education. **And so after my thesis I was just like wow, the students have so, they come in so full of knowledge of their own world,**

**and I have to recognize and center that more than my own knowledge**

(Interview, Nov. 10, 2020).

More than anyone else in this study, Chloe was able to pinpoint a specific set of people and experiences that influenced and continue to impact her identity as a critical literacy educator. Throughout the process of working with her advisor and writing her thesis—which consisted of a demonstrated theoretical understanding of critical literacy, followed by two critical literacy-infused unit plans that moved the theoretical understanding into practice, followed by an argument that race should be taught in schools through the works of contemporary Black authors—Chloe came to consider critical literacy as a defining characteristic of her teacher identity. This move to philosophically center critical literacy manifested primarily in two teaching values that Chloe consistently talked about throughout our conversations: centering and honoring student voice over her own, and helping students be prepared for the real world. Unsurprisingly, these two priorities for approaching critical literacy are also closely aligned closely with the critical thinking and empowering of student voices that Chloe felt was missing in her own education, and are also the most frequently occurring ways that tenets of critical literacy show up in her pedagogy.

As a teacher, Chloe decided to intentionally bring perspectives and voice into her classroom to guide her students towards the critical thinking that she was never taught as a student. The 2020-2021 yearlong theme in her classroom was “The Power of Voice,” and the first academic task students completed for the year was listening to a TED Talk by Clint Smith’s entitled “The Danger of Silence” and discussing questions like “what is the power of voice?” and “is your voice powerful? Why or

why not?” and “what is the relationship between silence and fear?” She then asked her students just a few weeks into the school year to think about what they would do to make their voices heard in the upcoming year (a sampling of their responses is found in Appendix E). For the rest of the year, Chloe continuously revisited the idea of voice in texts, including questions about whose voice is heard and why, and how voices hold power across the texts and assignments she gave her students. She cited one of her biggest teaching strengths as always remembering that students “are bringing things to the table that are just as important as what [she’s] bringing,” and reported consistently making it a point to ask students to share their opinions, reactions, and connections to texts (Interview, Nov. 19, 2020).

After spending a few weeks early in the fall 2020 semester emphasizing the importance of voice, Chloe wasted little time in introducing her students to the way in which they would be thinking about and evaluating voice all year: critical literacy. Here, again, Chloe was intentional and direct. She spent class time directly teaching her ninth grade students what critical literacy is, down to the specifics of the “four points of critical literacy...the multiple viewpoints, sociopolitical issues, action, those ones” (Interview, Dec. 21, 2020). From there, she guided her students through a first critical reading with the picture book version of Maya Angelou’s *Life Doesn’t Frighten Me* (1993) and elicited their “critical literacy first impressions” in order to gauge their initial thinking about critical literacy. Chloe described this lesson series as a way to set the expectation that critical literacy was going to be a foundational and frequently-used way of thinking in her classroom, and to prepare students to be “co-conspirators” (Chloe’s word, but also notably and topically the phrase used by Bettina

Love [Love, 2019] when talking about the role of white educators in abolitionist teaching) in the process of developing and using critical literacy skills.

In our final conversation, Chloe admitted that the 2020-2021 school year—her first in the classroom and one interrupted by COVID-19 induced challenges—may not be the year that she gets to execute the highest goal of critical literacy pedagogy: moving thinking into practice and “connecting the things [they’re] doing to the real world” through action (Janks & Vasquez, 2011). She cited action as “the highest goal” of her pedagogical thinking, and shared how she envisioned this work unfolding even though it had not happened yet. She imagined helping students choose a topic and stance about which they feel passionate, and then guiding them as they figure out a way to do something “outside of the classroom bubble” to demonstrate a commitment to action, “whether that is volunteering with an organization...or even something like starting a blog to cultivate awareness.” Chloe admitted that this level of work is logistically difficult, but also that she felt committed to doing it because of the significance it would hold for her students. Highlighting an issue or cause of personal interest and then taking action to explore, address, or contribute to that cause is arguably the highest level of having agency and finding and using one’s voice (Freire, 2000). For Chloe, having experienced K-12 teachers who continuously attempted to prevent her from using her agency and her voice turned these into deeply held pedagogical values in her own teaching.

### **Being “the Baby Teacher”: The Pedagogical Challenges of Novice Status**

When entering the job market as a new teacher in 2020, Chloe’s specific beliefs about critical literacy pedagogy made finding a school like hers—one that

offered curricular freedom instead of a fully set and provided curriculum—a priority. She mentioned having friends in other schools that had “completely canned curriculum” in contrast to her own ability to “pretty much build the ninth grade curriculum” on her own, which she prefers (Interview, Nov. 19, 2020). Chloe mostly talked about this curricular freedom as a good thing, aside from occasionally feeling almost *too* free and in need of a little support as a brand new teacher. Unfortunately, however, the school-level support she did mention getting did not come in a form she necessarily agreed with:

**Chloe: My department chair and my principal I think both have different ideas about what the purpose of English education is? Than I do maybe?**

And so when I started, they said ‘you need to teach The Odyssey (Homer, 199AD), and Night (Wiesel, 1960), and Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare, 1597). **And so those were like, mandated by my school.** And then my department chair who's awesome, like she is so helpful, but she has a very classic literature background? And so anytime she gives input it's always like, you should teach The Scarlet Ibis or The Most Dangerous Game. **And so I think it's partially that balance of like, as a baby teacher in a new school like, how much do I have to, you know...So I've kind of leaned more towards this year, taking their suggestions, um. But I think probably next year or in a few years, they would be very open to me moving outside of that more if I want to...**

Olivia: And so, when she makes those nudges like oh you should probably do this and this...do you mostly take them?



Chloe: Yeah yeah I pretty much do. I'm, **I think maybe next year and in the next couple years I'll try to be like “ok maybe this instead.”** But this year I've been kind of like, yeah, okay. I will do that.

Olivia: Do you find that you mostly agree with them? Or if it were up to you, would you do different stuff?

Chloe: **I think if it were up to me, I would do different** (pause) not because they're not accurate and somewhat interesting, but I think just like, **for my teaching philosophy, the purpose of education is like connection and showing them how they can use what we're doing in the world. And she is very much like classic education, we need to know the classics to be elevated and that kind of vibe?** And so it's not it's not that I don't agree with them from like, a pedagogical or like education standpoint? **It's more just like they don't align with my philosophy** (Interviews, Nov. 10 and 19, 2020).

Our multiple conversations about designing curriculum were where Chloe reported experiencing all of her personal challenges to implementing critical literacy pedagogy, and her status as a first teacher served as a huge complicating factor. On one hand, as a new teacher Chloe naturally wanted and sought advice and support from her peers and administration. On the other hand, however, though the administrators offering her support were “super nice” and “know so much,” they held “different ideas about the purpose of English education” that were irreconcilably at odds with Chloe’s own beliefs. When talking about what to do with the text suggestions she received from her administration, Chloe positioned herself “as a baby

teacher in a new school” whose status afforded her very little curricular agency despite the fact that she repeatedly noted that her school allows complete curricular flexibility to both her and her colleagues. In these stories of seeking and receiving administrative guidance, status and experience afforded the principal and department chair suggestion-making power that Chloe did not yet feel comfortable rejecting. The result was that although she was arguably more prepared than anyone else in this study to enact critical literacy pedagogy before stepping into a classroom, her efforts to move her critical literacy teacher identity into practice were curtailed by her novice teacher status. Chloe felt stuck teaching things that “do not align with [her] philosophy” that she otherwise would not choose to teach if it were up to her because she was the “baby teacher.”

Pedagogically, this struggle with agency manifested in the classroom in ways even Chloe’s students noticed. For example, when they started reading *The Odyssey* (Homer, 199AD)—the first text of the year that was, to use Chloe’s word, “old”—her students noticed and questioned the choice, and commented that it “doesn’t seem like the thing we normally do.” Chloe did her best to mitigate this struggle between the work she wanted to do and felt was best for her students and the suggestions she felt like she had to take because she was a novice educator by filling every non-suggested nook of her curriculum with self-selected elements chosen with a critical literacy lens. As mentioned previously, this work primarily took the shape of providing counternarratives and authors of color, presenting her students with social issues to critique and debate, and creating a classroom space where students felt comfortable exploring and using their voices.

Finally, it is important to note that the way Chloe described and envisioned her curricular agency over time was not static. When talking about the current school year, her first, she described the administrative curricular suggestions and their delivery using very concrete, non-negotiable verbs. The department chair and principal *said*, and certain curricular elements were *mandated*. However, whenever our conversation shifted and Chloe envisioned her future self with more experience and, therefore, status in the school, she used verb phrases that carried agency: at the time of interview she was *taking their suggestions*, but in the future she will be *moving outside* of the suggestions if she *wants* to. In this future envisioning Chloe positioned herself as someone with more power and ability to choose what she wants to teach based on what she thinks is best for her students instead of what she is asked to teach by her administrators.

### **Amelia**

*“I live my life by a certain set of morals and ethics predicated on the valuing of others’ humanity and respect for humanity. And I think that to be a good teacher, first and foremost, you need to have that in line with yourself in order to be in front of students.*

-Amelia

Despite never having met her before this study, conversations with Amelia always felt like checking in with an old friend. Both before and after all three interviews we found ourselves chatting about everything from politics to the logistics of dating during a lockdown to good salmon recipes (I twice interviewed her either right before or right after dinner), and the conversations were always relaxed and familiar. This comfort-from-the start was also reflected immediately in our first interview, before which we somehow found ourselves talking about the portrayal of

race in the news. This was my earliest hint to a fact that would only later become clear: of all the participants in this study, Amelia was the most frequently reflexive about her whiteness and the role that her social identities—particularly her whiteness, her femaleness, and her faith—play in her teaching. To explain the development of this reflexiveness and Amelia’s identity development and pedagogical thinking in this sub-chapter, I begin by relaying what she described as the conflicting messages of different elements of her upbringing. From there I discuss when and how she reported learning about social justice and how she translates those lessons into her own classroom, before finally exploring her challenges feeling unsupported in her school environment.

### **Conflicting Moral Messages: Family, Faith, and Figuring it All Out**

The very first questions I asked each participant in the first interviews were about family, beliefs, and childhood exposure to diversity. In Amelia’s case, these three elements were inextricably linked with each other in sometimes contradictory and confusing ways. When it came to talking about her family, Amelia demonstrated both a clear and deep love for her family, as well as a recognition that throughout her life they have unintentionally presented and upheld problematic beliefs:

I went to Catholic school because, and I mean we could talk more about this, but, “there weren't any good public schools” where I grew up. And I just thought it was because we grew up in the Bronx and I had heard that there are parts of the Bronx that are unsafe and I was like, “oh, I guess if I go there I'll get stabbed or something!” (laughing) I mean **that's just the narrative that I just took at face value as a kid...** And so my two best friends were

Ecuadorian/Salvadoran and Puerto Rican/Salvadoran, and I remember coming home and my mom was like (mock chiding voice) “well, you're hanging out with all the Hispanic girls.” And I'm like, what does that even mean? **And it was very confusing to me I think? Because I also got the message, you know, the Catholic message of “treat others the way you want to be treated, but then I would hear my mom say things** and I was like, hmmmh. Like, that doesn't seem quite right to me?...**And I love my mother and I know that these, these constructs are not about the individual and it's about like, how people are socialized. But I mean, she was being—she IS being—a hypocrite,** and I think a number of those incidences were just in my consciousness but I didn't necessarily know what to do with them (Interview, Dec. 14, 2020).

Amelia commented multiple times on the duality between the messages she was getting from her Catholic faith and Jesuit education in her K-12 school years—ideals rooted in centering people’s humanity and the idea that all people are created in God’s image and should be treated and respected accordingly—and some of the narratives she was getting from her family members about race, culture, and gender. It is here that Amelia cited her racial consciousness and awareness of identity beginning:

**I think I always understood that like there are, there were and are differences in, especially I think like my consciousness with race, specifically?** But I wasn't sure why certain people were categorized certain ways or stereotyped certain ways and I still didn't understand, like, how my

whiteness plays into it. **I think that consciousness has grown over decades and is still growing, and I'm still learning and making mistakes.** And, you know, my students are 90-plus percent Black and Brown students, **so even in my growth as a teacher and how I'm thinking about my positionality and my, my social identity and the power dynamics there,** it's just, it's evolved a lot over time (Interview, Dec. 14, 2020).

Amelia's stories about her family, her primary school experiences, and her teaching context frequently ended in unprompted reflections about how her beliefs, perspectives, and self-awareness have evolved over time. She was the only participant to mention the positionality and power of her identities as a young white female teacher, and to voluntarily reflect on what that meant for herself, her students, and her classroom. Amelia frequently positioned herself as "still growing, and still learning and making mistakes," saying things like "I'm working towards anti-racist goals" (Interview, Nov. 29, 2020) and "we all kind of wade within the waters of white supremacy...and it takes this like, constant learning and unlearning...especially as a white person" (Interview, Feb. 3, 2021).

As she moved into and through her teaching career, Amelia's teaching context continued to support her learning, unlearning, and growth by continuously forcing her to reevaluate her identity and positionality:

It was a shift in my thinking. My first couple of years I was, you know, head above water, let me do this. I just think it was survival mode. Then it was okay, I get this, so let me go make a curriculum to hone these skills and start to branch out. **And then by years three and four I started to realize some**

**of the experiences that my students were having were things that I can never experience. Because even though I grew up in an urban area I'm still white, I hold white identity, and therefore I can't fully understand the experience of somebody who's moving through the world with these other, you know, with a marginalized identity.** And then by year four five I was like but wait, there's more, there's more! I learned a little bit about critical literacy and was like oh shoot, you can build socially just, equitable curriculum where you're reading things by authors that are not necessarily canonical, you're watching videos, like, **English curriculum is a fusion of these things that can then broaden your worldview, and help you critique the powers that be and what's going on with that. [And then] really kind of also interrogating my positionality in the classroom and my responsibility** (Interview, Feb. 3, 2021).

Over time, Amelia's emphasis on understanding her own identity and her role as a white teacher in a classroom full of Black and Brown students<sup>4</sup> began to translate into a belief that her students should do the same. An emphasis on awareness of one's intersecting identities and how those identities impact the way one moves and interacts in the world became not only a priority for herself, but also turned into a foundational element of Amelia's beliefs about literacy and teaching. Specifically, she stated an ongoing interest in the intersection of literacy and identity, and defined being a critical literacy teacher as using multi-modal forms of literacy to help students critique and examine identity and power dynamics.

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<sup>4</sup> In the 2020-2021 school year, Amelia's school demographically reported being 55% African American, 30% Hispanic, 5% two or more races, 5% Asian, and 4% white, and 1% Indigenous American

These critical literacy teaching priorities were directly reflected in many elements of Amelia's pedagogy, ranging from the macro-level structure of her syllabus to the micro-level activities she designs to meet year-long goals of exploring identity, empathy, and power. At a macro-level, Amelia's 9th grade curriculum was designed as an intensive exploration of identity. In the same way that she grew over time to understand and interrogate her own identity and positionality, Amelia structures her school year to help her students do the same. The themes of her units in the 2020-2021 school year progressed as follows: "coming of age, identity, and empathy," then "how does empathy translate into justice," followed by "how do you use your power responsibly" and the year ended with "who are you, and what can you do based on who you are to further what you've learned?" The progression of these themes meet several critical literacy goals, most notably the goals surrounding multiple perspectives (Stevens & Stovall, 2011), which students bring into the classroom in the form of conversations about their own identities and beliefs; and critiquing power (Morrell, 2008), which students were explicitly asked to do in conversations about how identities hold power.

On a micro-assignment level, a majority of Amelia's assignments and activities focused on identity, empathy, power, and justice, and center other elements of critical literacy pedagogy. Within the first few weeks of school Amelia had students explicitly thinking about identity and empathy, which is a reflection of her own coming to consciousness as a teenager. In her formative years when aspects of identity were first coming into her consciousness and were confusing, Amelia relied on Jesuit understandings of empathy and common humanity as a moral compass to



steer herself forward. Accordingly, she reported always opening her school years by working with her students to explicitly name their different identities, and discussing how identity and empathy are interconnected (see Appendix F for an example of one of her students' identity maps from an early identity mapping activity).

By the end of Amelia's yearlong identity exploration, students have advanced their identity conversations to the point of actively naming and discussing intersectionality, which is directly reflective of the way Amelia described her own progression from awareness to thinking about positionality and power. Students are asked to demonstrate this advanced critical thinking through a couple of summative projects. The first is an "activism" project that students complete after a unit in which they read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and *The Hate U Give*. In this project, students are asked to choose a social or political issue and propose an event or a movement to address that issue, combining critical literacy's emphasis on multimodal forms, critiquing power in sociopolitical issues, and thinking about action (see Appendix F for the Activism project assignment). The second project is a multimodal investigation of students' voices and intersecting identities that taps into critical literacy's emphasis on multimodal representations. Students create and share pieces including poems, narratives, short videos, and spoken word performances that embody aspects of their intersecting identities. In these pieces, students discuss aspects of their identities and how and where those identities do and do not hold power across contexts (See Appendix F for student poem and narrative examples from this project).

### **Learning to Name Social Justice and Value Perspectives**

As a teenager, when Amelia moved into (a private, Catholic) high school she continued to experience cognitive dissonance between what she was learning in her religion and her Jesuit education and what she was seeing and hearing people around her do and say; for example, one of the teachers she cited as being most influential in teaching her about morality and social justice was later fired for being openly gay. She also, however, finally encountered education experiences that began providing her with the language to talk about and the space to explore her burgeoning interests in identity and social justice. She described a handful of teachers who were critical in her awakening to and interest in sociopolitical issues:

My theology teachers were amazing. **We read, I can't remember exactly who the authors of the texts were, but they just offered different perspectives on world issues.** And then we would apply Catholic social teaching to injustice. Or we would do these reflections after (immersion service experience days) and **it was centered on listening to other people's experiences who were actually, you know, going through things that we were only sort of, we only were like peeking into or had a window into.** And they just were really good at asking questions that felt challenging. **I remember they always were like, well, like these are things that are ongoing, and if we're looking at this through the perspective of, you know, social justice and getting there and taking action like, yeah, it's good to learn about these things and the facts of what's going on but, you know, how do we actually achieve sort of this ideal world?** And I think they pushed me in that way to try to consider some of those things and not just

be like, “oh, well, this is happening and that’s sad and that sucks, but to be more like, okay, well, why is this happening? Why are people suffering? And I was still on the ‘how can I help,’ and I look back and I’m like hmmm, kind of white savior-y of me, but thinking about it as a kid I was just like, hmm, interesting. **This isn't right, so how do I apply what I learned and do something?** (Interview, Dec. 14, 2020).

Despite starting out as, in her words, “a bit white savior-y,” high school was the time that many of Amelia’s values and beliefs about education began to crystallize. It was in this time that she decided that teaching was her way “to do something” in the world, and also when she decided that exploring a variety of perspectives on different issues was an important part of being a responsible citizen. Incorporating diverse perspectives and taking social justice action came to define a core principle of Amelia’s teacher identity, which she describes as “a responsibility to either be asking hard questions, or to be presenting material or using resources that are amplifying the experiences of melanated people...(and) naming behaviors at a developmentally appropriate level” (Interview, Feb. 3, 2021). Pedagogically, the high school learning experiences that she describes as being formative to these beliefs—specifically readings texts that offered different issues on world perspectives, prioritizing the voices of people who have had a variety of experiences, and keeping an eye towards action—eventually turned into the lens through which Amelia approaches curating readings and materials for her students.

Critical literacy pedagogy calls for texts to be multimodal and to represent a variety of perspectives, which are the same criteria that Amelia cited as guiding her

decisions about texts for her students (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). One example of this is the selection of Sam Richards' (2010) "A radical experiment in empathy," in which Richards attempts to get his American audience to empathize with an Iraqi insurgent. Amelia used this video in her classroom to help introduce her students to empathy, and to highlight different perspectives on world issues the same way her high school teachers did for her. She explains this particular TED Talk choice as being

Really good because it's different. Like we have very few Muslim students and we have a student population of mostly Black and Brown students, not very many who are of Middle Eastern descent. So for them to think about, like, 'oh, wow, there is this whole other group of people that is being discriminated against,' or...why sometimes the United states goes into other countries because they want certain resources and it's void of any empathy towards the people and starting to break those things down (Interview, Feb. 3, 2021).

As her students watched the talk in class, Amelia had them take notes and frequently pause to discuss using guided questions like "why might the United States be okay with supporting non-democratic countries that may be doing harmful actions?" and "what about the video challenged your perspective or worldview of the US as a traditional 'power' house?"

The rest of Amelia's text selections for this same empathy unit further evidence her critical literacy perspectives when curating texts for her students. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)—the anchor text for the unit—was the only text Amelia ever mentioned teaching that was strongly suggested to her by a school leader

versus being her own selection. She described being “a little nervous” about the selection because the book is “written by a white woman and narrated by a little white girl...and there’s a lot of problematic stuff in it” (Interview, Feb. 3, 2021). To counteract these problems, Amelia surrounded the text with other diverse perspectives, including excerpts from Bryan Stevenson’s (2014) *Just Mercy*, content from Facing History and Ourselves, and Angie Thomas’ (2017) *The Hate U Give*. She used these supplementary text selections not only to offer diverse perspectives, but to help her students critique representation in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). For example, she had her students look at the portrayal of traditions in both *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) to complicate the overrepresentation of white traditions in texts, and critique the fact that “there is one chapter devoted to Black people being together in the whole book (*Mockingbird*), and it’s not even narrated from the Black perspective” (Interview, Feb. 3, 2021). The language surrounding representation and who gets to tell which stories is directly reminiscent of the “listening to stories of people who were actually going through” Amelia reported being encouraged to do in high school, and serves as evidence of the manifestation of her personal beliefs translating into practice.

### **Saying “No”: Finding Strength in Numbers and Status**

The biggest challenges to critical literacy pedagogy Amelia reported were both rooted in time: time lost to battling administration over arbitrary and unfounded requirements, and finding time to lay all the groundwork necessary to enact certain pedagogical practices. On the administrative front, Amelia described a duality. On one hand, she personally liked most of her administrators and appreciated their goals

for the school. On the other hand, however, she noted several times that she felt like there was no support for teachers and that teachers' knowledge was neither utilized nor respected. This lack of respect was especially visible to Amelia who, in a leadership role as the English department co-chair, spent a lot of time in meetings with her principal and curriculum director presenting initiatives and ideas that get "shot down due to a lot of pridefulness." She described administrative decisions as the illusion of "some sort of democratic decision or something that [they're] doing together, but it's really not," made particularly troubling by the fact that she and her coworkers disagreed with most of her administration's decisions:

Today, for example, we sat in a meeting for an hour. We looked at data and we saw that 200-some odd kids have A's for all their classes this term, and 250 something have F's. And **I feel like our administration doesn't trust us and they blame us for everything**, and we were putting in the chat like, "what is the root of this? Why does the data look that way? What does it have to do with the pandemic? If we've done X, Y, and Z where's the support from you all?" **And they kept talking about a culture of achievement, and of high expectations, which is what we have. We HAVE high expectations for the kids.** (So) then we said, "well, we don't have common department planning time, we don't have common grade level time, we barely know when we're meeting," and it was met with "I'm giving you this amount of time on Wednesdays at your request, so why don't you just meet in the three hours that we give you?" But in the three hours that they give us we're being asked to do all these other things. There's also been a push to do lessons a certain way

now, too, **and it comes from our admin seemingly needing control, so as experienced teachers we all have been pushing back.** The lesson plan template they want us to use is one that's like what you'd use in college, and **it's another sudden ask that would not help inform practice in any way. It would just check a box. So as professionals who align lessons to standards and have clear objectives etc., we're like, we're already doing this, we're not using these lesson plans. I am grateful to work with colleagues who care about and center the students, want to build relationships, and challenge this push for a one-size fits all way of collecting data and planning and all of that.** (Interview, Feb. 3, 2021).

Most of the challenges Amelia stated battling were similar to these: administrative requirements that she felt “would not help inform practice in any way,” and that therefore stood as direct barriers to her critical literacy pedagogy. Fortunately, as a teacher in her seventh year at the school with a leadership position and the support of her colleagues, Amelia felt empowered to say “no.”

Amelia ’s descriptions of overcoming challenges often grammatically took on a literal “us” versus “them” dynamic, with the administrative “they” making demands that the united teacher front “we” believed were either already happening or were unhelpful. Across interviews, this united “we” was consistently cited as a support to tackling administrative challenges, and included at various times Amelia ’s department co-chair, the other English teachers in her department, and the staff as a whole. Amelia positioned herself and her colleagues as experienced, talented educators who have the agency to speak out and “challenge the push[es]” because

they have the credibility and skill as professionals to be able to do so. Though she described herself and many of her colleagues as being “swamped” and “burnt out” in the face of unhelpful and occasionally harmful administrative challenges, their confidence and strength in numbers repeatedly found them empowered in her stories to push back. In turn, this empowerment also showed up in individual instances of resistance. For example, when it came to including a question about students’ pronouns/LGBTQ+ identities on a survey, despite such a question not being allowed in according to her school’s alignment with the “teachings of the Catholic church” (her quotes), Amelia did it anyways. Her imagined response to getting pushback against this transgression was “I will keep having those conversations...and if they [say anything] I will probably just keep having them because, so what?” (written correspondence). Again, Amelia’s self-positioning as a knowledgeable and capable educator equips her with the perceived agency to do what she believes is best for her students, even if that means directly opposing her administration.

Outside of struggles with administration, Amelia’s other major challenge to critical literacy pedagogy was having enough time to do everything she wanted to do. In terms of pedagogical supports, she noted on multiple occasions that working at a private school afforded her the opportunity to design her own curriculum. With the exception of one or two strongly suggested texts—most notably the inclusion of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) at the request of a former department head—she was free to design everything herself. The downside to this comprehensive lack of curricular oversight was that implementing some pieces of her ideal critical literacy pedagogy were especially time consuming, and Amelia did not feel like she had



enough time to collaborate with colleagues, or receive enough support from administration to compensate for this lack of time.

Pedagogically, this time challenge seemed most distinctly problematic when Amelia was discussing the “action” piece of critical literacy. She stated that “the ideal is at the end of each unit kids demonstrate the content, the skills, and then put it out into the world somewhere;” and her annual yearlong summative project—an activism project—is a testament to this belief (Interview, Nov. 29, 2020). In summary, for this project students are asked to select a social or political issue of interest, and then design a movement, including a proposal for an actionable item to kickoff or support that movement. Then, in an ideal world, Amelia would like to connect her students with relevant community members with whom they could share their proposals in hopes that the connection would lead to the students getting involved in some way in support of their issue of interest. Amelia cited the goal of this yearly project as learning to transcend the classroom into action, but noted that she continuously gets stuck at the time-intensive nature of creating a network of partnerships for her students to tap into. Using literacy for action and activism is one of the highest goals of critical literacy (Freire, 2000), and it is the element with which Amelia has struggled the most not due to lack of knowledge, planning, or ability, but due to lack of time and support from administration in freeing up her time and/or helping her secure partnerships.

**Ellen**

*“I understand [critical literacy] to mean literacy—reading and writing—for social justice...I’m a social justice educator first, and more of an English/literacy teacher second”*

-Ellen

In my first Zoom call with Ellen, I did not have to ask any interview questions to get a feel for her values as a person and an educator. In fact, neither of us had to speak at all for me to begin to get to know her. For starters, Ellen’s Zoom background is a large, stylized version of the word “revolution” in which the first “O” is a small raised fist—the international symbol of resistance against oppression— and the letters of “LOVE” are emphasized with the use of Latin characters and highlighted in red (so, REVOLUTION, but with the fist also being red; see Figure 3). The background is impossible-to-miss-huge, taking up the entire screen, and I later came to learn that it is an original piece of artwork that Ellen and one of her high school students painted for a protest they attended together.

**Figure 3**

*Ellen's Handmade Zoom Background*



When I got about halfway through the pre-interview IRB necessities of verbal recording assent and participants’ rights, Ellen shifted slightly in her chair, revealing the top half of a t-shirt that read “Ningún ser humano es ilegal”(no human being is illegal; for our second conversation she was sporting an “Unafraid Educator” t-shirt produced by and whose purchase funds support the United We Dream organization,

which is the largest immigrant youth led community in the country; and finally, during our third conversation, she was wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt under her jacket). Before we began our first conversation I was already getting to know Ellen as someone who lives, breathes, speaks, walks (wears!), and unabashedly embodies social justice education, and I was excited to learn about how critical literacy fit into her teacher identity. To trace the lineage of Ellen's beliefs and pedagogy, I begin with the family foundations of her beliefs, before moving into exploring the development of her social justice orientations throughout her K-12 and college experiences. Finally, I end with Ellen's critique of her teacher preparation program and the critical-literacy aligned teaching technique she found elsewhere in her college coursework.

#### **“Doing” Social Justice Education: The Importance of Speaking to Power**

The first thing we talked about in our first interview was Ellen's family, upbringing, and early understandings of education. She smiled a lot as she explained how most of the adult members of her family were active in schools working towards equitable literacy initiatives for as long as she can remember. Despite living in the suburbs, when Ellen was a child both her mom and grandma volunteered in the nearby urban school district to help kids with literacy, and her mom, aunts, and uncles started a program that funds grants that help encourage creativity in the classroom. More recently, her family had begun working on a project to support teachers' work around Black Lives Matter, and her grandpa co-founded an organization that works to provide college scholarships to low-SES students in the same urban district her mom used to volunteer in. For Ellen's entire life, she has been surrounded by an extended family who works in and for equitable education for minoritized and low-SES

students, and credits these family members with igniting the earliest spark of her passion for social justice education.

Unfortunately, Ellen's experiences in her K-12 education stood in stark contrast to the thinking promoted at home. When I first asked about her K-12 school experiences she laughed, then sighed, and then said, "I'm not a fan (chuckles) of my (high) school." She went on to explain that she did not appreciate the Eurocentric learning or the people she encountered in her high school with the exception of two teachers:

I have two favorite teachers from high school, both that I still keep in touch with; one was my ninth and 10th grade English teacher, and the other one was my 11th and 12th grade Spanish teacher. **I think probably both of their views on social issues I could identify with, and I was in such a conservative environment that to find somebody that I could relate to was affirming.** I remember specifically asking my English teacher, **"why do you teach here? Why do you want to teach all of these ignorant rich white kids? I could see you being in (the nearby urban school district)...why would you want to be here?"** And basically she said to me, "We have a common goal, both of us. As much as you want to teach in an urban district, I see the same need in teaching in a suburban district, which is why I'm here. If I'm not here, who's going to challenge these kids' thinking? If I'm not here, these are people that are going to grow up and be in positions of power based on who their parents are and how our society is; if I don't expose them to different points of view and I don't discuss social issues with

them and share different opinions, they're never going to be exposed to it. I see my role as that I'm fighting the same social justice battles: if someone doesn't talk to kids in this bubble or pop the bubble they're never gonna learn.” So that made me think, you know, she's right and I see what she's saying. I'm with people that [make me feel] empowered because they believe the same things, **but I also think part of my responsibility as a white person is to talk to other white people because if they're not open minded when it comes to whether it's, for example, race, they're not likely to listen to somebody of another race** (Interview, Nov. 6, 2020).

This story about Ellen’s English teacher was the first she told about influential educators, and she framed it as a learning experience that directly connected to the way she approached her role as a social justice advocate and educator. The question she posed to her teacher as a high schooler of “why do you want to teach all of these ignorant rich white kids?” revealed a certain, common initial orientation to the role of social justice education: that it is for non-ignorant, non-rich, and non-white kids (Swalwell, 2019). Ellen’s chosen teaching placement at the time of interview in the “International Academy” program of an urban school—a program designed to specifically serve the school’s largely Central American newly arrived immigrant population<sup>5</sup>—reveals that this belief is still largely held. However, in the coda of the story Ellen shifted from being in the story with her teacher in high school to present interview time, where her beliefs more closely echoed those of her

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<sup>5</sup> According to the county website, the demographic makeup of the larger school in which Ellen works is 49% African American, 47% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 1% White, and 1% “other,” with 100% of students receiving free lunch. In the “International Academy” program where Ellen’s ELA classes are housed, 100% of students are newly arrived immigrants that are, by her definition, mostly but not entirely Hispanic.

English teacher. She noted her own perceived responsibility “as a white person is to talk to other white people”—to use her power to speak to power—in order to enact change.

In her everyday life, Ellen actively uses her voice and her privilege to speak to power: for example, she is a frequent and vocal attendee at race- and immigration-themed protests and rallies, she spoke at the Supreme Court on behalf of DACA in 2020, and in college she was the mediator between campus police and her Black and Brown friends at events put on by the Black Student Union. As a teacher, speaking to power and advocating for students is an important cornerstone of Ellen’s literacy teacher identity, and she frequently uses critical literacy to help her students use their voices to do the same. When I asked Ellen what it meant to be a good teacher, her number two response after “love them unconditionally” was about teaching students to ask questions in order to self-advocate and “challenge constructs, challenge systems, challenge authority, challenge what you’re reading. Whatever it is, like, you know, challenge ME, please!” (Interview, Dec. 12, 2020). This response was reflective of Ellen’s belief that students need to learn how to critique power and challenge authority, which was a belief that continuously surfaced in her artifacts and descriptions of practice.

I found one of the most striking examples of this piece of Ellen’s literacy teacher identity in practice to be an ongoing project she had been and was continuing to mediate between her students and local school officials. The project began in 2019 when her students discussed the lack of social justice awareness in their prescribed curricula, and wanted to lobby to have a social justice course added to their school

district's graduation requirements. Ellen guided them through conversations about making clear demands, choosing the correct people to pressure, and choosing a vehicle to make their demands known. The students decided to write formal letters to the district superintendent, which Ellen taught them how to do in class (an example can be found in Appendix G). Fast forward to the time of data collection—fall semester 2020—and, despite COVID-19-induced online instruction, this work was still continuing. A state board of education representative reached out to Ellen during COVID, and Ellen's response was "I'm happy to talk to you but my students are the ones leading this work, so you should really talk to them." And it worked. Ellen spent several lessons preparing her students for the visit and for conversations about policy changes, and helped them create questions and a list of demands. When the state representative finally came, one student asked her if she could "create a space for us to continue these conversations and to express our voices and our concerns and then can we take action to do something about it?" The representative said yes, invited some of Ellen's students to speak to her (the representative's) university education students, and Ellen and her students are now working to set up a forum with other high schools in the district and finish a policy proposal to submit to the state board of education. This entire process is rooted in critical literacy ideals that are directly reminiscent of Freire's description of "dialogical action" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000, p. 168): identifying places where systems are failing the oppressed people that they should serve, and using literacy—different modes of reading, writing, and speaking—to challenge and address these failures.

While this example seems like an extraordinary one—in part because it is—it is an authentic representation of Ellen’s focus on getting her students to advocate for themselves and others. This focus was represented not just in recounting of extraordinary pedagogical circumstances, but also in everyday literacy activities. For example, when doing a close reading of Peggy McIntosh’s “White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack,” students were not only guided to practice routine literacy skills through activities like finding, citing, and analyzing evidence, but were also asked to engage critically with the text. It is important to note, here, that this text is an incredibly complex one that I did not personally encounter until graduate school, which is evidence of the fact that not only does Ellen ask students to engage in critical literacy, but she does so with rigorous texts that many people would assume high school language learner students would not be able to read, thus providing them access to dominant academic discourses (Ávila & Moore, 2012).

Through critical evaluation of such rigorous texts, Ellen asked students to deeply consider white privilege, to examine internalized racism both in the text and in their own lives, and to think about how their understanding of white privilege might be used to enact change (See full discussion question list for this text in Appendix G). In both of these examples—from the most extraordinary case of writing policy proposals to the more mundane, everyday task of close-reading a text—Ellen asked her students to engage in critical literacy activities in order to consider and challenge unjust systems and structures. And although she mostly does this work with urban students of color, many of whom are immigrants, the practices are all rooted in beliefs she shares with her suburban high school English teacher: use



your power to speak to power and interrupt the dominant status quo, and teach your students to do the same.

### **Finding Space and Thinking About Race: The Significance of Knowing Stories**

In an otherwise very conservative high school environment, being able to connect with her like-minded English and Spanish teachers was affirming for Ellen. The importance of finding a place of like-minded individuals was also an important theme in her approach to finding friend groups:

Before all of this social justice stuff I was a huge basketball player. And that was, kind of my life was sports. [But] in my junior year of high school I had a conflict with a basketball coach and I was actually cut from the basketball team because she didn't like me. So the weekend right after there was this retreat [for] Teen Institute (a national youth organization), and at the time it kind of was going to be a conflict with basketball, but then since I wasn't on the team I was like, "yeah, sure, I'll go!" And then I found out that the retreat was being organized by this organization Youth to Youth and **I started attending and I was like 'wow, this, this is where I belong. Like this is definitely it.** And so I got involved in being on youth staff, and it was in [a nearby urban city] and so there were students from the suburbs that participated but it was mostly the inner city school district, and **that's where most of my friend group came from, and that was a very diverse group of people and friends.** I guess that was kind of a turning point (Interview; Nov. 6, 2020).

Ellen described this shift from basketball to Youth to Youth as a turning point that was pivotal in two ways. First, like with her English and Spanish teachers, she found affirmation and belonging in a place whose focus was on youth voice and leadership, which eventually opened up a host of opportunities including traveling around the country to participate in and lead parts of conferences. Second, it was a space that led to a diverse friend group that Ellen didn't find in her other high school experiences, which in turn opened Ellen up to a world of new identities and stories. Over time, this sort of exposure to diversity shifted into a prioritization of getting to know people's stories, which is reflected in Ellen's teacher belief in exposing students to a variety of voices through text. This belief is best illustrated by Ellen's text selections and text selection priorities.

At the time of our third interview, Ellen's students were currently working through excerpts of two books: *I am the Night Sky* (Next Wave Muslim Initiative, 2020), which is a collection of essays by ten Muslim teenagers exploring what it is like to be young and Muslim in America, and *Our Lives Matter* (Ballou High School Writers, 2015), which is a collection of personal stories written by 30 teens of color from Ballou High School in Washington, DC; Ellen had also organized virtual author visits with some of the youth authors from each of the books. Ellen chose to read these two texts because she felt that they would inspire her students "to read and see, like, hey, I could write like that" (Interview, Dec. 12, 2020), and specifically sought out the publishing company of the books, Shout Mouse Press, because of its dedication to amplify the voices of marginalized groups and work with youth.

This text selection process is a direct extension of Ellen's belief that, when choosing texts, a top priority is to address issues of representation by bringing in a diverse number of stories:

A lot of times I feel like people say "diversity" and then they only talk about race, or with ELLs they only talk about immigration, and they forget about, like, the intersectionality of all of our identities...This is actually something I've been trying to do very intentionally this year....be(ing) as diverse as possible and in all aspects (Interview, Dec. 12, 2020).

This belief and the class texts that result from it are a direct reflection of one of critical literacy's main tenets: reading and producing counternarratives (my description) that make visible a wide variety of identities and experiences (Stevenson & Beck, 2017). Ellen began to learn the importance of these critical literacy practices in her "turning point" as she became part of a community of diverse friends.

### **Being "the Token White Girl": Learning Co-Conspiratorship and Subversion**

Finding her first diverse friend group in the Youth to Youth program at age 16 set a precedent for Ellen of the importance of "a very diverse group of people and friends," which became a habit as she moved into college:

**I was the only white kid in my friend group**, and there were so many situations at [PWI University] where there would be a big group of Black people and all of a sudden we're surrounded by campus security or police officers **and [my friends] would be like "Ellen go show your face so they know it's ok, go talk to them and tell them there's no problems here."**

And it happened all the time where I would have these realizations that I

would do things without thinking about it and then my friends would be like, “what did you just do?” Like I remember driving on and off campus, and at night time they have security and I, I would never stop at the security. They just waved to me and I would go through. **And I remember the first time I did that with my friends in the car, they're like, “What are you doing? You have to stop here!” and I said, “I've never stopped here!”** And they said “yeah you always have to stop here, what do you mean you never stop?” They said “yeah they search us, they search our car they check our IDs” They just told me how they're interrogated there. And from then on, anytime we went onto campus that it was nighttime, before we got to campus they would say “Ellen you drive we'll duck down so we don't have problems.” **And that's what we would do to get onto campus** with no problems because otherwise I was in the car with them and they would get searched and I'm just like “they're students here, they have [PWI University] IDs; just because they're Black, they don't belong here?” **Um, so, a lot of those things just really upset me and we were constantly playing games to get around the system, but I'm just like, this is wrong. So I think that's where, like, a lot of my passion about fighting racial injustice came from: just watching my friends suffer in terrible ways** (Interview, Nov. 6, 2020).

Stories of witness and co-conspiratorship like this one—of being part of communities of people of color, witnessing those communities' racialized, anti-Black and anti-immigrant experiences, and then doing, as Bettina Love describes co-conspirators needing to do, the work of “tak(ing) risks for somebody, put(ting)

something on the line...using your privilege”(Love, 2019)—were peppered throughout Ellen’s recounting of her college and post-college career experiences. Throughout these stories, Ellen juxtaposed her friends’ experiences of institutional surveillance and anti-Black racism (Jenkins et al., 2021) with her own lack of similar conflict (“what are you doing? You have to stop here!”...”I never stop here!”) to highlight discrepancies, and her whiteness is always positioned as an active tool to help her friends subvert systemic oppression (“go show your face so they know it’s ok”). She also frequently uses the pronoun “we” to position herself as an active co-conspirator working with her friends of color to creatively subvert oppressive systems (“we were constantly playing games to get around the system”).

Ellen's up-close-and-personal witnessing of abusive authorities and institutional, systemic, anti-Black racism is mirrored in her approach to making classroom decisions, which was best summed up in her own words of “staying true to your values and making sure everything you’re doing is meaningful and constantly evaluating, and if it’s not meaningful then protect your kids from it” (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020). In the same way that she helped her college friends creatively subvert racism in postsecondary spaces, so does Ellen attempt to subvert harmful norms of the K-12 system and protect her students. This belief in shielding students from the impact of dominant racist, classist, and sexist education practices frequently came up in curricular conversations, as well as conversations about teaching challenges.

When it came to conversations about teaching challenges, Ellen repeatedly cited two institutional-level factors as her two biggest challenges to implementing critical literacy pedagogy. The first was an abundance of paperwork, meetings, and

conversations to “justify the work that [they’re] doing” in the International Academy. She sees these extra requirements as taking away “valuable time that [she could] be using working directly with kids, or planning lessons that will be more meaningful directly from kids,” and views them as having trickled down from the district level (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020). In her view, district leaders put pressure on her school leaders, who in turn put pressure on her. Ellen’s response to this pressure was “we know what we’re doing, so let us do what we’re doing!” and she reported mostly leveraging close relationships with certain administrators to circumvent these challenges by getting the most necessary tasks done in the most painless way possible and ignoring the rest. In these conversations Ellen recognized that as a teacher she is part of a system and in some ways has to play along, but draws the line and begins fighting back against decisions that could potentially hurt her students, like pressure to add more testing or to change/remove the International Academy program. The way Ellen navigates and challenges institution-level hurdles was especially clear in the way she described her second challenge to implementing critical literacy pedagogy (which she actually refers to as a battle, not a challenge): standardized testing. We were talking about the testing requirements at her school when I asked if having required PARCC (national standardized) testing impacts her teaching. Ellen paused for a moment, laughed, and said:

It's supposed to. But, no. **Um, and I think administrators know that about me by now? Like, we're not doing PARCC prep.** I just kind of ignore the PARCC training, you know, sign in, sign out, close my door and go back to class. **I think when I was starting out as a newer teacher and just getting**

**to know the system I felt more of that pressure** [and] it really stressed me out and got under my skin because I'm so strongly against it. But I think learning the system and how things work I think I feel less pressure [and am] able to stress less because I'm able to either ignore things or realize like, it's really not a big deal. Like, no one's gonna follow up on that. So I close my door. Ignore them. Disregard them. And there are certain testing strategies and test prep that we're actually required to do, and **I am very transparent with my students. I'll tell them like, this is, unfortunately, something we have to do. We're fighting to try not to, you know, but right now we just gotta do it.** We talk about how it's not fair. And I'm like, you know, do your best. It's not a grade. If you need to, like, click through it. I don't care. So I'm honest with them. As far as other test prep, I don't do it. **We just keep doing what we're going to do.** I have learned over time, like, fighting those battles kind of like, makes them check up on you more often? Or like they want to see that you're doing it? **Whereas if you take more of an approach and you're just like, "Okay!" and then you just kind of do your own thing no one really knows what you're doing. So that approach has worked out a lot better for me** (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020).

In stories like this one about what she sees as harmful institutional requirements, Ellen frequently constructed a literal "us versus them," dynamic, positioning administration and others responsible for implementing institutional norms as "they/them," while she and her students formed an "I/we" combative alliance. In these stories, Ellen, the "I," identifies the harmful dominant norms and

then links herself to her students (“this is something *we* have to do” and “*we* keep doing what *we’re* going to do”) as collective co-conspirators against an oppressive system. These stories also align Ellen with another “*we*” that is the greater body of scholarship that agrees that standardized testing is unhelpful for language learning students like hers, thus placing her in a greater community of those working against elements of institutional harm like standardized exams (Solórzano, 2008).

Ellen’s stories were frequently self-reflexive, and reveal that as her institutional knowledge of the way “the system” works grown over time, so has her ability to say “*we’re* not doing [it]” and find creative subversions that better suit her students’ needs. In the same way that Ellen used her whiteness in college to be a co-conspirator with her friends against institutional racism, she continues to use her knowledge and status to fight against what she views as oppressive and unfair systemic education practices. What is especially interesting in the specific case of testing is that not only is Ellen attempting to “protect” her students by encouraging them to “click through” the PARCC test (the only standardized test she cannot simply fully ignore), but she is taking a personal hit for the emotional safety and best interest of her students: While her students do not get a grade for completing PARCC, Ellen, herself, actually does in that PARCC scores impact her teacher evaluations. At the end of the day, though, Ellen views her role as a co-conspirator with her students against harmful systemic requirements as being more important than her teacher evaluations, and continues to creatively subvert the system and subject her students to as little harm as possible, even when it potentially jeopardizes her own position.



When looking at what Ellen *refuses* doing, it is also valuable to look at what she *is* doing in her classroom in lieu of things like test prep and mandated curricular elements: if she rejects standardized curricula and assessments, what does she use in their stead? The answer lies in writing and projects that are deeply reflective of critical literacy practices, and that not only reject hegemonic standard curricular elements, but replace them, sometimes literally, with counternarratives. For example, the first real “unit” Ellen teaches every year is a narrative one that she cites as some of her best teaching. After several weeks of working on the elements of narrative through activities and close readings of exemplar texts including Langston Hughes’ (1967) “Thank you, M’am,” Lensey Namioka’s *The All American Slurp* (Namioka, 1987), and Eric Walters’ *My Name is Blessing* (Walters, 2013) (all texts by and/or about authors/characters of color), Ellen asks her students to write their own counternarratives (my description of these narratives) to tell their stories. This assignment creates space for students to share, lift, and celebrate their own voices and experiences in opposition to the traditional narratives largely championed in schools, and their stories are gorgeous (an example of these student counternarratives from fall 2020 can be found in Appendix G). These counternarratives—a defining characteristic of critical literacy (Behrman, 2006)—stand in stark contrast to the standardized test prep that they replace in Ellen’s classroom, and serve as evidence to not only her commitment to critical literacy pedagogy, but also to her lifelong belief in rejecting unfair and harmful effects of systemic oppression that appear in her classroom.

### **Amplifying Voices: Considering Who Gets to Have the Conversations**

Finally, as we moved into conversations about her teacher preparation experiences, it became clear that Ellen's social justice lens was also a position she used to frame and critique her teacher education. Overall, Ellen noted that she "liked" her education coursework and named several influential people that have impacted her teaching in small ways, for example, a classroom routine from her mentor teacher here, or a lot of unconditional support and a best practice from her program coordinator there. However, she was also very quick to admit that many of the elements of what she considers her social justice teaching—the heart of her teacher identity—came from elsewhere:

A lot of my social justice teaching is from [PWI University] but not the College of Ed. Like, **I liked my education classes, I thought they were great, but we didn't really, it wasn't specifically like thinking through a social justice lens maybe?** I feel like so much of it was discussing strategies and not so much considering diversity and social justice. [But] there was one education course that I took that was specifically related to diversity and equity and it was a younger Black woman teaching the course, and I loved it as far as the content. **I was like, these are the conversations we need to be having, this is what we need.** But then I remember bringing it up in class and saying like "not, not just us as educators, but **these are the conversations we should be having in our classrooms with our students.**" And I remember the teacher saying to me, like, "oh, no, these aren't the conversations to be had with your students these are just for us as educators so that we're aware of these issues when we're making decisions as teachers."

But it's not to be conversations to be had with them.” And I was just like “**why not? Like, why is it only like an adult conversation?**” (Interview, Nov. 6, 2020).

The idea of discussions—who should get to have them and why, what they should be about, and what the goals of dialogue should be—was a frequently recurring theme in our conversations about Ellen’s teacher preparation and classroom practice. Her disagreement with this diversity course instructor was one example of the general critique she had of her entire program: that it did not do enough explicit teacher preparation surrounding having social justice conversations in classrooms. This critique is why Ellen cited a different, non-college-of-education intergroup dialogue course as being the biggest source of inspiration for her teaching now. In fact, this intergroup dialogue course—the same kind scholars have written about as being supportive of critical education writ large (Griffin et al., 2012)—was so influential that she chose to structure her social justice course exactly like the intergroup dialogue course was, and she uses protocols from the course to structure regular social justice dialogues in her English classes.

The importance of these social justice conversations is so central to Ellen’s teacher identity and her beliefs about teaching that she dedicates 40 minutes of her ELA classes twice a week—the equivalent of one full period of instruction per week—to these dialogues. The process, in short, is an entirely student-led protocol in which the class reads some sort of social identity-based or social justice article, a couple of students walk the rest of the class through the more traditional ELA elements like meaning/theme/evidence/etc, and then the class has a discussion about

students' responses to the article. In this protocol, students engage with and critique texts, and then using their voices and their opinions about those texts to have shared dialogue.

Although Ellen did not provide hard copy examples of the topics that emerge in these dialogue days—the students come up with them day-of—the way she described guiding her students through reading other texts serves as an important insight into the way she prepares students to participate in these dialogues and the sorts of conversations they are taught to have. A questioning guide for excerpts from Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1997) *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (yet again, a text I first encountered in my doctoral program that Ellen is reading with her 10th grade ELL students) demonstrates a progression from text comprehension-based questions ("according to the article, if you walk into any racially mixed high school cafeteria at lunch time, what will you notice?"), to more critical questions ("what is the image that we often see of young black men in the media? How does that affect how people view young black men?"), to, finally, questions that ask students to consider and share their own experiences ("In this section, Tatum asks two more questions, as follows: "How should I act?" "What should I do?" "How have you been told that you should act as a member of your particular racial group? Why?") (See Appendix G for full questioning guide). In such questioning progressions, Ellen is helping students build traditional ELA skills, but is doing so in a way that scaffolds their ability to flex their critical literacy skills to critique texts and representations and then use their own voices and experiences to share and discuss. Critiquing representation in texts and helping students create counternarratives are two

cornerstones of critical literacy pedagogy (Behrman, 2006), and are a direct reflection of Ellen’s commitment to critiquing the systems that impact(ed) her friends and students. In turn, pedagogy that reflects these beliefs sits at the heart of the most frequently occurring dialogic routine in Ellen’s classroom.

### **Ayana**

*“I think I’ve used this phrase before, live in your love? You know, and I think as a teacher, what a good teacher does is, is understand the world that your kids are going to face. Right? And try to prepare them for that. Like it’s beyond the exam.*

-Ayana

Ayana—the only participant I knew personally prior to study recruitment—was also the only participant in this study whose primary school education experiences took place outside the United States. In Trinidad, where she lived until she was thirteen, she was surrounded by a family that emphasized the importance of education. She recalled going to private schools where there was a large focus on Eurocentric language and literacy skills, and that her father had purchased her a British composition book called *The Student’s Companion* (Best, 1963) from which she learned homonyms homophones that she enjoyed practicing and laughing at. When I asked her about her experiences with diverse identities in her early schooling, her answer centered on religion as she noted that she “grew up in a Hindu home, went to a Catholic school for seven years, and then went to a Muslim secondary school for three years” (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020).

Though we spent the majority of our time talking Ayana’s high school years in the United States (this was her choice), we did speak briefly about what her school experiences were like in Trinidad. She recalled that her family was full of teachers, particularly on her father’s side, and that her first teacher was her aunt. Thanks in part

to this family of educators, she specifically recalled there being “a huge push on literacy...before the school year even began, my mom would have me read all the books and do all the work. So education and academics was huge in my home” (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020). Ayana recalled there being a lot of competition between her and her similarly-aged cousins to have the highest grades and class ranking (she laughed while noting that she was, in fact, always at the top), and that when she moved to a high school in the United States she arrived feeling very confident in herself as a student. This confidence became an important aspect of one of her earliest experiences as a student in the United States. I begin Ayana’s sub-chapter with this story, followed by a description of how she came to value social justice education and adopt critical literacy pedagogy. I round out Ayana’s sub-chapter with an exploration of the challenges she has encountered through the process of figuring out critical literacy without any formal preparation training.

### **From Experiencing Tough Love to “Living Your (Tough) Love”**

As Ayana transitioned from talking about Trinidad to talking about her high school experiences in the United States where she was suddenly “one of two Indo-Caribbean kids” in a school of 3,000 students, the lack of religion in school was the first culture shock she mentioned experiencing in her new public school. We both laughed as she explained, “I was like, oh, nobody’s praying this morning? We’re just, not gonna pray? We’re not gonna thank the Lord for today in whichever form? No? Okay then” (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020). As she continued to talk about her high school experiences and teachers, stories of culture shock gave way to a story about academic shock:

The very first day I was there—I didn't start school the first first day I started in like, October because my green card didn't come on time—so I'm in this ginormous school and they're like, you got to go find this this room. And my little self was like “okay!” trying to figure it all out, cold because it was October and that was freezing cold for me. So my US history teacher, Mr. Mitchell, halfway opens the door. And he was this white man, just like, chunky white man, and he stinks of cigarette and he's kind of like, out of breath from walking from the middle of the classroom to the door. And he saw me and he said this—and I will never forget this—he said to me, “this is honors.” And I said to him, “okay.” And he's like, “can you handle honors?” And I was like, “yes.” And he was like, “you have to read a lot and write a lot. Can you read a lot and can you write a lot?” And I think it was me—I don't know, I don't even know if he heard my accent because like, I didn't even get to talk. So it must have been how I looked, maybe? And I was like, “yes, I can do it.” Because I didn't believe anything else, you know? I was never felt to believe anything else. And then he ripped my first paper apart, like just ripped it apart. And I remember I was like, “can I fix it to change my grade?” “Nope!” he's like, you're going to hold that grade. And then I was like, never again will I get a C in this man's class. **And so I worked really, really hard in his class and then ended up loving him because I understood why he was tough. I understood that his toughness came from a place of love.** (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020).

The story of Mr. Mitchell was the first introduction to what turned into a recurring theme in Ayana’s descriptions of her priorities, which can be summed up as holding high expectations and giving students rigorous work out of love. She called this “living her love,” and noted that she is “often told that [she’s] a ‘nice bitch’” with her kids because she loves them, and they know she loves them, and they know she pushes them out of love. Ayana explained that to be a good teacher is to “understand the world your kids are going to face,” and then love them enough to do what is necessary to prepare for it.

The love Ayana has for her students was obvious when she talked about them; she smiled as she described her school as being full of “amazing kids [with] such good hearts,” and frequently stopped in the middle of talking about pedagogy or classroom experiences to describe individual students’ stories, home lives, and achievements. It is this love and a deep respect for her students that over time shifted her priority of loving her students into one of her two core teaching beliefs: that it is a teacher’s job to “see every single child as an individual” and make space for those individual voices, experiences, and perspectives to manifest in the classroom. On a personal Ayana reported doing this by taking the time to connect with and know each of her students, a process that she believed was made easier by the fact that her school is in the same neighborhood in which she lives in her city, and that many students in the school are Indo-Caribbean like her<sup>6</sup> (this was part of the reason she chose to work

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<sup>6</sup> The district demographic profile of Ayana’s school in the 2020-2021 school year indicates that the school was 35% Black, 28% Hispanic, 24% Asian (all Indo-Caribbean Asian, per Ayana’s report), 4% Indigenous American, 4% White, 3% two or more races, and 2% Hawaiian, with 66% of students being eligible for free lunch.



in the school in the first place). On a pedagogical level she does this by centering student voice and choice in the classroom.

In terms of practice, Ayana brought up the importance of protocols in her classroom on several different occasions across our three conversations. She explained that protocols—many of which center upon discussion and debate—are an intentional choice designed to decentralize her voice in the classroom, and to “ensure equity of voice [by] really allow(ing) the kids to talk to each other and have a discussion.” She went on to explain that “a lot of times the quieter kids are the kids who have a different perspective,” and that having protocols helps bring these perspectives forward, encouraging the presence of multiple perspectives in her classroom from the students themselves (Interview, Jan. 22, 2021). One such example is “The 4 Lenses” protocol, that asks students to approach texts from a variety of perspectives, and can be found in Appendix H.

### **Teaching Over Time: Progressing from “Survival Mode” to “Critical Literacy Educator”**

Although centering student voice and perspective was an important aspect of Ayana’s current pedagogical thinking at the time of interview, she also described a long teaching journey of getting to these priorities. She explained that her development occurred over a few stages, beginning with a teacher preparation experience that did not prepare her to be a good teacher at all, but instead “emphasized so much classroom management [and] behavior management. They tried to teach [us] to assess but it was like (in a mocking voice) ‘fist to 5!’ and cold

calling”<sup>7</sup> (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020). This emphasis on management techniques and the resulting lack of critical work in her teacher preparation sent her into her first teaching job feeling unprepared, which, when combined with the high-needs environment of the school and a principal that she described at one point as “a dictator,” meant that Ayana did not grow as an educator in ways that she wanted:

When you're at a place like Initial Job High School **I think we were just trying to survive**, you know? Even when, even when we had it, you know, **there was always something and the stakes always felt so freaking high**. It was survival mode, just being able to get through the day without breaking down or feeling like this is not for you, managing all the things that's on your plate as a first year or second year teacher, doing them and doing them well and doing them with fidelity. **It was, you know, let's do data. Let's create this whole path to (state standardized exam) scores. Let's get to college readiness. There was always something there to do, and then when you got good at things, then you got thrown more things**. And I don't think I ever had the chance to really stop and be like, but is my class meaningful? **Yeah, kids are passing the (state) exams, yes scholarship reports are there, sure kids can write essays. But is it meaningful? Are they walking out of my class feeling empowered to do something?** Or feeling like they need to talk, like it's two o'clock in the morning and they send me an Instagram video like “Hey, Miss. I was thinking about, I was thinking about what we talked about with like, with bridging racial barriers and Ahmed

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<sup>7</sup> “fist to five” and “cold calling” are both teacher-centered, discipline-forward ways to do spot-assessments and/or elicit feedback from students in class that prioritize quiet compliance and controlled response.

talked about friendship. What do you think of this video? I want to send it to a brand new kid at school.” I just, I felt like I never had a moment to truly stop and reflect and follow through with something (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020).

Ayana’s description of teaching in her first school as a novice teacher was peppered with language that positioned her as an overworked and overwhelmed product of compounding systemic pressures. She described a high-needs school that was on low-performing lists for the city and state, which in turn meant that all of her focus was on checking institutional boxes for exam scores, college readiness metrics, and “doing” data. The way the school measured her success as a teacher was through these measures, which in turn influenced the way she viewed herself and her role in the classroom as someone who needed to prepare her student to meet benchmarks. In these descriptions she had no time or agency to set her own priorities, which in turn meant that she never got to think about what was meaningful and to design important, empowering learning experiences for her students.

In the middle of describing a lack of growth at her first site, Ayana spontaneously inserted a vignette about a student interaction from her second school context (where she worked at the time of data collection). This vignette, in which she highlighted a class conversation about bridging racial barriers through a late night message from a student, stands as a direct comparison with what she saw as a failure in her prior context. In her first school, she worried that students were not walking out of her class “feeling empowered to do something,” and in her new context a student felt so empowered to take action as a result of conversations that occurred in her class that he messaged her in the middle of the night. The use of this vignette suggests that

although Ayana felt powerless in face of systemically-induced stress her first school, as she moved into a new context she was able to learn and grow as an educator in ways that led to pedagogical and, as she later noted, critical literacy growth.

After she commented several times that her pedagogy had changed and progressed noticeably after moving to her new school setting, I asked Ayana if she could specifically recall what circumstances encouraged this growth. She credited the beginning of the progress to a specific unit:

**My first year at (new school) I chose my (curriculum) based on the staples for the grade, right? I was coming into a new grade, I was a brand new, I had never taught 10th grade before, so I went just based on just the staples.** And you know, I had a certain friend tell me, “well I don't see any person of color being your anchor text, I see them being your supplementals.” And I've always remembered that conversation because when I listed the people (she was) like ‘these are all white people.’ And I'm like, well, I'm doing—and I started telling her all these *supplemental* texts by authors of color. **And it didn't hit me right there, it hit me like somewhere around December when I'm like, why, like why am I teaching *The Great Gatsby*? (Fitzgerald, 1925) These kids don't care about *Gatsby*!...** So I decided to do a privilege activity and the kids started having all of these discussions about privilege and it felt different. And I don't remember what I had planned for the next day, but the next day they wanted to talk more. And, and that's when I, it was supposed to just be one day or one-day lesson that became a two-day lesson that just kind of continued. So I tied up *Gatsby* really quickly and then

went into a full-fledged unit (on privilege and the American Dream). **I was supposed to start *Macbeth* and I didn't, and that's when the idea of *Born a Crime* (Noah, 2016) happened** (Interview, Jan 22, 2020).

Ayana mentioned this transformative *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925) unit on several occasions, and cited it as a turning point for her pedagogy. When she talked about first starting at her new school, despite being an experienced teacher who was hired into a leadership position (she was brought in as an instructional lead), Ayana positioned herself as “brand new,” and accordingly chose to rely on provided grade-level “staples” that were primarily canonical white authors. Towards the middle of the year, however, Ayana’s belief in centering students helped her to reevaluate her classroom, and she found that students were doing their work because they liked her, but that they were not invested in their learning or doing anything “meaningful.” After an impromptu privilege activity (see Appendix H for the powerpoint slides Ayana used to guide students through completing and reflecting upon the activity), Ayana was inspired by “level of conversations...and it was through that experiences that [she] really started thinking about what [she] was teaching.” As a result, she abandoned all of her plans for the rest of the unit, replacing them instead with a new multimodal set of texts exclusively featuring authors of color and stories that she thought her students would find more relatable and be more interested in thinking critically about.

Prioritizing the students emboldened Ayana to reject other things that she was “supposed” to do. She noted that the school did not have ‘required’ texts, but that “there was always the unspoken ‘you got to teach your Shakespeare’” (Interview,

Nov. 17, 2020), and that teachers were encouraged to source from a provided state curricular resource. Rejecting these dominant “unspoken rules” meant the restructuring of her entire curriculum, beginning with the immediate inclusion and centering of Black and Brown voices like Trevor Noah and Langston Hughes as anchor rather than supplementary texts. The results of this turn towards elements of critical literacy—specifically centering diverse perspectives in texts and evaluating sociopolitical issues like privilege—resulted in Ayana fully turning to valuing critical literacy as a teaching belief and pedagogical priority. She described her current pedagogical stance and identity as a critical literacy educator by drawing a line between her own literacy experiences, her students’ literacy experiences, and her evolved beliefs about teaching:

Like how shitty is school that you're going through school and you're seeing all these things that you feel has nothing to do with you; when do you ever belong? **I didn't belong. I didn't feel like I belonged in college, either.**

When do you actually feel like you belong? When do you see yourself? And I just, **I feel like when you have kids in the inner city where they come from all over the place, I think it's just so important to take that thread and pick it up and give it to the kid, you know? We started reading Trevor Noah and a kid said to me, he's like, “I know this is South Africa, but the imagery he uses makes me feel like I'm back home in Grenada.” And I was like, here's your thread, kid.** And the level, and this sounds so cheesy, but the level of engagement that you feel is different when you start becoming a critical literacy teacher, you know? I feel that kids are, kids are not doing the

work because of compliance, the kids do it because they want to do it. And I think seeing that in my class every single day, you know, makes me feel good. Because it makes me, it pushes me to want to bring in more of these types of texts to give kids the opportunity to bridge texts to their experiences, to share their insights and then, you know, bring in another text and then two others and have them synthesize (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020).

Throughout a series of stories, Ayana explained to me that at the beginning of her teaching career she had never heard of critical literacy or critical pedagogy, and that she was in her eighth year of an ongoing journey to becoming a critical literacy educator for her students. She described this identity as being one in progress, and at the time of our interviews its pedagogical manifestations lay most strongly in the critical literacy tenets of including multiple and contradictory perspectives, and guiding students towards critically examining sociopolitical issues (Behrman, 2006). A good example of this pedagogy in practice is the unit Ayana built around Trevor Noah's (2016) *Born a Crime* (she continued to refine this unit since inventing it on the spot as an answer to her students' disinterest in *The Great Gatsby* [Fitzgerald, 1925], and used it to start off the 2020-2021 school year with her AP students). On the multiple representations front, throughout this unit students read, among other things, Noah's memoir, Maya Angelou's (1970) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story," rap and hip-hop lyrics, and nonfiction articles about Apartheid and the government and history of South Africa. As students read these multimodal texts, Ayana guided them through a variety of conversations and writing assignments that demand thinking

about sociopolitical issues and how those issues impact students' lives. For example, she made students research the history of Apartheid, discuss stereotypes that are commonly held about their identities, and discuss privilege both in the South African and United States contexts (See Appendix H for a list of the final critical writing assignment options students complete as unit summative assessments that serve as culminating pieces of all this critical thinking). This unit—which centers around students discussing multimodal, multicultural literature in a variety of discussion formats ranging from small group debate protocols to literature circles to whole class discussions—is a combination of Ayana's stated passion for centering student voice, and her burgeoning critical literacy identity in practice.

### **Continuing to Grow: Moving Pedagogy from Awareness to Action**

Unlike other study participants, Ayana did not cite school barriers or standardized testing as pedagogical challenges. The way she talked about both her school and the greater education system indicated that she felt a great deal of agency to make her own pedagogical decisions in service of the needs of her students. Part of this agency seemed rooted in her confidence as a middle-career educator, and part of it seemed rooted in her context: her public school was founded in principles of social justice—she described her principal as being social justice minded and they even have a schoolwide social justice film festival every year—and she stated feeling confident that she would be free to teach whatever she wanted to teach thanks to both the priorities of her administration and her status as a teacher leader, especially if it aligned with social justice goals. Further, although all students in her school were beholden to state standardized exams that impact graduation and her students also sit



for an AP exam, she did not mention feeling pedagogical pressure due to either of these assessments. Instead, when I asked about challenges, Ayana specifically mentioned a personal challenge to implementing critical literacy pedagogy in her classroom that was reminiscent of her previously stated understanding of herself on a critical literacy educator journey:

The action piece, you know? **Like, we feel passionately about something, then I don't ever, like, I have to work on getting them to do something about it.** And so, you know, my, my AP (assistant principal), when she was a teacher she had one of her kids join a political campaign and was campaigning for, I think he was part of AOC's (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) campaign or something. And, and it came from doing all the work with MLK and doing all the work with reading Malcolm X's autobiography, all that stuff, right? And I'd like, that's, that's personally my next step. Like how do I turn all the theory into action? **I'd really like to give them enough to not just see a problem but want to do something about it and do it authentically without, you know, being like, oh, I have to write a letter, I have to do this to get a grade, but because I think this is like, this, I want to do this. I want to advocate for people. I want to advocate for myself, my community. You know? My voice matters. So that's my next step. I don't know the answer yet, but I have been thinking about it!** (Interview, Jan. 22, 2021).

Ayana's biggest critical literacy pedagogy challenge at the time of our last interview was figuring out how to move aspects of her developing critical literacy teacher identity into practice. She had no formal training surrounding critical literacy,

and her own school experiences both in Trinidad and the United States centered largely on Eurocentric literature and literary values that did not provide a foundation for her to build upon. Further, besides her assistant principal who is no longer in the classroom, she also reported having no coworkers doing this work in their practice to learn and work with. Building students towards exercising/speaking to power and taking action is a cornerstone of critical literacy pedagogy (Ávila & Moore, 2012), and Ayana was both aware of this and actively thinking about how to build towards it.

### **Sofia**

*“I think that what I most value is making sure that I create a curriculum that has students evaluating what's happening in the world, right? Past, present, and also like kind of predicting the future, too. A way for them to engage what's happening in the world in real time so that English class feels meaningful to them.”*

-Sofia

Sofia is unique in that she was the only participant to find her way into this study in what I consider to be a complete accident. Whereas the other participants were sourced by direct reference—someone saw the recruitment materials and made a connection between me and an educator they knew and could verify as a good fit—Sofia and I were four degrees separated. The month I was recruiting, one of my running friends asked how my study was going, and I gave him an update. He is blind and I am one of his running guides, and he just so happened to have another running guide who worked in a school, who had another teacher friend that sounded like a good fit for the study, who wanted to participate but did not have time, who then directed me to Sofia. I want to reflect this uniqueness in how Sofia and I were connected in how I present her story and her identity.

Unlike the other participant stories in this study, I do not present Sofia chronologically or through the evolution of some set of connected beliefs. Part of this is because, by her own admission, at the time of interview she had been in high school over 20 years ago and did not remember it very well and did not have much to say about her family; part of it is because most of her critical literacy growth happened during her teaching career and she did not connect it back to childhood experiences like the other participants; and part of it is because she was incredibly proud and enthusiastic about the work she does with her AP students so this felt like an important place to begin (she confirmed these conclusions when member-checking this [her] section of the chapter). For these reasons, I have chosen to dive straight into a cornerstone of Sofia's pedagogy through which all her other teaching beliefs can be demonstrated and understood: the AP Capstone and Research courses she supervises and teaches. From there I explore how other aspects of her critical literacy teacher identity are linked to this work, and how Sofia viewed the challenge of standardized testing.

### **Teaching AP: (A)(P)ush for Curricular Reinvention**

In the 2020-2021 school year Sofia was in her 16th year in her current school—a large, urban high school that she described as being very diverse across racial, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic identities<sup>8</sup>—where she has come to serve as a sort of advanced placement (AP) guru. Over the past 15.5 years, Sofia has not only taught every English-oriented advanced placement class that the school

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<sup>8</sup> The school's county demographic profile indicated that in the 2020-2021 school year the student body was 42% Hispanic, 27% African American, 25% White, 4% Asian, 2% two or more races, and 1% "other," with just under half of students receiving free lunch. Sofia added that she believes there are 88 household languages spoken in the school.

offers but also, in her words, “gave birth to the AP Capstone program,” which requires students to take and pass four AP exams, and complete both AP Seminar and AP Research courses. The process of giving birth to an AP Capstone program required a bevy of trainings and professional developments, which turned out to be revolutionarily inspirational for Sofia’s pedagogy:

**I was feeling, I was feeling burnt out. I was feeling like, do I still want to be a teacher? And so the Capstone program gave me [a reason and an outlet to reinvent my classroom], and a way to teach a really important skill. So I recruited students to take the pilot of [AP] Seminar and the population was mostly women of color, [and] I wanted to make sure they were seeing themselves represented in academia.** So I think the biggest thing for me was to turn seminar into a class that focused entirely on women of color. And so we read, we read Jesmyn Ward's (2013) memoir and we studied *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) . I found this great book with excerpts about, like, what it means to be an Asian woman in the 21st century, and the philosophy tied to Confucius. **And then we talked about the intersection of, you know, feminism with racism and social class and all that.** So we talk about all these really important things, and the feedback that I got from the kids is “never before have I focused on a woman of color for the entire year.” **And so that, that class really, it breathed life into me when I thought that maybe my teaching career was going to take a different path** (Interview, Dec. 11, 2020).

When Sofia described the ways that AP Capstone “breathed life” into her and her curriculum just as she was hitting a breaking point in her career, all of the descriptions were steeped in the principles and values of critical literacy. First, Sofia recruited a class of students for the pilot semester that consisted of “mostly women of color.” CollegeBoard’s AP courses and programs have an ongoing history of equity problems, with opportunity gaps existing between white students and every other racial subgroup (CollegeBoard, 2014). For example, in the state where Sofia teaches, Black and African American students represent almost a quarter of graduates, but only about 8% of successful AP exam takers (numbers that would only worsen if the statistics looked at the entire student body and not just “graduates”). By recruiting an AP Seminar class of predominately students of color, Sofia used literacy in the form of a rigorous critical reading and research-based course to provide her students access to a hegemonic system (McArdle & Turner, 2021).

Further, once Sofia gave her students this access, she filled the space entirely with literature by and about women of color so that her students would “see themselves represented in academia.” The two texts Sofia specifically cites—Jesmyn Ward’s (2013) *Men we Reaped* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*—are both extensive counternarrative explorations of intersecting nondominant identities; Ward’s memoir explores the intersection of race, poverty and gender while Anzaldúa’s semi-autobiography is a foundational text in Chicana literature that explores power, oppression, and intersecting identities through the author’s experiences as a Chicana and a lesbian. Sofia used these texts and others

to teach her students how to interrogate identity, power, and intersectionality, which are all foundational elements of critical literacy pedagogy (Luke, 2000).

After taking AP Seminar and doing these investigations of identity and power, Sofia's students then progress into AP Research where she guides them through a yearlong research project. According to CollegeBoard's AP Research website, the major course goal of AP Research is to conduct independent research to write a college-level academic paper (CollegeBoard, 2021). In her class, Sofia kicks up the rigor and applies critical literacy ideals by guiding her students to specifically research topics that they feel have critical social and political significance. From there, they complete not just a "college-level academic paper," but an entire mini-dissertation (her term) that includes writing a literature review, completing an IRB that gets reviewed by the school district's Office of Accountability review board, conducting original research using a variety of data collection methods, writing up findings and discussions, and, finally, an oral defense. Some examples of her students and their topics have included a gay male evaluating the school district's sex education curriculum because he felt that his identity is was represented, and a Filipina/Latina girl exploring colorism's impact on Asian women's perception of body image (a complete student paper would be too long to include in this document, but see Appendix I for a complete list of students' 2020/2021 topics, as well as this Filipina/Latina students' mid-year poster presentation of her topic).

From the student perspective, the critical literacy skills learned and demonstrated throughout the mini-dissertation process are complex. Sofia first provides students with dozens of mentor texts and topics to get them prepared to

critically evaluate texts with a specific eye towards power, privilege, and representation. For example, she described one activity called the “Chopped Synthesis Activity” that was designed to re-introduce students to the skill of effectively connecting sources after a lot of COVID-19-induced time away from writing (See Appendix I for the activity worksheet). Sofia chose Kona coffee as the topic knowing that several of her students liked it but knew very little about it, and pulled together three multimodal resources—an image, an article excerpt, and a news clip—for her students to analyze and put into conversation. By the end of the activity, the kinds of analysis her students were doing spoke specifically to critical literacy’s aims of examining power and representation in texts: Sofia reported that they mentioned the farmers and land rights; the social, political, and economic impact of farm machinery; and the power dynamics involved in who and how people are portrayed in news clips (white women versus Native Hawaiians).

After reading several mentor texts and practicing applying a critical literacy lens to those texts through these kinds of activities, Sofia then specifically asks students to take up a topic that holds social or political weight, critically evaluate a variety of text sources and types surrounding this topic to develop a knowledge foundation, and then collect data from a variety of sources and perspectives in order to contribute some sort of conclusion, plan of action, or recommendation. The students’ ability to take up this charge is reflected in the list of topics and the mid-semester report example found Appendix I.

**“The Ultimate Goal”: Reading the Word to Enact In the World**

As mentioned at the beginning of this sub-chapter, because the mini-dissertation and all of its component parts are such a huge and demonstrable example of Sofia's pedagogy and beliefs about teaching, it seemed important to open with its description for continuous reference. However, of equal importance is an understanding of not only how this huge undertaking is reflective of Sofia's critical literacy pedagogy, but also how it is reflective of her teacher beliefs, and how these two are inextricably linked.

Across our three conversations, I asked Sofia at different points about her teacher values, her teacher beliefs, and her understanding of the responsibilities of a literacy educator. Common across her answers was some mention of the work in her classroom preparing students to exist in the real world. This belief is reflected in the way she defined critical literacy for the study—as “the close reading of texts to understand how language...relay(s) messages about the real world and our interactions with the world”—and also in how she describes her personal ultimate goal as a teacher, which is “to create a curriculum that has students evaluate what's happening in the world; past, present, and also like kind of predicting the future, too...a way for them to engage what's happening in the world in real time” (Interview, Jan 15., 2021). Sofia described this engagement as an active process, and sees her role in the classroom as that of a facilitator guiding students towards using literacy for productive change:

**I think that our society, and also globally, we're on the cusp of these amazing changes.** I think that if you and I are fortunate enough to live to, you know, to our early 80s or 90s we're going to look back at this time as like, I'm



gonna get emotional saying this, but as **a time of amazing change where we're inspiring our kids to push back against systems that have oppressed them for so long. And so, um, I feel like we have spent our careers showing kids how to do this through literature and through writing and it's happening, right? When, when everything went down with George Floyd in the spring and early summer my kids took to the streets.** They were there. They're the ones fighting back. They're the ones who are advocating for the defunding of the police. They're the ones who created, like, I have a group of girls who created this organization called SELAH, I forget what it exactly stands for, but it's about racial reconciliation in (city where Sofia works). **And I think that for us, providing those spaces in the classroom are, are instrumental in them being advocates and being agents of change. And so I think that the English classroom is just a small part of that** (Interview, Dec. 11, 2020).

For Sofia, the impact of her pedagogy, as well as her responsibilities as an educator, extend far beyond the walls (or the Zoom rooms) of her classroom. She views her literacy classes as valuable time to be spent on students learning how to be “agents of change,” which was reflected in descriptions of her encouraging of students to focus on the sociopolitical issues that impact them for their critical analysis and research work. She also reported spending her outside class time supporting and encouraging the translation of literacy into action, which was evidenced by her current status as the faculty advisor and mentor for students who seek to take social, political, or social justice action. For example, Sofia served as a

mentor figure to the student who founded the SELAH group, and volunteered to be the faculty mentor for a group called GirlUp that one of her students wanted to start to raise money to support the education of girls in Liberia (so far, GirlUp has sponsored an educator panel, did community awareness and outreach, and organized a fundraiser that raised over \$7,000). Her commitment to helping her students enact their literacy skills for change is an extension of her belief and a central argument for critical literacy (Morrell, 2003) that suggests that literacy is an important vehicle for that change, which in turn drives the choices she makes to support her students, both pedagogically and otherwise.

### **Personal Experience with Interpersonal Relationships**

More than any other participant in this study, Sofia was not only eager to talk about herself, but she also wanted to talk about *me*. She spent an extra 20 minutes after the first interview asking questions about my life experiences and teaching, and seemed so genuinely interested and enthusiastic about my story that I left the conversation feeling affirmed as a human and an educator. By the time our third conversation happened I felt more like I was logging in to talk to a friend than a research participant. According to Sofia, this unfeigned interest in people and relationships, especially when it comes to education, traces back to childhood. Growing up, Sofia's parents always stressed that school was important. However, because she was an excellent student and her brother struggled, most of her parents' focus was on him, leaving Sofia to (unsuccessfully) seek academic attention and connection at school:

I guess the one teacher that I was closest to—but it was complicated—was, her name was Mrs. Nelson. Ellenany Nelson. **So she was just a really critical person and I always like, kind of wanted to get to know her, I wanted to know about her. I would describe myself as being someone very warm and accessible and I feel like Mrs. Nelson wasn't, and so I was always trying to find out more, and she had her walls up.** And so I am the complete opposite, right? If I could take you into my classroom now, you would see that I have multiple couches—I have this huge purple couch, a love seat, a comfy chair; I really try to make the classroom environment conducive to comfort and a second home. And I'm an open book with my kids within limits. I give them my cell phone number, especially during the pandemic, in case they need anything. **So I think that part of the thing about, you know, just trying to be a successful teacher is that if you, if you make yourself accessible, right, like if you make yourself available and you show your kids what it means to be vulnerable that they will model that?** And they will build trust with you. I think—I'm going to get a little emotional—I think that you can probably tell like, **from my own high school experience that wasn't there, and I think that's something that really resonates with me. Like I was seeking it out and I really tried to form those relationships and they weren't there, and, and I needed them. Right? And so when I became a teacher I wanted to be that person** (Interview, Dec. 11, 2020).

The emotion that surfaced when Sofia talks about seeking out relationships with educators who are not open to or reciprocal of her emotional investment was a

testament to how strongly these experiences impacted her views of education and what an educator should be. Further, the way she described Mrs. Nelson is a manifestation of Sofia's unstated but constantly demonstrated belief that all people have value and are worth knowing regardless of the "walls" they put up. For example, in a later conversation about who Sofia's students are, the first example she gave was of a girl named Valerie who is "complicated" with a very challenging history that includes an absent father and bouts of homelessness. When talking about Valerie, Sofia noted that "English is hard for her...and there is a lot of tension between [them]," but also that Valerie has "the most beautiful singing voice you've ever heard," and that they follow each other on Instagram. Like Mrs. Nelson, Valerie had walls, but Sofia's own high school experiences instilled a belief in breaching those walls to forge relationships, and teaching her students to do the same.

Creating bonds with and between students is the linchpin that holds the rest of Sofia's pedagogy together. And while sometimes this relationship and community building takes the form of more low-stakes items like asking everyone in the class to "share a weird story" or including birthday shoutouts on powerpoint slides, it is also an integral part of how she described approaching elements of critical literacy pedagogy—particularly providing multiple and contradictory perspectives and multiple representations—in her classroom.

Sofia noted that both her greater school context and her individual classes were full of a students that represent a spectrum of social identities. She also noted making it a priority as an educator to model accessibility, openness, and vulnerability in order to build trust and rapport with students so that they share aspects of their

identities, including their languages, races, cultures, political beliefs, faiths, and sexual orientations, with her and with each other. As she builds these relationships and trust in her classroom, she then leverages them through groupwork and strategic partnering so that her students serve as multiple and contradictory perspectives and text representation for each other. She described her classroom as being “based on teamwork” so that at the end of the year students are able to say “I really got to know everyone in this class, and I got to learn from them and their perspectives” (Interview, Jan. 15, 2021). Even though the major product in Sofia’s class is students’ mini dissertations, much of the work she described leading up to these final pieces—even in the era of COVID-19-induced digital learning—is group or partner based, with students being asked to critique texts together and discuss their perspectives together.

### **The “Responsibility” of Students Passing**

Sofia’s made a mid-career decision to go back and obtain a second master’s degree to improve her practice, which is one testament to her commitment to lifelong learning and professional development. However, after 16 years in the classroom, she described her future growth as an educator as more of an opportunity rather than the need to solve any particular teaching challenges. That being said, when I asked about any personal challenges she faced to implementing critical literacy pedagogy she laughed before explaining:

Maybe this is gonna sound terrible, but **I’ve never felt burdened by [required standards]**? It’s more of a checklist, right? **I think those are the bare minimum**, like, my job is to expand upon them and to integrate those. Like, you know, one of the standards of learning for 11th grade is like, make

sure your kids understand plot and theme. And it's like, okay (laughs), but like can they, can they write a claim? Can they analyze evidence? That's 10 times more important to me, whether I'm teaching standard, honors, AP, doesn't matter. **[But] I definitely feel pressure from the [standardized] assessments; ensuring that the kids pass. Having mostly AP classes it's embarrassing and it's sad when kids don't pass** their [required state standardized exams]? **I think that ultimately whenever there's some kind of standardized test that really takes away from my instruction [because] no matter what level I'm teaching, right, there has to be instruction that's based around that.** And it probably sounds like kind of a jerk move to be like, **'well, I have to prep them for the test and that's annoying,'** but it is taking away from the other skills. So I'm really like, I'm teaching them how to navigate 60 questions to be successful so that they can graduate, but I would rather have them focus on their writing or on reading a really meaningful book together. **At this point it's like okay, this is my responsibility. Like I feel like I keep using that word, but um, yeah, like I have to show them examples** (Interview, Jan. 15, 2021).

When thinking about two of the biggest institutional requirements for teachers that have the potential to impact curriculum—required standards and standardized testing—Sofia had two very different responses based on her perception of those requirements. Standards, which she saw as being fair and the “bare minimum” upon which it is her job to build, were no problem. She described happily treating them like a starting checklist before building out what she feels are more important skills and

pedagogy. However, the required nature of standardized exams, which she viewed as incompatible with good instruction and relevant skills, are more problematic. When it came to talking about exams and exam preparation, the verbs Sofia chose are absolute: she thrice said that she *has* to prepare students and show them examples, and described exam preparation as a “requirement.” She used the word “responsibility,” which places her in a power hierarchy in which she and her students are trapped without agency: students must take the test, therefore she must prepare them for the test both in order to not only graduate, but to avoid the embarrassment and sadness that comes with failure. In turn, doing the preparation to meet the requirements takes away from her ability to implement other, more important literacy goals like critical literacy instruction.

### **Segue to Chapter 5**

Throughout this chapter I have outlined highlights of the critical literacy teacher identity development, critical literacy pedagogy, and pedagogical supports and challenges of each of my five study participants. In these outlines I have not only tried to capture their identities and pedagogy, but also their vibrant personalities as people and educators, because I believe having a sense of these personalities provides a helpful, humanizing foundation for thinking about cross-case findings and the implications of this study. In the next chapter (5) I bring the above individual findings together into conversation and pull out common patterns and themes in order to further answer my three research questions.

## CHAPTER 5: Cross-Case Findings

One important analytical benefit of a multiple case study is that it allowed me the opportunity to compare findings across cases in order to look for patterns and themes that extend across the five study participants (Yin, 2018). In this chapter, I bring the individual findings from my five participants together into conversation to answer my research questions, and I have organized this chapter by research question for the sake of clarity. I first address research question one regarding teachers' critical literacy identities. Then, I discuss findings from research question three regarding supports and challenges to participants' critical literacy pedagogy before returning to question two, how participants move identities into pedagogical action. I chose to discuss research questions two and three in reverse order because findings from question three regarding participants' perceived challenges and supports to pedagogical enactment help frame a discussion of the findings of question two.

Overall, I found that across these five participants, the paths and circumstances that led to the adoption of a critical literacy teacher identity were diverse, but that once the identity and a set of beliefs surrounding critical literacy were adopted, participants shared common pedagogical approaches and noted experiencing common supports and challenges. Differences were found in participants' positioning and self-framing as agentive critical literacy pedagogy enactors, which helped explain some differences in critical literacy classroom pedagogy.

**How do participants' lived experiences inform their critical literacy teacher identities? (RQ #1)**



My understanding of critical literacy teacher identity in this study was framed using the characteristics of teacher identity found in Beijaard et al. (2004): that teacher identities are constantly changing and developing, that they are bound to the individual-in-context, that they consist of sub-identities, and that agency impacts identity development and the ability to move knowledge into practice. I flipped each of these characteristics into questions specifically about critical literacy in order to evaluate my participants' critical literacy teacher identities: from where did participants' critical literacy teacher understandings/identities come and how have they evolved over time? How does context influence critical literacy teacher identities? What other beliefs and sub-identities interact with and support critical literacy teacher identities? How does personal agency interact with contextual supports and limitations to influence critical literacy identity? I explain my findings for research question one by first answering each of these questions, and then explaining how they collectively create participants' fluid critical literacy teacher identities.

### ***How do Critical Literacy Teacher Identities Emerge and Evolve Over Time?***

The only three truly shared commonalities across these five participants' biographies and education experiences were female gender identities, growing up in households that in some way emphasized the importance of education, and choosing teaching as a (first) career. Everything else—including how and to what degree those families emphasized education, and whether or not all five English teacher participants even liked English as a school subject before deciding to be English teachers—varied. Across these anticipated endless variations, there were three

notable characteristics that impacted the emergence and evolution of critical literacy teacher identities over time: when and how participants encountered critical literacy as a concept, their exposure to social justice thinking and action, and their pursuits of opportunities to continue their education. I summarize each of these sub-findings first before explaining how they collectively impact the ongoing evolution of participants' critical literacy identities.

**Encountering Critical Literacy.** One of the obvious starting places for understanding the emergence of participants' critical literacy teacher identities was to look at when they first heard of or interacted with "critical literacy" as an idea. Of the five participants in this study, only Amelia experienced what she considered critical literacy pedagogy in her own K-12 education, and these experiences were isolated to a couple of teachers and a non-required experiential education program that she opted into. All of the other four participants (and Amelia, in most of her required classes) recalled receiving entirely "traditional" educations featuring whitewashed experiences like reading predominately or solely canonical texts in English, writing non-critical five-paragraph essays, and learning history through a Eurocentric lens. Each of these participants then went on to experience similarly traditional teacher preparation; none reported learning about critical pedagogies in their explicit preparation programs, and only Ellen and Chloe reported having other university experiences that prepared them to be critical literacy educators.

When it came to teacher preparation, Chloe was the only one to encounter the idea of "critical literacy" anywhere in her preparation, and even this encounter was outside the bounds of her coursework in a happy accident that she describes as being

a “lucky” connection with her undergraduate thesis advisor. This advising connection and thesis wound up preparing Chloe with a thorough knowledge of both theoretical and pedagogical approaches to critical literacy, and she entered her career as an educator with critical literacy as a primary aspect of her teacher identity. At the other end of the spectrum, Ayana reported never even hearing the word “critical” in conjunction with pedagogy until a couple of years into her career. Even then, after she attended a district-level professional development that mentioned critical race theory, she recalled having learned about but not “truly practic(ing) or understand(ing)” critical approaches to literacy until several years later. Eventually, critical race theory inspired her to look more into critical teaching approaches which, likely in part due to the fact that she is an English teacher, led her to critical literacy. Sofia, Ellen, and Amelia all fell somewhere in-between, with Ellen and Amelia arriving at critical literacy through the conduit of social justice education, and Sofia finding it through the process of obtaining a mid-career master’s program for English educators. Most notably, none of these study participants encountered critical literacy in their actual teacher preparation coursework or K-12 schooling experiences.

The problem of experiencing very little critical literacy in K-12 or initial preparation, of course, is that in education “we teach, research, and otherwise practice what we know” (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 188). Peter Smagorinsky refers to this process as “the self-perpetuating cycle of conservative schooling” that “makes it difficult for a progressive pedagogy to get an initial foothold and then establish a stronger position in the U.S. K-12 educational system” (2010, p. 23). The fact that none of the participants in this study came to critical literacy through their preparation

is significant in both encouraging and discouraging ways in terms of the self-perpetuating cycle of conservative schooling. On the discouraging side, the lack of focus (or even mention, as far as they can recall) of critical literacy in any of participants' preparation coursework is an indication that despite being a widely theorized approach to literacy education since Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was translated into English in 1970, critical literacy may not be making strides researchers and theorists have called for in preparation and practice. On the encouraging side, however, the fact that all five teachers found and adopted critical literacy despite their more traditional preparation experiences means that there are footholds of progressive critical pedagogy for literacy teachers to stand on if they take the time to find them.

**Exposure to Social Justice Thinking and Action.** For all participants, discovery of critical literacy happened through the conduit of an interest in social justice education. Prior to ever hearing the term "critical literacy," both Amelia and Ellen were interested in topics surrounding social justice. For Ellen, this interest arose in part by watching many influential members of her family do social justice education work like raising money for scholarships for low-socioeconomic youth of color, and in part through watching the inherently unequal treatment she and her Black and Brown friends received from authority figures. For Amelia, it came from getting involved in social justice conversations through a Jesuit lens, and from doing community outreach work in high school. Both of these women entered into education as a social justice endeavor, and explicitly describe choosing English Language Arts (ELA) as a subject and critical literacy as a lens because they allow

space for social justice conversations. As Amelia explained in her rationale for choosing to be an ELA teacher, “English is more, I think it has more avenues in terms of flexibility with conversations you can have, things you can read, and ideas you can toss around” (Interview, Dec. 14, 2020). Chloe also entered teaching with a social justice focus and a desire to “do equity things in education” instead of the political science track she had originally chosen (Interview, Nov. 10, 2020). However, unlike Amelia and Ellen, Chloe’s interest in social justice and equitable conversations was rooted in theoretical exposure and not in having experiences with minoritized peers or communities. When she then encountered critical literacy as a theoretical approach to literacy education, it fit with her other theoretical beliefs about education and immediately wanted to learn more.

By comparison, Sofia and Ayana entered the profession with the more traditional goal of teaching ELA, and then came to social justice realizations by being in the classroom and seeing the needs of their students. Sofia described some of the bigger teaching topics in her year—all of which centered on social justice themes—as being efforts to make literacy personal for her students: “we’re talking about Blackness in the 21st century. And we’re doing a lot of really deep, courageous conversations about race...I do want it to be personal, right?” (Interview, Jan. 15, 2021). Similarly, Ayana described her shift towards critical literacy as originating from watching her students finally make personal connections to the work they were doing:

I did a whole thing on privilege after *Gatsby* and it was shaped by the interests that they had. The level of conversations. It was a personal thing. Not like the

whole ‘I agree with so and so because’ or ‘the text says so and so,’ but it was more like, ‘do you feel like,’ or ‘I see this, you know, and I live this.’ And it was through that experience that I started really thinking about what am I teaching and how do I get that level of engagement and that level of caring? (Interview, Dec. 14, 2020).

For both of these women, critical literacy became an important part of their teacher identities when they realized that it was the best lens for their students.

From a theoretical standpoint, critical literacy is inherently a tool for social justice in that it allows students to recognize the ways language can carry, perpetuate, and interrupt social constructs and oppressive power (Freire, 2000). As Freebody and Luke (1990) note, “literacy is a social practice, with political and economic potentials and ramifications” (p. 15). In these theoretical approaches, critical literacy is conduit for enacting social justice education. The experiences of the participants in this study suggest, however, that there is actually a flow of beliefs from social justice general to critical literacy specific: rather than critical literacy being a means to social justice ends, for these participants social justice beliefs cleared a path to the discovery of critical literacy. From the outset, the difference between these two phrasings seems trivial: social justice and critical literacy goals are one in the same, so the directional flow of beliefs should not matter. However, given that the idea of “social justice education” is becoming a more commonly discussed and promoted concept over time in education thanks in part to the proliferation of approaches like culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), the paths of these participants suggest that if

critical literacy is introduced as a social justice approach to literacy educators it may stand a better chance of catching on.

**Continuing Critical Literacy Education.** Finally, once participants had discovered critical literacy through social justice thinking, all five described themselves as active, lifelong learners of the subject, committed to continuing their own ongoing professional development. Interestingly, the ways participants were seeking their continuing education aligned directly with how they first found critical literacy in the first place. For Ellen and Amelia who found critical literacy through social justice interactions, this meant joining grassroots, social media-based educator communities doing social justice literacy work. Ayana and Sofia—who both found critical literacy mid-career in more formal professional development/program spaces—reported continuing their learning through formalized opportunities through their school districts, like an “emerging leaders for social justice” workshop series to which Ayana had to apply and was one of only fourteen accepted participants. In Chloe’s case, ongoing learning meant continuing to work with the same college advisor that introduced her to critical literacy in the first place, and continuing to read critical literacy research and literature. Regardless of the approach to continuing learning, what is important to note is that all five participants reflexively described their critical literacy identities as being works-in-progress, and actively sought their own continuing education opportunities to support their own ongoing growth.

Overall, there are a couple of interconnected takeaways in terms of how these five participants’ critical literacy teacher identities emerged and have evolved over time. The first is that these critical literacy teachers’ identities all have roots in social

justice education, but none in formal K-12 experiences or teacher preparation. The second is these teachers saw their critical literacy thinking as being constantly evolving, and actively sought their own continued learning opportunities in ways that reflect the paths that led them to critical literacy in the first place. These commonalities and differences across how participants found and continue to grow their critical literacy identities interact in important ways with the other aspects of identity development. The most notable of these interactions is in terms of the role of sub-identities and how agency is created in school spaces, which I discuss in more detail below.

### ***How Do Current Contexts Influence Critical Literacy Teacher Identities?***

Study participants talked about three different contexts when discussing their critical literacy identities, beliefs, and practice: the personal context, the school context, and the larger education system context. I explained personal contextual influences on participants' critical literacy teacher identities in the above section on identity emergence and development. The school and broader education contexts also bore significant weight on participants' critical literacy identities and warrant exploration here.

All five study participants worked in schools that they intentionally chose (versus being placed or having to take a position because they were in need of a job). Further, all five of their schools were demographically predominantly or entirely students holding marginalized identities. For Ayana and Sofia, whose journeys to critical literacy were guided largely by the experience of having predominantly minoritized students, context was obviously a powerful influence. Similarly, Ellen's



placement as a teacher in a special program for multilingual immigrant students shifted her critical literacy teacher lens, which she explained by clarifying that she “still would say [she’s] passionate about race...but a lot of [her] focus has changed to immigration” (Interview, Nov. 6, 2020). Like Ellen, all participants reported that their pedagogical lenses were influenced heavily by their students, which makes sense for a group of teachers identifying as critical literacy educators since part of critical literacy pedagogy involves centering student voice.

Besides students, who were universally cited as influential actors to participants’ critical literacy growth, the other aspects of the school context—particularly colleagues, curriculum, and administration—were largely notable due to their *lack* of impact on participants’ critical literacy identities. With the singular exception of Ayana’s assistant principal, who had done action-oriented work in her classroom prior to becoming an assistant principal that Ayana referenced as her personal “next step,” none of the five participants cited having colleagues with similar critical or critical literacy perspectives that they could learn from. Ayana and Chloe both indicated that their colleagues were helpful with other aspects of teaching and, in Chloe’s case, had very similar teaching styles, but neither mentioned any critical or social justice pedagogy help. Both Sofia and Ellen saw themselves more as leads in their schools, positioning themselves as givers versus recipients of support. For example, Sofia agreed that at this point in her career she was the “content helpER” for the English department (Interview, Dec. 12, 2020), and Ellen agreed that while most of her colleagues want what is best for the students and are “a supportive group of educators,” that even her closest working peer is “better at more of the

paperwork and note taking and checking boxes whereas [Ellen] is more of the social justice perspective free spirit” (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020). More than anyone else, Amelia was acutely aware of the lack of colleague support, indicating that, like Ellen, she liked her colleagues and found them to be a supportive group of peers, but that they were all burnt out and that she wished she had a mentor but instead received very little support and has had to figure it out for herself. In Clark & Hollingsworth’s (2002) model of teacher professional growth, supportive colleagues and learning communities feature as an important potential source of stimulus for teacher growth. Unfortunately, for the participants in this study, colleagues did not serve as a source of critical literacy identity support.

The other named aspects of participants’ school context that were more deeply connected to the greater dominant system of education—namely suggested curriculum and standardized testing measures—were not seen as benefiting the development of participants’ critical literacy teacher identities. Unsurprisingly, the four participants who reported having required or standardized testing for their students (Amelia’s private Catholic school context did not have required testing) saw it as a detractor, which I will discuss further in the findings for RQ3 which address supports and challenges. Further, it was actually a *lack* of prescribed or suggested curriculum that deemed important all participants because they could grow their critical literacy identities and beliefs through developing their own content. All participants discussed having most or full control over their curricular choices as a huge benefit to their critical literacy practice, and Ellen serves as a particularly good example because she was one of the strongest critical literacy educators in this study

and, although she tried to be humble about it, explained that “I don’t know how to say this in any other way, but, I wrote the curriculum for the 9th and 10th grade...I’ve selected, you know, the texts and the projects and those kinds of things that we’re going to do” (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Chloe found the texts suggested to her by her administration to be out of alignment with her teaching philosophy.

Reynolds (1996) was one of the reviewed studies regarding the influence of context on teacher identity in the Beijaard et al. (2004) teacher identity study that I use to frame my understanding of teachers’ identities. Reynolds (1996) refers to school contexts as “landscapes,” and draws a parallel between teaching and gardening. In this metaphor, teachers are the gardeners and the time/place of their gardening is the workplace landscape. In the same way that gardeners tend to adopt the tools and designs of their time/place/country and learn to garden in ways that compliment the landscape, so, too, are teachers’ identities and practices influenced by the norms in their schools and systems in ways that encourage them to blend in and conform to certain conventions (Reynolds, 1996). For the five participants in this study, critical literacy influence and inspiration was not readily found in their contextual landscapes outside the classroom. This means that students served as great inspiration for critical literacy thinking, but otherwise participants’ school and district contexts did little to support their critical literacy teacher identities.

### ***What Beliefs and Sub-Identities Impact Critical Literacy Teacher Identities?***

Though phrased differently from person to person, common across all five participants were two shared beliefs: 1) that the English classroom is less a place

where students should be taught a specific set of books and skills, and more a place where students learn how to think deeply about the world and their places in it, 2) that building relationships and the presence of love are central to student learning, and 3) that identity exploration was a critical classroom activity. Additionally, as explained above in the findings surrounding the emergence and evolution of critical literacy identities, social justice beliefs about education played an important role in the way participants arrived at critical literacy as a teaching lens. I explore findings surrounding each of these beliefs and the role of “social justice educator” as a sub-identity in participants’ critical literacy identities below.

**Preparing Students for “The Real World.”** Every participant specifically mentioned holding the belief that literacy learning should center on encouraging students to think about and prepare for the real world at least once, with Sofia doing so literally in her personal definition of critical literacy. Sofia’s definition of critical literacy was that “critical literacy is the close reading of texts to understand how language, plot, etc relay messages about the real world and our interaction with with world” (Survey). When asked to explain, she added that “the best thing that we can do as English teachers is to teach kids how to think” (Interview; Dec. 11, 2020).” Similarly, Ayana’s mention of the role of “the real world” in her teaching beliefs came when described that what “a good teacher does is understand the world that your kids are going to face, and try to prepare them for that” (Interview, Dec. 12, 2020). Judging by Ayana’s description of the world as something students are going to have to “face” and struggle to be “prepared” for, as well as the fact that she paused and sighed halfway through this statement, the “real world” for her students is going

to be a place that will be challenging in many ways for them. Ellen echoed this sentiment when she explained that it was important to teach students to ask good questions because “there’s a lot of injustice in this world and [students] need to be able to stand up for [themselves]” (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020).

For all of the participants, preparing students to think about and move in the world was central to their literacy teaching identities specifically because of who their students are: minoritized youth who will face “a lot of injustice” because of their identities. These beliefs lie at the heart of critical literacy theory, which proposes that critical approaches to literacy equip individuals, particularly oppressed individuals, to understand and critique inequitable power hierarchies, and then exercise power to enact social justice goals to address those power hierarchies (Freire, 1973; Freire & Macedo, 2005). Accordingly, for these five participants, a critical literacy lens to instruction helps prepare their minoritized students to do the “deconstructing power [and] watching out for rhetoric” necessary to approach not only exclusive dominant curricula, but also the world around them (Chloe, Interview; Nov. 19, 2020).

**Relationships and Love.** The belief that critical literacy is an important means to prepare students for the real world is deeply connected to the second major shared participant belief: that building relationships with and knowing students is imperative. All five participants cited relationships as being a paramount priority; after all, it is impossible to prepare students for the world if you do not know who they are. Amelia explained that one of her most important strengths as a teacher was her “ability to build relationships with kids and listen to kids and (then) incorporate student voice” (Interview; Dec. 29, 2020) while Chloe noted that she didn’t think she

would have survived her first semester had she not prioritized building relationships with her students. Ellen, Sofia, and Ayana took the relationship piece even further by emphasizing the importance of love. Ellen's immediate answer when I asked what it meant to be a good teacher was that students need to be loved "unconditionally...because if we want them to be successful academically or in any other capacity, they need to be loved" (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020). Similarly, Ayana prided herself on creating a classroom that "feels like love" (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020) and Sofia noted that one of her top priorities is that the "kids feel loved and valued" (Interview, Jan. 15, 2021).

Bell hooks theorizes on the relationship between love and teaching in her writing about pedagogies of hope. hooks defines love as "a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust," and notes that "when these basic principles of love form the basis of teacher-pupil interaction the mutual pursuit of knowledge creates the conditions for optimal learning. Teachers, then, are learning while teaching, and students are learning and sharing knowledge" (Hooks, 2003, pp.131-132). By centering love as a critical element of their classroom spaces, Ellen, Sofia, and Ayana establish their classrooms as such spaces where "the mutual pursuit of knowledge" can take place. The idea of a mutual pursuit of knowledge in classrooms is also very Freirean at its core: teachers are not the sole knowledge holders filling empty student vessels with thoughts; rather, students bring their own unique and valuable knowledges into classroom spaces to learn and grow. Antonia Darder wrote about the connection between Freire's critical pedagogy and love, arguing that Freire "firmly believed that teaching for liberation...was a task that

required a love for the very act of teaching. For only through such love could the political project of teaching possibly become transformative and liberating” (2002, p. 507). In this light, the belief in the power of relationships and love in the classroom that the participants in this study hold is not just an approach to teaching, but a critical factor in their ability to be critical literacy educators.

For all participants, this belief in the importance of student relationships and love translated into a belief in the necessity of identity exploration in the classroom designed to help both students and teachers get to know and love each other. In turn, this prioritizing of student identity exploration also served as a driving force behind aspects of participants’ critical literacy pedagogy enactment. For example, all five participants open their academic years with some sort of unit focusing on identity and narratives in order to “get to know the kids” (Ayana, Interview, Dec. 14, 2020) and to begin an “exploration of self-identity” to prepare for the rest of the year (Ellen, Interview, Dec. 12, 2020). From a critical literacy perspective, this focus on identity is necessary because of the inherent role identity plays in all texts. Every text is “imbued with societal and cultural structures of race, class, and gender, (and) marks the site of the struggle for power, knowledge, and representation” (Hagood, 2002, p. 250). In turn, an important goal of reading a text—especially for students of color like most of these participants’ students—is to see and critique the identities represented through the lens of one’s own identity (Morrell, 2008).

**“Social Justice Educator” as a Sub Identity.** In explaining sub-identities as an important characteristic of teacher professional identity, Beijaard and colleagues note that teachers possess not one but a variety of sub identities that influence each

other and harmonize (2004). Accordingly, to understand participants' critical literacy identities it is important to look for evidence of other sub-identities that compliment and influence the critical literacy identity. As mentioned in the examination of how these five participants came into and continue to sustain their critical literacy identities, I noted the significance of aspects of social justice education. Although only Ellen and Amelia directly labeled themselves as social justice educators—Ellen noting that she identifies as a social justice educator first and literacy teacher second” (Interview; Nov. 6, 2020), and Amelia describing her teaching style as being “socially just” (survey)—the way each participant talked about social justice goals both directly and indirectly suggested that “social justice educator” was an important shared sub-identity across participants that influenced their critical literacy selves.

Chloe, whose critical literacy teaching identity is very deeply connected to the college advisor who introduced her to the concept, described this advisor as being incredibly social justice oriented. Similarly, Sofia described the mid-career master's program that steered her towards critical literacy as having “a lot of classes that were geared towards social justice education, so I got to enroll in those, and that really transformed my own curriculum and how I approached texts and approach my syllabi” (Interview; Dec. 11, 2020). Barbara Comber (2015), along with most critical literacy theorists, maintains that “different theories of social justice underpin critical literacy” (p. 363). This view of social justice underpinning critical literacy education supports the conclusion that not only are social justice approaches important for critical literacy educators, but that social-justice is a necessary sub-identity for critical literacy educators' identities. Indeed, in this study, Ellen, the participant with



arguably the most consistent and critical use of critical literacy pedagogy in her teaching, viewed social justice as being a central part of her identity. In comparison, Ayana, whose social justice awareness is more newly developing, demonstrated the least consistent use of critical literacy pedagogy in her artifacts and descriptions of practice.

**What supports and/or challenges do participants face when implementing critical literacy pedagogy, and how do they navigate challenges? (RQ#3)**

As mentioned, before discussing findings from research question two and exploring patterns in how participants enacted their critical literacy identities into practice, I want to first examine the supports and challenges participants described facing when doing this enactment. In particular, because the challenges participants faced and their perceived agency in overcoming those challenges influenced their pedagogical enactment, understanding supports and challenges prior to looking at pedagogical enactment is useful.

When examining participants' supports and challenges to enacting critical literacy identities into pedagogy, I noticed that they mapped neatly onto the same spectrum of contexts used to think about how context influences critical literacy teacher identity. There were challenges and supports at the personal level (participants' selves and classrooms), the local level (participants' schools), and the system/institutional level (broader education context). Overall, I found that the contextual level of participants' challenges directly influenced the way the challenges were navigated, and that different aspects of critical literacy teacher identities impacted participants' perceived agency to overcome challenges at the two higher contextual levels. Also of note is the fact that participants' stated critical literacy

supports existed almost entirely at the personal level and not at all at the institutional level, while challenges demonstrated an opposite trend and existed very minimally at the personal level but with much greater frequency at the local and institutional levels. Table 2 offers a summary of participants’ major stated supports and challenges to critical literacy implementation mapped onto these three contextual levels, and I discuss participants’ critical literacy supports, challenges, and navigation of challenges below.

**Table 2**

*A Contextual Model of Participants' Stated Critical Literacy Supports and Challenges*

Context Level	Challenges	Supports
Personal Context (self/classroom)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal critical literacy knowledge* (Ayana)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students (All 5 Participants)</li> <li>Self-selected professional development (All 5 Participants)</li> <li>Critical literacy knowledge (Chloe)</li> <li>Social justice education knowledge (Ellen, Amelia, Sofia)</li> </ul>
Local Context (school)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School-level assessments (Chloe)</li> <li>Lack of administrative support (Amelia, Ellen, Chloe)</li> <li>Suggested or required curriculum (Chloe, Amelia, Ayana)</li> <li>Standardized assessments (Ellen, Sofia)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Curricular freedom (All 5 Participants)</li> </ul>
Institutional/System Context (cultural ideology of schools/education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hegemonic, dominant-culture ideals of “literacy” (All 5 Participants)</li> <li>Non-critical teacher preparation programs (All 5 participants)</li> <li>Hyper-standardization (Amelia, Ellen, Ayana)</li> </ul>	None

*\*This manifested as a “personal” challenge, but is actually the byproduct of institution-level (teacher preparation) failures*

***Supports to Critical Literacy Pedagogy Enactment***

The five participants in this study were pretty unified when it came to what supports help them enact critical literacy pedagogy, with the most frequently cited supports being students, curricular freedom, and self-selected professional development. I have already discussed findings surrounding self-selected professional development in this chapter, so I focus on the supports of students and curricular freedom here.

Across the board, the participants in this study demonstrated unending love and respect for their students. Sofia noted that her students were “10 times smarter” than her (Interview; Dec. 22, 2020), which explains why one of her initial descriptions of her classroom was that “every day we’re doing something where they’re learning from each other, and I’m just kind of a facilitator” (Interview; Dec. 11, 2020). Similarly, Ellen noted that the first group of students she ever taught was incredibly impactful because “their curiosity made learning exciting...and [they] had such powerful conversations (Interview; Nov. 13, 2020); over time, the conversation protocols she piloted with that first group of students turned into a cornerstone of her critical literacy pedagogy. Further, all five participants specifically mentioned making curricular choices based on their students’ interests, both because it was important for students to see themselves in curriculum (Amelia), and because student-directed content was more engaging (Ayana). Across the board, these five participants all demonstrated high levels of respect for their students and their students’ knowledge, which in turn led to their students being invaluable supports to critical literacy pedagogy both from an inspiration and an in-class performance standpoint.

In addition to students, all five participants also cited curricular flexibility as an instrumental support in enacting critical literacy pedagogy. Ayana named curricular flexibility as one of the things she was looking for when she decided to switch schools, noting that one of the biggest perks of her current school was that she was treated like a professional and that “there was never a set curriculum, never a, ‘you have to teach this, you have to teach that’” (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020). Amelia explained the benefits of this kind of flexibility when I asked about whether she had curriculum requirements at her school. She replied no, and that “yeah, it sucked at first, but how adaptable you have to be, how flexible you have to be, it taught me so much professionally...it’s like, I can put in all these cool things that they want to learn about” (Interview; Dec. 29, 2020).

Behizadeh and colleagues (2019) have written about the importance of curricular freedom in enacting critical composition pedagogy, and the fact that all five participants cited curricular flexibility as a pedagogical support suggests that this finding holds true for critical literacy as well. Chloe’s context, where, by her estimation, about 65% of the year she has full control over what she teaches and about 35% of the year she does not, is a great example of the importance of curricular freedom for critical literacy enactment. When Chloe was free to do what she wanted she was able to fully enact critical literacy in ways that she and her students seemed excited about; the other 35% of the time, in comparison, critical literacy was worked in as a supplement and not a main lens for teaching and learning.

Overall, participants’ cited supports in this study existed almost exclusively at the personal context level. Even the singular local context support—curricular

freedom—was actually just a way to support teachers’ ability to use their personal professional knowledge to make decisions in their classrooms. These findings regarding critical literacy school supports are not surprising given the fact that critical literacy pedagogy stands at odds with the inherent oppressive underpinnings of traditional school curriculum and the institution of an education as a whole (Giroux, 1987; Saunders, 2012). Instead, they highlight the preexisting understanding that critical literacy pedagogy stands at odds with the currently whitewashed norms of education, and the current status of critical literacy as a grassroots pedagogical approach that teachers are enacting and developing on their own instead of with the support of their schools and/or the system as a whole.

### ***Challenges to Critical Literacy Pedagogy Enactment***

Alongside supports, the challenges that participants reported facing in enacting critical literacy pedagogy further support the idea that critical literacy is at odds with institutional norms. Unlike supports, however, there were fewer commonalities across participants. This is likely because although the five paths these participants took all led to self-identifying as critical literacy educators for this study, the diverse set of experiences each participant had along the way resulted in participants experiencing different kinds of challenges to their critical literacy pedagogy enactment. I outlined each participants’ critical literacy pedagogy challenges in their intra-case sub sections, and will summarize them as follows: Because her critical literacy journey was very self-directed, Ayana’s biggest challenge when moving from beliefs to implementation was knowledge-based; she was still figuring out *how* to do the work. In contrast, Chloe—who was academically

prepared for critical literacy work and knew exactly what she wanted to do to move her identity into practice—found her critical literacy practice curtailed by her novice teacher status. Ellen and Amelia’s paths through social justice pedagogy to find critical literacy resulted in them both having a large amount of critical literacy work they want to enact, meaning that finding planning and preparation time to do all the work was a challenge. Finally, Ellen and Sofia were both strong critical literacy educators with a combined 24 years in the classroom, but their status as public school teachers led them both to cite required standardized testing as a hurdle because of the class time it takes up that they would prefer to spend doing other, better critical literacy work.

The most interesting findings concerning participants’ pedagogical challenges did not lie within the bounds of the individual challenges themselves. Rather, what was particularly interesting was how participants used agency to *navigate* these challenges (which I discuss below), and context-level trends of the challenges. With the exception of Ayana’s personal-context admission that she “[doesn’t] know the answer yet, but [has] been thinking about” how to guide her students’ towards social justice action (Interview; Jan. 22, 2021), participants challenges to critical literacy pedagogy exist entirely at the local (school) and institution-level contexts. As with participants’ stated supports, there is nothing surprising about these findings. Critical literacy research has repeatedly noted that schools do not encourage critical literacy practices (Brannon et al., 2010), and that although critical literacy as a lens is very adaptable and applicable (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014) it is difficult for teachers to take up for a variety of reasons (Dozier et al., 2006). The challenges reported by the

five participants in this study support these preexisting findings, indicating that most of the reasons that critical literacy is difficult for teachers to enact is that they have not been trained or encouraged to do it, and face myriad challenges at the school and institutions when they attempt to figure it out on their own.

### ***The Role of Agency in Navigating Challenges***

When it came to conversations about overcoming the different contextual levels of challenges to enacting critical literacy pedagogy, different aspects of participants' critical literacy teacher identities combined in complex ways with supports in the local context environment to inform how much agency each participant expressed having. As mentioned in my data analysis overview, after noticing patterns in the ways participants were talking about navigating their pedagogical challenges, I did a full round of coding for how participants were grammatically positioning themselves in our conversations. What I found is that participants' perceived agency looked different depending on the context level of challenge presented. Further, across the five participants, evidence of strong grammatical and positioning agency in the face of challenges to critical literacy pedagogy was connected to both how much pedagogical freedom participants felt they had within their schools (which was connected to how long they had been in their schools), and how strongly they identify as critical literacy educators (which was connected to how long they had been practicing critical literacy pedagogy and how explicitly central the complimentary sub-identity of social justice educator was). For these participants, low amounts of either pedagogical freedom or experience as a critical literacy educator resulted in low evidence of perceived agency in at least one

of the contextual levels, while high amounts of both translated into high amounts of perceived agency across contextual levels. The relationship between these factors is illustrated in Table 3, and I explore it further below.

**Table 3**

*School Experience, Critical Literacy Knowledge, and Pedagogical Agency*

Participant	Critical Literacy Knowledge*	Pedagogical Freedom**	Expressed Agency by Context Level		
			Personal	Local	Institutional
Chloe	medium-high	medium-low	medium	medium	n/a
Amelia	high	medium-high	medium-high	medium-high	n/a
Ellen	high	high	high	high	high
Ayana	low	medium-high	medium	medium	high
Sofia	medium	high	high	high	medium

*\*Based on how long participants have been identifying as critical literacy educators and how explicitly they center the sub-identity of social justice*

*\*\*Based on participants' expressed pedagogical freedom in their schools*

The relationship between participants' critical literacy experience, pedagogical freedom, and agency at each context level is important to understand before moving into an examination of participants' critical literacy pedagogy, and is best displayed through a few comparative examples. Example one is a comparison of Ellen and Sofia. Although Sofia had been an educator for twice as long as Ellen at the time of interviews, and both women exhibited high levels of agency at the personal and local context levels, Sofia has not identified as a critical literacy teacher for as long as Ellen, and does not actively center the complimentary sub-identity of social justice educator as strongly as Ellen does. Accordingly, Sofia displayed less



perceived agency at the institutional context level than Ellen. This is best illustrated by examining their two different approaches when faced with standardized testing. Though both women articulated a strong distaste for the required standardized exams their students had to take and stated that it detracted from their critical literacy practice, when talking about the idea of exam preparation, Sofia's response was "no matter what level I'm teaching, right, there *has* to be instruction that's based around [the tests]" (Interview; Jan. 15, 2021). By comparison, Ellen's response was "we're not doing PARCC prep...I don't do it" (Interview; Nov. 13, 2020). When faced with the same institution-level challenge, the strength of Ellen's critical literacy beliefs and preparation give her a stronger agency to resist a practice that she feels is harmful for her students than Sofia.

Example number two is a comparison of Chloe and Ayana. Chloe, who was relatively confident in her theoretical preparation as a critical literacy educator, exhibited much higher agency at the personal level than Ayana, who was comparatively in the early stages of her critical literacy educator identity. However, Ayana—an experienced teacher with a leadership role at her school—did not report experiencing any local context challenges, which is the majority of what hindered Chloe's critical literacy practice. As a result, these two participants displayed similar amounts of agency when designing and implementing critical literacy pedagogy. Overall, the amount of agency participants demonstrated at different levels impacted the way they moved their critical literacy identities into practice, which I continue to explore throughout the results of research question two below.

**How do participants' critical literacy teacher identities inform their critical literacy pedagogies? (RQ#2)**

In this section, I begin with participants' definitions of critical literacy, because their definitions help bridge their identities to their practice. From there, I discuss how participants leverage the supports navigate the challenges outlined above in the exploration of RQ#3 to enact these definitions and the critical literacy identities they represent through the four critical literacy pedagogy categories from my literature review: 1) presenting multiple, diverse perspectives 2) reading critically and resistantly with an eye towards power 3) reading and creating counternarrative and multimodal text forms, and 4) guiding students to think about action and exercising their voices/power through literacy to meet social justice goals. Across participants' descriptions of pedagogy and submitted artifacts, there were noticeable trends in the incorporation and frequency of use of each of these pedagogical categories, most notably the fact that "thinking about action and exercising voice to meet social justice goals" was the least frequently occurring category while "presenting multiple diverse perspectives" was the most frequently occurring category. In the subsections that follow, I explain patterns across participants' pedagogical choices, as well as patterns across how their perceived agency influenced the movement of participants' critical literacy teacher identities into practice.

### ***Five Critical Literacy Educators Define "Critical Literacy"***

I begin, here, with a brief overview how these five educators defined critical literacy in their own words and how they characterized critical literacy throughout our conversations, because these understandings help frame participants' approach to pedagogical enactment. First, here is a look at what critical literacy is in participants' own words from the initial survey:

*Amelia: Critical literacy requires critique of power dynamics and examination of these power dynamics as produced through multiple modes of literacy (linguaging, themes, topics, etc.)*

*Ayana: Making meaning of a variety of texts that consider a variety of perspectives that reflect the reader's experience.*

*Chloe: Critical literacy is a form of critical reading that asks the reader to specifically consider the text's place in the world, power dynamics, and socio-political issues. It also encourages the reader to engage in praxis to help create a more just society.*

*Ellen: I understand it to mean literacy (reading and writing) for social justice!*

*Sofia: Close reading of texts to understand how the language, plot, etc., relay messages about the real world and our interaction with the world.*

Unsurprisingly, all of the expected keywords for critical literacy including “power,” “texts,” and “the world” appeared multiple times both throughout participants’ direct definitions as well as their extended definitions in our conversations. There was a clear consensus across participants that critical literacy helps students use different modes of language to engage with aspects of the world around them, including social justice issues, power imbalances, and multiple perspectives. The other commonality across participants’ critical literacy understandings was the viewing of critical literacy as a skill and lens for approaching content that is compatible with other more traditional literacy skills like citing evidence or writing a claim. This is a particularly important nuance when thinking about the feasibility of critical literacy in classrooms, and is best demonstrated in how

participants approached the idea of state and national standards like the Common Core. Given all five participants' aversion to other elements of standardization like exams and set curriculum, one might expect the approach to required standards to be negative. That did not, however, prove to be the case at all.

All five study participants mentioned the Common Core casually in passing, and did not express any strong distaste for the standards in the same way that they expressed distaste for other institutional elements like standardized exams and suggested texts. For example, Ellen mentioned the standards in passing by saying “we’re still using Common core standards...but there’s flexibility as far as like, selecting texts, final projects, assessments, and those kinds of things. We have flexibility” (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020). Clearly, Ellen did not view the Common Core as restricting her curricular flexibility or ability to implement critical literacy, as was also the case with Chloe and Ayana, who both describe using the skills from standards in conjunction with self-selected texts and materials to create rigorous critical literacy instruction. Sofia also used the word “flexibility,” stating casually that there were “the standards and then (we) could decide what to do...there’s a lot of flexibility” (Interview, Dec. 22, 2020).

For these participants, the Common Core and other required standards—which, if you exclude the accompanying suggested texts lists, tend to focus on skills like analysis, argumentation, and the elements of narrative instead of content (National Governors Association, 2010)—bore little weight on their critical literacy beliefs and pedagogy. When Ayana explained the curricular freedom she has, she described her school in passing as being “very skill based. It’s all about the skills, it’s

not so much about content,” which was something she found to be beneficial in her growth as a critical literacy educator because it meant having the freedom to choose texts and text approaches while still teaching all of the ELA “skills” that her school collectively prioritized like writing claims (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020). This separation between traditional ELA skills and content was indirectly similarly referenced by all participants, as was the connection of critical literacy to content and not to standards-based skills.

When participants were asked to provide and discuss examples of their critical literacy pedagogy, all of the ensuing conversations were about text selection, the content of conversations, and the content of assessments. Anytime skills were mentioned, such as Amelia talking about helping her students practice claim writing, they were always brought up because of the critical literacy approach applied to the content used to teach the skill (in this particular example, the content was Donald Trump). The emphasis of critical literacy as being a lens applied to content for these participants impacted everything from the way they talked about their identity development, which largely centered on social justice knowledge and understanding, to how they talked about implementing critical literacy pedagogy, which mostly involved conversations about texts, discussions, and text-based assignments. It also framed critical literacy as a lens and skill that could be fairly easily and compatibly applied in the classroom without having to sacrifice, complicate, or replace any of the standards-based skills participants were already expected to teach.

### ***Multiple Perspectives***

More than any of the other critical literacy pedagogy categories, the participants in this study described the importance of bringing multiple perspectives into their classrooms. This incorporation of perspectives appeared in two ways: through leveraging students' experiences and viewpoints, and through text curation. The emphasis on multiple perspectives in the classroom seemed to be a natural extension of the aforementioned shared participant belief in the importance of knowing students' identities and building relationships. All five participants expressed a desire to decentralize their own positions in the classroom as the knowledge holders, and instead position students with their unique identities as the perspective-bringers in the classroom.

Ayana and Sofia both explained that the reason their classrooms are so discussion-centered is because discussion allows students to learn from each other. Sofia noted her habit of strategically "pair(ing) students in collaborative groups with people who they wouldn't normally talk to" for the explicit purpose of allowing students to "learn from [everybody] and hear their perspectives" (Interview; Dec. 22, 2020). Also citing the importance of student exchange, Ayana enumerated the reasons she frequently uses protocols in her classroom as follows: "one, they pull me out of the conversation on purpose...two, they give (kids) steps so it ensures equity of voice, and three, it really allows the kids to talk to each other and have a discussion" (Interview; Dec. 14, 2020). Similarly, the extensive student-led discussion protocol that Ellen described implementing in her class twice a week was solely designed to "provoke dialogue on social issues" during which students exchange perspectives on

everything ranging from politics to contemporary racism to controversial news articles (Interview; Nov. 13, 2020).

All five participants demonstrated high levels of perceived agency when talking about incorporating student perspectives in their instruction. This makes sense given the shared belief in the importance of student voice, and also aligns with one of the major theoretical underpinnings of critical literacy pedagogy. Freire and many of his critical literacy scholarly peers argue that students are not empty vessels to be filled, but are instead full of their own rich experiences, knowledges, and understandings that they bring to the classroom (2000). By intentionally designing spaces that elicit and center these student perspectives for learning, the participants in this study consistently uplifted and reaffirmed students' knowledges as legitimate in their classrooms.

Even more frequently discussed than the value of student perspectives was commentary on the important role that text curation plays in bringing perspectives into the classroom. Most commonly in our conversations surrounding multiple text perspectives, participants mentioned race, culture, and gender as the sought after perspectives, with other social identities—including sexual orientation, religion, and intersecting social identities—appearing less frequently. Every participant specifically mentioned the word “perspective” at least once when talking about either how they choose texts writ large, or why they chose a particular text to teach. For example, when explaining why she chose to teach *I Am Malala* (Yousafzai et al., 2013) and *Born a Crime* (Noah, 2016), Ayana explained that she was “considering perspectives” and “how [to] expose them to something else” besides the canonical texts that are

commonly suggested and taught (Interview; Jan. 22, 2021). Similarly, when talking through how she chooses texts when designing units, Chloe stated that “if I have to spend time on something that’s Eurocentric white centered, then I try to kind of even that out with one or two other things that are resistance perspectives or a BIPOC voice or something like that” (Interview; Nov. 10, 2020).

Ayana and Chloe’s statements, here, are reflective of an important pattern that emerged across participants and their text selections: The higher perceived curricular agency participants had in their schools, the more likely they were to not only include texts that represented a variety of perspectives, but to situate these texts as *anchor* texts as opposed to *supplementary* texts. Accordingly, the two participants who demonstrated the highest amount of curricular freedom and agency—Ellen, and Sofia—detailed and shared units anchored by one or two central texts and supported by three to six supplemental and multimodal texts, all of which represented a variety of authorship representing multiple minoritized (nondominant) identities. In contrast, Chloe described using nondominant texts as supplements to other dominant curricular suggestions/requirements, and Ayana and Amelia fell somewhere in the middle, occasionally using anchor texts by both dominant and non-dominant authorship and providing supplemental texts primarily from non-dominant authorship.

Finally, it is worth noting from a perspectives standpoint that even when participants were recommended to teach texts presenting dominant perspectives, they often framed their teaching of these texts as being evaluative of perspective. For example, Amelia explained the way she chose to teach her department chair’s suggested text, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2010) as follows: “you have a child, a



little white girl narrating the book from her perspective... (so) we talk about stereotypes, justice, fairness, whose voice is being heard... and we're able to kind of critically look at it and critique it." Similarly, during a discussion about voice, Ellen challenged her students to evaluate the editors and authors featured in her grade's suggested textbook—which was full of white authors and she only asked her students to evaluate but not read—by asking them, “does that sound like a Dominican name?... So are you going to trust them to tell us your story?... Who's telling your history, and do they know you?” (Interview, Nov. 13, 2020).

Several critical literacy scholars, including Borsheim-Black and colleagues (2014), comment on the “surprising lack” of research examining critical literacy as an approach to traditional curricular texts, arguing instead that “it is precisely because certain texts have become canonized—upheld as having particular literary merit or cultural value—that they offer the apposite opportunity to engage students in critical literacy” (pp. 124). With theoretical literature overwhelmingly emphasizing that critical literacy is a *lens* that warrants application to all texts with the explicit purpose of evaluating the presence of power (e.g. Vasquez et al., 2019), the Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) makes good sense. In this study, examples like Amelia's treatment of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and Ellen's discussion of her classroom textbook affirm the idea that required curricular texts can provide rich opportunities for critical literacy applications. These instances demonstrate the compatibility of critical literacy as a pedagogical approach *regardless* of whether or not teachers are provided with required texts, and are an encouraging glimpse at the potential of critical literacy to be enacted in any classroom setting. At the same time, however, the limited occurrence

of canonical texts in this study's data—and the fact that they were frequently mentioned as being required, undesirable choices—also indicates that participants did not believe that critiquing canonical requirements was the most valuable use of critical literacy applications or their classroom time.

### ***Counternarrative and Multimodal Text Forms***

The literal words/phrases “counternarrative” and “multimodal text forms” were used rarely by participants throughout our interviews; however, evidence of each of these text types appeared in descriptions and artifacts of practice. Because participants did not explicitly name their counternarrative choices as such—with the exception of Chloe, once, when she described how she “evens out” mainstream canonical suggestions with “one or two things that are resistance perspectives or a BIPOC voice” (Interview; Nov. 10, 2020)—I relied on definitions from the literature to evaluate participants' pedagogy. To identify evidence of counternarratives, I used the Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) description of counter-stories as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (p. 32). Haddix & Price-Dennis (2013) further explain counternarratives as texts that serve as alternate stories that stand in opposition to “traditional power discourses that frame diversities as deficits” (p. 275). By these definitions, the participants in this study both assigned counternarrative texts to students (more frequently; all participants did this), and asked students to create their own counternarratives (less frequently; only Ellen and Amelia explicitly did this according to artifact description and submission). For example, on the assigned text side, Ellen described choosing texts in her classroom specifically to “amplify the

voices of marginalized groups” (Interview, Dec. 12, 2020)—including a collection of “stories, essays, poetry, and art that confronts anti-Muslim discrimination and explores what it means to be young and Muslim in America today” (Next Wave Muslim Initiative, 2020, Night Sky Book webpage).

Multimodal texts—those that include more than one modality of communication including written, audio, and visual forms (Serafini, 2010)—appeared frequently in participants’ pedagogical choices and often overlapped with the “multiple perspectives” component of critical literacy. For example, Amelia mentioned using Sam Richards’ TED Talk to challenge her students’ perceptions of the United States as the “good guys” throughout history and in international politics. Similarly, Sofia talked about watching Elizabeth Acevedo’s performed poetry in her classroom as one of the authors of study in her year of solely teaching women of color, a choice made in part because she wanted her female students of color to see themselves reflected in school, and in part because she wanted other students to see and understand these identities in order to b. Multimodal texts were most frequently appeared throughout participants’ pedagogy as readings (broadly defined, here, to include watching and listening to texts), but also occasionally appeared as projects or assessments like in Chloe’s oral storytelling project to accompany her students’ reading of *The Odyssey* (199AD).

Participants’ perceived agency to create and enact their own critical literacy curricular tools impacted the role that counternarrative and multimodal texts played in their classrooms. As was the case with texts representing multiple and contradictory perspectives, the higher perceived curricular agency participants had in their schools,

the more likely they were to include counternarrative and multimodal texts as *anchor* texts as opposed to *supplementary* texts. For example, Amelia, who felt a high level of curricular agency, centered a whole teaching unit using a TED Talk as a primary text, whereas Chloe also utilized a TED Talk, but did so as a curricular supplement to a suggested text from her administration. From an assessment standpoint the findings were similar: Ellen, who identified as a lifelong social justice educator, demonstrated a high level of agency in creating classroom tools like assessments through a critical literacy lens. As a result, she made choices like assigning a writing assessment in which she asked her students to address stereotypes about their races in poetic and narrative verse (an example of which can be found in Appendix G). Ayana, in contrast, positioned her critical literacy identity as still in development and demonstrated less perceived agency in developing non-standard assessments, primarily submitted artifacts in which summative assessments were all prescribed advanced placement (AP)-style essays (see Appendix H for one of her AP-style writing assessments).

Overall, the ultimate goal of a critical literacy lens is reimagining all pedagogical elements, or having a critical literacy lens turn into a way of “being and doing” teaching/learning (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 300). The way participants in this study approached including counternarratives and multimodal texts in their classrooms suggested that the more critical literacy knowledge and pedagogical agency a literacy teacher has, the closer they can get to “being and doing” critical literacy in their classrooms all the time.

### ***Reading Critically and With a Resistant Perspective***

As was the case with counternarrative and multimodal text use, participants less frequently labeled their critical and resistant reading pedagogy as such, meaning I needed to draw from literature to frame my understanding of these practices. When it came to reading evidence of critical and resistant reading, I used Behrman's (2006) understanding of critical and resistant reading in critical literacy pedagogy to guide my understanding of participants' explanations and artifacts of practice. Behrman's (2006) critical literacy pedagogy literature review described critical and resistant reading as exploring a text through "different identities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion" in an attempt to understand which voices are present, which are missing, what the author's stance is, who has power, and why (p. 484). By this definition, all of the participants engaged their students in critical and resistant reading, most frequently through the lens of social identities (specifically race, gender, and class).

One example of critical and resistant reading is found in the topic choices and reading Sofia's student's did for their mini-dissertations. To complete these huge projects, Sofia took time to guide her students through the selection of a social or political topic that is significant to them, and then helped them decide how to select and critically evaluate texts to perform a literature review for that topic. A sampling of her students' topics and reasoning is evidence of this work: one student's project revolves around a critical reading of the district's sex education curriculum because he feels his identity as a gay male is not represented; another girl is doing a similar critical evaluation through her unrepresented lens as teenager who had gotten pregnant and miscarried a child. In Ellen's classroom, students' critical evaluations of

the district's curricular requirements led to a class wide project advocating to school board officials for the inclusion of a required social justice elective.

Evidence of critiquing power dynamics also showed up outside the bounds of major projects in participants' teaching of literacy skills. When guiding students through the writing skill of creating a thesis statement claim, Amelia asked her students to practice by evaluating "the effectiveness of the President of the United States" (Artifact). Students had to directly evaluate and critique the most powerful man in the US in order to do their claim practice, which included responses like "the president has continued to show his lack of effectiveness through various acts of misconduct, his scare tactics, and his inability to listen to his advisors" (Artifact). Similarly, to have her students practice citing evidence to support inferences, Ayana showed the TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" (Adichie, 2009) and asked students to respond to one of a handful of journal prompts citing evidence from the talk (Artifact). The journal prompts all required students to think about aspects of identity and power; for example, "what single stories have you noticed that others have about you? What dilemmas have you experienced when others view you differently than you view yourself?" (Artifact). Again in this critical literacy pedagogy category, the more participants positioned themselves as having agency at the local and institutional levels and feeling confident in their critical literacy pedagogy, the more critical and resistant reading and writing they reported doing.

### ***Exercising Power by Using Literacy for Action***

Across these five participants, the least frequently-occurring critical literacy pedagogy category was moving students towards exercising their voices and power

by thinking about and taking action. Ironically, this category was also cited by participants as the pedagogical “ideal” (Amelia, Interview; Dec. 14, 2020) or “highest goal” (Chloe, Interview; Dec. 21, 2020). While Ellen, Sofia, Amelia and Chloe all described classroom projects designed to push students towards thinking about and taking sociopolitical action, Chloe had not yet implemented the pedagogy she described at the time of interview (it was in a unit planned for later in the year), and Amelia expressed the fact that she felt like what she was doing was not enough. Further, Ayana openly admitted that moving students to action was the next step on her critical literacy journey but that she was struggling to figure out how to take it.

For most of these five participants, the gap between where their current pedagogy stands and their ability to reach the “highest goal” of social justice action was created by the culmination of all of their pedagogical challenges and the areas in which they feel the least agentive. For example, Chloe indicated that her administrators’ curricular suggestions were preventing her as a “baby teacher” from doing what she would like to do all the time in her classroom, and that the logistics of planning such rigorous material for her students during a pandemic as a first year teacher were too much (she also cited not wanting to overburden students during the pandemic) (Interview; Nov. 10, 2020). Similarly, Amelia’s stated overall pedagogical challenge was making enough time to do all of the things she wanted to do in her classroom while not having enough support from administration. This was the same challenge and area of least agency she cited when I specifically asked what hurdles stood between her and enacting her pedagogical “ideal” of ending every unit with students completing action-oriented projects.

It is unsurprising that exercising power by taking action was the least commonly occurring practice in this study. Students taking action against oppressive systems is the most pedagogically “radical” of these four reviewed categories, because encouraging students to take action against oppressive systems poses a threat to the current normative education system itself. Conveniently, because the system is self-perpetuating—as the participants in this study show, teachers experience normative K-12 education, then prepare to teach in colleges of education that reproduce normative ideals—the threat of social justice action interrupting the status quo can be minimized by not preparing students or teachers to think about how to take such action. Although scholars such as Ávila and Moore (2012) demonstrate how action-oriented activities like writing critical responses to the authors of a text can align with multiple Common Core Standards, they and others also concede that the standards can be intimidating, and require training and preparation for teachers to be able to approach with a critical literacy eye towards action (Ávila & Moore, 2012; Dozier et al., 2006). The fact that social justice action was the least frequently occurring practice in this study combined with the fact that guiding students towards social justice action was the most explicitly cited growth point for three out of the five participants (Amelia, Ayana, and Chloe) supports these findings.

### **Summary**

To summarize the main takeaways from this chapter, participants in this study all held a similar set of beliefs about the value of critical literacy in the classroom, but the origins of those beliefs as well as the way participants enacted those beliefs into practice varied. When it came to participants’ critical literacy teacher identities, I



found that holding social justice as a complementary sub-identity, working with minoritized students, having curricular freedom, and self-selecting professional development opportunities related to critical literacy were all important factors. In terms of enacting these critical literacy identities into practice, the four traits of critical literacy pedagogy appeared with varying frequency. Noticeably, the frequency of each trait was connected to how much its use involved challenges at different context levels: the more implementing a particular critical literacy trait involved directly addressing systems/structures outside the classroom context, the less frequently it was used. Centering student voice and multiple text perspectives were the most frequently occurring pedagogical choices, while taking social justice action was the least frequently occurring choice. Finally, I found that participants mainly experienced supports to their critical literacy pedagogy at the personal context level (for example, choosing professional development), and mostly experienced challenges to their critical literacy pedagogy at the local and institutional levels (for example, suggested curriculum). The way participants navigated challenges largely depended on a combination of their critical literacy knowledge and their perceived agency in their school contexts. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I bring all of these findings into conversation and discuss the implications for teachers, teacher educators, and future research.

## **CHAPTER 6: Discussion**

In this final chapter I first briefly review the highlights of this study as well as the findings presented in chapters four and five. To conclude, I discuss the study's limitations and implications for critical literacy theory, teacher education, practice, and future research.

### **The Study in Review**

This research was a multiple case study of five secondary ELA teachers who self-identify as critical literacy educators, and it sought to answer three primary questions:

1. How do participants' lived experiences inform their critical literacy teacher identities?
2. How do participants' critical literacy teacher identities inform their critical literacy pedagogy?
3. What supports and/or challenges do participants face when implementing critical literacy pedagogy, and how do they navigate any challenges?

To answer these questions I conducted nearly 17 hours of conversations with my participants—three roughly one-hour interviews per participant—as well as administered a survey and collected teaching artifacts for triangulation of interview data. I approached the analysis and discussion of these questions using a critical literacy theoretical lens applied to Beijaard et al's (2004) essential characteristics of teacher identity.

In answer to research question number one that investigated the link between lived experiences and critical literacy teacher identity, I found that a variety of

personal and educational experiences resulted in the adoption of critical literacy teacher identities. However, these experiences rarely involved learning about critical literacy pedagogy in teacher preparation. This supports preexisting literature that suggests that literacy teachers are infrequently prepared to teach critical literacy (Skerrett, 2010) and other critical pedagogies (Ajayi, 2017) in their preparation experiences. The variety of experiences that participants cited as informing their teacher identities as well as the variety of ways in which participants viewed their critical literacy teacher identities in relation to their overall teacher identity (if these were different) also supports extant teacher identity literature finding that teacher identities have multifaceted roots and frequently contain several complimentary sub-identities (Beijaard et al., 2004; Olsen, 2008a).

In terms of research question number two regarding how critical literacy teacher identities translated into practice, I found that there were several common critical literacy pedagogy “moves” shared by my five study participants. The most frequently occurring of these teacher moves are reflected in and serve to support what little critical literacy pedagogy literature already exists, and include: centering student voice in classroom activities (Saunders, 2012); choosing texts that represent a variety of identities and perspectives (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013); teaching students to read and critique sociopolitical texts (Sun, 2017); and designing assignments, projects, and assessments that encourage students to critique systems (Benders-Slack, 2010) and create counternarratives (Stevenson & Beck, 2017).

Finally, findings surrounding research question three—what supports and/or challenges participants faced in their pedagogical enactment and how they navigated

challenges—produced the most novel set of results since these are understudied areas for in-service teachers. Answering this question revealed that the most valuable supports to enacting critical literacy pedagogy were curricular freedom, critical literacy knowledge, years teaching/comfort in context, and self-selected professional development. Behizadeh et al. (2019)—one of the only available studies examining curricular supports to critical and/or social justice pedagogies—found very similar supports in their study of factors supporting critical composition. In terms of challenges to implementing critical literacy pedagogy, my five participants felt most constrained by their teacher preparation, by perceived suggested and/or required curriculum in their schools, by time, and by institutional factors like standardized testing. These results extend what the few preexisting studies on in-service teachers' implementing social justice pedagogies have found, which mostly focus only on the impact of standards on critical pedagogy (Dover, 2013).

In the forthcoming discussion of these findings, I first explain the limitations of this study, before exploring the convergence of these three research questions through their implications for four areas: critical literacy theory, teacher education, in-service teachers and schools, and future research. I then conclude where I began, with myself.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations of this study, most of which are connected to the scope and context. First, this study took place during a global pandemic, which generated a few limitations ranging from what I felt comfortable asking participants to do to how they were enacting pedagogy in their classrooms. Second, inherent in

most multiple case studies is the lack of ability to generalize findings based on sample size. The small sample size of this study as well as the identities of the participants is a limiting factor for the implications in that I can only speak to the experiences and pedagogy of five educators.

My methodological choices were significantly impacted by the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. When I first dreamed up this work I had hoped to find myself in classrooms with my participants, observing their critical literacy practice and getting a chance to talk to them about their classroom choices. However, the move to online instruction curtailed this dream, and also resulted in the decision to not intrude upon participants' Zoom classes for fear of making already over-stressed and struggling teachers and their students even more anxious. To navigate around these challenges I adjusted my research questions and found other ways for participants to share and discuss their pedagogy through artifacts and interviews. I also encouraged participants to share with me not only what they were actively working on in their classrooms, but also artifacts and teaching from pre-COVID that may have been more authentic representations of their pedagogy given the fact that, for many, the move to virtual instruction was a challenging one. All of these choices meant that, at the end of the study, my understanding of participants' pedagogical thinking and choices was limited to their own artifacts and accounts of their teaching and some student work samples. Being able to be in non-COVID-19 remote classrooms would have likely given me a more authentic representation of participants' pedagogy, as well as the ability to examine aspects of pedagogy that are

more difficult to capture in artifacts and reconstructions of practice like interpersonal interactions, classroom setup/decor, and in-class conversations/questions.

Further, the nature of case study research—which often examines fewer cases in more detail versus more cases in less detail (Yin, 2018)—coupled with my own limited resources (I initially compensated participants out of pocket before receiving grant-funded support in spring 2021) limited the sample size of this study. In turn, a sample size of five limits my ability to make any broad generalizations that extend outside the bounds of these five participants in the school contexts in which they were located at the time of data collection. Also, in a study about identity and critical literacy, it seems important to note that the identities of the participants and their students create a limited scope through which the study’s implications should be viewed. The participants in this study were mostly white women, and all study participants worked in urban schools with mostly Black and Brown youth. This is important, because presumably critical literacy identities translate differently into pedagogy when the identities of the teachers and/or the students are different than the ones in this study. The implications of this final limitation are further explored below in the “implications for teacher education” and “implications for future research” sections.

### **Implications for Critical Literacy Research: Minding the Gap**

I have mentioned the theory-to-practice gap that exists in the field of critical literacy—particularly in secondary US classrooms—at several points throughout this dissertation, and the findings of this study highlight some of the implications of this gap. Theoretically, critical literacy literature has been consistent over time on the

point that critical literacy is a *lens* and not a prescriptive set of how-to's for teachers and students (e.g. Cervetti et al.; Lankshear et al., 1993; Vasquez et al., 2019).

However, when looking at how this theoretical perspective translates into practice as this study does, some gaps emerge when considering both *how* that lens gets applied in classrooms, and *where* critical literacy belongs alongside preexisting institutional norms.

### **Critical Literacy: a Lens for Whom?**

When talking about the idea of using critical literacy as a “lens,” extant literature does not differentiate between the application of critical literacy as a lens for teachers to use in planning and teaching versus as a lens to teach explicitly to students. This study indicates that the difference is important because of the way critical literacy plays out in contexts. With these five participants, critical literacy showed up in the classroom in two different ways: sometimes the participants were using it themselves to select their texts, assessments, and assignments, and sometimes they were teaching it directly and explicitly to their students. A comparison example of this would be Sofia's creating an entire curriculum centering Black female voices versus Ellen's guiding her students to critique the authorship of their suggested textbook and question what that authorship might mean for the representation of multicultural voices. Both are excellent examples of aspects of critical literacy pedagogy in practice, but one is more of a rejection of dominant forms on behalf of students in favor of critical literacy choices (aka the teacher using a critical literacy lens), while the other is a guiding of students to explore and reject dominant forms on their own (aka the teacher teaching students to use a critical literacy lens).

In an ideal scenario, this difference would be negligible: teaching students about critical literacy and then guiding them consistently in how to use it as a lens for reading and writing and social justice action should not look so different from a teacher consistently using all of the four characteristics when teaching and consistently guiding students to examine dominance and challenge power imbalances and social injustice. However, the way that these five participants enacted critical literacy pedagogy within their specific contexts revealed that the different characteristics of critical literacy pedagogy are not implemented equally, with multiple perspectives and counternarratives appearing at a much higher frequency than critiquing power and taking social justice action. This meant that when participants applied critical literacy as a lens to their teaching, their students experienced a rich representation of experiences, identities, and modalities via diverse authorship and perspectives, but were less frequently guided in a critique of, for example, the fact that these voices are not the ones that are traditionally represented in classroom spaces. In short, when participants applied a critical literacy lens to their pedagogy in this study, it sometimes meant that the students, themselves, received fewer opportunities to be critical. Some of the most exciting pedagogical moments actually happened when a critical literacy lens was applied by both teacher and students, like when Chloe taught her students what critical literacy was and then had them apply it to a handful of multimodal texts, or when Amelia paired *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) with *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2016).

This variety of critical literacy lens applications serves as a window into future possibilities for both theoretical and empirical critical literacy endeavors. First,



theoretical and pedagogical attention would be well spent on further unpacking the idea of critical literacy as a lens by specifically considering the question “for whom?” This study shows that there are a number of answers to that question that lead to a variety of pedagogical outcomes that are all valuable and all warrant further consideration. For example, when the answer is “educators,” what happens when, as in the case of Ayana, a lack of teacher preparation and resources leads to a teacher-lens that strongly emphasizes identity representation in texts but is still thinking through how to guide students to social justice action? When the answer is “students,” what happens when, as in the case of Chloe, critical literacy is explicitly taught as a lens to students, but its use is interrupted by the existence of preexisting curricular requirements? Most importantly, what choices lead to the answer being “both,” and how might educators conceptualize this in their work?

Second, this study revealed that there is much left to learn about how teachers’ contextual realities impact the way they are able to implement critical literacy pedagogy. This study highlighted the challenges and supports that impacted the way five teachers translate critical literacy identities and beliefs into practice, revealing that supports mostly existed at the individual level and challenges mostly existed at the local school and institutional levels. I am not aware of other studies that investigate supports and challenges to critical literacy pedagogy implementation, and more investigations into the pedagogical experiences of critical literacy educators in practice would help strengthen this conversation and contribute to further theory-building about the most useful supports for navigating challenges to critical literacy practice. Further, the way these five participants navigated pedagogical challenges

almost always involved the desire to challenge and subvert institutional norms like required curriculum and standardized testing by utilizing creative curricular choices like strategically working in multicultural authors as supplemental texts and centering students' voices in class through the use of discussion protocols. Ávila & Moore (2012) suggest that such professional creativity has the potential to bridge the gap between critical literacy and more dominant expectations. Future critical literacy research into the role of pedagogical creativity within the bounds of required standards and curricular elements would be useful in answering questions about *how* educators can most successfully implement critical literacy lenses into practice.

### **Classrooms, a canon, and the Common Core: Where Does Critical Literacy Belong?**

Currently, critical literacy scholarship is mixed on whether a coexistence is possible between critical literacy pedagogy and traditional pedagogical approaches, and, if so, what this coexistence might look like. On one hand, some critical literacy theorists wonder whether critical literacy will always be inherently at odds with institutional norms (Luke, 2000). Investigations of language arts curricula that have been concluding for decades that literacy instruction is full of “normative assumptions” (Bomer, 2017; Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 373), wherein the “norm” is what Urrieta and colleagues (2010) refer to as the “whitestream” (p.181). These theorists suggest that because whitestreaming flows into suggested and required curricula (Urrieta et al., 2010) and is consistently being reinforced through teacher preparation (Sleeter, 2017), critical literacy is not viable as an approach intentionally taken up or taught by dominant institutions. On the other hand, other scholars have concluded that critical literacy can and should work in conjunction with the currently

dominant canon. For example, Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) define literary canonization as texts that get “upheld as having particular literary merit or cultural value,” and argue that the very existence of the canonization of texts demands the use of critical literacy (p. 124). The authors argue that precisely because these texts make assumptions about power and accepted culture, it is important for teachers to discuss the implications of canonical literature with students through an examination of things like what voices are and are not heard and what assumptions are being suggested about dominant ideologies (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014). Indeed, applying a critical literacy lens to dominant texts and requirements is one way to make sure students learn the dominant practices for which they will be held accountable (Delpit, 2006), while also being able to critically evaluate those practices through the lens of multiple perspectives and other culturally affirming approaches (Morrell, 2008).

The five participants in this study both confirm the potential for critical literacy in classroom spaces where required or suggested curriculum featuring canonical or traditional texts exist, while simultaneously suggesting that this approach is not taken up frequently or with excitement by critical literacy educators. Across my conversations with participants in this study, critical literacy was repeatedly actively framed as being at odds with the dominant institutional norms of education. This disconnect stemmed from two interconnected places: 1) Participants’ own non-critical educational experiences and 2) Participants’ beliefs that dominant norms are disengaging and unresponsive to their students’ lives. This oppositional relationship manifested across findings: in the fact that none of the participants experienced critical literacy in any of their education or preparation experiences, in the fact that all

of the named challenges to critical literacy pedagogy had external roots in their local school and/or institutional contexts; in the fact that perceived curricular freedom and external, self-selected professional development were the most commonly cited supports; and in the fact that suggested curricula were always cited as challenges that prevented traits of critical literacy from being enacted in the ways and with the frequency that participants wanted. The disconnect surfaced in participants' commentary on everything from viewing standardized testing and test prep as taking up time that students could be spending on other more valuable work (Sofia), to Ayana recalling her sudden realization that "these students don't give a fuck about Gatsby" when assigning what she understood to be "the tenth grade standard" text *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925) (Interview, Nov. 17, 2020).

However, at times the very presence of institutional requirements necessitated the use of critical literacy practices in interesting ways that complicated the perceived dichotomy between critical literacy and institutional norms. Despite their verbal indications that critical literacy and dominant norms are nearly mutually exclusive, participants' pedagogical examples and artifacts often indicated a creative and complex coexistence. One example of this is when Amelia combined the "required" *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) with Angie Thomas' (2017) *The Hate U Give* and challenged her students to think about the presentation of Black characters' experiences in both texts (i.e. through the lens of a young white narrator and white author in one, versus through the lens of a Black teenage narrator and Black author in the other). It is these moments of highly successful coexistence between traditional and new texts/perspectives in this study that confirm that critical literacy is, in fact, a

lens that can and should be used to approach *any* text (Vasquez et al., 2019). Each participant in this study showed at some point, even when they did not realize they were doing so, that critical literacy is actually an approach that welcomes both traditional and non-traditional texts into the classroom in conversation with each other. Every addition of a supplemental TED talk, poem, or short story further confirmed this finding. The more that critical literacy as a field can embrace, encourage, and propagate this coexistence in lieu of wondering about the either/or of the canon and the Common Core, the more feasible critical literacy may appear over time and, in turn, the more we may start seeing it as a pedagogical approach in literacy teacher's preparation and classrooms.

Another important addition to the conversation about the representation of critical literacy in scholarship is the fact that none of the participants in this study saw critical literacy as being at odds with the preexisting traditional standards and skills of literacy education. In fact, all five—including Amelia who worked at a private school—spoke without issue about using Common Core and/or state standards in their teaching, and positioned the standards as a valuable framing of literacy skills that were easy to incorporate into their teaching and that aligned with their critical literacy goals. This finding serves as an important nod to the possibilities of critical literacy as a very attainable approach to framing literacy instruction in classrooms that are standards and skills oriented (or CCSS-aligned), instead of a theoretical dream that would require large systemic overhauls to implement.

Instead of taking issue with the standards-based skills, participants encountered the most challenges when it came to prescribed *content*—specifically the

texts, languages, standardized exams, and identity representations—of normative literacy education. Across the board, the participants in this study cited an oppositional relationship between what and how suggested content is taught from a critical literacy perspective, and what and how content is suggested and measured through institutional norms like prescribed curriculum and standardized tests. Normative ways of teaching and assessing students' content knowledge were never positioned as demanding critical investigations or representations of power, positioning, and multiple perspectives, which was seen as being incredibly problematic, particularly for participants' Black and Brown student populations.

Hilary Janks (2000) describes the content access challenge in schools of “provid(ing) access to dominant forms, while at the same time valuing and promoting the diverse languages and literacies of our students and in the broader society,” and cites this challenge as being “among the key issues that confront educationists...in institutions with increasingly diverse student populations” (pp. 176-177). At times, particularly in moments where suggested curricular elements were present, the participants in this study worked hard to provide access to both dominant and diverse forms; in fact, many of the most compelling critical literacy moments that appeared in this study arose during the intentional attempts to do both. For example, Ellen's students' challenging local education policy and Sofia's students' research projects investigating and critiquing social issues both indicated that using critical literacy approaches can easily be used to meaningfully and critically provide access to dominant languages and literacies while also using students' diverse literacies and perspectives to comment on challenge those forms. Taken together, this study's

findings that critical literacy is compatible with the currently existing skill sets that literacy educators are asked to teach—and that a multitude of approaches to content can be layered onto the teaching of these skills—is encouraging. It suggests that critical literacy understandings should more explicitly highlight not only that critical literacy is a *lens*, but that it is a lens that has the potential to bring dominant and non-dominant forms together into productive conversation with each other for a more rich and nuanced discussion about power and representation in each.

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

#### **Applying a Critical Literacy Lens to Literacy Teacher Preparation**

First and foremost, at the preservice teacher level, literacy teacher preparation needs to specifically and directly include an introduction to critical literacy both theoretically *and* as a lens to approaching pedagogy. In this study, there was little evidence to suggest that critical literacy was introduced to preservice teachers at all during teacher preparation coursework, and we know that the self-perpetuating machine of hegemonic schooling has made it to where very few preservice teachers actually experienced critical literacy in their own K-12 experiences (none of the participants in this study had) (Sleeter, 2017). In short, this means that literacy teacher education might benefit from a critical literacy lens itself. In practice, this would mean that teacher educators guide their preservice teachers in a critique of traditional literacy education, and then introduce and model the characteristics of critical literacy pedagogy. While understanding what currently prevents critical literacy from coming out more in teacher preparation is outside the bounds of this study, the experiences of these five participants and takeaways from critical literacy literature does provide

some insight into what such an introduction to critical literacy theory *and* practice might look like.

As mentioned, in terms of the critical literacy literature, “critical literacy” is constantly being theorized and described slightly differently, but there are a few throughlines that remain constant. The ways that participants in this study defined and operationalized critical literacy throughout our conversations—differently based on person and context but with noticeable common patterns—further reified these common threads, which include: critical literacy is a lens that can be applied broadly, it requires thinking about power, perspective, and representation in texts, and there are a few consistent pedagogical moves that are particularly well-suited to applying a critical literacy lens in classrooms. If preservice teachers are introduced to these common threads and then asked to consistently apply them to their thinking about, planning, enacting, and reflecting on practice, dozens of different critical literacy approaches might appear that are responsive to who these preservice teachers and their students are. This variety of approaches is something to embrace and is reflective of the context-dependent, non-prescriptive nature of critical literacy.

Finally, we also know that young teachers are increasingly being prepared to have progressive and critical viewpoints (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009), but struggle to overcome challenges to connecting their developing progressive rhetoric and philosophical beliefs into practice (Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020; May, 2015). Because critical literacy is one such progressive and critical approach to teaching, it is important to consider ways to prevent these gaps from occurring. This study indicates that self-selected ongoing professional development was an important resource for



participants' ongoing critical literacy pedagogical development. This indicates that connecting students with these resources and encouraging or requiring them to connect with supportive critical educator communities outside the bounds of the preparation program might help them move into their roles as novice classroom teachers with preexisting support systems for ongoing critical literacy growth.

### **Critical Literacy Beliefs and Pedagogy as a Spectrum**

In terms of preparing teachers to be critical literacy educators, this study suggests that critical literacy teacher identities exist on a sort of spectrum, and that social justice beliefs and identity reflexiveness help teachers progress along this spectrum. While all five study participants were able to name and explain the impact of their students' identities and the need for critical literacy pedagogy in the education of those identities, they did not all similarly investigate the role of their own identities. Ellen and Amelia, who both named and verbally unpacked their whiteness and the role that their whiteness played in their careers and in their roles as educators of Black and Brown students, were the two participants whose pedagogy most indicated the more explicitly critical aspects of critical literacy like investigating power in sociopolitical issues and planning/exercising voice towards the achieving of social justice goals. Comparatively, while Sofia and Chloe were both able to identify and discuss the challenges of whitewashed curricula in their own K-12 experiences and were also conscientious about representing a variety of intersecting identities in their classrooms, neither of these participants ever named their own whiteness.

Utt and Tochluk (2020) explain that oftentimes “white teachers in urban schools may discuss institutional racism, yet too few have nuanced understandings of

how their racial identity affects their teaching practices” (p. 126). In the case of Sofia and Chloe, this lesser awareness of the role their whiteness plays in the classroom was reflected in less instruction guiding students to be directly critical of power imbalances and/or social injustices. When compared to Ellen and Amelia, their critical literacy pedagogy choices more frequently included the less overtly critical traits like incorporating a variety of identities in texts, reading and creating counternarratives, and examining sociopolitical issues but not always with an explicit eye on power. Because the ultimate goal of critical literacy is to interrogate, resist, and critique dominant power structures, this lack of frequent focus on the overtly critical aspects of critical literacy is notable. Most interestingly, Ayana—the only teacher of color in this study—aligned more pedagogically with Sofia and Chloe than Ellen and Amelia.

For preservice teacher preparation, this idea of critical literacy as a spectrum is significant in two ways. One, it is an important reminder that preservice teachers are going to enter their programs at a variety of starting points on the spectrum, and that some will need more support than others. This is something that teacher educators need to be aware of and to address through targeted feedback. Two, the recognition of critical literacy as a spectrum strengthens the above call for programmatic infusion, and suggests that building in spaces for identity work and reflexivity are crucial in helping all preservice teachers progress along the spectrum. Baily and Katradis (2016) hypothesized a similar sort of spectrum in their study of preservice teachers’ understandings and positionalities towards social justice education. In their study, one end of the spectrum was a complete rejection of social

justice responsibilities and the other end was a complete embracing of them; their participants progressed along the spectrum as they worked in classrooms with students and simultaneously had reflexive conversations in their preparation classes (Baily & Katradis, 2016). This study similarly suggests that in order to support preservice critical literacy teachers' development, teacher educators need to require preservice teachers to interrogate both their own identities and the identities of their students, and foster dialogues about the role that identities play in influencing critical literacy pedagogy. These examinations will necessarily require participants to consider how their identities impact their attitudes, assumptions, prejudices, and interactions in the classroom, and to evaluate and build their critical literacy practice in these reflexive spaces.

#### **“Preparing Students for the Real World”: Not Only a K-12 Educator Belief**

When thinking about implications for teacher education, it is important to consider Chloe's pedagogical challenges, specifically, as the only participant to have any critical literacy preparation before entering the classroom. In this study, all five participants shared a belief that critical literacy was important to prepare their high school students to face the real world, and as it turns out, that advice also holds true when thinking about how to prepare preservice teachers to be critical literacy educators. Chloe's case indicates a need to not only do theory, modeling, and practice work with preservice teachers, but to make that work as realistic as possible. The more that teacher preparation and ongoing teacher professional development can support teachers' ability to apply critical literacy as a lens to any text and teaching choices versus just those over which the teacher has direct control, the more these

teachers will flourish. Doing so would, for example, help prepare early career teachers apply a critical literacy lens to required curricular texts in the same way that Amelia paired *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) with *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) instead of feeling lost in the face of unanticipated school and institutional requirements.

Often, when theory to practice work does exist in preservice teacher preparation it is not within the bounds of realistic scenarios; for example, an end-of-semester project in a theoretical course might be to create a unit plan or series of lessons (this was the bulk of Chloe's undergraduate thesis). However, when there is no boundedness to such assignments that mimics the challenges faced in school contexts (i.e. required texts or the inclusion of standardized test preparation) they do not fully prepare novice teachers for the real world. This was reflected in the fact that Chloe was unsure that she would be able to actually enact either of the units she planned for her critical literacy undergraduate thesis. Accordingly, it is important for critical literacy preparation to include a variety of more realistic practices, like taking sample required units or curricula and revising them with a critical literacy lens, and evaluating mentorship experiences with a critical literacy lens. Even more important, preservice teachers need to practice applying a critical literacy lens to their teaching as soon as they enter their student teaching experiences so that they begin experiencing and planning for pedagogical challenges. This requires not only sufficient preparation to actually do the work, but also that mentors and supervisors be trained to provide feedback on the characteristics of critical literacy pedagogy and support preservice teachers as they attempt to navigate pedagogical challenges.

Finally, this study suggests that preservice teachers need to be introduced to critical literacy work as a point of targeted growth and not as something that they can learn once and be done with. The participants in this study were all at different points of their critical literacy educator journeys, and all approached their pedagogy reflexively and as constantly developing. Discussing some of the realities of critical literacy pedagogy with preservice teachers in advance—that it will develop and deepen with time, that it will likely be particularly hard to navigate in the beginning, and that it will continue to grow as teachers’ agency in their schools grows—can help equip them with growth mindsets and prevent the possibility of new teachers growing frustrated or disheartened and giving up.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Pedagogical Suggestions**

In terms of the pedagogical choices that support critical literacy in secondary classrooms, the common pedagogical traits across participants in this study offer a handful of suggestions. First, having students think about, reflect upon, and bring their own identities into the classroom and into their reading and writing of texts is a classroom imperative. All of the participants in this study held conversations about identity early on in the school year and then continued to revisit these conversations in order to frame the reading and creating of texts, which suggests that this is a foundational pedagogical move. From there, centering student voices and curating multimodal texts that represent a variety of identities was the most popular way to bring multiple and contradictory perspectives and counternarratives into the classroom. Participants also frequently utilized news, politics, and popular social

issues as discussion points to guide students in the process of critiquing power and critically thinking about sociopolitical issues. Finally, the fact that there was no consistent approach to the critical literacy call of guiding students to think about and take social justice action but that all participants spoke to this work is a nod to both the importance of this pedagogical move, as well as the fact that it will need to be an intentional point of pedagogical growth for critical literacy educators.

### ***How Teachers Can Implement, Support, and Sustain Critical Literacy Pedagogy***

Currently in the US education system, “teachers burdened with mandated curricula who want to engage in critical literacy practices must advocate for their students’ and their own intellectual freedom” (Zacher-Pandya, 2012, p. 24). For these five teachers, that advocacy looked like self-selecting professional development and getting creative with how to employ critical literacy in their curricula. In our current moment, most schools’ suggested texts, the Common Core suggested texts, as well as the widely accepted literary canon whose contents line many schools’ book room shelves are all overwhelmingly white and male in authorship and perspective (Moore et al, 2014; National Governors Association, 2010). Because of this, many teachers and scholars feel that required/suggested curriculum and the “standards will likely never overtly endorse critical literacy” (Avila & Moore, 2012, p. 32). Fortunately, the teachers in this study demonstrated that critical literacy does not need a formal endorsement to emerge in classrooms. Rather, it can easily align with required standards because it applies more to literacy content and is compatible with preexisting standardized skills, and—specifically because it is a lens to be applied

freely and not a prefabricated curricular approach—can be made to fit even around even suggested or required classroom readings.

Based on the ongoing self-selected learning of the participants in this study, seeking out sources of critical and social justice teaching inspiration and continuously visiting those sources is one of the keys to the process of critical literacy learning and growth. All five participants actively sought out resources and like-minded communities of educators everywhere from social media-based individuals and organizations, to academic literature, to more organized professional development programs, and tapped into these resources to continuously grow and develop their practice. For in-service practicing or aspiring critical literacy educators, this is an important note for how to learn and grow professionally: when schools and colleagues do not materialize as like-minded, supportive communities conducive to growth, it becomes necessary to find these communities elsewhere as learning does not happen in isolation.

Further, particularly for teachers who find themselves in contexts with suggested or required content, it is important to remember to conceptualize critical literacy as a lens that can be applied to any required skill or text. Three of the most commonly cited pedagogical moves in this study—presenting multiple and contradictory perspectives, reading and creating counternarratives and multimodal texts, and critiquing sociopolitical issues—were all made by participants at different points by choosing texts and resources to supplement other required or suggested skills and content. The fact that all participants were beholden to required standards and several faced suggested curricular elements but were still able to make each of

these pedagogical decisions with relative frequency is an encouraging reminder for practicing educators: critical literacy pedagogy is not an ‘only for those with full freedom’ approach to teaching that is thwarted by the existence of suggested or required elements. Rather, critical literacy is a suitable lens for any literacy skills, content or text because it depends on *how* we ask students to read and create and does not have to depend on *what* we ask students to read and create.

This emphasis on critical literacy as the *how* and not necessarily the *what* (though ideally educators get a say in both) is important to reiterate for teachers who feel pressured by accountability measures. This study featured examples of both: while Ellen felt empowered and unbothered enough about her test scores’ impact on her teacher rating to say “no” to standardized test prep, Sofia admitted worrying about test scores both for herself and, more importantly, on behalf of her students. Though Sofia noted that test preparation did occasionally take away time that she felt would be better spent on other instruction, she also noted that she was able to incorporate many of the skills her students needed for both the PARCC and AP exams through the conduit of critical literacy, particularly in terms of text selection and critiquing power in sociopolitical news and issues. In such spaces where teachers find themselves without full curricular flexibility or beholden to normative content and accountability measures like Chloe, Ayana, and Amelia did, critical literacy pedagogy still proved to be achievable by applying a critical literacy lens to the required elements, as well as curating a diverse range of supplemental readings and writing tasks.



Finally, this study suggests that the higher along the critical and social justice literacy spectrum teachers move and the more agency they begin to have in their school spaces, the more they might consider embodying the critical literacy characteristic of social justice action in support of their students. Although Ellen was the only participant in this study to fully take this step by saying “no” whenever possible to standardized test preparation and explaining her reasoning to her students, I believe she sets an important standard for other critical literacy educators. By outwardly advocating for her students, Ellen was not only freeing up time to do other, more valuable work in her classroom, but was also modeling the potential of critically literate social justice action for her students. In turn, her students followed in her footsteps and similarly advocated for their own academic needs to local school board officials. Ellen’s example demonstrates that when literacy educators can both apply the characteristics of critical literacy pedagogy in their teaching *and also* embody these characteristics in their thoughts and actions, they have the potential to inspire and guide their students to do the same.

### **The Role of Schools**

When considering the role of the government and policy in the future of critical literacy education, Allan Luke wrote that “perhaps it is not a question of whether and how government might bring ‘critical literacy’ under an umbrella of state curriculum policy, but rather a matter of government getting out of the way so that ‘critical literacies’ can be invented in classrooms” (2000, p. 15). The supports and challenges that participants in this study reported experiencing when enacting critical literacy pedagogy suggests that “getting out of the way” might, in fact, be the most

useful thing that schools can do to support critical literacy educators. I believe that teachers are in the best position to illustrate and advocate for their needs, so the recommendations that I have for schools based on this study come almost directly from the mouths of my participants. Primarily, their needs existed in two specific and interconnected forms: ongoing professional learning, and time.

From a professional learning standpoint, all of the participants stated that ongoing learning opportunities were essential in learning how to be better critical and social justice literacy teachers. Specifically, they noted that because they did not have solid pedagogical models from their own experiences to fall back on, and because it takes time to move theories about critical pedagogy into practice, time to engage in consistent and targeted professional development was vital. The time and effort participants spent in seeking out their own growth opportunities demonstrated that teachers know what supports they need, and that schools should seek out teacher opinions about what these supports are and where to find them. Their emphasis on social justice beliefs and direct commentary on the challenging process of moving these beliefs into meaningful practice also demonstrates a need for ongoing learning that emphasizes reflexive work on both mindsets *and* corresponding practice.

These recommendations for teacher-led professional development are deeply connected with the second school recommendation, which is that teachers need time to do this work. As established at various points throughout this dissertation, putting critical literacy into practice is hard. Teachers have a constant need for reflection, revision, and redesign that takes time and energy (May, 2015). Multiple participants directly mentioned wanting and needing more time to plan, learn and develop their

pedagogy, and also mentioned not being afforded this time in their school spaces.

This suggests that schools need to give teachers unstructured, intentional time in their daily schedules to support all the learning, unlearning, practice, and reflection needed to grow as critical literacy educators. Without time, as Amelia noted, it is difficult for critical literacy work to get done, and teachers wind up feeling isolated and burnt out and their pedagogy suffers.

Finally, one of the biggest implications for schools from this study is the fact that teachers need freedom and flexibility to excel as critical literacy educators (or any kind of critical educator, for that matter). Specifically because the institutional norms of education are inherently resistant to critical pedagogy, the more teachers can have the freedom and flexibility to navigate and disrupt those norms, the more successful they will be. Every single participant in this study cited curricular freedom and the ability to be creative and incorporate a wide variety of texts, modalities, and assessments in their practice as a vital support to their critical literacy work. Insofar as schools are able, they should learn from these teachers' stories and provide as much flexibility and freedom as possible (alongside providing the time and resource support for teachers to take advantage of said freedom to do critical literacy work!) so that teachers create and enact engaging critical literacy pedagogy for their students.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As mentioned in the rationale for this study, critical literacy is well theorized but much less frequently studied in practice, especially in the United States. That means that this study was just the tip of an entire iceberg of critical literacy research potential, much of which I hope to engage in with pre- and in-service teachers

moving forward in my career. Because the field of empirical critical literacy work is so relatively sparse compared to its theoretical counterpart, more exploration of the pedagogy, supports, and challenges that lead to the successful implementation of critical literacy in K-12 classrooms is needed. The goal of this study was to learn more about each of the above elements, but one multiple case study dissertation's worth of work with five teachers located sporadically throughout the United States is nowhere near enough.

The fact that four of the five participants in this study cited the origins of their critical literacy identities as being *outside* the bounds of their teacher preparation suggests that more research surrounding the possibilities of critical literacy teacher preparation is needed. Chloe's experiences as the only participant to encounter critical literacy in her preparation serve as a useful guide for thinking about important next steps. For Chloe, theoretical preparation and pedagogical planning via her undergraduate thesis were helpful in establishing her critical literacy identity and pedagogical thinking, but then some of the realities of being a new teacher in a school with suggested curriculum elements interrupted her ability to enact practices the way she had originally intended. This raises questions about the potential of critical literacy theory and pedagogy when introduced within literacy teacher preparation coursework, and what experiences in the preservice process are most helpful in helping novice educators attempt to navigate pedagogical challenges in their student teaching internships? Finding and exploring the coursework experiences of a secondary literacy teacher preparation program that introduces and emphasizes critical literacy in theory and in practice would be useful in addressing such

questions. This research could successfully take the form of (quasi)experimental studies on the influence of critical literacy theoretical and pedagogical preparation in coursework, or of self-studies or action research projects by critical literacy teacher educators attempting to do this work with their preservice teacher candidates.

Another important next research step is to examine critical literacy pedagogy with teachers who teach white students. Currently, much of the research on equity literacy in action that does exist comes, like this study, from teachers working in schools serving large percentages of students of color and multilingual students. Unfortunately, this can create the impression “that white and wealthy students wouldn’t benefit from a curriculum informed by equity literacy (when) in fact, these students may have the steepest learning curves when it comes to learning about bias, discrimination, and inequity” (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015, p. 39). Presumably, approaches to critical literacy in majority-white classrooms would look necessarily different (Swalwell, 2019), and there is currently little existing research on what this pedagogy might look like, or how it differs from the way critical literacy pedagogy is enacted with students of color. Katy Swalwell does this work with social justice education more broadly, and similar investigations into the possibilities and challenges of critical literacy in privileged school spaces would be an interesting follow up to both this study and her work. A study asking similar questions to this one about the pedagogy of self-identifying critical literacy educators and the supports and challenges they encounter in majority-white spaces would help provide some of these nuanced understandings.

Finally, and most important to my researcher heart, I believe it would be incredibly valuable to extend examinations of critical literacy work to include the students that it is designed to serve. This study was limited by COVID-19 in ways that left me out of classrooms, but I would love to work with both teachers and students in tandem in the future, and believe that doing so presents a variety of important research opportunities. First, *talking* to teachers about their pedagogy and *observing* them in action produce two very different sets of data. *Talking* to teachers meant that I was able to generate important takeaways about participants' decision-making, beliefs, and larger-scale pedagogical experiences like text selections, classroom activity choices, and school-level challenges. It also means, however, that I was *not* able to comment on more granular and language-specific aspects of practice that occur in classrooms, like, for example, how teachers ask and answer questions to promote critiques of power and language in texts, how they frame text selection with students, how they interact with students in the classroom, and how they guide students to discuss multiple and contradictory perspectives. These more granular-level observations are only possible with research on the ground in classrooms, and can help provide more nuanced answers to important questions about specific elements of critical literacy practice such as: How do critical literacy educators center and discuss identity and power in their classrooms? How do critical literacy educators use questioning/discussion techniques to guide the development of students' critical literacy lenses? How do teachers' and students' identities impact classroom critical literacy practice? What pedagogical choices help build students' social justice and/or

social justice action mindsets? and What pedagogical techniques do teachers use to develop students' critical literacy lenses?

Because critical literacy is so grounded in the identities, perspectives, and power of people and ultimately aims to create social justice change, collaborative research methodologies like teacher action and participant action research with teachers and students would help provide important perspective when thinking about the above questions and about questions surrounding supports and barriers to critical literacy pedagogy. On the teacher side, this study showed that educators are better positioned than anyone else to think about their own teaching, and to recognize the challenges they face as well as the tools they need to grow and overcome those challenges. Accordingly, collaborating with teachers to study their process of critical literacy pedagogical development, implementation, reflection, and revision would provide further insight into questions about *how* teachers enact their own critical literacy lenses and beliefs into practice. On the student side, collaborating with secondary students as they experience and develop their own critical literacy lenses has the potential to provide perspective on the effectiveness of elements of critical literacy pedagogy that no amount of talking to teachers or observing classrooms would be able to provide. Only students are best poised to think about what texts, text experiences, conversations about language, and identity exploration best help develop critical perspectives on literacy and language, so involving them in future research is a necessary step.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to write a “conclusion” for a study that feels like a commencement. I began this project to learn more about teachers who are what I wish I had better known how to be throughout my teaching career—impactful critical literacy educators—and am leaving it inspired to immediately continue the work. Throughout this process I was lucky to get to know five brilliant teachers with five unique identities and sets of pedagogical approaches to critical literacy education. Above all, they demonstrated that critical literacy pedagogy is not only feasible, but feasible across a variety of contexts, in conjunction with preexisting skills-based standards, and regardless of prior experiences. Taken together, their identities and practices illuminate important next steps for critical literacy preparation, pedagogy, and future research, and leave me increasingly hopeful about the possibilities of critical literacy progressing further from theoretical isolation into K-12 practice.

Because I feel like this study is more of a midpoint of an ongoing journey, I want to close with a brief quote from Chloe as she was ruminating on her identity as a social justice and critical literacy educator. As she thought aloud about the history and development of her teacher self, she repeated twice in summary: “It’s been, it’s just been a long journey. A long journey” (Interview, Nov. 10, 2020). Like Chloe, my own identity development and road to critical literacy—to this dissertation—has been a long journey, but it has been a journey that has helped sharpen my focus on the importance of what is next: finding ways to help create more teachers like the five critical literacy educators whose identities and work have filled these pages.



## Appendix A

### Recruitment Emails

#### **Email sent to education peers to identify potential study participants:**

Dear (Educator Friend)

I am asking for your help in identifying talented current secondary literacy teachers (English or social studies) to participate in a research study. Let me first say that I know COVID-19 is making for some interesting times for education, but I also strongly believe that it is important to not lose sight of learning and growing despite these extraordinary circumstances. Possibly now more than ever given the sociopolitical state of our country, thinking about and learning from what we do well as an education community is important. That is why I am focusing on strong educators for my dissertation research.

The purpose of this study is to explore the teacher identities and pedagogy of critical literacy educators. *For this study, a “critical literacy educator” is ‘someone who values teaching students to read and write texts with the purpose of evaluating multiple perspectives and critiquing power.’* Participation in this study includes:

- Completion of one survey (electronic; no more than 20 minute time commitment)
- Participation in three 1-hour, 1-on-1 interviews with the researcher (electronic, no more than 60 minutes each)
- Sharing teaching artifacts (unit plan, lessons/materials)
- Compensation for participation

For questions or to recommend a critical literacy educator (*including yourself!*), please contact the principal investigator, Olivia Murphy, by replying to this email, by phone at 704-254-7945 or by email at [OMurphy1@umd.edu](mailto:OMurphy1@umd.edu). Please also feel free to forward this email directly to potential participants and mention that you think they might be an excellent candidate so they can contact the researcher directly.

Thank you so much for your time,

Olivia Murphy  
Principal Investigator

## **Nominated (Potential) Participant Recruitment Email:**

Dear (Teacher),

First things first, thank you for taking the time to even read this, especially as I know it is a particularly scary and trying time to be a teacher right now. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park, and I am doing my dissertation research about talented critical literacy educators and their pedagogy. You were nominated for participation in this research study by someone who thought you may be a critical literacy educator. In order to be eligible for participation, you must identify with the following statement:

- “I am someone who values teaching students to read and write texts with the purpose of evaluating multiple perspectives and critiquing power.

**AND** do at least two of the following in your teaching:

- Use supplemental (to standard curriculum), multimodal, and multicultural texts
- Use narratives and counternarratives
- Use student choice in research projects
- Hold social action as an instructional goal (for example, in assessments)
- Bring resistance or resistant perspectives into your classroom

Participation in the study includes:

- Completion of one survey (electronic; no more than 20 minute time commitment)
- Participation in three 1-hour, 1-on-1 interviews with the researcher (electronic, no more than 90 minutes each)
- Sharing teaching artifacts (unit plan, lessons/materials)
- Compensation for participation

If you are interested in learning more about or in participating in this study, please contact the researcher at [OMurphy1@umd.edu](mailto:OMurphy1@umd.edu) or by phone at 704-254-7945. I also want to thank you for your time and consideration in our current environment; I know it is an extraordinary one for all of us, but I also believe that now, maybe more than ever, it is important to examine and learn from what educators are doing in their classrooms (whatever those classrooms happen to look like this year!)

Thank you so much for your time,

Olivia Murphy  
Principal Investigator

## Appendix B

### Initial Survey

#### Questions copied from GoogleForms:

\*Do you want to make your own pseudonym for this research? Totally not required, but if so, enter it here:

1. How would you describe your race? Choose all that apply:
  - a. Asian
  - b. Black or African American
  - c. Indigenous American or Alaskan Native
  - d. Hispanic or LatinX
  - e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - f. White
  - g. I prefer not to say
  - h. Other (describe if willing):
2. How old are you?
3. How much emphasis would you say your parent(s) and/or guardian(s) placed on education when you were growing up?
  - a. A little to none at all
  - b. Some
  - c. A lot
4. How diverse would you say your friend group was growing up?
  - a. A little to not at all
  - b. Some
  - c. A lot
5. How diverse would you say your neighborhood was where you grew up:
  - a. A little to not at all
  - b. Some
  - c. A lot
6. The high school you attended was:
  - a. Urban
  - b. Suburban
  - c. Rural
  - d. N/A or Unsure
7. The high school you attended had:
  - a. 1-700 students
  - b. 701-1500 students
  - c. >1501 students
  - d. N/A or unsure
8. How would you describe the literature you read in high school?
  - a. Majority dominant canon (i.e. prominent Eurocentric, male, 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century authors...sometimes called “the classics”)
  - b. Majority non-dominant canon

- c. A mix of canon and non-canon
  - d. Don't remember
9. Is there a particular middle or high school teacher who you would describe as being very influential to your teaching? (This can be in either a "what to do" or "what not to do" way)
- a. Yes
  - b. No
10. The college/university you attended as an undergraduate was:
- a. Urban
  - b. Suburban
  - c. Rural
  - d. N/A or Unsure
11. The college/university you attended as an undergraduate had:
- a. 1-4,000 students
  - b. 4,001-10,000 students
  - c. 10,001-20,000 students
  - d. >20,000 students
12. The college or university you attended as an undergraduate had:
- a. Little to no diversity in the student population
  - b. Some diversity in the student population
  - c. High diversity in the student population
  - d. N/A or unsure
13. Is there a particular college or university teacher who you would describe as being very influential to your teaching? (This can be in either a "what to do" or "what not to do" way)
- a. Yes
  - b. No
14. What was your undergraduate major?
15. The college/university/program you attended for your teacher preparation was:
- a. Urban
  - b. Suburban
  - c. Rural
  - d. Online
  - e. N/A or Unsure
16. The education preparation program you attended had:
- a. Little to no diversity in the student population
  - b. Some diversity in the student population
  - c. High diversity in the student population
  - d. N/A or unsure
17. What was your education specialization or degree (i.e. "secondary language arts," etc)
18. Do you have a Master's degree or higher?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. I'm in a program now

19. If you answered "yes" or "I'm in a program right now" above, what is your specialization?
20. In your current teaching placement, how diverse would you say your student population is?
  - a. A little to not at all
  - b. Some
  - c. A lot
21. In your current teaching placement, are you expected to teach with a particular set of standards in mind?
  - a. Yes, the Common Core
  - b. Yes, something besides the Common Core
  - c. Yes, a mix of the Common Core and something else
  - d. No
22. In your current teaching placement, are students required to pass standardized tests in order to graduate?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Other
  - d. Unsure
23. In your current teaching placement, how much control would you say you have over what is in your curriculum:
  - a. A little or none at all
  - b. Some
  - c. Full or almost full
24. In your current teaching placement, how much control do you have over the texts your students read?
  - a. A little or none at all
  - b. Some
  - c. Full or almost full
25. In your current teaching placement, how much control do you have over the summative assessments you assign?
  - a. A little or none at all
  - b. Some
  - c. Full or almost full
26. In your current teaching placement, how much control do you have over your day-to-day lessons/classroom activities?
  - a. A little or none at all
  - b. Some
  - c. Full or almost full
27. In your current teaching placement, how much time would you say you spend collaborating with others on your curriculum and/or day-to-day teaching:
  - a. Little to none
  - b. Some
  - c. A lot
28. In your current teaching placement, how many of your colleagues would you say have teaching priorities/philosophies similar to yours?

- a. Few or none
  - b. Some
  - c. Most or all
29. In your current teaching placement, how supported do you feel by your administration?
- a. Not at all
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Fully
  - d. Would rather not answer
30. Do you plan to stay in your current teaching placement for the foreseeable future?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
  - d. Would rather not answer
31. List a few key words or phrases that describe your teaching style:
32. List a few key words or phrases about what you believe students need to know:
33. List the people or experiences that most influence(d) your teaching:
34. Briefly define what equity in education means to you:
35. Briefly define critical literacy in your own words (if you can't, that's totally ok!):

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

#### Interview 1

##### Semi Structured Starting Questions

\*The questions on this list are a base set for each participant. I will also ask individual follow-up questions OR change the wording of some questions based on participants' initial survey responses. Some questions may be omitted based on the flow of conversation.

\*\*Prior to survey, remind participants: You are free to “pass” on any questions you do not wish to answer, and to stop the interview at any point. Your participation in this study is voluntary and can be rescinded at any time without penalty, including in the middle of this conversation; if you have any questions please let me know. Additionally, just a reminder that all data collected during this research process--including your responses to these questions--are and will remain anonymous; no identifying information will appear in any publications/presentations/etc that come from this study.

\*\*\*Tell participants: The purpose of this first interview is to learn more about your background and the experiences that helped shape you into the critical literacy educator you are now. If at any point you want to share a story, an anecdote, or a bit of information that you feel is important, please feel free to do so whether or not it pertains to a posed question.

1. In the survey I asked you to define critical literacy and you wrote “ \_\_\_\_;” would you like to add on to that or explain it any further?
2. The definition and descriptors for self-identification in this study were (read or provide recruitment descriptors). Explain why you self-identified with this?

\*\*Now I'm going to ask some questions about your life and education experiences to get an understanding of what sorts of experiences influenced your identity as a critical literacy educator...

3. What was your home life like growing up?
  - a. Tell me about your family.
  - b. You said your parents/guardians (did/not) support your academic life growing up, can you explain that a little more?
  - c. You said your neighborhood/school was (\_\_\_\_ diverse) what sorts of interactions did you have with people whose identities were different than yours? (i.e. different races, cultures, faiths, linguistic repertoires, etc)
4. Tell me about your relationship with school growing up
  - a. Did you enjoy it?
  - b. What sorts of things did you enjoy learning about and doing in school?

- c. What sorts of things did you read in your English and history classes, and what sorts of assignments were you given?
  - d. Tell me about a teacher that stands out in your memory.
  - e. You mentioned you had a particularly impactful high school teacher- tell me about them.
5. Tell me about your teacher preparation program
- a. What sorts of knowledge and ways of teaching were emphasized?
  - b. Did you learn about critical literacy in your preparation?
  - c. You mentioned you had a particularly impactful college professor- tell me about them
  - d. Tell me about a formative experience you had with a student when you were in your preparation.
  - e. Tell me about your first group of students. (What did you learn from them?)
6. What do you think most influenced your beliefs about and approach to teaching?
- a. When and why did you decide to be a teacher?
  - b. Who or what do you think was the biggest influence(r)(s) on your choice to teach literacy critically?
  - c. Tell me about an important experience that shaped your teaching.
7. (Read study critical literacy descriptor...)
- a. Where do you see elements of this descriptor in your practice?
  - b. (In response to 6.a) What do you think led you to think or teach this way?
  - c. Do you recall experiencing critical literacy approaches in your own education experiences?
  - d. What do you believe has most influenced your development as a critical literacy teacher?
8. Keeping in mind that the goal of this interview was to unpack what in your history shaped you into someone who was nominated as an outstanding critical literacy educator, are there any other stories, memories, insight, or experiences you want to share?

## **Interview 2**

### **Semi Structured Starting Questions**

\*The questions on this list are a base set for each participant. I will also ask individual follow-up questions OR change the wording of some questions based on participants' initial survey and interview 1 responses. Some questions may be omitted based on the flow of conversation.

\*\*Prior to survey, remind participants: Like last time, you are free to “pass” on any questions you do not wish to answer, and to stop the interview at any point. Your participation in this study is voluntary and can be rescinded at any time without penalty, including in the middle of this conversation; if you have any questions please let me know. Additionally, just a reminder that all data collected during this research process--including your responses to these questions--are and will remain anonymous; no identifying information will appear in any publications/presentations/etc that come from this study.



\*\*\*Tell participants: The purpose of this second interview is to learn more about your current teaching context and how and why you teach the way you do. As in the last interview, if at any point you want to share a story, an anecdote, or a bit of information that you feel is important, please feel free to do so whether or not it pertains to a posed question.

1. Tell me a little about your school
  - a. Did you specifically choose the school? If so, why? If not, how did you find the job?
  - b. Tell me about your school's approach to curriculum
    - i. You mentioned having \_\_\_ control over your curriculum; what is *your* approach to curriculum?
  - c. Do the students in your school have to take exams? If so, what are they and how do they impact your teaching? If not, how do you think that impacts your teaching?
  - d. What are the biggest strengths and challenges your school faces?
2. Tell me about your administration
  - a. What sorts of leadership styles do you work with?
  - b. How involved are they in what happens in your classroom?
  - c. What kinds of support do you get?
3. Tell me about your students, what are they like?
  - a. What sorts of identities are represented in your classroom?
  - b. How do you get to know your students?
4. What does it mean to you to be a good teacher?
  - a. What about a good literacy teacher, specifically?
  - b. You described your teaching style as \_\_\_\_, can you explain why you chose those words?
  - c. You said you had \_\_\_ control over your curriculum/texts; how do you choose what texts and topics to teach? Can you give examples?
  - d. You said you had \_\_\_ control over your assessments; how do you design assessments: what do you prioritize? Can you give me an example?
  - e. What are your biggest teaching challenges? How do you address them?
5. Walk me through a lesson or a series of lessons that you feel were particularly effective critical literacy lesson(s)
  - a. What made this teaching so effective?
  - b. How did you know you were successful?
  - c. What were your students' reactions and outcomes?

### **Interview 3**

#### **Semi Structured Starting Questions**

\*The questions on this list are a base set for each participant. I will also ask individual follow-up questions OR change the wording of some questions based on participants' initial survey, interview 2, and observation responses. Some questions may be omitted based on the flow of conversation.

\*\*Prior to survey, remind participants: As always, you are free to “pass” on any questions you do not wish to answer, and to stop the interview at any point. Your participation in this study is voluntary and can be rescinded at any time without penalty, including in the middle of this conversation; if you have any questions please let me know. Additionally, just a reminder that all data collected during this research process--including your responses to these questions--are and will remain anonymous; no identifying information will appear in any publications/presentations/etc that come from this study.

\*\*\*Tell participants: The purpose of this final interview is to talk a little bit more about the classes I got to see, and about how you view critical literacy’s role in your teaching. As in the other interviews, if at any point you want to share a story, an anecdote, or a bit of information that you feel is important, please feel free to do so whether or not it pertains to a posed question.

1. How do you view your identity as an educator: what do you most value, and why?
  - a. Why do you feel this is an important approach to teaching?
  - b. Who or what do you think has most influenced your teaching style?
  - c. What do you hope your students take away from spending a year with you?
2. In your (artifact name/type) I noticed \_\_\_\_\_. Why did you choose to do/say/assign this?
  - a. Why did you choose \_\_\_\_\_ text/activity? (x as many artifacts as applicable)
3. Tell me about how you approach critical literacy in your teaching
  - a. When and how did you learn how to be a critical literacy educator?
  - b. How did your own literacy experiences prepare you to be the teacher you are?
4. What supports have been most helpful in developing your identity and pedagogy over time? How do you continue to grow as an educator?
5. What challenges have you encountered to your critical literacy work or your pedagogy in general?
  - a. How have you overcome these challenges?
  - b. What supports do you have or wish you had to help overcome these challenges?
6. Is there *anything* we haven’t talked about in these three interviews related to this topic/the things we’ve talked about that you want to share? Any stories?

## Appendix D

### Final Code Deck

First Cycle		Second Cycle
Phase 1: Deductive*	Phase 2: Inductive (Structural and Theming the Data)**	Phase 3: Axial***
<p><u>Critical Literacy Pedagogy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counternarrative &amp; Multimodal forms</li> <li>• Social justice action</li> <li>• Socio-political critique</li> <li>• Multiple &amp; contradictory perspectives</li> </ul> <p><u>Identity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past experiences</li> <li>• Context</li> <li>• Beliefs &amp; sub identities</li> <li>• Agency</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pedagogical supports</li> <li>• Pedagogical challenges</li> <li>• Navigating pedagogical challenges</li> </ul>	<p><u>Critical Literacy Pedagogy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counternarrative &amp; Multimodal Forms               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Author identities</li> <li>○ Student stories</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Social Justice Action               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Projects</li> <li>○ Challenging</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Socio-political critique               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Current Events</li> <li>○ Social Justice Issues</li> <li>○ Discussion</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Multiple &amp; Contradictory Perspectives               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Identity exploration</li> <li>○ Centering student Voice</li> <li>○ Discussion</li> <li>○ Diverse Texts</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Identity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past Experiences               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Finding “critical literacy”</li> <li>○ Impactful non-preparation coursework</li> <li>○ Mentors</li> <li>○ Experiencing tenets of critical literacy</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Context               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Students</li> <li>○ Suggested curriculum</li> <li>○ Supportive Colleagues</li> <li>○ Black &amp; Brown students</li> <li>○ White identity</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><u>RQ1 (Identities)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Encountering critical literacy</li> <li>➤ Social justice beliefs</li> <li>➤ Beliefs about good teaching</li> </ul> <p><u>RQ2 (Identities → Practice)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The role of agency</li> <li>➤ Curricular supplements</li> <li>➤ Centering students identities and voices</li> <li>➤ Critical literacy knowledge</li> </ul> <p><u>RQ3 (Supports/Challenges)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Local supports</li> <li>➤ Institutional challenges</li> <li>➤ Knowledge and context agency</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beliefs &amp; Sub Identities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Social Justice</li> <li>◦ Identity as developing</li> <li>◦ Literacy is for “the real world”</li> <li>◦ Morals and ethics</li> <li>◦ “Good teaching” and love</li> <li>◦ Students as knowledge holders</li> <li>◦ Situating whiteness</li> <li>◦ Defining critical literacy</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Agency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Time in school</li> <li>◦ Critical literacy knowledge</li> <li>◦ Leadership roles</li> <li>◦ Purpose</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Pedagogical supports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Students as inspiration</li> <li>◦ Social media</li> <li>◦ Formal PD/continuing education</li> <li>◦ Curricular freedom</li> <li>◦ Supportive administrators</li> <li>◦ Supportive colleagues</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Pedagogical challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Test preparation</li> <li>◦ Time</li> <li>◦ Not feeling respected as a professional</li> <li>◦ Provided curriculum</li> <li>◦ Assumed curriculum</li> <li>◦ Lack of knowledge</li> <li>◦ Student academic level</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Navigating pedagogical challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Framing agency</li> <li>◦ Grammatical agency</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
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*\*Deductive codes denoted by •*

*\*\*Inductive codes denoted by ◦*

*\*\*\*Axial codes denoted by ▶*

## Appendix E

### Chloe's Highlighted Artifacts

1. "What will you do to make your voice heard" collection of responses to display after watching Clint Smith's "The Danger of Silence" TED Talk and having a discussion of the importance of voice:





2. Description of empathy unit final activism project (first page of assignment package) after reading *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) and *To Kill Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960)

**Final Project Description for TKAM & The Hate U Give  
Empathy transforming into justice**

**Goal: Create a proposal in which you describe all aspects of starting a movement pertaining to a topic you are passionate about within society.**

Duration of Project: 3-4 weeks

**Week one tasks and goals:**

- a) Introduce group members and set up group norms
- b) Research your issue and topic
- c) Brainstorm all aspects of proposal in general way

**Aspects of Proposal:**

- Come up with an event or initial movement that you could implement and actively plan and execute (this should not just be an awareness poster)

Your group must write up an actual proposal that includes the following sections

- Why is there a need to begin a movement pertaining to this issue? (Provide background on the issue or injustice happening)
- Plan your movement event. Where and when will your movement be held? Who is your target audience? What will you do? Will it be a rally? Will you raise awareness by using posters and then holding an event? Will your movement take place at a family event? At a public space? Will there be games? Giveaways? Speeches? Etc...
- How much would it cost to run your event? (Food, space reservations, games, sound system, etc...)

3. Student narrative and poetry examples from “Identities and Power” unit in which students consider how aspects of their identities do and do not hold power:

**Insert Written Narrative in space below:**

When I was about the age of 5 I always wondered why I had soft, kinky, curly hair and my mother's hair was brown and straight or sometimes wavy. And I wondered why her skin tone was white, and I was just a light skinned colored girl this would always affect me because society would always portray me as hHispanic or Cape-Verdean, and this would become their assumption of me and who I was because that's what they thought when they looked at me. Indent One of the questions that I would always be asked was, "so if your black and white which side do you identify more with," and I would always say "why do I have to choose sides of myself I would think to myself that halfway through my body is an demilitarised zone I am not warren countries my parents were not warlords fighting for control of my identification." These questions about being mixed and people looking at me when i was always with my mother would always affect me because it would leave me thinking something was wrong with me that I wasn't supposed to come out the way I did. This is where the thought of being white came up because I would see how my mom was white and her hair was so pretty and I wonder why I don't look like her why or even why I don't have the same skin tone as her or even hair texture.

One day I was at my grandmother's house, and I remember I was with my uncle and his best friend Cindy had come over, and I had said to her that I wanted to be white just like my mom. Cindy felt the need to educate me on why I look the way that I do. Her response to what I said was that because my mom is white and my dad is black that is why you're light skinned because you are a mixture of them both therefore this makes you mixed and the reason why you look like your dad more because he is more dominant than your mother. Because of this talk with her I now understand it is a good thing to be mixed because you get to experience both sides of two different cultures and races., Most people don't get to experience two different races and cultures like me so I should always be grateful for being who I am today. I will never fully understand why it's so important to know peoples race and what they identify with, but today in 2020 when asked what are you I am able to say "I'm not an alien whose origins are to be proved traced back to travel martians hordes who conquered red desert sands and gaseous martians skys. I am a human being two ears, two eyes, and a heart that beats in time not a show dog whose pet agrees to be determined before buying. You don't need to know my genes. I wear them just fine I got pockets full of culture that you'll never need to see, so do me a favor and stop assuming because I am more than my race; I am more than my color, and the next time you feel tempted to ask, don't or at least have the courtesy not to stare at me like i'm some beast and ask what are you.





**Part I - Written Piece Rubric (32 points total)**

**Content: Narrative Structure**

- a) Does my writing begin with a **hook**, or the first couple of sentence of my piece draw readers into the narrative and quickly provides them with context (3pts) 3/3
- b) Does my piece focus on an incident/experience in my life and use details and imagery to depict this memory with race/gender? Show do not just tell! (5pts) 5/5
- c) Does my piece include a reflection from you, the author on the importance of this event? How it made you feel? Illustrates it's impact on you? (5pts) 5/5
- d) Does my piece offer an insight or larger lesson the readers and listeners can infer from your piece? What may the lesson be? What new insight did you have about yourself? (5pts) 5/5

**Skills: Figurative Language, visual representation, length & mechanics**

- e) Does my piece include at least 3 examples of figurative language which are highlighted in my writing? (3pts) 2/3

- f) When spoken and recorded/performed, is my piece at least 2:30 - 3 minutes in length? (3pts) 3/3
- g) Does my writing piece include at least 3 visuals that symbolically or literally represent my experience. These can be included from online or visually drawn or sketched (3pts) 1.5/3
- h) Does my piece include correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar? (5pts) 2.5/5

**Insert CER analysis paragraph in space below:**

A key theme from my nonfiction piece is to always love yourself and learn to accept who you are whether you are mixed or not. Within my piece I used a number of examples to develop this theme. In the first paragraph of the piece I wrote, "When I was about the age of 5 I always wondered why I had soft, kinky, curly hair and my mother's hair was brown and straight or sometimes wavy. And why her skin tone was white and I was just a light skinned colored girl" quickly realizing that this affected me as a kid," (Queen). Through this thought of wanting to look like my mom, I never really understood what it was to be mixed in a stereotypical world, but over time I learned what it meant to be mixed and the challenges that I would soon overcome. For example being asked what are you, Ii would say, "Today in 2020 when asked what are you I am able to say I'm not an alien who origins are to be proved traced back to travel martians hordes who conquered red desert sands and gaseous martians skys I am a human being two ears, two eyes, and a heart that beats in time so do me a favor and stop assuming because I am more than my race I am more than my color and the next time you feel tempted to ask don't,"(Queen). Because I have now been educated on how and what to say when people ask me what I am and why I am mixed, I feel like I can survive in this society that we have today . It was through these empowering people and moments in my life that I realized that I had a voice and could stand up for who I am and what I thought. Therefore,And throughout life I have learned to love and understand myself and my circumstances.

**Part III - Reflection Analysis of Your Piece Rubric (20 points total):**

**\*\*This will be counted as a written ASSESSMENT grade about 13% of final grade - NOT as part of your project grade. This will be due on google classroom as a separate assignment.**

**Prompt:** Pretend you are a reader analyzing your own writing. Identify the lesson about your own life (**the THEME**) you are seeking to convey to readers as the author of your nonfiction piece. Please write **ONE substantial CER paragraph** that analyzes, in detail, the importance of this lesson to the piece and your race/gender identity as a whole. This must be a **minimum of 8 sentences** in length.

sentences combined/broken up with correct punctuation & other mechanics?  
You will be deducted one point for every 4 mechanics errors! (4pts) 3/4

:

**Insert Written Narrative in space below:**

There's two viruses in this world: coronavirus and racism

We live in a type of world where a black man can't walk outside his house.

Wwe live in a world where a black man can't walk on the sidewalk without being interrogated

I've been seeing on the news white men beating up black mean for something that they haven't

even done all because of their skin color.

Any news I seen that black men died because of how they look

this world needs to change

there's two viruses going on in this world the Coronavirus and racism

Those who have the heart to stand up has stand up my like places in Minneapolis

it's been 150years since a car has been invented and we have cars like Lamborghinis and

Bugattis

it's been a hundred years since things like Technology has been invented now we have

MacBook Pros and Chromebooks

and it's been a hundred years since there's been segregation and it still looks like we are

segregated to this day

why can't things change like our technology is it because of skin color or is it because people are

afraid

Bang Bang that's all I be hearing in the news where a white person is shooting a black person

We already have problems to deal with in this world and now there's more people causing more

problems

now there's more ways of people dying over something that should have ended years ago

there's two viruses in this world the coronavirus and racism

**Part I - Written Piece Rubric (32 points total)**

**Content: Narrative Structure**

- a) Does my writing begin with a **hook**, or the first couple of sentence of my piece draw readers into the narrative and quickly provides them with context (3pts) 3/3
- b) Does my piece focus on an incident/experience in my life and use details and imagery to depict this memory with race/gender? Show do not just tell! (5pts) 5/5
- c) Does my piece include a reflection from you, the author on the importance of this event? How it made you feel? Illustrates it's impact on you? (5pts) 5/5
- d) Does my piece offer an insight or larger lesson the readers and listeners can infer from your piece? What may the lesson be? What new insight did you have about yourself? (5pts) 5/5

**Skills: Figurative Language, visual representation, length & mechanics**

- e) Does my piece include at least 3 examples of figurative language which are highlighted in my writing? (3pts) 1.5/3 must label and highlight them!
- f) When spoken and recorded/performed, is my piece at least 2:30 - 3 minutes in length? (3pts) 3/3
- g) Does my writing piece include at least 3 visuals that symbolically or literally represent my experience. These can be included from online or visually drawn or sketched (3pts) 0/3 - need your video!
- h) Does my piece include correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar? (5pts) 3/5

**Insert CER analysis paragraph in space below:**

The topic of this paragraph is that people of color do not have the rights that they should have because of racism. That is the lesson that he is trying to make, and that is his claim. And it's been a hundred years since there's been segregation and it still looks like we are segregated to this day, This shows that he is talking about racism and how it should have ended a long time ago, but it's still going on to this day. And he is talking about how things still haven't changed over the past years. We already have problems to deal with in this world, and now there's more people causing more problems. He is trying to say that they are causing more problems than they should be because they are already going through a lot in this world and causing those problems will make it harder for everyone. He's trying to explain that this world needs to change but does not look like a change over the past years. Because things are still going on that happened a couple years ago that they said would not happen to this day. He said that there's two viruses in this world, the coronavirus and racism and one of them should not be there.

**Part III - Reflection Analysis of Your Piece Rubric (20 points total):**

**\*\*This will be counted as a written ASSESSMENT grade about 13% of final grade - NOT as part of your project grade. This will be due on google classroom as a separate assignment.**

**Prompt:** Pretend you are a reader analyzing your own writing. Identify the lesson about your own life (**the THEME**) you are seeking to convey to readers as the author of your nonfiction piece. Please write **ONE substantial CER paragraph** that analyzes, in detail, the importance of this lesson to the piece and your race/gender identity as a whole. This must be a **minimum of 8 sentences** in length.

**Rubric (20 points total):**

- a) Do I make a specific claim that takes a stance about the theme/lesson about life present within my piece? (3pts) 3/3
- b) Do I use at least **TWO concrete pieces of evidence** from my piece, properly introduce and cite these pieces of evidence, and cite myself as the author in MLA format? (6pts) 3/6
- c) Do I thoroughly explain 1) the importance of the words and phrases within my chosen evidence and 2) describe how and why the evidence relates back to my

## Appendix G

### Ellen's Highlighted Artifacts

#### 1. Superintendent letter examples

June 11, 2019

Dear Superintendent Kang,

I am writing today about the importance of having our Human Rights and Social Action class and how this class should become a graduation requirement for all students in Washington DC.

We need this class to be a graduation requirement because it is very important, in order for every student in DC to graduate and be out there successfully. I can tell you that some students are going out into the world to live their lives, but they don't know how to confront this society, especially if they are a part of a marginalized group, like women. We need to learn more about our own rights. We need to have the liberty to speak without being scared. We need to ask ourselves who we really are, what does society want, and how can we act in society to solve problems?

We really need to focus on our future, what is best for us, our families, our friends, our partners, and our country. If we have the opportunity to have this class as a graduation requirement, I guarantee that it will have a lasting impact. I am in 10th grade and this class really impacted my learning and my life. If other students would have the same opportunity, I think they would change their mind, too. When I enrolled in this class, I was ignorant about what was happening in our society, but now I am concerned about what is happening around me. I am more secure about what I want, not just what society wants.

If we all come together, we can make a change in this country. Thank you and I hope you really take this into consideration. If you help us, we would make history.

Sincerely,

---

June 10, 2019

Dear Superintendent Kang,

Today I'm writing this letter to talk about a specific class that changed the way I think about different issues. Since I started to take Human Rights and Social Action, I started to see the world in a different way and I'm glad about it. As a student at Cardozo, I recommend you make this class a graduation requirement because I believe that this class can help people just as it helped me to become a different person.

In this class, we had dialogues about privilege, oppression, race, gender, allies, bystanders, equality, equity, stereotypes, and other important topics that I wasn't aware of. For example, I thought women and men were equal, but after participating in a Privilege Walk activity that we did, I realized how oppressed I am and that made me feel badly.

This class has taught me a lot of things and I think all students should have to take this class because they will learn a lot just like I did. It would be great if we start to educate youth about the issues discussed in our Human Rights and Social Action class because we, as society,

need people who know what is going on in this world and take action when there is injustice; that is how we will see a change in the world.

This class is as important as math, English, history, and all other graduation requirements because this class teaches students life skills; this class is about life. I want this class to be a graduation requirement because we all need to learn more about how society is and what actions we can take to change it.

Sincerely,

---

June 10, 2019

Dear Superintendent Kang,

Today, I write to you about issues in our community and in our school. First, let me tell you how a class changed my mind and challenges my thinking every day.

Before I took Human Rights and Social Action, I was not able to understand what was going on in my community and in my school. In this class, I have learned about who is a part of dominant groups and who is a part of subordinate groups in our society. Additionally, I learned why it is so important to advocate for change in our community.

I believe that many students, like me, would like to know more about issues in our community and how it affects our future goals. This class should be a graduation requirement because this class has a clear message that I want all students to learn.

In this class, we organized actions and we achieved that many people now have an open mind. I have my own testimony of how my mind changed over this class. I learned about my own eight social identities and how they make me special.

I recommend this class to all people who are willing to make a change in our community and in our school.

Sincerely,

2. Discussion list from “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh

“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”  
Peggy McIntosh

Before Reading: Brainstorm a list of white privileges. How many can you come up with in your group?

Is it easy or difficult to list white privileges? Explain.

Part 1 (paragraphs 1-5):

The first paragraph of the article discusses men’s willingness to “work to improve women’s status...but they can’t or won’t support the idea of lessening men’s.”

1. Why do you think people in the dominant group aren’t willing to give up their privilege?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Do you think it is possible to “improve the status” of a subordinate, oppressed, group without the dominant group giving up some of their privileges.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What are specific examples of privileges that a dominant group could give up to make society more equitable?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Would you be willing to give up your privilege? Why or why not?

In the second and third paragraphs, McIntosh discusses how she didn’t learn to see white privilege as an advantage, but rather as the “norm.” Why do you think white people have a difficult time recognizing their



privilege or seeing it as a privilege?

What does McIntosh compare white privilege to at the end of the third paragraph? Explain this simile in your own words. What is being compared and why?

McIntosh quotes Elizabeth Minnich at the end of the fifth paragraph, “Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow “them” to be more like “us”.

1. Reflect on this quote. What do you think about it?
2. Are the lives of white people neutral, normative, average, and ideal? Why or why not?
3. Should the goal be to allow people of color to have a life like white people?
4. Would you like to have the life of a white person? Why or why not?

Part 2: McIntosh’s List of White Privileges

What surprised you or stood out to you? Why? Is there anything on this list that you never realized? Explain.

Is there anything you disagree with on this list? Why or why not?

What do you wonder? What questions do you have?

Which items on this list do you think have the greatest affect on the disparity between white people and people of color? Why?

Choose three examples of white privilege and explain how that privilege affects people of all races in society.

Item Number	Affect on Individuals, Groups, and Systems in Society

Part 3 (paragraphs following the list):

After making her list, McIntosh admits to repeatedly forgetting each of her realizations. Do you think that people of color forget the ways in which they are oppressed on a daily basis? Explain, challenging yourself to make personal connections.

McIntosh says that she was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts, but never in invisible systems.

1. What is racism or what makes a person racist?
2. Do you think that by having a systematic, unearned set of privileges white people are racist? In other words,
3. are all white people racist because they are inherently privileged in society? Why or why not?

McIntosh argues that “disapproving of the systems won’t be enough to change them.” She says that even if white people do not agree with their privileges, they still have them.

1. Do you think that disapproving of one’s privilege can make a change? Why or why not?
2. If we acknowledge that these privileges exist, how can we use that knowledge to make a change?
3. What do we need to do to have a more equitable and just society?

After Reading: What do you think of this article? Would you recommend it? Why or why not?

### McIntosh's List of White Privileges

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, out numbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh color and have them more or less match my skin.

3. Counternarrative student examples from “Thank You M’am” (Hughes, 1967), “The All American Slurp” (Namioka, 1987), and *My Name is Blessing* (Walters, 2013) identity unit & follow up poetry unit.

**Leaving Home Hurts**

By:

I’m going to talk about how hard it was for me to leave home and the people who I grew up with. Most parts of this story take place in El Salvador. Also, I will talk about the many good experiences that I had in El Salvador and how these experiences made it even harder for me to make a decision.

I lived in Chalatenango, El Salvador with my grandma and my grandpa. My parents came to the United States when I was two years old. In 2016, the little two year old baby had now turned into a sixteen year old teenager, who grew up without having Mom or Dad at home, but having Grandma Julia and Grandpa Joel, who always were there for me, giving me love and all of the things I needed to become a humble and unique person. Both of them mean a lot to me. Leaving them was something that I never wanted because I had great moments with them, moments that I will remember forever. Life in El Salvador was awesome! Sharing each day with these two people that mean so much to me was the most important thing for me. Going to the street every afternoon after school to play soccer with my friends was already a routine. The whistle of my friend Geovany outside of my house was the signal that it was time to go outside and play until the sun went down.

Time was passing. I was growing-up really fast. I was fifteen and I had already accomplished one of my dreams, to be a part of my city’s soccer team, C.D. Chalatenango. Representing Chalatenango by playing soccer in different cities in El Salvador was something that I felt proud of and something that I will feel proud of for the rest of my life. Many people told me, “You are good at playing soccer,” but I always told them, I might not be a good player, but I leave my heart and my soul on the field every time I played for my city. I grew up with this inspiration, to be someone in my city, someone who the people will feel proud of when they hear my name.

Every day better opportunities came for me. Now, El Salvador’s national U-15 wanted me to be part of their team. I remember when one of my coaches gave me the news. I couldn’t believe it! All of my dreams were coming true!

Everything seemed to be great, until one day when I got home after practice and I saw that Grandma Julia looked different. She was staring at me with a sad face.

“What’s going on Mamita?” I asked.

“Nada, hijo, eat something. I made sopa de arroz for you. You must be really tired,” Grandma Julia answer.

“I hope everything is okay and thank you for la sopa, Mom,” I said.

I wondered what was happening. She always seemed to be so happy every day I come home from practice.

Until one day, while I was eating lunch before I go to practice, she sat by my side and told me, “Sabes lo que pasa hijo, your parents want you to go to the United States.”

I smile and told her, "Don't worry, Mamita, I'm not going anywhere".

"Your parents sounded very serious when we were talking about this," she added.

"I'm not going anywhere," I replied.

"Your parents want to talk to you about this" she whispered.

After that conversation I went to take the bus to go to the stadium to my practice, I was on the bus thinking and thinking about what my Grandma had just told me. Everything started to become hard, even soccer. I couldn't totally concentrate at practice, something was going on in my head, those words were stuck in my head. I tried to avoid thinking about that, but it was impossible. I didn't even want to think about leaving everything I had accomplished, leaving the people who I grew up with, my grandma and grandpa, also leaving all of the opportunities I had in soccer, but that is how it was. I spoke to my parent's I told them that it was a hard decision for me, that I was about to be part of El Salvador's U-15, but they told me that here in the United states I would have better opportunities.

It was very hard for me to make a decision, but I started to understand some things. I have always wanted the best for my grandma and my grandpa, so I thought about it and I knew that if I come to the United States, I could help them. In a few days, I made a decision. I felt sad. I cried and I started telling my friends about it. Some of them didn't believe me, but it was time to talk to my grandma. She was watching TV on the sofa and I sat by her side. I didn't even know how to start the conversation.

She looked at me and told me, "Have you already made a decision?"

"Yes, Mamita, I talked to my parents and thought about it and I think it's a good opportunity for me to go, so when I get to the United States I can help you and my grandpa."

"Don't worry about us, I just want you to be in a better place, in a better country, so you can reach all your dreams, Javier" She said.

"This house is the best place for me grandma and if I go, it is because I want to help you and to help my grandpa, too." I told her.

"Your grandpa doesn't even want to talk about this. I have never seen him so sad. He has decided to not be here the day you leave," she whispered.

I looked down for a few seconds and then looked outside where my grandpa was laying in the hammock. I felt a lump in my throat. I could feel my heart falling apart. I could see all the great moments I shared with him, how he used to called me "hijito" every day he came home from work. I stayed quiet. I didn't know what to answer to my grandma. I knew that if I spoke I would cry.

"You know that you are like a son for Joel. When I was pregnant, he always told me that he wanted a boy, but that didn't happen and when your mom left you with us, he got crazy. He didn't know what to do with you. So imagine how he feels right now that his hijito is about to leave," Grandma added.

"And you know that he's like my father. I feel so much love for both of you and I really don't want to leave this place, leave you and my grandpa, but at the same time I feel like I'm going to help both of you," I answered.

“I know, Hijo, and you mean a lot for us but you have to pack your things. I’m going to the store to buy you a brush and other things because somebody is coming tomorrow to pick you up,” Grandma mumbled.

I felt terrible in that moment. I went to my room and started to take some clothes out of the closet. When I finished, I went to my other grandma’s house to say goodbye. I didn’t cry at that time. The difficult part was the next day at home, when the coyote came to my home to pick me up.

My grandpa left home early that day. He woke me up and told me, “Se cuida, Hijito,” and then he left. I saw that he was about to cry, just like me. I fell asleep for a few more minutes but then I heard somebody talking with my grandma. It was the coyote.

I woke up and ate before I left. I was so nervous. I finished eating and then the coyote said, “Are you ready?”

“Yes, I’m ready,” I answered.

Grandma was already crying.

“I will be okay, Mom,” I told Grandma.

“Okay, Hijo, take care and see you soon,” she said under tears.

I hugged her and told her, “Love you, Grandma.”

Tears came out of my eyes while I was walking to the car. That was the last time I saw Grandma in person.

---



They ask me to write down  
My race

And I think  
And think  
Very seriously

And consider  
Writing down the truth  
And have my answer read

I have my sister yessy supporting me, brushing my hair,  
making fun of me,  
cooking and buying food for me.  
Inside this body.

I have my second mom Alejandra echando tortillas,  
cooking, washing clothes,  
Watering the plants, reganandonos and taking care of us,  
Inside this body.

I have la laguna de olomega with beautiful plants,  
Peaceful parks, many kids running around her  
and la nina mila cooking delicious mulitas.  
Inside this body.

I have la nina marleni making delicious tortas and burgers,  
Her kids running around the house while she's giving us a  
warm and heavenly coffee.  
Inside this body.

I have Beth waiting at the door everyday with a big smile,  
Real and warm hugs, inspiring me, supporting me encouraging me  
teaching me, and giving me advice to be a better person.  
Inside this body.

I have San Antonio Silva, the institute, my classmate,

Beatriz telling me to behave myself, cooking at midnight for me,  
Helping me with my homeworks, and taking care of me,  
Inside this body

I have the church, where I feel comfortable with people like  
Willy, Isaac, Felix, Elsy and my aunt Vero who's always waiting for  
Us with hugs and smiles ready take us out.

I have Perquín with a big and peaceful river,,,  
many trees surrounding him, seating on a big rock  
eating mangos con limon y chile in a fresh and relaxing air,  
Feeling nervous at the same time thinking about snakes.

But I stop

And simply write down

Latina

---

I wasn't expecting traveling to the place I went, and I didn't imagine that my assumption  
of that place was completely wrong.

From October 5th to 7th of 2018, I went to Miami with a group of people that belonged  
to a social justice association called United We Dream. We were going for a conference. There  
was a lot of diversity and our purpose was to make Amendment 4 pass. This amendment would  
allow 1.2 million people to vote, who lost their right after being convicted of a felony, even  
though they had completed their sentence terms already.

While I was at the conference, one of the speakers said that we were going to go out and  
make a change, a change that would restore the rights of minorities in Miami. I wanted to do my  
best and help. My group's leader out of the nowhere asked me if I wanted to lead a group of 10

4. Questioning guide for excerpts from Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (1997)

**“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”  
Beverly Daniel Tatum**

Section 1: Listening

Directions: Listen as the first section of the article is read aloud to you. As you are listening, answer the questions with what you hear and understanding from the reading.

1. According to the article, if you walk into any racially mixed high school cafeteria at lunch time, what will you notice?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What is the question “on the top of everyone’s tongue?”
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. If you walk into a racially mixed elementary school, what will you see?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. When does “racial grouping” being?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. As children enter adolescence, what is the question that they begin to explore?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What does the above question include for black youth?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Why do black youth think about themselves in terms of race?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. How would Tatum’s ten-year-old son, David, describe himself?

9. Why would he mention his height and not his racial identity?

10. What happens to David when he is fifteen-years-old and six-foot-two?

What do people do when they pass him on the sidewalk?

What happens to him at the mall? What do strangers assume about him?

After listening to the first section of the article, summarize the main idea(s).

What do you wonder? Write one question. Your question can be something that you don't understand or it can be a question that you have about the content of the article.

After completing the listening activity, reflect on how you feel about the activity. Were you able to answer most of the questions? What were some of the challenges?

## Section 2: Reading

Directions: Read page two and answer the questions.

1. As children, where do racial minorities get many of their beliefs and values? Give one specific example. What can "race-conscious" parents do?

2. In racially mixed schools, how are children often segregated? What message does this send to the students about what it means to be a member of their racial group?

3. Explain how elementary school children and teenagers' birthday parties are different.  
In predominantly white communities, why is dating an issue for young black women?
4. What is the image that we often see of young black men in the media?  
How does that affect how people view young black men?
5. Why might young black men experience "social success" in white schools?
6. Summarize in your own words what happened to Malcolm X.
7. Make a connection between Malcolm X and the ninth-grade student in his homeroom.  
How are their experiences similar? At the end of the second page, it says, "Like Malcolm, this student got the message." What is the "message" that they got?
8. Summarize the main idea(s) from the section "Coping with Encounters..."
9. Explain how experiencing racism could result in a need for self-segregation.
10. When we reflected about our social identities on our life maps, we considered what it means to be a member of our particular racial group. In this section, Tatum asks two more questions, as follows: "How should I act?" "What should I do?" How have you been told that you should act as a member of your particular racial group? Why?

### Section 3: Speaking

Directions: Read the sections “Oppositional Identity Development and Academic Achievement” and “The Search for Alternative Images.” Select one part that stands out to you. Summarize that part in your own words and write an open-ended discussion question you have about that part. Then, ask three of your classmates your question. Summarize their responses in the space provided. Finally, write a reflection, responding to your classmates’ answers and incorporating your own ideas.

Summary:

Question:

Peer 1 Response:

Peer 2 Response:

Peer 3 Response:

Reflection:

### Section 4

How did Jon’s experience change in college? How did this affect him? Did it have a positive or negative impact? Explain.

What do you think the phrases “trying to be white” or “talking white” mean? Can you give an example? Is acting or speaking a certain way a reflection of your race? Does it affect you, depending on your race? Explain.

What are the positive and negative consequences of self-segregation?

At the end of the article, Tatum states, “Implied in this discussion is the assumption that connecting with one’s Black peers in the process of identity development is important and should be encouraged.” She asks “If a young person has found a niche among a circle of White friends, is it really necessary to establish a Black peer group?” What are your thoughts? Explain.

## Appendix H

### Ayana's Highlighted Artifacts

#### 1. Four lenses discussion protocol.

A THINKING ROUTINE FROM PROJECT ZERO, HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

## Lenses for Dialogue

A routine for looking through lenses and exchanging perspectives.

SEE

Look closely at the work. What do you notice? Make lots of observations.

CHOOSE  
AND SHARE  
A LENS

Think about how you see the world; your lenses. These could be related to your role in your family, your race, your ethnicity, your gender, your sexuality, or anything else about you. With a partner or small group, each choose one lens and take turns talking about how you might see or think about the work through that lens.

PROBE


Ask a question to understand more about another person's lens and perspective.  
Possible question starters:  
*Say more about what you mean by....*  
*Tell me more about why you see/think/feel...*

REFLECT


Take a minute or two to look again at the artwork. Do you have any new observations or questions? What issues or themes did your lenses conversation invite you to think about?

Share your experience with this thinking routine on social media using the hashtags [#PZThinkingRoutines](#) and [#LensesForDialogue](#).

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**PROJECT ZERO**  
HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



ARTS AS CIVIC COMMONS

This thinking routine was developed as part of the Arts as Civic Commons project at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Explore more Thinking Routines at [pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines](http://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines)

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## 2. Privilege activity Powerpoint slides

**Privilege Game**

- This game is about privilege and social mobility.
- Crumple up the paper on your desk.

**Privilege Game**

- The game is simple — you all represent the USA's population. And everyone in the country has a chance to become wealthy and move into the upper class.
- To move into the upper class, all you must do is throw your wadded-up paper into the bin while sitting in your seat.

**Post Game**

- Why are we playing this?
- How can this game be a symbol for the American Dream?
  - Everyone got a chance, right? But is this equal opportunity?
  - People in the back: How did you feel before the game even began? Did you even have a clear view of the trash can? Did you try? Did you work hard? What could the people — the obstacles — in the way represent?
  - People in the front: How easy was this? Did you even look back or worry about the people behind you?
- How has this game influenced your thinking on the dream and evaluate the accuracy of the symbol?

**Post Game**

- Different spots = different opportunities/privilege
- Front of the room = privilege/advantage/opportunity
- Back of the room = lack of privilege, low socioeconomic status, fewer resources

### Post Game

□ How this game influenced your thinking on the American Dream?

### Post Game

- The closer you were to the recycling bin, the better your odds. This is what privilege looks like. Did you notice how the only ones who complained about fairness were in the back of the room?
- By contrast, people in the front of the room were less likely to be aware of the privilege they were born into. All they can see is 10 feet between them and their goal

### Post Video

- Which pieces of these exercises resonate with you and which pieces do not? What might be too simple?
- In what ways does this exercise reflect your experience of the education system and of privilege more generally? What specific experiences do you have that reflect or contradict this exercise?
- What can each of us do to create dynamics in our education system and more generally in our society that give everyone more equal access to opportunity and resources?

### American Dream Handout

- Complete the reflection.

### 3. AP-style critical writing assignment options for the end of the *Born a Crime* unit.

2. Thesis assessment criteria (across both Humanities courses in the 11th grade):
  - Includes the word “because”
  - Provide an outline to your paper
  - Use sophisticated vocabulary
3. Parallels between apartheid and Jim Crow
4. ECT paragraph skills
5. Triple entry journal skills

#### Stage 2 – Assessment Evidence

#### **Performance Task Summary:**

##### **Synthesis Essay topics:**

1. The question of “race” and the surrounding issues have dominated not only American society but also societies all around the world. W.E.B DuBois asserted that claimed that people were “white” or “black” ignored human diversity in favor of biological falsehoods over a hundred years ago. Today, mainstream scientists embrace the idea that race is, in fact, a social construct.

The history of race as a genetic factor continues to fuel racist beliefs and behaviors. These categories however remain necessary to study racism despite the challenges to understand structural inequalities and discrimination.

Carefully read the six sources, found below, including the introductory information for each source. Write an essay that synthesizes material from at least three of the sources and develops your position on the proposal that experts in biological and social science develop a means for researchers to transition away from the use of the racial concept in genetics research.

2. In a shrinking world, questions about diversity seem increasingly polarizing and often result in changes in policy, law, and attitudes. Today the majority of the world’s population believes their country has become more diverse with gender equity increasing while family ties weaken. However, the view on the significance of religion in an increase in diversity varies by country. Despite the seeming decline in religious adherence, religion continues as the source of violence and exclusionary laws and practices. In 2015, sub-Saharan Africa saw a larger increase in religious restrictions than any other region in the world.

Carefully read the six sources, found below, including the introductory information for each source. Write an essay that synthesizes material from at least three of the sources and develops your position on the extent religion plays in an individual’s sense of self and identity.

##### **Argument essay topics:**

1. Trevor Noah states that “the only way to make apartheid work, therefore, was to cripple the black mind” in his memoir *Born a Crime*. He explains that “Under Apartheid, the government built what became known as Bantu schools. Bantu schools taught no science, no history, no civics. They taught metrics and agriculture: how to count potatoes, how to pave roads, chop wood, till the soil. ‘It does not serve the Bantu to learn history and science because it is primitive,’ the government said. ‘This will only mislead, showing him pastures in which he is not allowed to graze.’ To their credit, they were simply being honest. Why educate a slave? We teach someone Latin when his only purpose is to dig holes in the ground?” Write an essay that argues your position on Trevor’s claim about the relationship between education and subjugation.
2. Trevor Noah, a comedian and biographer, postulates that “We spend so much time being afraid of failure, afraid of rejection. But regret is the thing we should fear most. Failure is an answer. Rejection is an

answer. Regret is an eternal question you will never have the answer to. ‘What if...’ ‘If only ...’ ‘I wonder what would have ...’ You will never, never know, and it will haunt you for the rest of your days.” Write an essay that argues your position on Noah’s belief about “regret “ haunting people.

3. Trevor Noah, a comedian and biographer, “grew up in a world of violence,” but was never violent. As he recalls his childhood and examines the violence he suffered at the hands of his step father he shares his realization that relationships are sustained “by love.” Noah sees “love i[as] a creative act.” His mother helped him see that “When you love someone you create a new world for them. My mother did that for me, and with the progress I made and the things I learned, I came back and created a new world for her.” Write an essay that argues your position on Noah’s claim that “love is a creative act.”

**Rhetorical analysis essay topics**

1. Trevor Noah wrote his memoir *Born a Crime: Stories From a South African Childhood* (2016) sharing his experience growing up in an Apartheid South Africa. Noah witnessed the fall of Apartheid from his unique perspective as a “colored” person in a segregated country dominated by an imperializing power. He explores the social, cultural, economic, and personal consequences of imperialism in a country divided. The passage below is an excerpt from Part I of that memoir. Read the passage carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Noah makes to convey his attitude toward his subject.
2. Trevor Noah shares his experiences growing up in South Africa during Apartheid and the end of the Apartheid system in his memoir *Born a Crime*. The passage below is an excerpt recounting experiences from his adolescence from that memoir. Read the passage carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Noah makes to convey his attitude toward his subject.
3. Trevor Noah wrote his memoir *Born a Crime: Stories From a South African Childhood* (2016) sharing his experiences in “the hood” hustling for a living. Read the excerpt carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Noah makes to convey his message.

Research component:

*Reading Born a Crime will be a richer and more meaningful experience for students if they first have an understanding of South Africa’s system of apartheid and its historic legacy. Students should devote some time to exploring resources that detail this history, and the role of South Africa’s National Party in the apartheid system, as this will enhance their overall understanding. Most importantly, centering Nelson Mandela’s importance in South Africa—particularly his role in ending apartheid—is key to having a rich context for the book. Additionally, understanding how race and racism function in South Africa is important for readers, as this knowledge will shed light on how people were placed into racial categories (an act that, as Noah describes, could be arbitrary) and then treated based on their category. It is also essential that readers understand how “coloreds” were discriminated against both during the apartheid era and during the various post-apartheid leaderships transitions, as this discrimination helps clarify the broader relevance of Noah’s story. Finally, having your readers analyze the work of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides a powerful framework for grappling with the devastating impact of apartheid.*

Rubrics can be found [here](#).

**Other Evidence of Student Mastery:**

<b>Journal prompts</b>	TBD based on student interest
<b>Progress check</b>	AP Classroom: Units 2 & 3 (CollegeBoard)
<b>Discussion</b>	Protocols to be used in unit: -block party -final word

## Appendix I

### Sofia's Highlighted Artifacts

1. Students' 2020-2021 dissertation topics.

Student	Topic	Presentation Guests Record your name and email address.
	Body image, diet, social media	
	Soviet Union immigrants and their experiences in the U.S.	
	U.S. government and the economy	
	Mental healthcare and TikTok	
	The benefits of video games	
	Authoritarian governments/U.S.	
	Sex education curriculum	
	Women empowerment in the music industry	
	Sex education curriculum	
	Universal healthcare in the U.S.	
	Evangelical Christians and their political beliefs	
	Patriotism of black women in the U.S.	
	Social studies curriculum	
	VA foster care system	
	Stress and exercise	
	Community health workers in African countries	
	Lesbianism and the heterosexual matrix	
	Environmental racism/Anacostia River	
	Female migrant workers at the Mexican-American border	
	Colorism and Asian women	
	Environmental racism/Alexandria	

	dream analysis	
	Political polarity in the U.S.	
	Genderqueer identities	
	Artists and economics	
	Science curriculum and evolution	
	D.C. murals and BLM activism	
	Equity, anti-racism, and high school name changes	
	Environmental policies	
	High school curriculum's preparation for college success	
	Sexual assault/consent education	
	Asian American mental healthcare	
	Muslim American identity	
	Equity and anti-racism in high schools	
	Generational differences in voting	
	Environmentalism and the fashion industry	
	Baltic genocide and social studies curriculum	
	Perceptions of Muslims post 9/11	

## 2. Chopped synthesis activity



**First, review your three basket ingredients.**

Item 1: Image of coffee farm in Hawaii



Item 2: Dora, Bronson. "Kona Coffee Fights Back." *Hawaii Business*. 10 July 2018.

"In an industry built upon hand-picked, quality coffee, there's much debate about mechanical harvesters. Some local growers believe existing technology is ill-suited to Kona's terrain and unable to match the quality of human hands. 'Kona coffee is a very high value crop,' says Suzanne Shriner, president of the Kona Coffee Farmers Association, 'and one of the reasons we get that high dollar for it is because we hand-pick our red cherries, and those have the most flavor and are low in defect.' A farm labor shortage is happening nationwide across all kinds of crops, leading to an industry-wide push for more automated farm equipment."

Item 3: "Kona Coffee" *NBC News* March 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLUFbMu1e94>

**Second, assign each group member a role.**

Student #1: initiates and facilitates discussion on what argument to formulate; writes claim; writes concluding sentence

Student #2: participates in discussion; writes all evidence; proofreads and revises paragraph once completed

Student #3: participates in discussion; writes first commentary

Student #4: participates in discussion; writes second commentary

**Third, as a group, discuss the three sources, decide upon an argument, and compose your paragraph. Use the space below to write. And your time starts now (25 minutes).**

Please compose your paragraph using the following structure:

Claim

Evidence from item 1 and item 2

Commentary

Evidence from item 2 and item 3

Commentary

Concluding sentence

**Chopped** Paragraph

--



### 3. Sample mid-semester dissertation/literature review report



## BEAUTY AROUND THE GLOBE: COLORISM IN ASIA



### PROBLEM STATEMENT

In today's society, women are held to a different standard. They are expected to look a certain way by being a certain height, weight, or how they dress. Although, beauty standards go beyond the surface. For example, many beauty standards are engraved in cultures around the world. Each culture is held to a different standard from one another. Specifically in Asia, many females from a young age are being taught that being pale is beautiful. This idea is not only harmful because of the measures women will go to to brighten their skin, but also because it creates self image issues that are with them until adulthood. Perhaps studying this topic can explore how colorism among Asian women got implemented into their culture and the prevalence it has in their society in the 21st century.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

How has colorism affected Asian women's, specifically ages 15-35, perception of body image in the 21st century?

### HYPOTHESIS



After completing the research, I am expecting to have a better understanding of this generation long issue in Asia. Through learning the history and the role colorism has in their society, I am hoping to find the effects it has on women's self image.

### METHOD OF INQUIRY

In order to investigate this problem, I will be conducting surveys and a few possible interviews within the age group of 15-35. Surveys will give a baseline of how young Asian and Asian-American girls feel in their skin and if this concept has affected them. Additionally, interviews with women on the older side of the spectrum will give insight on how the toxicness of Asian beauty standards has affected them in adulthood.



### ASSUMPTIONS

- Colorism is a class issue and not a social one.
- Skin whitening products are not harmful to the body.

### DEFINITIONS

- Colorism: Prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group.
- Self Image: The idea one has of one's abilities, appearance, and personality.

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