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Developing Critical Consciousness in the English Language Arts Classroom

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in Teaching

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Chapter One

Introduction

While the trial of Derek Chauvin was taking place in Minneapolis, I was sitting in my classroom with my school's equity specialist. I was crying. She was patient. The book I was teaching to students, I explained to her, was *The Hate U Give* (2017), a young adult novel about a Black teenage protagonist, Starr Carter, who witnesses the murder of her friend at the hands of a police officer. The chapter we were reading that week was the one in which the grand jury, despite Starr's testimony, declines to charge the officer. Days before, Darnella Frazier took the stand to tell the world what Derek Chauvin had done to George Floyd. "I have to talk about it," I said, "but I don't know how."

This felt like a stunning admission from an educator who should know how to talk about this, but instead of rolling her eyes, my colleague simply nodded. She could see I was afraid. I was afraid of saying the wrong thing and exacerbating the pain of my Black students. I was afraid of the wrath of White parents, many who had already objected to the inclusion of the book in the first place. I was afraid of saying nothing at all.

After I finished sharing with her, she met my eyes and said to me, "You're teaching from fear. Your students need your best. Teaching from fear is not your best" (Personal Conversation, 2021). Since that conversation, I have not looked at teaching the same.

Prior to that moment, I genuinely considered myself a teacher whose practice reflected a culturally-relevant pedagogy. Like many other educators, I lived by the sparknotes version of it: if someone were to ask me how I practiced being a culturally-relevant teacher, I would have told them about the inclusive literature I taught and the civil rights heroes displayed all around my

classroom. I would have talked about meeting students where they are at, learning all about their backgrounds, and remembering to publicly recognize certain holidays.

If someone were to ask me about critical consciousness, though, I would have blinked and asked them to repeat the term. Often forgotten or ignored, critical consciousness is the third component of Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally-relevant pedagogy. Whereas the first component, academic success, refers to holding all students to high expectations, and the second, cultural competence, refers to helping students develop a positive sense of their cultural identity, the third, the development of critical consciousness, refers to something that can feel a bit more daunting for an educator, but is nonetheless essential (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). Critical consciousness, in essence, refers to the ability to critically think about unjust systems in society and to the commitment to act against those systems. In a classroom engaged in critical consciousness development, students are able to connect the work done in class with the work that needs to be done in the world. They see, for instance, how Starr Carter's story is just like Darnella Frazier's story, and how those stories are woven into a larger story of a broken system in desperate need of change. It is daunting, this work. It is daunting because it asks teachers to no longer teach from fear. It is daunting because through a certain lens, it can be perceived as political. Yet, it is also liberating.

According to the creator of culturally-relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995), there is a clear need for teachers to turn towards critical consciousness work. In an interview, Ladson-Billings (2019) said that "You can't do one or two and say, 'Oh, I'm being culturally-relevant.' You've got to do all three things" (Fay, para. 10, 2019). In 2014, Ladson-Billings (2014) published *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix*, a piece in which she regretted how "...few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work, instead

dulling its critical edge or omitting it altogether” (p. 77). Reflecting on these concerns and my own experience, I realized that this was an issue that needed to be further explored. This capstone will do just that.

The central question driving this capstone is: *What are the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the English language arts (ELA) classroom?* In exploring this question, I am interested in learning more about the successes and failures of classrooms in enacting critical consciousness work, as well as the effect this work has on academic outcomes and the culture of academic communities. I am also interested in this work as a White, middle class, cisgender male, because I have blind spots like many educators do. I am passionate about learning how to be a more culturally-relevant teacher so that I can better support each of my students.

This chapter of the capstone project concerns my personal interest in the topic, the ramifications of the research for stakeholders, and the context and rationale for the capstone.

Rationale

The year before the pandemic sent schools into distance learning, Minnesota was already deep in the midst of a racial and socioeconomic equity crisis. In a 2019 report, “A Statewide Crisis: Minnesota’s Education Achievement Gaps,” researchers Grunewald and Nath (2019) found that Minnesota has “some of the largest achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the nation” (p. 3). The solutions to this crisis are complex and multifaceted, but as educators, there is an urgent need to reflect on our culturally-relevant practices.

One approach for addressing the opportunity gap is the development of critical consciousness in students. Decades of scholarly research have shown critical consciousness to be

effective in improving academic achievement, career-readiness, and mental health. In Diemer and Blustein's (2006) study of the impact of strengthened critical consciousness on urban youth, researchers found that students with higher levels of critical consciousness "had higher levels of progress in their career development" (p. 228). Similarly, in Carter's (2008) study, students who developed a deep awareness of the structural inequities at work in both education and society developed ways to push back against those barriers and pursue academic excellence (p. 13).

In my suburban school, this research has the potential to provide new tools for my colleagues and myself to tackle inequities in the classroom and empower students. As is the case in much of Minnesota, our school has notable racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities. Over the last two years, attention has not only been drawn to the disparities in academic outcomes, but also to the personal experiences of students of color (Personal Communication, 2021). With this research, we can add more tools to the toolbox, and begin a more intensive push towards a system that supports the success of all students.

My desire to explore this topic further was borne not only out of my experience of teaching students during the Chauvin trial, but also in reflection of my curriculum and practice. In my experience as an English teacher, I have sought to create space for students to interact with the world through reading and writing, but that space has often failed to be a critical one. I have taught students to read and grapple with messages embedded in literature, but rarely have I taught them to respond to them. Rarely have I taught students to question the depictions literature presents of the world or how those depictions have shaped our world. This failure to engage with literature critically or create opportunities for critical reflection through writing has not only prevented students from engaging in a deeper and more enriching relationship with literature, it has also allowed for the perseverance of messages that uphold oppressive systems.

This research will help myself and others become better teachers to all of our students. Assembling a toolbox of strategies for developing critical consciousness may help increase student buy-in, bridge the opportunity gap, and empower students to become more critical thinkers and engaged citizens within their communities. This work will help teachers develop a more culturally relevant practice.

Context

For the last two years, I have taught at a suburban high school. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, the demographic breakdown of our school is 0.1% American Indian, 5.2% Black, 5.7% Hispanic or Latino, 6.5% Two or More Races, 14.6% Asian, and 67.9% White. Our graduation rate is 98.7%, which is higher than the state average.

Despite our documented success, our school has struggled with inclusion and in addressing racial inequities. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, an alumni group comprised of people of color wrote an open letter articulating their damaging experiences at our school, which included incidents of racism by students and staff, and a lack of support from the administration (Personal Communication, 2020). In 2018, as the result of a mental health crisis occurring amongst the students, an outside group was brought in to survey the school and propose plans of action. One of the findings was that students of color felt marginalized both by staff and peers. Staff and students are aware that this is an area the school needs to address and improve upon (Personal Communication, 2018).

Developing critical consciousness in students and staff is an approach that has the potential to make significant changes in schools like mine. Critical consciousness, after all, is community work. It is engaging in a dialogue about what is serving the community as a whole, what is not, and then generating and pushing for solutions. The research shows that this work

improves academic performance, and it suggests that it creates a more empathetic and inclusive community. The teachers I have spoken with in our school are motivated to engage in more intensive culturally-relevant work, but often feel overwhelmed by the job and without the time to learn. This capstone will provide new resources for them to begin.

Summary

In this chapter, the core problems that this capstone aims to address are identified and the rationale for addressing them is outlined. At the state level, the data shows Minnesota is experiencing an opportunity gap crisis that is severely impacting students of color. At the school where I teach, there are significant areas in need of improvement with regard to racial equity, and the response to these issues must be comprehensive and intensive. Through this research, I add to that response by identifying the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in the ELA classroom.

Chapter two is focused on the research regarding critical consciousness work in education and specifically its application in ELA classrooms. The first theme covers the history of critical consciousness, including the background of Paulo Freire (2014) and how others have come to interpret his work. The second theme explores how different educational philosophies and theories relate to critical consciousness development. The third theme outlines different strategies for teaching critical consciousness that are specific to ELA. The fourth theme explains relevant criticisms of the development of critical consciousness.

Chapter Two

The driving question of this capstone project is: *What are the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom?* The goal of this project is to equip ELA teachers interested in enacting a more culturally relevant pedagogy with research-based strategies for developing critical consciousness. To begin answering this question, this chapter explores the available research on the topic.

Overview

Four different themes are covered in Chapter Two. The first section provides an overview of critical consciousness, which includes the history of the term, as well as a detailed summary of the three stages of critical consciousness. The second section explores Freirean Pedagogy and its relationship to different educational philosophies and theories. The third section examines different reading, writing, and discussion strategies for developing critical consciousness. The fourth section reviews critiques of critical consciousness, including concerns regarding the efficacy of critical consciousness with respect to White privileged youth.

Freire and Critical Consciousness

History of Paulo Freire

In order to understand critical consciousness, it is important to first understand the man who conceptualized it: Freire. An educational theorist, literacy educator, and once political exile of Brazil, Freire is considered among his contemporaries as “one of the most important critical educators of the twentieth century” (Giroux, 2010, p. 725). Indeed, Freire’s (2014) work in critical pedagogy shaped an entire generation of educational leaders, from theorists to policymakers to teachers. As the founder of critical pedagogy and the conceptualizer of critical consciousness, his voice has guided much of the research for this capstone project.

After surviving a childhood steeped in poverty, Freire developed a deep passion for the liberation of the oppressed, which eventually led him into the world of education- specifically the field of literacy. Freire learned firsthand the connection between oppression and illiteracy. A child that often went hungry, Freire saw how hunger impacted students' ability to learn to read (Schugurensky, 2014). This prevented people from participating in the political process and stymied any social movements that aimed to improve societal conditions (Schugurensky, 2014). It kept individuals from being able to learn about the world in which they live. For Freire (2014), this was less a flaw than it was a feature of society; those in power sought to keep the powerless weak so that they could more easily control them (p. 51).

It was while teaching literacy to poor laborers in Brazil that Freire coined the term critical consciousness. In Freire's work (2014), he drew a line connecting the perseverance of oppression with the state of one's consciousness; consciousness, in this sense, refers to one's *perception of reality* or how one sees the causes of their conditions. Freire argued that many exist in lower levels of consciousness, which he categorized as *magical* and *naive* (p. 85). With magical consciousness, people perceive their reality through a superstitious or religious lens, which disallows the possibility of larger societal causes for their circumstances or their ability to intervene and change their conditions (Cammarota, 2013). Their lot in life, as they understand it, is fated or predetermined. As Freire (2014) stated, "Under the sway of magic and myth, the oppressed (especially the peasants, who are almost submerged in nature) see their suffering, the fruit of exploitation, as the will of God—as if God were the creator of this 'organized disorder'" (pp. 61-62).

The second and higher tier of consciousness, naive consciousness, is one in which people are more perceptive about the causes of their conditions, but their outlook is limited to forces

such as family, cultural norms, and coincidence. At this level of consciousness, individuals do not critically look at larger systems in society that perpetuate their conditions. A contemporary example of naive consciousness can be found in the racist ideas about the cultures of marginalized communities being the cause of the opportunity gaps in education (Cammarota, 2013).

Critical consciousness is the third tier. Individuals that practice a critical consciousness are able to draw lines between their conditions and societal structures or systems and then take action against those systems (Watts, 2011). The process of developing a critical consciousness is referred to as *conscientization* and it has three different stages: 1) critical reflection, 2) political efficacy, and 3) critical action. The next section outlines each of these stages.

Critical Consciousness

Critical Reflection

The first stage of conscientization is critical reflection. In this stage of critical consciousness development, individuals learn about systems of oppression in society (Watts, 2011). The critical reflection stage involves questioning commonly held beliefs and attitudes, examining who benefits from the prevalence of these beliefs and attitudes, and finally reflecting on how history has shaped contemporary systems and how contemporary systems sustain inequality (Jemal, 2017, p. 608). Through this work, individuals are able to connect with and categorize their experiences with and observations of oppression. Jemal (2017) emphasized that critical reflection does not happen in isolation, but in dialogue with others. Through dialogue, individuals are able to investigate different ways of thinking and identify prevailing problems within a community, also known as generative themes (p. 612).

Political Efficacy

In the political efficacy stage of critical consciousness development, individuals cultivate a sense of agency and empowerment. Freire (2014) argued that the “oppressed must see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressor so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them” (p. 64). Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) suggested that this stage is implicit to conscientization, though the stage is still being researched by scholars. They pointed out that, logically, it is a necessary stage. With how overwhelming the prospect of making change is, individuals must first have confidence in their ability to do so (p. 849).

Critical Action

In this stage of critical consciousness, individuals actively work to solve societal problems. As Jemal (2017) noted, this can take many forms, including voting and community organizing (p. 608). Action, according to Freire (2014), is an inevitable result of reflection, but the reflection must be meaningful. Action depends on the previous stages of conscientization. In order to act against systems, people need to know why those systems must be changed and how to go about doing so. Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) conceptualized critical action in three different ways. The first is personal action, in which an individual contributes to the critical consciousness of a larger group of people by way of helping them analyze their conditions. The second is collective action, in which the group influences those outside of their group. The third is mass action, in which the group is mobilized to make social change.

Praxis

It is important to bear in mind that conscientization is not linear, but cyclical. One does not simply *arrive* at critical consciousness. Praxis, with regard to critical consciousness development, refers to the ongoing process of conscientization in which individuals engage in both reflection and action. Sometimes, as Jemal (2017) stated, this happens simultaneously:

“Civic engagement and sociopolitical action seem to shape how one perceives self, others and social injustices” (p. 616). Action should result in further analysis and reflection, and then further action. Praxis is what makes critical consciousness transformational.

Critical Consciousness and Educational Approaches

Although critical consciousness development is not exclusive to one particular education theory or pedagogy, there are approaches that are more useful than others. This section explores Freire’s beliefs about developing critical consciousness in the classroom and examines the theories and philosophies that are most compatible with critical consciousness work.

Freirean Pedagogy: Banking Model vs. Problem Posing Education

In describing problem posing education, Freire (2014) began with what it is not. Freire posited a critique of the traditional model of education, which they referred to as the *banking model* (p. 72). The metaphor of a bank serves not only to show how traditionalists view knowledge itself, as definitive and constant and the same for everyone, but also for how traditionalists view the *acquisition* of knowledge, through linear deposits. In this hierarchical model, the teacher is the source of all knowledge. They are the keepers of the knowledge vault. Students, on the other hand, are passive, empty vessels into which knowledge is deposited. Through rote memorization, students save this knowledge, which they then demonstrate in standardized assessments (Jemal, 2017, p. 606). The banking model is a teacher-centered, power-imbalanced approach to education that, in the view of Freire (2014), served only to reflect and sustain the status quo. In the banking model, students are taught to adapt and defend knowledge that they are not allowed to question themselves. Consequently, these students will grow into adults who unreservedly accept their reality, no matter how unjust or changeable it may be.

In contrast with the *banking model*, Freire (2014) advocated for *problem-posing education*, which he believed would achieve the goal of developing critical consciousness. This approach addresses issues with the banking model and is built on Freire's core values of love, humility, and faith (p. 91). Where the banking model holds that reality is an already defined thing that must be accepted, the problem-posing approach asserts that reality is constructed through active collaboration between teacher and student. The task of both teacher and student is to critically reflect on reality, generate ideas of how to change it, and then act on it. While teachers do operate as facilitators in problem-posing education, they do not position themselves as the holders of all knowledge. Instead they view students as co-learners in a critical reflection of reality (Seider, 2017, p. 1163).

In their description of problem-posing in the classroom, Seider (2017) notes that it often looks like a teacher introducing a topic related to social issues and then problematizing it (p. 1163). At one school in their study, students engaged in a culture circle, a foundational practice in problem-posing pedagogy. In this practice "students are presented with a symbolic representation of a social issue, and then engage in dialogue about why the problem exists, and what can be done about the problem" (p. 166). Trout (2008) describes an event in their classroom when students, all of them female, became upset about the school's strict dress code. Were Trout to adopt a banking model of education, they would have reinforced the policy, arguing that it is just the way things are. Instead, they led their class in a conversation about why the policy was unjust and then generated ideas of what to do about it. After working collaboratively, they eventually got the policy suspended (pp. 69-70).

Essentialism

Essentialism is a philosophy that promotes the transference of basic academic and cultural knowledge from teachers to students (Sahin, 2018, p. 194). From an essentialist perspective, the process of learning occurs when the teacher, the ultimate authority on knowledge, deposits information into passive students, who store this information through the process of memorization. Not only must the teacher convey knowledge, but also morality. This philosophy is deeply concerned with the preservation of cultural norms and values (Sahin, 2018, p. 194).

Roberson (2014) describes essentialist philosophy as a philosophy in which “core knowledge and skills are at best transmitted to students via teacher-directed classrooms dominated by what the teacher does as opposed to classrooms in which students are transformed into able and capable learners” (p. 344). Critical consciousness is antithetical to rote memorization of state-sanctioned essential knowledge. At its essence, it is about challenging those beliefs and collaborating to construct knowledge in a democratic environment (Jemal, 2017, p. 608). Since mutual respect and shared power is a prerequisite for critical consciousness work, critical theorists, like Freire, would find this approach to be completely incompatible with developing a critical consciousness.

Progressivism

Made famous by Dewey, progressivism is an educational philosophy that values developing intelligent and capable students and creating a more democratic society. A one-size-fits-all approach, this is not. Progressivism, with its democratic focus, is a philosophy that can be tailored to the needs of different communities, in the same way that democracy involves many different groups (Pecore, 2015, p. 54). Over the decades since its conception, progressivism has changed and has, to a degree, remained somewhat enigmatic (Pecore, 2015, p.

54). Most recently, scholars Pecore and Bruce (2013) have defined progressivism as “a pedagogical movement that emphasizes student-centered learning experiences and that incorporates aspects such as learning by doing, valuing diversity, integrated curriculum, problem solving, critical thinking, collaborative learning, social responsibility, democracy, and lifelong learning” (p. 10). In many ways, problem-posing feels rooted in progressivism. The two visions of education are compatible in that they share a commitment to democratic practices, student-centeredness, and critical thinking, among other values. Additionally, according to Pecore and Bruce (2013), many of the progressive schools of today effectively reconfigure the relationship between teachers and students by making these relationships more equal with regard to power-sharing and collaboration. In these schools, students are often involved in the governing processes and encouraged to engage in real world problem-solving, including, for example, protesting school policies (p. 11).

Social Reconstructionism

An offshoot of progressivism, social reconstructionism emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as a critique of the limits of progressivism. Central to the critique was the failure of progressivism to create a more just and democratic society. Social reconstructionism shares many of the same values of progressivism, but it also aims to help students become more moral and just citizens who critically think about the systems in which they live. According to Sutinen (2014), the goal of reconstructionism is to create a “democratic and loyal society in which the criterion of political and financial activity is not the self-seeking individual, but individual activity in which social problems are solved through the rational thinking of individuals” (p. 20). Social reconstructionism, with its roots in progressivism and its focus on

addressing oppressive systems within a society, is conceivably the antecedent of Freire's problem-posing education.

Constructivism

First established in the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, constructivism is a theory of learning that proposes that students create knowledge through active problem solving and collaboration with others (Constructivism, 2021, para. 1). With each new experience, students engage in assimilation and accommodation, cognitive processes that refer to the process of taking in new information and assimilating with previous knowledge and taking in new information and revising previous knowledge (Constructivism, 2021, para. 3-5). Since experiences are foundational to learning, a constructivist teacher's pedagogy is decidedly student centered. The role the teacher plays is to facilitate learning opportunities for students and guide them as they construct new knowledge and deconstruct previous knowledge (Brau, 2018, para. 18).

Constructivist learning theory reflects critical consciousness in many ways. It rejects the idea that knowledge simply *exists*, arguing instead that knowledge is created through problem-solving and working with others, which mirrors Freire's rejection of the idea of reality being fixed and not subject to change (Hirtle, 1996, p. 92; Freire, 2014, p. 37). Additionally, constructivism's emphasis on drawing on student interests and prior knowledge, collaborating with others to make meaning, and student-centeredness, also reflects problem-posing education. Furthermore, Hirtle (1996), in their discussion of social constructivism, states that the "problem-posing as a framework for critical pedagogy rests in the Vygotskian notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)" (p. 91). The similarities between constructivism and

problem-posing education makes constructivism a useful resource in considering critical consciousness development.

ELA Strategies

This capstone project is focused on finding strategies for developing critical consciousness in ELA classrooms. In the research, experts have found pedagogical approaches and strategies that can raise students' consciousness and propel them towards action through reading, writing, and discussion. Three ELA specific categories are of interest to this capstone and will be explored in this section: reading, writing, and discussion strategies.

Literature

Multicultural Literature: Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors. The most common approach to increasing critical consciousness with regard to literature is to include more multicultural texts. "Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors," (p. 1) a phrase coined by Bishop (1990/2015), is commonly invoked when advocating for diverse texts, as it helpfully summarizes the need for them. (Johnson, 2018, pp. 570-71).

A central part of critical consciousness development is cultivating a strong sense of identity as a subject, as one with the power to effect change. As Freire (2014) notes, "one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity" (p. 50). Literature that serves as a mirror can be a useful tool in this regard. For Johnson et al (2018), a text that functions as a mirror can reflect not only physical and cultural similarities, but also emotional similarities, making some texts reflective of the experiences of students from different cultures. Students of all backgrounds can share similar emotional responses to a text, of course, and a text that elicits meaningful responses is a text that will be greatly effective in creating cross-cultural connections (p. 571). With regard to cultural mirrors, Acosta has found success in developing academic identities using Chicano

literature. Acosta (2007) details the Chicano Literature program developed at their magnet school. This program is founded on the Xicano Paradigm, which rests on four historically and culturally important components: *Tezkatlipoka* (self-reflection), *Quetzalkoatl* (knowledge), *Huitzilopochtli* (the will to act), and *Xipe Totek* (transformation) (pp. 37-38).

The first component, *Tezkatlipoka*, is most relevant in their studies of Chicano literature. According to Acosta (2007), the effects of oppression have destroyed many Chicano students' academic identities. This condition reflects Freire's (2014) description of the oppressed who have "have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires" (p. 47). To rebuild academic identities in this program, students read literature with characters similar to them and engage in thoughtful reflection about those texts and how they connect to their lives (Acosta, 2007, p. 37).

For Johnson et al. (2018), the last category set forth by Bishop (1990/2015), sliding glass doors, is the most critical when thinking about how to introduce literature that stimulates the kind of consciousness-raising Freire describes. They note that when students read books they enjoy, they often make personal connections with characters, connections which can inform how they exist in the world. To foster such a connection requires selecting texts with characters involved in social change and guiding students through the process of reflecting and responding to the text (p. 575). True to Freire, the authors also stress the importance of elaborating on experiences with the text in discussion in small groups. It is there that students will be able to construct generative themes and learn about different ways of thinking (p. 575).

The Literary Canon: Critical Literacy. Although introducing students to multicultural literature is considered an essential strategy for developing critical consciousness in students,

others advocate for teaching students to challenge the dominant texts presented in the literary canon (Borsheim-Black, 2014, p. 123). The literary canon is an oft-praised and oft-criticized category of literary works that dominates ELA classrooms and is dominated by deceased White men (Dyches, 2018, p. 539). Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) propose critical literacy pedagogy. Instead of dismissing problematic texts, this pedagogy argues for their inclusion as a way of teaching students to read *against* literature rather than only *with* literature. Reading *with* literature refers to the standard way literature is taught in ELA classrooms today. In reading *with* literature, students develop skills related to reading comprehension, identifying literary devices, analyzing for theme, and so forth. Reading *against* literature does not forgo the development of these skills, but rather includes additional skills, new ways of thinking about the text and how it has shaped and been shaped by history and ideology (p. 124-25).

The authors define five dimensions of literacy involved in reading *against* the text: canonicity, context, literary elements, reader response, and assessment. *Canonicity* refers to curricular decisions regarding literature selections and the notion of the canon itself (p. 125). The purpose of this dimension is to engage students in critical analysis of what canonical means and why certain texts are chosen over others (p. 127). *Context* refers to analyzing how both historical context, the time and place in which the text was written, and biographical context, the author's life experiences, have shaped the text (p. 128). *Literary elements* refers to analyzing literary elements for the ways in which they uphold ideas and systems in the world (p. 129). *Reader response* refers to reflection of how the reader's social identities impact their understanding of the text and their sense of connection to characters (p. 130). *Assessments* refers to the types of assessments teachers use at the end of a unit. These assessments should involve both literary analysis and provide students with opportunities to make social change (p. 131).

In a similar approach to critical literacy, Dyches (2018) conducted research using critical canon pedagogy in a secondary classroom. Her research revealed that when students read *against* the text, they begin to not only think more critically about literature, but also develop critical consciousness about the world they live in. In her study, students engaged in a unit that involved an exploration of the roots of the literary canon and the perseverance of certain narratives (p. 539). After learning about *why* certain texts continue to be selected in curricula, students engaged in *restorying* those narratives with new characters and places that reflected more diverse experiences than the originals (p. 551).

Composition

Reflective Writing. A major part of critical consciousness development involves understanding who one is in terms of situatedness or social location, specifically in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, along with other identifiers. As Freire (2014) noted, “one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity” (p. 50). Put another way, one cannot begin to evaluate the ways in which society perpetuates injustice without first understanding how one’s life has contributed to and/or been shaped by unjust societal systems.

Reflective writing is a place to begin doing that (Acosta, 2007, p. 39). Lee (2000) proposes as a starting point that students begin with a self-inventory in which they analyze different parts of who they are. Using the image of a jigsaw puzzle to represent the self, students are assigned essays in which they think about particular pieces of that puzzle and how they relate to the whole (p. 193-94). While students are engaging in the writing process about their identity, Lee (2000) connects the process of writing and rewriting with how one makes, unmakes, and remakes their own understandings about the world (p. 196). Similarly, Acosta (2007) argued for this writing approach as well. Keeping with the value of *Tezkatlipoka*, self-reflection, students in

their program begin by using literature to reflect on their identities, which foregrounds their lived experiences in the unit. An example of this occurs in their program when students use the metaphor of national borders to reflect on the barriers in their own life. This creates a bridge between personal experiences and systemic forces. They note this work is important as students need to develop an academic identity in order to engage in larger inquiries about their relationship with power (p. 38).

In their exploration of teacher preparedness in enacting a critical composition pedagogy, Behizadeh et al (2019) argue for a pedagogy to be grounded in historicity and dialogism. *Historicity* means the curriculum should connect to students' various lived experiences, and *dialogism* means students should be exposed to diverse texts, and engage in dialogue through composition, discussion, and listening (p. 59-60). Connecting to student experiences, through the lens of historicity, looks like self-reflective writing. Students in this type of classroom are tasked with reflecting on their backgrounds and lived experiences and how those experiences connect to larger societal systems.

Restorying. A central feature of Dyche's (2018) critical canon pedagogy is the activity of restorying. Restorying, in essence, is a way to insert new perspectives into stories that feature predominantly White characters and that were written for White audiences. For her unit, students engaged in restorying by rewriting Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* with new details and forms related to identity, place, time, metanarrative, mode, and perspective. The result, Dyche found, was that students were able to "deconstruct, reconstruct, and repurpose their required canonical curriculum" (p. 552). In an additional study, Dyches (2017) found that restorying Shakespeare's work allowed students to draw on their own experiences to make meaning from a canon from which they may have been disconnected. This strategy not only

skillfully crafted accessibility to the text, but it engaged them in thinking critically about why certain stories are selected over others (p. 304).

Discussion

Freire Culture Circles. Culture circles are a foundational tool for critical consciousness development. Freire (2014) coined this term to refer to the discussions he would have with peasants in Brazil in his literacy program (p. 103). In culture circles, students would dialogue with each other, speaking from their own experiences and in their own manner of speaking, which allowed them to create knowledge outside of the dominant ideologies (Cammarota, 2017, p. 197). Freire (as cited in Brown, 2011) stated, “cultural circles are a way to generate critical conversations among teacher-students and student-teachers and can provide the motivation for critical consciousness and political action” (p. 1). Brown (2011) goes on to state that, “...teachers and students learn from one another as their democratic dialogue provides a means to name and upend social structures of privilege and oppression” (p. 1). Brown’s study (2011) sought to measure the efficacy of culture circles in raising critical consciousness. The unit was designed with Urban Fiction, in which students led conversations about the texts they read and came up with their own generative themes. The results were mixed. Students’ critical reflection increased, with many identifying as anti-racist by the end of the unit, but they still attributed, to some degree, the causes of individuals’ circumstances as less structural and more individual. Still, Brown notes that the conversations about the texts between students helped them to acquire a more empowered sense of their identities (pp. 8-9,). Similarly, in Seider et al’s (2014) study of different schools promoting critical consciousness work, researchers found that schools that followed the design of Freire’s culture circles demonstrated much higher levels of critical consciousness development (p. 1175).

Debate. While discussion seems to be a vital part of developing critical consciousness, the power dynamics of those discussions have a large impact on their success. Most important to Pitner and Sakamoto (2016) is that there is shared power during discussions. They note that discussions with the goal of developing critical consciousness are often over-structured, ironically resembling the Banking Method they attempt to eschew. As a solution, they promote classroom debate as a form of discussion (pp. 6-7). In this strategy, teachers and students share power, with the teacher's role being simply to assign students to a particular side and then manage time allowed for each side.

Critiques

Effect on White Students

Nurenberg (2011) reflected on his experiences as an educator "in a school primarily serving affluent white students" (p. 52). A follower of Freire, Nurenberg struggled when he realized that the multicultural curriculum he taught to his students was resulting in resistance and disengagement. If it is important to center stories from the oppressed and invite students into the work of challenging unjust systems, then "how does all of this match up against calls for greater authenticity for (and from) students in largely white, privileged environments?" (p. 54). This is a question scholars have often left unanswered (Jemal, 2017, p. 617).

Tyler et al. (2020) studied the impacts of critical reflection on the thriving of Black and White students. To measure *thriving*, the researchers used the 5 C's of Positive Youth Development, and to assess levels of critical reflection, the study collected survey responses from participants (p. 758). The participants came from three different groups: White students attending low-income schools, Black students attending low-income schools, and White students attending middle-income schools. The researchers did not categorize Black students at

middle-income schools because the sample was not large enough for their analysis. The results of this study revealed something troubling about white students' experiences. Among the findings of the study, one result revealed that White students who exhibited higher levels of critical reflection showed less compassion and empathy, were less likely to associate with diverse peers, and experienced unsatisfactory relationships (p. 767).

Scott Seider (2011) conducted a study at a secondary school composed of middle-upper class and mostly White students. In this study, he analyzed changing beliefs about homelessness over the course of a semester-long “Literature and Justice” class. Specifically, he was analyzing students’ beliefs about whether homelessness is the result of individual or situational factors. The mixed methods approach yielded conflicting results that Seider later interpreted and drew conclusions from. In their results, the quantitative data revealed that these students indicated less empathy for the homeless by the end of the semester, but the qualitative data, shown through interviews, revealed that students almost uniformly shifted from viewing homelessness as caused by individualistic factors to homelessness caused by situational factors. Relying on other theories of identity and social justice, Seider posited that while privileged students can learn about systemic inequalities, they will eschew any feelings of empathy or sense of responsibility as a way of protecting their identity and worldview (p. 358).

Conversely, other studies have turned out different results. In her study, “Social Justice Pedagogy for Whom? Developing Privileged Students’ Critical Mathematics Consciousness,” Kokka (2020) examined responses of advantaged students to a social justice oriented curriculum that involved critical consciousness work. She found that privileged students, while needing significant additional supports, can increase their critical consciousness (p. 797).

Summary

This chapter helped answer the question driving this capstone: *What are the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom?* This chapter charted the history of critical consciousness, from Freire's conception of the term to its contemporary applications in the classroom. It introduced approaches to developing critical consciousness related to the literature selected, the reading and writing strategies employed, and the components of a constructive discussion. It illustrated the process of critical consciousness, as well as the potential pitfalls with privileged populations.

This chapter laid the groundwork for Chapter Three. The following chapter includes the project itself. In that chapter, I will describe the unit designed to support students in developing critical consciousness. I will provide details of what the unit is built around and identify the consciousness-raising strategies addressed in this chapter that will be utilized.

Chapter Three

Overview

Chapter Three outlines the curriculum designed to address the question: *What are the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom?* In this unit, students are learning to read and analyze the novel *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie (2011) from two different approaches: reading *with* the text and reading *against* the text. In reading with the text, students are practicing skills related to reading comprehension and literary analysis. In reading against the text, students are learning critical literacy skills, which involves exploring the beliefs and ideologies that shape a text.

The goal of this project is to provide ELA teachers with tools to develop critical consciousness in students in their ELA classrooms. Helping students think critically about how literature and composition informs and shapes their reality is something I have been passionate about, but have not always executed well. If there are other teachers out there who struggle with this, too, I hope this will be a resource they find valuable.

The research presented in Chapter Two outlined a number of different approaches for developing critical consciousness in the ELA classroom. The approaches that are used in this unit are outlined below:

Literature:

- **Critical Literature Pedagogy:** This approach engages literature from a critical perspective. Building off of traditional reading strategies, referred to as reading *with* a text, this approach advocates for reading *against* a text. Put another way, students develop literary analysis skills and critical literacy skills. Proposed by both Borsheim-Black (2014) and Dyches (2018), critical literacy refers to the ability to analyze a text for its ideological

messages a particular text presents as well as the messages sent by those who choose that particular curriculum. While students learn to comprehend and analyze a text for its themes, they will also learn to investigate its underlying ideologies.

Composition:

- Self-Reflective Writing- As a starting point for critical reflection, self-reflective writing engages students in analyzing the different parts of their identity, which will allow them to see how their identity relates to larger societal systems. Acosta (2007) proposes that this type of writing helps students to see themselves as academics engaged in analysis and as individuals connected to communities. Similarly, Lee (2000) suggests that self-inventory is an essential place to begin developing critical consciousness.

Furthermore, they argue that the writing process, the act of writing and rewriting, can help students understand the ways in which they are constantly changing and growing.

- Restorying- In response to canonical literature, this strategy advocates rewriting stories that reflect a more diverse experience. Students engaged in restorying rewrite details related to time, place, perspective, and identity in the literature, making it more relevant to their lived experiences. This activity supports students in accessing content that they may feel disconnected from.

Discussion:

- Culture Circles- Introduced by Freire (2014), culture circles refer to dialogue where students speak about their experiences in reflection of the course content. In a culture circle, students speak freely with one another about how their experiences connect with content, which can lead to generative themes or prevailing ideas that students share about what is important in the world (Cammarota, 2017, p. 197).

- Debate- Drawing on the ideas of Freire's culture circles, the debate strategy put forth by Pitner and Sakamoto (2016) is an answer to the issue of power-sharing in a classroom. The reason for utilizing debate over traditional discussion is that it relinquishes the teacher from their position of power over students and instead grants more power to students to engage in dialogue about particular topics (pp. 6-7). Additionally, this strategy calls for randomly assigning different sides to students, which has the effect of students taking on perspectives and beliefs different from their own.

The strategies outlined above will be incorporated into the unit. Over the course of the unit, they will be measured for their efficacy in developing critical consciousness.

Rationale

As stated in Chapter One, there is an opportunity gap crisis in the state of Minnesota, and the school in which this unit takes place is not immune to it (Grunewald, 2019, p. 3). In the face of this crisis, teachers and administrators alike have promoted culturally-relevant teaching as a solution, a practice that includes setting high expectations, cultivating a deep pride in one's identity, and developing critical consciousness. More often than not, however, the first two are practiced while critical consciousness is ignored.

The efficacy of critical consciousness in improving outcomes for students is supported by the research. A study by Diemer and Blustein (2006) found that critical consciousness increased student progress in career readiness (p. 228). Carter (2008) found that students who were aware of structural inequities did not, as some have argued, adopt a victim mentality, but rather developed new skills for navigating oppressive systems in the pursuit of academic achievement. This research suggests that Ladson-Billings (2019) is right: One cannot enact a culturally-relevant pedagogy without critical consciousness (Fay, 2019, para. 10).

At the outset of this project, the intention was to revise the curriculum for a ninth grade English unit on *The Hate U Give* (2017), but for reasons to be elaborated on, the project is a revised curriculum for an eleventh grade Elements of Literature course, specifically the unit on the novel *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie (2011). The first reason is that the types of strategies used in this unit require a level of intellectual and emotional maturity that most ninth-grade students do not yet have. Culture circles and examining a text through a critical lens would not be the most effective approach for students at this stage in their development. Students are still developing the ability to discuss a text, let alone have a conversation about the persistent ideologies underpinning those texts. Secondly, based on the literature review, the structure of this class lends itself well to the critical literacy strategies outlined by Borscheim-Black (2014) and Dyches (2018). The focus of the class is to develop deeper reading skills through discussions, literary analysis, and personal reflections. Incorporating critical literacy strategies supports this focus.

Setting and Audience

The setting for this project is a secondary suburban high school. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, the demographic breakdown of our school is 0.1% American Indian, 5.2% Black, 5.7% Hispanic or Latino, 6.5% Two or More Races, 14.6% Asian, and 67.9% White. On average, the graduation rate is 98.7%, which is higher than the state average.

This curriculum is designed for Elements of Literature, an eleventh grade, semester-long course. The class includes 21 male and 10 female students, and 22 White students, three Black students, three Hispanic/Latino students, and three students of two or more races. Seven students are receiving special education services.

Curriculum Framework

The curriculum framework used for this project is “Understanding by Design” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2012). Within this framework, students progress throughout a unit from acquisition to meaning-making to transfer, and this unit is designed with those stages in mind. This unit began with the following desired results: 1) Students will develop critical literacy skills, including reading *with* and *against* a text, and 2) Students will be able to critically analyze systems and engage in action to change those systems. Assessment evidence related to discussion, reading, and writing was then created to measure these results. Lastly, I created lessons, activities, and informal assessments that support students in acquiring the content, making meaning of the content, and transferring the skills learned to real world scenarios.

This unit is influenced by the progressive values articulated by Pecore and Bruce (2015), which include student-centered learning, democracy, valuing diversity, and critical thinking (p. 54). The unit is also rooted in constructivist learning theory. As a student-centered approach that promotes inquiry based learning, this learning theory reflects Freire’s (2014) method of problem-posing method to develop critical consciousness (pp. 73-74). Throughout the unit, students will construct knowledge through reading, writing, and discussion activities, with the aim of developing a critical consciousness that is democratic and inclusive.

Project Overview

This project is focused on the question: *What are the best strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom?* To answer that question, I have created a curriculum unit designed for an eleventh-grade literature course. Organized around the novel *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie (2011), this unit uses strategies identified in Chapter Two for developing critical consciousness in the teaching of a classic text.

Guided by critical literature pedagogy, the aim of this unit is to teach students how to read *with* and *against* a text. As stated previously, reading with the text refers to reading comprehension and traditional literary analysis. A student reading with the text is reading it for its themes, its use of literary devices, and to make personal connections. In other words, it is accepting the text on its own terms. Reading against the text refers to critically analyzing a text for its ideological implications. A student reading against the text is reading to understand the relationship between narrative and ideology, the way literary elements are used to communicate social messages, and how the social location and experiences of the reader influence how they metabolize the text.

The unit will take place over the course of seven to eight weeks and has been organized into four different modules. In the first module, students are introduced to the text, the goals of the unit, learn about the literary canon, and engage in activities meant to help them reflect on their relationship to reading. In the second module, students learn about the context of the novel and the context of the author's life. In the third module, students read the text, participate in discussions, and engage with the text in writing activities. In the fourth module, students work on their summative assessment for the unit, a "restorying project" that incorporates the skills practiced over the course of the unit.

Module One will last one to two weeks. In this module, students will be presented with an overview of the unit, which will include information about the text and the learning objectives, which are: to develop the skills of critical literacy and a deeper connection to literature. As a discussion-based class, students' first task will be to establish discussion norms and expectations. In small groups, students will decide what makes a discussion safe and constructive, and what detracts from a safe and constructive discussion. Once students have

finished compiling their norms and expectations, the class will generate a list and vote on the five most important. This list will be referenced repeatedly as the unit progresses.

To get students thinking critically about themselves as readers with worldviews, students will engage in reflective writing about their identities, both personal and social. As Lee (2000) pointed out in the research, critical consciousness has to begin with a self-inventory. To help facilitate this process, students will complete social identity wheels, read examples of reflective writing, and respond to journal prompts meant to help students shed light on how their identities shape their relationship with literature. As these reflections touch on more vulnerable parts of students' lives, not just their identity but also their opinions on contentious issues, these reflections will not be shared with their peers.

After students examine their identities, they will consider the identity of the Western literary canon. Explicitly, students will be taught the meaning of the phrase “literary canon” and how the Western literary canon has evolved over time, as well as what it might mean in different communities. Students will then engage in a research activity in which they catalog five texts included in the Western canon and then reflect on what their inclusion says about the identity and purpose of the canon.

Module Two will last approximately a week. In this module, students will research the context in which the novel takes place as well as the context of the life of the author, Agatha Christie. In the interest of creating a space where students are learning from each other and not just from the instructor, topics will be assigned to different students, who will then teach their peers about the topics in presentations to the class. Students will have the week to work on creating their project and they will present their projects over the course of the unit.

Module Three will last approximately four weeks. During this time, students will be reading the text, engaging in writing activities, and preparing for and participating in small and large group discussions. The writing assignments are designed to get students thinking about how they connect and do not connect with the text. Like the characters in the novel, students will keep a journal/diary documenting their journey through the novel. Journal writing will take place at the start of class each day and will last approximately ten minutes. These journals will provide evidence for students' understanding of the text and the development of their critical consciousness. Prompts will vary to engage students in different ways to think about the novel and themselves as readers: reader-response, restorying, and critical reflection.

Reader response writing is meant to help students develop a deeper connection to the text. An example prompt might be: *Each of the guests on Soldier Island handle their guilt differently. How do you cope with guilt? Which character's manner of coping feels most similar to yours?* Creating connections between their personal experiences and the experiences of the characters will help students make meaning of the text. Restorying writing prompts ask students to think about the text in a different way, such as rewriting characters with different identities or changing the mode in which the story is told (i.e. creating a twitter feed for a character, a Facebook page for the island, etc). These prompts will help students prepare for the restorying assignment they complete later in the unit.

Students will also respond to prompts that help them think critically about themselves as readers. An example of a prompt might be: *Think about who is most and least sympathetic to you in this novel. Are they characters with power? Are they characters who are more vulnerable? How do your biases inform your feelings of sympathy about these characters?* Engaging students in an examination of why they experience the text the way they do will help them better

understand themselves as readers, which in turn has the potential to increase critical awareness about the relationship between ideology and literature.

To prepare for small and large group discussions, students will complete discussion preparation assignments. These assignments will consist of 8-10 questions that ask students to read with and against the text. An example of a reading with the text question might be: *The writer compares the characters to different animals at the start of this chapter. What is the significance of these descriptions? What theme topics do these descriptions evoke?* With this question, students are practicing analyzing characters for themes, a fundamental literary analysis skill. An example of a reading against the text question might be: *Read the descriptions of Vera Claythorne in this chapter. How do these descriptions reflect attitudes towards women of Agatha Christie's time? Do any of these attitudes persist today? Explain.* With this question, students are putting the text in the historical context of societal views of women, connecting those attitudes to descriptions in the text, and interpreting how those attitudes persist today.

Guided by Freire's (2014) culture circles, discussions will provide space for students to collectively make meaning of what the text says and how it connects to modern life. Alternating between large and small group discussions, with small group discussions occurring more frequently, students will come together prepared with their discussion question responses, as well as one additional question they can pose to the group, and engage in a conversation. While guidance will be provided when necessary, the responsibility for a rich, constructive conversation will rest on students. This will be made clear to them. Throughout these discussions, students will be reminded of the norms and expectations established at the start of the unit, and will be provided with sentence stems to help them engage in thoughtful, respectful dialog.

Module Four will last one week. In this module, students will participate in a debate about the inclusion of the text, *And Then There Were None*, in the Elements of Literature curriculum. This debate will be a summative assessment that evaluates students' skills with regard to citing textual evidence in support of an argument and preparing for and participating in a discussion about the text. The question put before them will be: *Considering the controversial elements of And Then There Were None, should the text continue to be taught in Elements of Literature?* Following the model set forth by Pitner and Sakamoto (2016), students will be assigned into pro and con sides. Each side will have 7-10 debaters, the students participating in the debate, and 7-10 supporters, those who help debaters prepare their arguments. In these groups, students will decide on roles. Over the course of a class period, students will engage in a structured debate that includes opening arguments, presentation of cases, rebuttals, and then a closing.

Students will also work on another summative assessment for the unit: the "Restorying Project." Restorying is an activity in which students take a classical text that was written for a predominantly White audience and reimagine it for a broader or different audience. For this assessment, students will write a first-person account from one of the guests about an incident from the text, but they will restory it. Students will make changes to at least three of the following: identity, setting, and metanarrative. Restorying identity refers to changing the social identity of a character (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, etc.), restorying setting refers to changing the time and place in which the story takes place, and restorying metanarrative refers to changing the way in which the story is written (e.g., instead of journaling, the characters keep a blog).

This project brings together a number of the goals of the unit. To begin with, students will be thinking critically about the choices the author made in this text and what beliefs and attitudes those choices reflect. In reimagining the text, they will be making inferences about the characters and how they would behave with changed identities and in different settings. They will be

actively involved in creating their own mirror or window, and, by extension, investigating the beliefs and attitudes they hold as readers. This project will help develop students' critical consciousness, as it asks them to become aware of how oppression exists in literature (e.g., the text's biases and absent narratives) and actively work to change those systems by writing in new narratives.

Standards

Of the 2010 Minnesota English Language Arts Standards, this unit addresses reading, writing, and speaking and listening standards. These standards, which are cited in Appendix A, are addressed through the weekly activities students engage in and in the summative assessments for the unit. Standards guide this unit, meaning every lesson and formative assessment is geared towards helping students develop mastery over these skills.

The reading standards are addressed through the discussion preparation assignments and in the final summative assessments. In response to these questions, students are citing textual evidence in support of their claims about the text, making inferences about the text, and analyzing the text for theme. The writing standards are addressed through the journal assignments, the research project, and in the final restorying project. In these, students are engaging in a writing process, synthesizing information from various sources, and composing different types of writing, including reflective and narrative writing. The speaking and listening standards are addressed in the weekly class discussions and in the final debate. In these assessments, students are creating discussion norms, evaluating different perspectives, and arriving prepared not only with answers to the assigned questions, but with questions of their own.

Evaluating Effectiveness

To evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used in developing critical consciousness, I will analyze students' work in formative and summative assessments. Additionally, I will document student progress with daily notes of anecdotal evidence of the successes and shortcomings of the unit.

Summary

This chapter provides information about how this capstone project answers the following question: *What are the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom?* It includes the rationale for the project, which is rooted in both personal experience and research. It explains the setting and audience for the project, an eleventh grade Elements of Literature class at an upper middle-class secondary school. It outlines the unit itself, which is centered around Agatha Christie's novel *And Then There Were None* (2011). Importantly, it details the strategies that will be used and the curricular frameworks that shape the unit.

Chapter Four is a reflection and the final chapter of the capstone project. In this chapter, I review the limitations of the project and possibilities for future research.

Chapter Four

Overview

Included in this chapter is a comprehensive reflection on the process of developing this capstone project which sought to answer the question: *What are the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom?* This reflection delves into the development of the research question, the experience of assembling and synthesizing the available research, and the creation of the curriculum.

Chapter One described the journey that led me to this research question. I shared how while the trial of Chauvin was taking place in Minneapolis, I was in the middle of teaching *The Hate U Give* (2017), a novel about a young Black teenager who is killed by the police. In the convergence of these two things, I felt suddenly unprepared. After a conversation with the school's equity specialist, I realized that I knew less than I thought I did about culturally-relevant pedagogy, and I wanted to learn more. So for this project, I decided to dive deeper into culturally-relevant pedagogy, hoping that I would grow as an educator in the process and eventually create a product I could share with my colleagues. I turned first to Ladson-Billings, which led me to Freire and his work on critical consciousness. Soon after, I decided to embark on finding the best strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom.

Chapter Two explored the available research on critical consciousness. Organized into four different sections, the literature review included the background for and contemporary understandings of critical consciousness, the connections between critical consciousness and educational philosophies and theories, strategies for developing critical consciousness in the classroom, and critiques of critical consciousness work.

Chapter Three detailed the project itself, a curriculum unit centered on Agatha Christie's (2011) novel *And Then There Were None*. In this chapter, I laid out the setting and audience for the project, the rationale for its creation, and the curricular frameworks used to design the project. Additionally, I provided a detailed overview of the curriculum. This overview included the length and duration of modules, what strategies are utilized in lessons, and what tools are used in evaluating the effectiveness of the project.

In Chapter Four, I have detailed my reflections on the creation of this capstone project. I consider the process of coming up with the idea for this project, the literature review process, the process of creating the curriculum, the challenges and limitations of the project, as well as a personal reflection.

Capstone Process

In the months spent creating this capstone, I have cultivated a far richer understanding of culturally-relevant teaching, specifically with regard to critical consciousness development, than I had before I began. As most things go, what I thought I would walk away with is different than what I am. I envisioned my project would be centered on contemporary multicultural texts, like *The Hate U Give* (2017), and not on a classical text like *And Then There Were None*. It was not until I came across critical literature pedagogy in my research that I realized that learning to apply a critical lens to canonical literature would be the most effective approach towards developing critical consciousness in the students at my particular school.

Literature Review Reflection

In the earliest stage of my research, I had only my original topic, culturally-relevant pedagogy. Critical consciousness was not on my radar until, while researching, I read an interview conducted by Fay (2019) with Ladson-Billings in which she discussed the importance

of supporting students in developing critical consciousness as a part of a culturally relevant pedagogy. In thinking about my own experiences as an educator, both where I was successful and where I needed to grow, I realized that I had stumbled onto the correct path. I then decided to identify the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom.

The sequence of the literature review reflects my own learnings of this topic. To arrive at what the best strategies were for developing critical consciousness, I first needed to dive deeper into the concept itself and how it fit within the world of education. Foundational to my understanding was Freire's (2014) *Pedagogy of Oppressed*. This text introduced me to the aims of critical consciousness, the educational philosophy of Freire, and the strategies he used to promote critical consciousness. Supporting my learning of this concept was the work of Jemal (2017), who gathered, synthesized, and organized relevant research on the topic. Their work pointed the way to other major scholars on the subject, whose work I quickly devoured.

With a better grasp on the fundamentals of critical consciousness, I studied educational philosophies and theories and compared them with Freire's problem-posing pedagogy. This allowed me to understand where critical consciousness work fit within prevailing approaches to education. Common threads and divergences emerged in the comparison. In the overlap between problem-posing pedagogy, constructivism, social reconstructionism, and progressivism was the importance of student-centered learning and collaboration. Essentialism, with its emphasis on teacher-centered learning, was in many ways antithetical to critical consciousness development.

Having gained a better understanding of critical consciousness and how it fit within the world of education, I began researching specific classroom strategies. As I read different studies and stories of ELA classrooms engaging in critical consciousness work, from challenging

dominant narratives in literature to reflecting on identity development, I noticed that they largely fell into three categories: reading, writing, and discussion.

Reading strategies included approaches to text selection as well as particular approaches to texts. With regard to text selection, the research revealed how multicultural literature can not only provide windows and mirrors to students, but can also inspire activism. Conversely, scholars Borsheim-Black et al (2014) argued for the inclusion of classical texts with controversial elements as a way of teaching students to read against a text for its underlying ideological beliefs. Dyches (2018), in her critical canon curriculum, also argued that classical texts can increase critical consciousness by creating opportunities for students to challenge dominant narratives. In the creation of this capstone project, I relied heavily on the insights gleaned from this research.

Writing strategies related to critical consciousness included reflective writing strategies and restorying. Lee (2000) argued that reflective writing not only helped students better understand their identities, but the writing process, filled with drafts and revisions, helped students to understand themselves as individuals who grow and change, both in their beliefs and in their understandings of the world they live in. Acosta (2007) argued that reflective writing helped foreground students' experiences in their curricular unit, creating a bridge between the content and the realities of their lives. With restorying, Dyches (2008) found that when students engaged in rewriting classical texts, they grew in their critical consciousness and their ability to discern ideological messages embedded in a text. These strategies were incorporated into this project through the diary/journal students keep as they read the text, and in the summative assessment, wherein students write from a character's perspective about an event in the text.

Discussion strategies included culture circles and debate. Culture circles, promoted by Freire (2014), are gatherings in which students come together and discuss the intersections of their lives with course content. This was shown to be effective in Brown's (2011) study in helping students to develop a better sense of an empowered identity and in Seider's (2017) study, the use of culture circles helped increase students' critical consciousness. Alternatively, Pitner and Sakamoto (2016) proposed using debate as a way to develop critical consciousness. Their study found that traditional discussions often promoted the banking method of education, as students still turned to their instructor for knowledge rather than making meaning of the content. As an alternative approach, they propose using debate to promote critical consciousness, as it diffuses power differences between students and the instructor. This capstone project incorporates both discussion strategies into the curriculum. Weekly, students will engage in a discussion about the text and how it relates to contemporary issues, and at the end of the unit, students will participate in a debate about the text.

Curriculum Creation

Although not as challenging as the literature review, developing the curriculum for this project was more difficult than I had anticipated. I made the decision to forgo the existing curriculum for this text and start from scratch, as it was hard to see how to incorporate the existing materials into the unit I envisioned. Much of what I created I am quite proud of. I am looking forward to incorporating diaries into the unit and working with students on creating their final restorying project, in which they will write a narrative account from the perspective of one of the characters. Teaching students to read against the text will, I believe, create a new access point to literature that they might not have had before, making the activity of reading a more interesting one.

It is important to stress that this curriculum does not abandon the traditional approach to literary analysis in favor of a critical approach. With critical literature pedagogy, students learn to read both with and against the text, meaning they practice traditional literary analysis (reading for theme, literary elements, word choice, plot structure, etc) and they practice reading a text for its ideological implications. State standards for reading, writing, and discussion are met in this unit.

With regard to reading, students will practice reading a text for its themes. Throughout the novel, students will respond to discussion questions which will ask them to analyze specific literary elements in the text including characters, symbols, setting, allusions, and more. The final project asks students to write from a character's perspective about a particular moment in the text, which means they will need an understanding of how the character has developed over the course of the text. Additionally, students will also read other informational texts for a research project and other fictional texts to enrich their understanding of the novel.

With regard to writing, students will be engaged in a reflective writing process throughout the unit. Similar to the characters in the text, students will keep a journal documenting their thoughts and experiences with reading the novel, which meets the standard for writing over extended time frames. They will also engage in a writing process that includes planning, peer feedback and revisions, when developing their final restorying project.

With regard to discussion, students will use the discussion questions assignments to engage in regular large and small group discussions. Discussions will engage students in collaborative work, from deciding on expectation norms to assigning roles. Students will discuss the text, but they will also discuss contemporary issues related to the text, including but not limited to racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. Prior to the discussion, students will have prepared

their responses to discussion questions as well as written their own open-ended questions to pose to the group.

Challenges and Limitations

While I am proud of this curriculum, the amount of time allotted could be an issue. Some of the skills students will practice in this unit, such as reading with the text and engaging in discussions, are skills they have practiced previously, whereas others, such as reading against the text, are new skills which may require more practice than this unit currently allows. Going forward, I see this curriculum as a first step in an ongoing conversation with my colleagues about changing our approach to canonical texts. I will likely adjust it before implementing it in my classroom.

Another challenge that I encountered in the creation of this curriculum was how to effectively design it for all students. In the literature review, I noted that a common critique of critical consciousness work is its inefficacy with affluent White students, and in the creation of this curriculum, the challenges of meeting those students became abundantly clear. An example of this is in the summative assessment for the unit, restorying. This is an activity in which students from marginalized backgrounds can write themselves into narratives where their identities are absent, but for many students, their social identities *are* present in the text and so their task will be to write in identities they do not share. To do this well, students will read supplemental texts about life experiences that are not included in the novel. That said, students writing from the perspective of a life experience that is not their own raises ethical questions.

Future Possibilities

At the school where I teach, conversations about equity and culturally-relevant instruction are ongoing. What this capstone can add to the conversations is insight into developing critical consciousness, which, as stated in Chapter One, may be an often-overlooked

element of a culturally-relevant pedagogy. Not only will this project illustrate how critical consciousness work can be incorporated into a curriculum, it will also provide stakeholders with research that demonstrates the importance of developing critical consciousness in students.

Should this be successful, my hope is that the structure for this unit can serve as a template for other canonical texts. The ELA department at my school is regularly discussing and debating over text selection, and of concern to many is how to teach canonical texts without ignoring their outdated and unsavory elements. Including this curriculum in that conversation could help reshape and improve on the curriculum for other texts.

Lastly, this curriculum lends itself well to cross-curricular possibilities with social studies. A significant portion of this unit is devoted to learning about Interwar Britain and over the course of the unit, students will be using that learning to make meaning of the text. Conceivably, social studies and ELA could collaborate to create a curriculum that enhances the learning in our respective disciplines.

Personal Reflection

As a teacher, the journey of creating this capstone has shaped me significantly. I have learned the importance of critical consciousness work in a culturally-relevant pedagogy. When I first decided on this topic, some concerns I had were that it would create a sense of helplessness in students from marginalized communities and that it would feel completely irrelevant to students who have not faced similar structural challenges. But as I soon learned from the research, supporting students in developing a critical consciousness does not mean teaching them to be victims and oppressors. It is, rather, helping them to understand the systems they exist inside of and to know the power they have to change them. Critical consciousness, in practice, is

not passive, but active; it is empowering. Understanding this has fundamentally changed the way I view implementing a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Similarly, my understanding of the ELA discipline and its possibilities for supporting students has expanded. The research has revealed to me how literature, even classical literature with controversial elements, exists as an access point for students to develop a critical consciousness. Literature shapes society and society shapes literature, and in this reciprocal relationship, space is created for students to intervene in the world. In the hands of a student, a novel can open a window to perspectives they may have never known, reflect back experiences they may have longed to see, or serve as a place for them to write themselves into the narrative. In a community of learners, a novel can create discussions about personal and collective struggle, as well as generate ideas for change. Through the incorporation of critical consciousness work into ELA classrooms, students will become more empowered and capable citizens in their communities.

Conclusion

This capstone project was created to answer the question: *What are the most effective strategies for developing critical consciousness in students in the ELA classroom.* Chapter One detailed the inspiration that led to this question and the rationale for why this question needed to be explored. Chapter Two organized and described the available research on critical consciousness, including its conception and its evolution in the world of education. Chapter Three outlined the curriculum created and the strategies incorporated for this project. Chapter Four expounded on what was learned in the creation of this project and the possibilities for its future development.

My hope for this capstone project is that it will equip ELA teachers with the tools to help their students navigate through and intervene in the world. Educators prepare students for the world as it is, and the world as it is is a flawed one. Where doors open for some, barriers abound for others. But this, of course, cannot be the end of the story. Just as a classic text can be rewritten to reflect new possibilities, so can students write themselves and their dreams into the world. Through critical consciousness work, students can learn to be more critical and confident readers, as well as learn to challenge prevailing norms and inequitable systems. Students can develop a deeper connection to the literature they read and a deeper awareness of their power to change the world.

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Appendix A

ELA Standards and Unit Outcomes

Reading Standards

11.4.1.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

11.4.2.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

11.4.3.3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Discussion Standards

11.9.1.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, including those by and about Minnesota American Indians, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

- Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.
- Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Writing Standards

11.7.3.3 Write narratives and other creative texts to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

- Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
- Use literary and narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, rhythm, repetition, rhyme, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
- Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).
- Use precise words and phrases, telling details, figurative and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
- Provide a conclusion (when appropriate to the genre) that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative or creative text.

11.7.5.5 Use a writing process to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, drafting, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 75.)

11.7.7.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

11.7.10.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
a. Independently select writing topics and formats for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks.

Unit Outcomes	Standards
Upon completion of this unit, students will be able to apply critical literacy skills to their reading of a classical text.	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
Upon completion of this unit, students will be able to conduct a short research project on classical text.	11.7.7.7
Upon completion of this unit, students will be able to engage in meaningful conversations	11.9.1.1 11.4.1.1,

about a classical text with regard to its literary meaning and ideological significance.	11.4.3.3
Upon completion of this unit, students will be able to reimagine a classical text through the creation of a restorying project.	11.4.1.1 11.4.3.3 11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10,

Curriculum Materials

In the interest of organization and efficiency, the Google Drive folder containing the materials for this unit is [hyperlinked here](#). This folder contains the daily lessons for each module, as well as the formative and summative assessments for the unit. In the scope and sequence chart below, I have included links to particular modules and assessments, as well as delineated the standards addressed in each lesson and assessment.

Day	Module One Lessons (Slides)	Standards
1	Unit Introduction – Overview of <i>ATTWN</i> unit – Group Activity: Setting discussion expectations – Reader Reflection	11.9.1.1, 11.7.10.10
2	Identity – Lesson: Social Identity – “The Big Eight” Social Identities Handout – “Exploring Social Identities” assignment	11.7.10.10
3	Identity – Lesson: Ideology – Political Ideology Test – Political Ideology Reflection – Discussion	11.7.10.10
4	Windows and Mirrors – Lesson: Windows and Mirrors – Trevor Noah interview with Jacqueline Woodson – Windows and Mirrors reflection – “The Danger of a Single Story” – Discussion Questions : “The Danger of a Single Story”	11.7.10.10
5	Reading WITH and AGAINST the text – Lesson: Reading with/against a text – Activity: Read “Cat in the Rain” by Ernest Hemingway and complete the discussion questions assignment. – Discussion	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
6	Literary Canon – Lesson: Literary Canon	11.7.7.7

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Activity: Literary Canon Research Assignment – Discussion 	
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Day	Module Two Lessons (Slides)	Standards
1	ATTWN Origins/Research Project Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lesson: Origins of ATTWN's title – Title reflection – Introduction to the ATTWN Research Project 	11.7.7.7,
2	Work Day: ATTWN Research Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Finding Reliable Sources – MLA Slideshow 	11.7.7.7,
3	Work Day: ATTWN Research Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Speaker Notes 	11.7.7.7,
4	Work Day: ATTWN Research Project	11.7.7.7,
5	Life of Agatha Christie/ Work Day: ATTWN Research Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lesson: Agatha Christie – Student work time 	11.7.7.7,

Day	Module Three Lessons (Slides)	Standards
1	Ch. 1-2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students check out <i>ATTWN</i> – Review reading <i>with</i> and <i>against</i> the text – Presentations on topics relevant to ch. 1-2: “Devon County” and “British Governesses” – Lesson “Class and Literature” + notes – Read ch. 1-2 – Discussion Questions (if students need more time, we can push this to tomorrow) 	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
2	Ch. 1-2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ATTWN Diary/Journal – Students will prepare for the class discussion – Review discussion expectations – Discussion 	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1

	– Reflection on Discussion	
3	<p>“The Sacrificial Egg” (text)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Practice reading <i>with</i> and <i>against</i> the text with “The Sacrificial Egg” by Chinua Achebe – Race and Literature Lesson – “The Sacrificial Egg” Discussion Questions – “The Sacrificial Egg” Discussion 	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
4	<p>Ch. 3-4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Review reading <i>with</i> and <i>against</i> the text – Presentations on topics relevant to ch. 3-4: “Scientific Racism” & “British Mercenaries in Kenya” – Students read ch. 3-4 – Discussion Questions 	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
5	<p>Ch. 3-4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal – Students complete the discussion questions they began the previous day. – Small group discussions 	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1
6	<p>Ch. 5-6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Presentations on topics relevant to ch. 5-6: “British Involvement in WWI” & “Primogeniture in Britain” – Students read ch. 5-6 – Students work on discussion questions. 	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
7	<p>Ch. 5-6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal – Students finish discussion questions – Large group discussion 	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1
8	<p>Ch. 7-8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Presentations: “Spinsters” and “British Race Riots of 1919” – Read Ch. 7-8 of <i>ATTWN</i> – Ch. 7-8 Discussion Questions 	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
9	<p>Ch. 7-8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal – Students finish discussion questions – Small group discussions 	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1
10	<p>Ch. 9-10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Presentations: “British Union of Fascists” and “Caravan Club Raid of 1934” – Read Ch. 9-10 of <i>ATTWN</i> 	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3

	– Ch. 9-10 Discussion Questions	
11	Ch. 9-10 – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal – Students finish discussion questions – Small group discussions	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1
12	“The Yellow Wallpaper” – Practice reading <i>with</i> and <i>against</i> the text with “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins – “The Yellow Wallpaper” Discussion Questions – “The Yellow Wallpaper” Discussion	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
13	Ch. 11-12 – Presentations: “Female Hysteria” and “Domestic Servants” – Read Ch. 11-12 of <i>ATTWN</i> – Ch. 11-12 Discussion Questions	11.7.3.3 11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
14	Ch. 11-12 – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal – Students finish discussion questions – Small group discussions	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1
15	Ch. 13-14 – Read Ch. 13-14 of <i>ATTWN</i> – Ch. 13-14 Discussion Questions	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
16	Ch. 13-14 – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal – Students finish discussion questions – Small group discussions	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1
17	Ch. 15-16 – Read Ch. 13-14 of <i>ATTWN</i> – Ch. 15-16 Discussion Questions	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
18	Ch. 15-16 – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal – Students finish discussion questions – Small group discussions	11.7.3.3 11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1
19	Epilogue – Read the epilogue of <i>ATTWN</i> – Epilogue Discussion Questions	11.4.1.1, 11.4.3.3
20	Epilogue – <i>ATTWN</i> Diary/Journal	11.7.10.10, 11.9.1.1

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students finish discussion questions – Small group discussions 	
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Day	Module 4 Lessons (Slides)	Standards
1	Debate the text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “Debate the Text” assignment is introduced – Students are assigned sides of the debate – Students assign roles within the group and prepare for the debate 	11.9.1.1 11.4.1.1 11.4.3.3
2	Debate the Text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students spend first ten minutes strategizing – Students engage in debate 	11.9.1.1 11.4.1.1 11.4.3.3
3	Debate the Text/ Restory Assignment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students write a reflection on their experience in the debate. – As a large group, students discuss their reflections – “Restorying Project” is introduced – Students begin work on the “Restorying Planning” assignment. 	11.9.1.1 11.4.1.1 11.4.3.3 11.7.10.10,
4	Restory Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students finish “Restory Planning” assignment. – Students begin the first draft their “Restory Project” 	11.4.1.1 11.4.3.3 11.7.10.10,
5	Restory Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students copy and paste Draft One onto Final Draft document – Students engage in Peer Feedback on draft 1 of “Restory Project” – Students apply feedback to Final Draft document – Final Draft due tomorrow. 	11.4.1.1 11.4.3.3 11.7.3.3 11.7.5.5 11.7.10.10,

