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Creating a Generation of Critical Information Consumers: Critical Literacy Strategies in an Upper Elementary Classroom

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Creating a Generation of Critical Information Consumers: Critical Literacy Strategies in
an Upper Elementary Classroom

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts in Literacy Education.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	4
Context.....	4
Personal Journey.....	5
Professional Journey.....	7
Summary.....	10
Researcher Positionality.....	11
Conclusion.....	11
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	13
Introduction.....	13
Historical Context.....	14
Defining Critical Literacy.....	18
The Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy.....	19
Critique of FDCL.....	24
Ambivalent Reading.....	26
Critical Literacy Strategies.....	26
Problem Posing.....	27
Alternative Perspectives.....	28
Switching.....	29
Exploring Identities.....	31

	3
Diverse Texts, Diverse Voices.....	32
Guided Comprehension 5 Step Direct Instruction Framework.....	34
Explain.....	34
Demonstrate.....	35
Guide.....	35
Practice.....	36
Reflect.....	36
Critical Literacy Lesson Framework.....	37
Engaging Students’ Thinking.....	37
Guiding Students’ Thinking.....	38
Extending Students’ Thinking.....	38
Critical Literacy in the Digital Age.....	39
Summary.....	40
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	42
Introduction.....	42
Overview of Project.....	43
Purpose.....	45
Rationale.....	46
Setting and Audience.....	47
Assessment.....	47
Timeline.....	48

	4
Summary.....	49
CHAPTER FOUR: Capstone Reflection.....	50
Introduction.....	50
Capstone Highlights and Reflections.....	51
Literature Review.....	52
Implications on Policy.....	53
Limitations of Project.....	54
Future Research.....	54
Results.....	55
Project Benefits.....	55

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Context

As an elementary teacher, one of the most crucial skills that I can teach my students is critical thinking. According to *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text*, critical literacy encourages readers to, “move beyond passively accepting the text’s message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors” (Mclaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 14). It is a skill that is necessary whether my students choose to continue their education after high school or enter an alternative career path. Critical literacy, also known as CL, is an important aspect of critical thinking because it requires people to examine all of the messages that are being put out for our consumption.

In today’s world, with all of our technological advancements, we have access to an unlimited amount of information at the click of a button. This also means that our students are a part of what will be the most connected generation when it comes to information sharing. As we wake up in the morning, our devices immediately recommend articles, books, podcasts, and advertisements for our viewing. We must then decide what information is accurate. It can be extremely difficult for adults to filter through that information to find the truth, but this can be combated by introducing critical literacy strategies to students at a young age, even in an elementary classroom. The research question that I pose is this: *How can critical literacy strategies be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of more informed citizens?*

According to the *National Center for Education Statistics*, in 2019, 95% of children ages 3-18 had access to the internet at home and therefore have unlimited access to information without necessarily having the ability to differentiate or understand the biases and prejudices that a text can contain. It is likely that this number is even higher today though the *National Center for Education Statistics* does not have any data more recent than 2019. These children have access to the internet both through a smartphone as well as a computer. No matter what method of technology students are using to access the internet, it is undeniable that their access to information is unparalleled when compared to previous generations. Whether it is a book, news article, academic journal, podcast, video, or social media post, it is our responsibility to teach students how to look at a piece of literature through a critical lens and teach them to identify the connection between language and power within the text. Once they can shift into this lens of critical literacy, it can improve their critical thinking skills about a piece of literature.

Critical literacy is a vital skill for children to learn and become confident in because as they get older and enter adulthood, they will be citizens who participate in our democratic processes and our communities. It is important that we have informed voters who can distinguish between fact and fiction as their vote influences the path our country will take every four years. It is crucial that teachers assist in creating informed citizens that will be responsibly engaged in the world.

Personal Journey

For as long as I can remember, I have loved to read. I believe that it stemmed from the fact that my mother never seemed to be without a book. As the only girl in the family, I wanted to be just like my mother, so I ensured that my nose was always in a

book as well. I enjoyed reading fantasy books that included made-up worlds, magic, and unique political systems. I used reading as an escape from my reality and as a tool to help me quiet my mind.

As I got older, my love for reading only grew and my love for school and learning grew with it. I had so many incredible Language Arts teachers in middle school that helped to cultivate my love for reading. I recall reading books like *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Flowers For Algernon*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. These books were a launching point that helped me to grow interested in a wider variety of genres. Not only did I fall in love with the act of reading, but I also fell in love with the rich discussions that came after. I enjoyed immersing myself in the characters and questioning their motives and decisions. As I progressed through school, the literature changed to *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and George Orwell's *1984*, but the discussions remained and became richer and more critical.

We began to examine themes of social injustice, sexism, and oppression. We argued over the morality of each character and contemplated their moral dilemmas and compared them to our own. Though I know that each novel, short story, and poem was chosen for a specific reason, I also came to realize that the books we were reading were reflective of our classroom but not our world. The majority of the books that teachers chose for instruction, especially in my early years of education, were predominantly written by white, English-speaking males, and often featured a protagonist that was also a white male. Coming from a district that was 98% white and consisted of primarily upper-middle-class families, I did not recognize any harm in this.

I realized pretty quickly that these novels may have represented students like me, but they did not accurately reflect the beautifully diverse world that existed outside of the school's walls. I began to gravitate toward stories that featured characters that were completely different from me. Books like *The Color Purple*, *Born a Crime*, *Challenger Deep*, and *Clap When You Land*. While I participated in engaging discussions about each of these novels, I did not join in critical literacy. I never asked myself why a book was chosen, nor did I ask myself what motivation the author had to write the story. I did not second guess whether the information that was given to me was truthful. Instead, I assumed that if it was written in a book, it must be true. I was never encouraged to ask what perspective might be missing from a text or why the author chose the language that they did. Reflecting now, it is easy to recognize that we were not actively participating in the reading process, but instead were passively receiving information and accepting it as truth. The issue of passively receiving information is still prevalent in classrooms of all ages.

Professional Journey

I have been teaching fifth grade for three years in central Minnesota at a school of over 800 students in grades K-5. Though I originally accepted the job as a 5th grade English Language Arts teacher, which was a dream position of mine, due to the pandemic, classrooms became self-contained and I have been teaching every subject area. Though I am not solely a Language Arts teacher, my passion for teaching reading and writing has only increased since I began my teaching career in 2020. I have enjoyed instilling a love and passion for reading in my students, just as my teachers did for me.

One way that I promote a passion for literacy in my students is through an interactive read-aloud that is separate from our curriculum's mentor texts. Though some in the profession may argue that 5th graders do not need to be read aloud to, I vehemently disagree. This fifteen-minute chunk of time has quickly become one of the most purposeful opportunities for learning within my day. First, I can choose books that feature a broad variety of perspectives. Instead of focusing on reading the same books to my students that I was reading when I was their age, I delve deeper to find new literature. I select literature that is newer, and diverse, and provides my students with opportunities to be uncomfortable. I believe that if students only read books that make them feel comfortable or books that only include characters that share their background, it is a missed opportunity. I desire for my students a sense of curiosity about the world, in the hopes that as they grow older, they will become responsibly engaged in the world around them. It is a goal of mine to provide my students with literature that represents the world outside of our classroom so that they can become responsible citizens. Though the district that I teach in is composed of primarily white students, it is my desire that they read literature that is authentic and culturally relevant. This literature will provide my students with greater opportunities to understand the relationship between language and power and how that power can be used to influence people. This integration of diverse literature requires students to keep delving deeper into the texts and to ask the imperative questions that can give them a new perspective on the literature and how it is reflective of the world around them.

In Minnesota, each grade level has a media literacy standard. The fifth grade standard for media literacy is this: 5.8.7.7 Distinguish among, understand, and use

different types of print, digital, and multimodal media (*Minnesota Academic Standards*, 2010). Specifically, the students are expected to achieve the following benchmarks:

- “Make informed judgments about messages promoted in the mass media (e.g., film, television, radio, magazines, advertisements, newspapers)” (*Minnesota Academic Standards*, 2010).
- “Locate and use information in print, non-print, and digital resources using a variety of strategies” (*Minnesota Academic Standards*, 2010).
- “Evaluate the accuracy and credibility of information found in digital sources” (*Minnesota Academic Standards*, 2010).
- “Recognize ethical standards and safe practices in social and personal media communications” (*Minnesota Academic Standards*, 2010).

The struggle that we have been facing with our curriculum is that the students do not read full novels or short stories. Instead, the students read a few paragraphs of an excerpt from a novel, a short story, or a poem. I can only assume that the reasoning behind this is to keep students engaged and to allow for each lesson to focus on one new and specific skill such as context clues, theme, or text structure. While this is a great way to practice reading comprehension skills, it is not easy to get students to dive deeper into a text and it does not provide ample opportunity to hit the media literacy standards that are required of fifth grade students in Minnesota. For students to meet the previously mentioned benchmarks, they need continuous practice on reading critically and they need teachers to model how to ask questions and make judgments about a text.

Because of this, I use read-aloud, small group leveled readers, and novel studies as a way to teach the students to think deeper about the text. Through my participation in

the Masters of Literacy Education program, I have taken many classes that have provided me with great insight into literacy instruction, however, my Critical Literacy class made me realize that my students are capable of deeper conversations. To engage students in these conversations and encourage other educators to look at literature through a critical lens, it is necessary to take a closer look at critical literacy not only as a strategy but as the mindset and scientific practice that it should be.

Summary

This Capstone Project will serve to discover ways in which critical literacy strategies can be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of learners that is more engaged in the reception of information. Critical literacy is not simply a lesson or unit that can be taught but instead is a shift in perspective that students can practice to better understand the relationship between language and power. First, I will analyze the historical context of critical literacy and how its definition has evolved. Then, I will be diving deeper into the benefits of critical literacy and its effects on students' comprehension of the material. Next, I will begin to examine the four dimensions of critical literacy; disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice (Mclaughlin & Devoogd, 2004). We will also be diving further into various studies that have been done to see what effects critical literacy has had on students over a longer period of time. Finally and most importantly, I will be identifying a multitude of critical literacy strategies that can be used in any reading classroom and establishing how educators can adapt those strategies to fit with an upper elementary learner.

Researcher Positionality

Influencing my research and perspective on the topic of critical literacy is my background. As a white woman from an upper-middle-class family, I was afforded many privileges that my students are currently not afforded. Education was always a priority as I grew up with two parents who had college degrees. As a white woman, I have not had to experience the discrimination and prejudice that some of my students face daily. Throughout my education, I always had literature that represented my family life, cultural and religious background, as well as my sexual orientation. It was not until college that I began to develop an awareness that having literature that reflected myself was an advantage that not everyone could experience. I have become more critically aware of the literature that my students are exposed to and I have worked hard to ensure that my students can participate in the critical thinking and critical literacy process by having diverse literature with diverse perspectives that will encourage my students to participate in social justice initiatives as well as become more informed consumers of information.

Conclusion

Critical literacy is a lucrative skill that students of all ages need to master. This generation of learners has greater access to technology and information than any previous generation. As they grow older, their access to information is only going to increase. We as educators need to prepare our students to be able to look at each piece of information through a critical lens. We must teach them to ask questions about the information that is presented to them instead of simply assuming the information is valid. We want them to become active participants in the process of reading instead of passive receivers of information.

If we can do this, students will be able to formulate their own opinions and beliefs about a text and may utilize that information to change their own practices and/or actions. While critical literacy is an essential skill, it is not a skill that is prioritized in teacher preparation programs. This means that upper elementary teachers do not have the resources or knowledge base that they need to become advocates of critical literacy. Teachers need access to a bank of resources that are simple, effective, and adaptable for third through fifth graders with a diverse set of learner needs.

For the remainder of this Capstone, we will be examining critical literacy as a pedagogical framework and how critical literacy strategies can be implemented in the elementary classroom. In Chapter Two, I will be examining the research around critical literacy as a framework and its historical significance. I will also provide a review of the literature surrounding the four dimensions of critical literacy, teachers' perceptions of critical literacy as well as the impact that critical literacy has on students. In Chapter Three, I will describe the creation of a website that will serve as a toolbox of resources for teachers that are looking to implement critical literacy in the upper elementary classroom. I will be discussing the methods that I used to develop this website as well as the content itself. The website will include an expansive overview of critical literacy as a framework for teaching reading as well as including simple and effective strategies for teaching critical literacy that is applicable in all upper elementary classrooms. Finally, I will be providing a list of texts that are appropriate for upper elementary students that can be taught using a critical literacy framework. In Chapter Four, I will be reflecting on the development and impact of my website on other educators who have the desire to implement critical literacy practices in their classroom.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

In Chapter One, I described my personal experience with literacy throughout my formative years of education. I acknowledged that while I had a great education and an incredible group of teachers that consistently inspired me to become the best teacher I could be, I did not have an education that prepared me for the reality outside of the school's four walls. I was not taught to think critically about the information that was presented to me through literature. Instead, I became a passive receiver of information instead of an active participant in the literature. I realized that the focus of my education has revolved around texts that reflected me and my experience but lacked an accurate representation of the world around me. I want to challenge and encourage my students to participate in their education in a way that I did not. I want them to ask difficult questions, recognize the power structures that exist within language, and utilize their learning in a way that can assist them in the pursuit of social justice. My research question is this: *How can critical literacy strategies be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of more informed citizens?*

This chapter explores various aspects of critical literacy. At the beginning of Chapter Two, I examine the historical context of critical pedagogy stemming from the work of Paulo Freire and analyze the theoretical framework that led to critical literacy. Then, I discuss the various definitions of critical literacy and delve deeper into the four dimensions of critical literacy. Next, I discuss critical literacy as it pertains to social justice. Then, I present some foundational critical literacy strategies that can be

implemented in elementary classrooms. I also submit two frameworks that can be used when presenting the critical literacy strategies for the first time, as well as a framework that is used when students are ready to fully integrate critical literacy into a normal reading lesson. Finally, I delve deeper into the role that digital literacy plays in the lives of our students and how digital media literacy relates to critical literacy in the elementary classroom. While there are many instructional strategies that teachers can use to increase student engagement and comprehension, critical literacy is one strategy that can promote engagement while also assisting in creating more informed citizens and encouraging social justice.

Historical Context

Critical literacy is a concept that grew from critical pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy was a concept that was first made famous by Paulo Freire (1970). Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who revolutionized the literacy movement in Brazil. He spent his life working to improve the lives of the underprivileged in Brazil and focused on improving literacy rates within marginalized communities. Freire knew that reading did not rely simply on decoding the written language, but instead was intertwined with students' knowledge of the world (Freire, 1983). In 1970, Freire published his revolutionary text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which Freire introduced the idea that students needed to be able to read the world before they can read the actual words in a text (Freire, 1983). By this, he meant that readers need to think about the text beyond its literal meaning and go deeper into questioning the text. He wanted readers to think about what messages the author might be trying to convey and question what motivations the author may have for communicating those messages (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). His most famous

work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, also rejected the popular “banking system” that was prevalent in education and instead promoted “problem-posing” education (as cited in Ward, 2022, p. 55). The “banking system”, which is a popular term coined by Freire, was his observation of the traditional education system. Freire said this of the banking model in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970):

Worse yet, it turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teachers. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (pp. 71-72)

Freire rejected this belief that it was an educator’s job to simply impart their wisdom and knowledge on their students, but rather it is their job to encourage students to become active participants in their reading (as cited in McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). While this system may have worked in the past, students are now able to find any information that they desire within seconds utilizing their everyday technology. Since students have immediate access to any information, it is imperative that we teach them not to take every piece of information as truth without looking at it through a critical lens.

Freire’s problem-posing model is a method in which an educator immerses themselves in the reality of their students. The educator then draws from the personal

experiences of the learners in order to generate themes that are based on that person's lived experiences. This immersion is done through extensive observation and substantial interviews with the learners to understand the context and background that each student carries with them (Kee & Carr-Chellman, 2019). This problem-posing model is an example of how Freire believed that students needed to be taught to "read the world" to "read the word" (Freire, 1983, p. 5).

Freire's problem-posing model and ideas about critical pedagogy were not entirely accepted by all communities inside or outside of the education field. In fact, Freire received a heavy amount of criticism from bureaucrats, fundamentalists, religious leaders, and right-wing conservatives. This criticism and distrust eventually led to his exile from Brazil in 1964 after the coup d'etat (Freire Institute, n.d.). According to Giroux (2010), Freire's critics opposed critical pedagogy because it encouraged people to examine the relationship between power and language to enact social change and helped them to realize "their own power as critically engaged citizens" (p. 717). Freire admitted in *The Importance of Reading* that teaching is a political act (Freire, 1983).

Critical pedagogy at its core is a method of encouraging students to examine issues of morality and critically analyze the role of power dynamics in the hopes of creating a more socially just society (Freire, 1970). The concept of critical pedagogy includes the idea that students should be questioning each other, their teacher, and the world around them. In order to address their curiosities, dialogue is an incredibly powerful tool to foster students' critical thinking abilities. "Reading the World" means that students must discuss and debate the author's messages and their choices of language within the literature and how that language may be affecting the reader (Freire, 1970, p.

5). The idea that social interaction and dialogue is a necessary component to cultivate student learning was an idea that was shared between Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky.

Theory of Social Constructivism

Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist whose research has impacted education for decades. The Theory of Social Constructivism was founded by Lev Vygotsky in 1968. Social constructivism is the idea that language and culture affect how people interact and communicate with the world around them. He proposed that how humans learn also depends on their cultural background and how they interact with others. As cited in Akpan et al. (2020), Lev Vygotsky's Theory of Social Constructivism also relies on the belief that students learn best through social interaction. According to *Social Constructivism: Implications on Teaching and Learning*, "...the constructivist sees knowledge as what students construct by themselves based on the experiences they gather from their environment, the social constructivist sees knowledge as what students do in collaboration with other students, teachers and peers" (Akpan et al., 2020, p. 50).

Critical literacy is grounded in the Theory of Social Constructivism because they both rely heavily on student curiosity and discourse. Critical literacy requires that students participate in the construction of knowledge with the help of their environment, culture, peers, and teachers. In order to understand what methods teachers can use to encourage students to participate in the reading process, we must first understand the foundations of critical literacy and the pedagogical implications and theoretical frameworks that have been discovered through decades of research (Giroux, 2010).

Defining Critical Literacy

Critical literacy, or (CL) does not have one universally accepted definition as it has been described differently by various researchers, educators, and theorists over the past few decades. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) explain critical literacy as a way to invite readers into the conversation and ensure that they become active participants in their reading and encourages readers to “question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors” (p. 14). In *Informing Critical Literacy with Ethnography*, Anderson and Irvine (1993) described critical literacy as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations.” For example, linguists have observed that there are words and phrasings that can cause emotions like sympathy in readers. Authors use these words and phrases so their readers will agree with their position in the text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). It is essential that students learn to identify these words and phrases and practice questioning the author’s motives when reading a text.

It has also been debated whether critical literacy is an action, a methodology, or an attitude. While there is no clear agreement on whether critical literacy is a theoretical framework, a pedagogical practice, or a lens through which you learn to read literature and media, every piece of literature reviewed has multiple elements in common. The literature defines critical literacy as a way of reading a text in which you become an active participant in the reading process in order to promote social justice. According to *Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices*, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys reviewed thirty years of literature regarding critical literacy and they

concluded that critical literacy is constructed of four major dimensions (Lewison et al., 2002).

The Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2006), created the Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy framework (FDCL) to help teachers better comprehend critical literacy and as a method of encouraging teachers to utilize critical literacy strategies in the classroom and to make CL feel more approachable. These four dimensions are known as disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice (see Table 1).

Table 1

Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy Framework

Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy		
Dimension	What does it look like?	Questions
Disrupting the commonplace	Looking at what is considered common or stereotypical in our society and applying a new lens to our view	How is the text trying to position me? Does this text include any stereotypes that are being portrayed?
Interrogating multiple viewpoints	Considering every perspective in a situation and evaluating multiple viewpoints at once	Whose viewpoint am I reading from? Whose perspective is missing from this text? Why did the author leave this perspective out of the text?
Focusing on sociopolitical issues	Examining the power and relationships between people, systems, and organizations	Why did the author choose these specific words to persuade me? How is the author using their power to influence my thoughts and opinions?

Taking action and promoting social justice	Engaging in the world and acting upon social injustice by examining inequities in power	How is the author using language to convey their opinion about sociopolitical issues? How can I utilize the information I learned in order to promote social justice?
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Note: The information was adapted from Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002).

The first dimension that is mentioned in *Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices*, is called “disrupting the commonplace” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). Disrupting the commonplace is a method of encouraging students to gain new perspectives by thinking about everyday situations through a new lens and understanding that our current knowledge is a product of history. It is a way of disrupting everyday ideas or stereotypes that are considered to be commonplace. This is distinctly different thinking than educators had previously, as it is a way of empowering students instead of allowing them to merely become receivers of knowledge (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).

Disrupting the commonplace also includes encouraging students to ask questions about whose perspective might be missing from the text, or questioning how the story might change if that perspective was included (George Lee, 2019). George Lee described an example of disrupting the commonplace in the journal *Two plus four dimensions of critical literacy*. One commonplace that could be disrupted is the idea that adults know better than children. When students have the opportunity to read books from the children’s perspective, they can start to question the ideas and motivations behind adults’ actions, causing a disruption to the commonplace (George Lee, 2019). A few examples of

questions that teachers could ask to help students disrupt the commonplace are as follows:

- How is the text trying to position me?
- Does this text include any stereotypes that are being portrayed?

For example, if a teacher was reading the book *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Riordan, 2006) with their students, the teacher might encourage them to disrupt the commonplace by asking questions such as:

- Why is the hero of the story always a male character?
- Why does this story portray the stereotype of a hero with an absent father and how does that affect how the text is written?

The second dimension of the FDCL framework is called “interrogating multiple viewpoints” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). Interrogating multiple viewpoints focuses on teaching students to view an issue from multiple perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of the issue. This requires educators to choose literature that is diverse in its representation instead of literature that represents only one side of an issue (George Lee, 2019). Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) described this dimension of their framework as teaching students to put themselves in the shoes of others while simultaneously understanding the text from their perspective. Interrogating multiple viewpoints also requires that teachers model how to seek out resources that include discourse that is different from what was presented in the text. This is not a process that is always easily digestible for some teachers because there is no correct answer. Examining multiple viewpoints means that students will not necessarily come to “neat and tidy conclusions” like they may be accustomed to in their schooling (Lewison et al., 2002, p.

383). Utilizing this dimension of the framework can be done through teachers asking questions such as the following:

- Whose viewpoint am I reading from?
- Whose perspective is missing from this text?
- Why did the author leave this perspective out of the text? (Luke, 1997).

Utilizing the same example of the Percy Jackson book as previously mentioned, a teacher could encourage students to ask questions to examine the perspectives included in the book (Riordan, 2006). Since the book is written from the perspective of Percy Jackson, the students could come up with questions such as:

- Why does the book not include the perspective of Percy's mother?
- How would the book be different if it was told from the perspective of Percy's father?

The third dimension of the FDCL framework is “focusing on sociopolitical issues” (Lewison et al., 2002, 383). This dimension requires readers to look beyond their own understanding and instead evaluate the systems to which they belong (George Lee, 2019). Utilizing this dimension also requires that teachers model how to examine issues involving relationships and power among individuals, groups, or systems. (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). Teaching is an inherently political act; this dimension requires educators to pay attention to how language, power, and relationships affect their students and the world around them (Lewison et al., 2002). The ability for students to examine issues of race, social class, sexuality and gender is a skill that students will need as they get older and begin to take in more literature about these topics and begin to participate in

the civic process (Ncte, 2020). Questions that may be asked while using this dimension according to Lewiston et al. are::

- Why did the author choose these specific words to persuade me?
- How is the author using their power to influence my thoughts and opinions?

Though the Percy Jackson series is a middle-grade fantasy series, teachers can still use this book as a vehicle for discussing social justice. In the beginning of the novel, teachers in the book do not treat Percy fairly because of his struggles in the classroom due to his dyslexia. This could encourage students to discuss learning disabilities and how the education system could assist students like Percy so they can succeed (Riordan, 2006).

The fourth and final dimension of the framework is called “taking action and promoting social justice”(Lewison et al., 2002, pp. 383). According to *Two plus four dimensions of critical literacy*, learning to think critically about a text is not enough. The purpose of critical literacy is not solely to learn how to question the link between language and power in literature but to learn how to use that knowledge in order to take action on sociopolitical issues. Students must learn to take agency and participate in the world around them to create positive change (George Lee, 2019). Questions that may emerge during the fourth dimension are:

- How is the author using language to convey their opinion about sociopolitical issues?
- How can I utilize the information I learned in order to promote social justice?

In regards to the discussion that the teacher may have with their students about learning disabilities, students can promote social justice by researching different learning disabilities and how it affects classroom performance and then creating an informational poster or presentation so their classmates can gain an awareness for what other students in the class may be struggling with.

Participating in critical literacy does not require utilizing all four dimensions through every piece of text and it does not require that you use them in a specific order. According to *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of the Text*, anytime that a reader engages in any one of the four dimensions of critical literacy, they are actively engaged in the process of critical literacy (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a). Students can begin to practice utilizing the four dimensions of critical literacy in elementary school so they can build those skills with the guidance of a teacher. As they get older, critical literacy can become an unconscious effort as they read books, social media posts or listen to a newscast.

Critique of FDCL

While critical literacy as a pedagogy is supported by most educators, researchers, and theorists, there are some who believe that the FDCL framework presented by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys is not substantial enough. According to Lee, the four dimensions of critical literacy framework are lacking in criteria. It is his opinion that while FDCL requires that readers evaluate and consider different perspectives, especially the voices of marginalized communities, the FDCL does not contain any criteria that could be used to evaluate whether a claim is valid or not (George Lee, 2019).

Another critique from Lee of the FDCL is that it does not prioritize creating a “safe communicative environment” (George Lee, 2019, p. 83) He claimed that in order to have these courageous conversations about difficult topics, teachers need to provide students with an environment where students are not coerced into engaging in these conversations, where they feel they are free to express their opinion without judgment. This is essential especially when considering the power dynamic between different participants in the conversation, such as the power dynamic between a teacher and a student (George Lee, 2019, p. 83).

In response to these two limitations, George Lee proposed that there be two additional dimensions added to the FDCL framework. He presented components of Habermas’s theory of communicative action (TCA) as a solution to the limitations of the FDCL. The first part of Habermas’s theory that he proposed to be integrated into the FDCL is the validity of a claim. Habermas found that each claim can be divided into three categories; objective, subjective, or normative claims. Each of these claims is then evaluated based on different criteria. George Lee believed that a similar set of criteria of the validity of claims could be implemented into the FDCL. The second part of Habermas’s theory is the ideal speech situation. The ideal speech situation stipulates that participants are each entitled to “participate on equal terms” and that each argument presented will be accepted and considered as part of the discussion (George Lee, 2019, p. 84). George Lee advised that the ideal speech situation be added as an additional dimension to the FDCL as it would require a safe environment for the difficult discussions that are necessary in order to participate in critical literacy (George Lee, 2019).

Ambivalent Reading

Often when researchers discuss critical literacy, they speak of reading with or against the text (Janks, 2010). This means that as we read, we learn that texts serve the interest of certain people and if a readers' values align with the texts, they begin reading for the text, whereas if a readers' values do not align with the text, they begin reading against the text (Zaini, 2022). Zaini (2022) introduces a new approach to reading critically: ambivalence. Ambivalent reading is defined as, "a reading practice that mediates between reading with and reading against texts" (p.3). Zaini goes on to say, "when reading texts ambivalently, readers understand them, partially engage with them, and simultaneously dissociate themselves from them" (Zaini, 2022, p.3). A reader who reads texts ambivalently will challenge the power relationships within a text, invite new perspectives in from the text and consider all perspectives without taking sides (Zaini, 2022).

Critical Literacy Strategies

While it is important to understand the theories and research behind critical pedagogy, teachers need strategies to actually implement critical pedagogy in the classroom. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004a) have developed several strategies to teach critical literacy that align with the four dimensions of critical literacy such as problem posing, alternative perspectives, switching, and exploring perspectives. These strategies can be used at any level of education with a variety of genres of literature. Students can practice these strategies with the guidance of a teacher while gaining confidence in their critical literacy skills. When discussing these four critical literacy strategies, I will be utilizing the children's book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1999) as an

example because it is a popular book that is read in an upper elementary classroom and the characters and plot are widely recognized by readers of all ages.

Problem Posing

The first strategy that is addressed in McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004a) is called problem posing. Problem posing is a method of encouraging students to ask questions that will challenge the text, the ideas within, or even the author and their motives.

Questions like: “What are the values that are implicit in the text? What kinds of people or what values are favored in the text? What values or people are marginalized? What are perspectives other than the ones in the text?” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2020). This is a technique that can work in a whole group instructional setting, small group instruction, independent work, or even in an online class discussion forum (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b). Problem posing is not limited to physical literature, it can also be utilized through digital texts, photographs, or even song lyrics. Instead of asking whose perspective is missing from the story, you may teach students to ask questions like: Who is in the picture? Who is missing from the picture? (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b).

If educators can teach problem posing beginning at the elementary level, these skills should transfer to adulthood. That is significant because we want to have a society of informed consumers. As mentioned earlier, in this digital age, we are constantly being bombarded by information and we need to be able to decipher the validity of that truth before forming our own opinion. Problem posing is just one strategy that can be used in order to assist students in challenging the text.

When reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* with a fifth grade class, a teacher may use problem posing as a way to question the motivations and actions of the

characters or author. The teacher may ask students; Are the boy or girl characters more important in the text? What do the “good” characters do that make them so “good”? What about the “bad” characters? (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). The students can then discuss why characters may have acted the way they did, or why J.K. Rowling used the specific language that she did.

Alternative Perspectives

The second strategy that can be used in an elementary classroom to promote critical literacy is called alternative perspectives. Alternative perspectives teaches students to look at the viewpoints of other characters in a story. These characters could be created by the reader because the reader feels like their voice is missing from the story, or they could be real characters whose voices are silenced within the story. There are many specific teaching strategies that assist students in creating alternative perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a).

Alternative Texts. One method in which students can examine alternative perspectives is by writing an alternative text. An alternative text is a version of the story the students read written from a different perspective. For example, an alternative text of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* might be written from the perspective of the parents that were sending their children to school, or from the perspective of the teachers at the school. These alternative texts can be told orally, written, drawn, or even acted out. Alternative texts are not limited to literature that is read in an English-language arts classroom, it could also be integrated into historical text in a social studies classroom, song lyrics in a music classroom, or even scientific research in a science classroom. Alternative texts are not the only way of guiding students to examine alternative

perspectives. There are multiple other strategies that fall under the umbrella of *alternative perspectives* that could be implemented as well such as character substitutions, characters perspectives, juxtaposition, alternative mind portraits, or theme based focus groups (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a).

- Character substitutions-Students imagine the story differently by substituting a character they know with an existing character in the book and explaining how the new character would act and how that would affect the overall story.
- Characters perspectives-Students reorient the story to focus on the desires of one character to better understand the characters' perspectives.
- Juxtaposition-Students examine two contrasting texts or two contrasting photos to identify that every story has multiple perspectives.
- Alternative mind portraits-Students choose two different perspectives in the text and draw a silhouette of each head. Students then fill the head with pictures and words that represent that character and their thoughts and feelings.
- Theme based focus groups-Teachers choose a read aloud text and students select a related text to read and discuss in small groups (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

Switching

The third strategy to teach critical literacy in an elementary classroom is called switching. This strategy is utilized when students imagine alternate versions of a story by switching out certain aspects of the story. For example, when reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, which primarily features a male protagonist, a teacher might ask their students to reimagine the story if the protagonist was a female. This could help students to identify any gender bias or discrimination in the text. It will also prompt

students to begin posing questions about the author's message and how that message is affected by gender roles or stereotyping. Gender switching is not the only form of switching that teachers can use in the elementary classroom. Other types of switching that can be explored include:

- Setting switching—switching the time period or physical location that the story takes place in.
- Theme switching—switching the message that the story is portraying.
- Clothing switching—imagining how the story might change if the characters dressed differently.
- Body-style switching—creating a new story by changing the physical appearance of a character.
- Emotion switching—altering the emotional state of a character in the story.
- Ethnic/race switching—imagining how the story may change if the character was a different race or ethnicity.
- Language switching—imagining how the characters or plot may change if the characters spoke a different language (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a).

Switching is a great tool to help students realize that every story is shaped by aspects like setting, race, language, and gender. When students learn to examine a text's purpose and message through switching, it can also prompt them towards social justice. For example, when a student is reading a book that reinforces gender stereotypes, they might begin to ask more questions about women's representation in children's literature (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a).

Exploring Identities

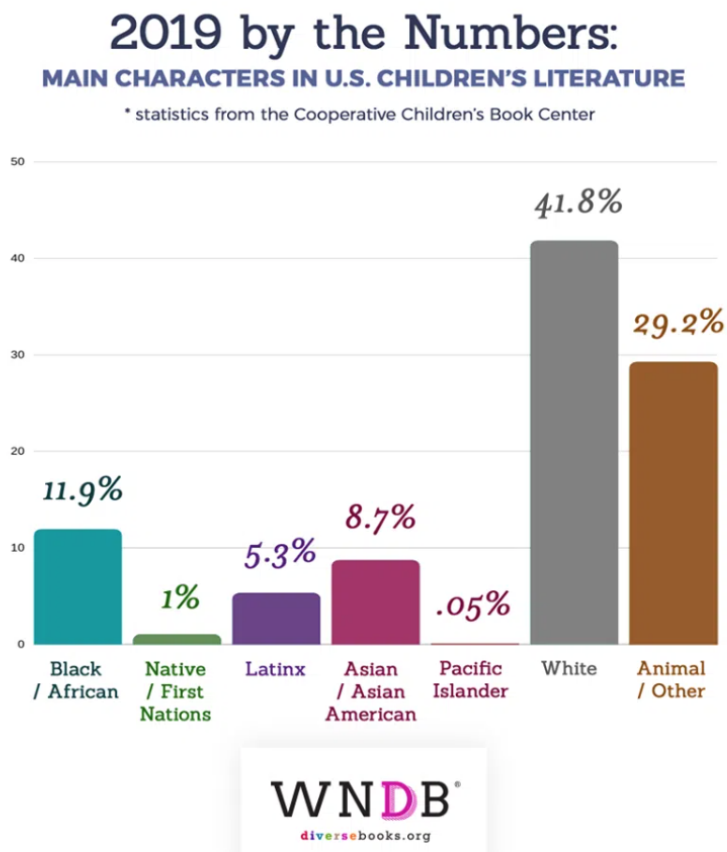
The final strategy that teachers can integrate into their teaching is called exploring identities. Exploring identities requires students to recognize that their identities inform how they perceive and understand the texts that they read. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004a) wrote, “much of who we are and who we are not is constructed through our reading, our everyday experiences, and the conversations we have with others” (p. 89). Identities are defined by things like gender, sexuality, occupation, family style, or personality type. When we teach our students to read a text while taking into consideration their own identity, it allows them to identify their own biases and therefore read the text with a greater awareness. Once again, taking the example of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, a teacher could encourage students to think deeply about how the main characters’ are affected by their own identities. They may ask how being an orphan has affected Harry Potter or how growing up in a poor household may affect how Ron makes decisions. Anytime a student is asking questions about context, they are exploring identities. All of these critical literacy strategies can be implemented into any grade level classroom. While students in highschool are often encouraged to think critically about a text, elementary students are not often given this challenge and opportunity. Teachers and parents cannot deny that their children have greater access to information than previous generations and in order for children to be responsible with the information they consume, they must first be taught to think critically about what they are reading.

Diverse Texts, Diverse Voices

In order for students to participate in critical literacy, they need to be exposed to multicultural texts that have a diverse set of voices to critically analyze. It is imperative that students see themselves and their identities reflected in the literature that they read. It has been said that multicultural books can present “windows, mirrors, or sliding glass doors” to students (Bishop, 1990, p.1). This means that books have the ability to reflect a student's experience back to them, to give them a window or insight into alternative perspectives, or it can be a sliding glass door that allows readers to step into a character's experience that may be different than their own (Bishop, 1990).

It is necessary for students to have multicultural books in order to explore identities, examine alternative perspectives or practice problem posing. Unfortunately, the level of diversity needed in children's literature can be difficult to find. According to a report done in 2019 by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, white characters are the main characters in children's literature 42% of the time (see Figure 1). The next highest represented group of main characters is actually animals. The statistics show that only 11% of all main characters in children's literature are black, while less than 9% are Asian/Asian-American, 5% are Latinx and only 1% are Native American.

Figure 1.

Representation in Children's Literature

Note: The graphic was taken from diversebooks.org with permission from the Cooperative Children's Book Center.

Critical literacy requires students to put themselves in the shoes of others, but in order to do that, they need to be reading about experiences that are different from their own. This means reading stories about characters from different cultural backgrounds. It is the teacher's job to ensure that their students are provided with a culture-rich library of literature to analyze. Once they have these culture-rich resources, they can utilize the two different frameworks to begin integrating critical literacy into their instruction. Once

educators understand the value in providing culturally relevant literature, and have the critical literacy strategies in their toolbox, they can begin to teach these strategies to their students.

Guided Comprehension 5 Step Direct Instruction Framework

While it is necessary that elementary teachers have the knowledge of the critical literacy strategies such as problem-posing, switching, and exploring identities, and have the multicultural literature and resources necessary to teach them, they also need a simple framework to actually teach these strategies. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004a) recommended the five step direct instruction framework created by McLaughlin and Allen (2002) in *Guided Comprehension in Grades 3-8* to give teachers a clear and simple guide for implementing these strategies. This framework includes clear scaffolding to guide students into utilizing the strategy independently. Scaffolding was a theory created by Lev Vygotsky that insists that students learn best when teachers slowly guide them to the desired skill or task (Vygotsky, 1978). It gives students the opportunity to learn by explicit instruction, to be active participants in the learning process, and allows for learning in a variety of instructional environments. The five steps are to explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect. When teachers are able to integrate these steps into their practice, they can guide students towards critical thinking and critical literacy.

Explain

The first step of the five step direct instruction framework is explain. This first step is critical because it introduces the strategy to the students. The teacher must read aloud in each step of this process. This allows the students to put all of their focus and energy into learning the critical literacy strategy and to practice applying it independently.

During this step of the framework, teachers must clearly explain the critical literacy strategy that they will be practicing throughout the lesson. An example of this step would be the teacher explaining that alternative perspectives are when we look at a story from a different perspective or reimagine the story from a perspective that is missing. The teacher may point out that texts are usually written from only one perspective and that it is important to question what that perspective is and what other perspectives may not be included (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

Demonstrate

The second step of the framework is the demonstration. This is the step where teachers should introduce the text that they will be using to teach the critical literacy strategy. The teacher should then read aloud from the text and demonstrate the chosen critical literacy strategy by thinking aloud about the text. The teacher will need to say their entire thought process out loud so students can make the connection between what they are thinking and how that strategy is connected to their thought process. McLaughlin and DeVoogd continued to give the example of alternative perspectives while explaining this step of the framework. This could include the teacher asking questions aloud such as, *“I wonder why the author is only choosing to tell the story from one perspective?”* Or *“What would this text look like if it was written from a different perspective?”* (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

Guide

The third step of the direct instruction framework is the guiding step. In this step, instructors will assist students in practicing the critical literacy strategy by putting them in small groups, or partnering them up with other students. Once they are in a group,

teachers will work with the students and prompt them to utilize the strategy, such as alternative perspectives by asking the students to consider the perspectives in the text that they are reading. The teacher will then encourage the students to engage in a rich discussion about the perspectives in the text while monitoring their discussion in case clarification of the strategy is needed. The students should then share their ideas with the class as an opportunity for more discussion (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

Practice

The fourth step of the 5-Step Direct Instruction Framework is the practice step. This is the step where the teacher will encourage the students to apply the critical literacy strategy independently or in partners. In McLaughlin and DeVoogd, they continued to use the strategy of alternative perspectives as their example and they asked their students to identify the perspectives that were used in the text and subsequently discussed what perspectives might be missing from the text. It is important that the instructor allows the students to discuss their ideas about alternative perspectives on their own without teacher interference because it allows teachers to monitor their comprehension of the strategy. Then the teacher can wrap up the lesson by fostering a whole group discussion in which each student/small group participates equally (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

Reflect

The final step in this framework is the reflection at the conclusion of the reading lesson. The teacher will encourage students to reflect on how that strategy assisted them in reading the text through a critical lens. The students should also be given the opportunity to discuss how they could implement this strategy in their independent

reading time or with other literature that is being read in the classroom (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

The guided comprehension framework is a great starting point for teachers that are not familiar with critical literacy. The website that I discuss in Chapter Three of this capstone will contain information on the 5-Step Guided Comprehension Framework and how teachers can utilize this framework to teach various critical literacy strategies. The 5-Step Guided Comprehension Framework is not the only framework that teachers should consider when implementing critical literacy lessons into their classroom.

Critical Literacy Lesson Framework

The second framework that McLaughlin and DeVoogd recommend is for when the students are comfortable and have mastered the different critical literacy strategies and are now ready to implement them in a reading lesson. It is not enough to simply tell students to start using the critical literacy strategies, teachers must give them clear opportunities within a reading lesson to practice strategies like problem posing, or alternative texts. Teachers can use this critical literacy lesson framework in order to integrate critical literacy into every reading lesson. This framework has four parts; Engaging Students' Thinking, Guiding Students' Thinking, Extending Students' Thinking, and Reflection (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a). The first portion of this framework is Engaging Students' Thinking.

Engaging Students' Thinking

Before beginning the reading lesson, teachers should engage students in the topic of the text by activating their background knowledge. The teacher should also set a

purpose for the reading lesson such as examining alternative perspectives or analyzing the significance of power in the text (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

Guiding Students' Thinking

The second step is where students begin to read silently or participate in patterned partner reading. This reading can be done with a narrative or expository text. Patterned partner reading is a strategy where teachers select a text and assign each student a partner to read with. Partners can then choose a pattern to apply to the entire text. Some examples of patterns they could choose from are:

- Read-Pause-Predict
- Read-Pause-Discuss
- Read-Pause-Sketch
- Read-Pause-Bookmark
- Read-Pause-Retell (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

As they are reading, the teacher should prompt students with questions about the text to allow students to apply a critical lens as they are reading.

Extending Students' Thinking

After the students have completed their reading, teachers should invite students to discuss what happened in the text with a critical lens. The teacher can also encourage students to engage in another key dimension of critical literacy: taking action. Depending on what type of text the students are reading about, this could be the time when teachers encourage students to identify any social injustices in the text and then students may take appropriate action (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a).

Reflection

The final step in the critical literacy lesson framework is the reflection step. This is the point in the lesson where the teacher reflects on how the lesson went. According to McLaughlin and DeVogd, after a critical literacy lesson, a teacher should ask themselves the following, “(a) what you taught, (b) why you taught it, (c) how you think the lesson went, (d) how students reacted to the lessons, and (e) what you plan to do to continue teaching from a critical perspective” (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a, p. 41). While the previously mentioned frameworks and strategies are great tools to use in the classroom when students are working with print text, they can also be used with digital media as well.

Critical Literacy in the Digital Age

While both of the previously mentioned frameworks are necessary for classroom instruction of physical texts, we cannot forget the role that digital media is playing in our society. With widespread access to technology, the ways in which information is created and spread is evolving (Burnett & Merchant, 2019). Previously, the critical literacy movement has been focused on “deconstructing texts, unmasking hidden assumptions, and interrogating bias and representation” (Burnett & Merchant, 2019, p. 263). While this approach has impacted the way that elementary teachers approach teaching literacy, it does not acknowledge the heavy consumption of information that students are taking in via digital content, particularly social media. This consumption of media information is typically referred to as critical media literacy or CML (Allen et al., 2022). Reflecting back on the research question; teachers must consider that their students spend more time engaging with digital texts than they do with physical texts (Flores-Koulish & Deal,

2008) *How can critical literacy strategies be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of more informed citizens?* If teachers can begin to teach their students to view all media, digital and print, through a critical lens, students will be better equipped to discern between information that is factual and “fake news” when they are consuming media outside of the classroom as well as inside of the classroom (Allen et al., 2022). Currently, the vast majority of consumers of social media and other forms of digital media were never taught aspects of critical literacy especially with digital texts. This has led hundreds of millions of adults to view articles, newscasts, or videos online and automatically take that information as the absolute truth. This is an incredibly dangerous practice, especially when it concerns information regarding politics, science, finance, or health and wellness. We saw the impact of this during the Covid-19 pandemic in which prominent figures in our society were making baseless claims about cure-all products, vaccine side effects, or preventative medicines that had not been backed up by the medical field. Once these claims were made online, the United States began to struggle even more with getting the pandemic under control because the population did not know what information to believe. This is only one example of many in which critical literacy skills would benefit people of every generation.

Summary

The research question that I am proposing is this: *How can critical literacy strategies be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of more informed citizens?*

Critical literacy is not a new concept, but it is still a concept that is not explicitly taught in all teacher preparation programs. Critical literacy is rooted in Paulo Freire’s idea

of critical pedagogy which essentially encourages students to become active participants in the reading process by viewing literature through a critical lens (Freire, 1983). The four dimensions of critical literacy were identified by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys after they reviewed 30 years worth of literature on critical literacy. These four dimensions are disrupting the commonplace, examining multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice (Lewison et al., 2002).

Elementary teachers must understand the four dimensions in order to begin implementing critical literacy in their classrooms. Once they have an understanding of the theories and research behind critical literacy, they can begin by using the Guided Comprehension 5-Step Direct Instruction Framework which provides teachers with a guide for teaching specific critical literacy strategies like problem-posing, alternative perspectives, and exploring identities (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002). Once teachers have a deep understanding of the critical literacy strategies, they can begin to utilize the Critical Literacy Lesson Framework to integrate the strategy into their reading instruction (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). Teachers must also acknowledge the importance that digital texts play in their students' lives and therefore must integrate CML or critical media literacy into their instruction by using digital texts and digital media as a mode of instruction in addition to print texts (Burnett & Merchant, 2019).

Chapter Three of this capstone provides a detailed description of the Capstone project. This project will be a website that will provide elementary teachers with information regarding the history of critical literacy and its connection to social constructivism. It will also provide teachers with background information regarding the four dimensions of critical literacy. The website will also give critical literacy strategies

that can be implemented in an upper elementary classroom with clear and concise directions to implement them. There will also be information regarding the Guided Comprehension 5-Step Direct Instruction Framework as well as the Critical Literacy Lesson Framework (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004a). Finally the website will include a list of multicultural texts that can be used in an upper elementary classroom as a vehicle for teaching critical literacy.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Critical literacy is not a topic that is frequently discussed in regard to elementary students. It is often thought that elementary students do not have the capacity to think critically about texts in the manner that critical literacy requires, or that some literature that children interact with might be too sad or too controversial, however, this is not an accurate perception. According to *Critically Literate Citizenship: Moments and Movements in Second Grade*, students are already actively engaging in critical literacy as those opportunities are already present in the everyday lives of children from a young age because children interact with the world through play and conversations (Yoon, 2020).

If children are engaging in informal critical literacy from a young age, there is no reason why upper elementary students in third through fifth grade cannot begin receiving formal instruction in critical literacy strategies. Before our students can become adept at reading literature through a critical lens, we need to make critical literacy an accessible method for teaching reading. This requires that teachers feel confident in their own critical literacy skills in addition to having the resources that they need to learn those skills.

In conversations with my own fifth-grade team, I spoke with them and realized that critical literacy is not a topic that is taught in most teacher preparation programs, but that teachers are willing to learn new methods of teaching as long as there is an easy and accessible way to get that information. This is where the idea for my Capstone project began to take shape. I am passionate about providing resources for my fellow teachers

that are simple, concise, and can be applied immediately in a classroom. My research question is: *How can critical literacy strategies be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of more informed citizens?*

Overview of Project

For my project, I have developed a website filled with information on critical literacy for upper elementary teachers. The website was created using wix.com and contains several pages of information about critical literacy and strategies that teachers can use (see Table 2). I chose to use wix.com as my tool for website creation because it is beginner-friendly with various templates and drag and drop functions.

Table 2.

Critical Literacy Website Design

Website Page	Content
Home Page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes an introduction to the website and introduces the author as well as the author's personal connection and interest in critical literacy
About Critical Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines critical literacy and discusses its connection to social constructivism and critical pedagogy • Introduces the four dimensions of critical literacy framework and how it is utilized in creating a classroom that is critically literate
Critical Literacy Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dives deeper into the specific strategies of critical literacy that fall within the FDCL and how those strategies can be used in an elementary classroom
Frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduces the 5-step guided

	comprehension direct instruction framework as well as the critical literacy lesson framework
Diverse Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lists culturally responsive literature for grades 3-5 that could be included in a critical literacy lesson
Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes a list of sources used during the creation of the Capstone project and paper

The website provides background information on the theories behind critical literacy as well as the numerous and ever-evolving definitions of critical literacy. This includes information on Paulo Freire and his critical pedagogy as well as a brief overview of social constructivism and how it relates to modern critical literacy pedagogy. It also contains a page of information on the four dimensions of critical literacy that were created by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (Lewison et al., 2002). Additionally, the website houses a page containing the 5-step guided comprehension framework (Lewison et al., 2002), the critical literacy lesson framework (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a), as well as the framework for critical media literacy (Allen et al., 2022). Most importantly, the website will have a page on different critical literacy strategies like problem posing, alternative perspectives and switching, with explicit examples from a text that could be used in an upper elementary classroom (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). Finally, the website will include an extensive page with lists of multicultural literature that can be used as a vehicle in which to teach critical literacy in an upper elementary classroom.

Purpose

As previously discussed in Chapter Two, elementary students have greater access to technology and therefore greater access to information and media than any generation in history. It is vital that educators understand the importance of critical literacy so that they can begin to instill a critical mindset in their students. The purpose of creating this website is to give teachers one source for finding a multitude of resources for critical literacy. Between teaching, lesson planning, meetings, and other commitments, teachers do not have the time to spend hours researching critical literacy, its frameworks, or the strategies that can be used to teach critical literacy.

The purpose of creating this website was to create a one-stop shop for critical literacy. I wanted the information and resources included on the website to feel very accessible to all teachers, even if they do not have any prior knowledge or experience with critical literacy. My goal was for teachers to be able to spend 30-60 minutes browsing the website, and then feel confident enough to start sprinkling critical literacy into their daily reading lessons.

While the website is intended for upper elementary teachers, the majority of the information included is broad enough that it can be adapted for any age level. The only information on the website that is upper elementary specific is the list of multicultural books that can be utilized in third through fifth grade as a vehicle for teaching critical literacy. While critical literacy can be utilized with almost any text, I am passionate about providing teachers with texts that reflect the many cultures, religions, languages, and identities that their students will encounter in the world around them. Once teachers have identified texts that are culturally relevant, they can begin to implement critical literacy

strategies into their classrooms and their students can begin to develop a critical mindset when it comes to their reading.

Rationale

According to the the National Council for Teaching English (NCTE), when students engage in critical literacy from a young age, they learn “1) to make informed decisions regarding issues such as power and control, 2) to engage in the practice of democratic citizenship, and 3) to develop an ability to think and act ethically. I chose to create a website because it is an easily accessible tool for upper elementary teachers. The information is synthesized so teachers do not need to read an entire textbook to find the information that they want. I also chose to create a website because teachers can frequently return to the website when they want additional information on critical literacy strategies.

The reason that I chose specifically to create a website centered around critical literacy instead of a curriculum unit, or professional development presentation is simple; critical literacy is not a box to check or a unit to complete and move on from. It is not merely a strategy that can be taught but requires students to develop a shift in their mindset that they will hopefully make a permanent change in the way that they take in information. A website will give teachers the opportunity to start with the basics of critical literacy and slowly add strategies to their repertoire.

Setting and Audience

The intended audience for this website is upper elementary teachers who are interested in learning more about critical literacy and how to implement it in their own classrooms. I will be sharing this website specifically with my fifth-grade team at

Mississippi Heights Elementary. There is a page on the website devoted to bringing examples of diverse texts that are appropriate for critical literacy lessons in a 5th-grade classroom. This list includes both fiction and non-fiction books and features genres like historical fiction, fantasy, contemporary, poetry and biographies. I will also be sharing the website with the third and fourth-grade teams at the elementary school where I teach as all of the critical literacy strategies discussed could be adapted and implemented in any upper elementary classroom. Because this website is intended for teachers, it includes educational jargon, however, any terms specific to critical literacy or the frameworks behind it are well explained through research as the website is intended for teachers who have no prior experience with critical literacy as well as teachers who are well versed in critical literacy strategies.

Assessment

In order to gain feedback from my team about the effectiveness of the website, I will be creating a Google form survey that will be linked on the website that I am creating. This Google form survey will be sent directly to the five teachers on my fifth grade team. After my own teaching team is able to review the website and give feedback on the website's functionality as well as effectiveness, I will reflect on the feedback that I get from my team in order to implement changes to the website. After changes are made, I will also send the website to the fourth and third grade teaching teams at my school. The Google form survey will ask the following questions:

- What did you like about the functionality of this website? Was this website accessible and easy to use?

- How much prior knowledge did you have pertaining to critical literacy before your viewing of this website?
- Did the presentation of the information on this website assist in your learning of the content?
- Have you utilized any of these strategies previously? If so, which ones?
- What strategies could you see yourself utilizing in your own classroom?
- What books from the lists could you see yourself using as a resource for teaching critical literacy in your classroom?
- How did this website assist in deepening your knowledge of this topic?

When I receive feedback from my peers, I can analyze the results and see what commonalities are found. After analyzing the results, I can implement any changes that are necessary to the website. Eventually, this may include an expansion of resources relating to critical literacy in a lower elementary classroom and picture books that can be used for critical literacy in the K-3 classroom.

Timeline

The idea for this capstone project first came to my mind about a year ago when I had the opportunity to take a class on critical literacy and I realized just how many opportunities for critical literacy my students have missed. In January of 2023, I began to research critical literacy, the theories that it was founded on, the frameworks that lend themselves to critical literacy instruction, as well as critical literacy strategies that can be implemented in an upper elementary classroom. In February of 2023, I created my research question, *How can critical literacy strategies be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of more informed citizens?* Then, I began to

collect research that would inform my research question and I analyzed the literature surrounding critical literacy and critical literacy strategies. In February of 2023, I wrote the first chapter of the Capstone Project that would serve as the introduction to the research question and the culminating project. In March of 2023, I dove deeper into the literature and began to summarize and synthesize the prevailing topics in the Chapter Two Literature Review.

In April of 2023, I finalized my plans for the Critical Literacy website and began to create a template for the website. I decided on the audience for the website, the design of the website, the topics that will be included on the website, and how the website would be assessed for effectiveness by my peers on the fifth-grade team. Throughout May, June, and July of 2023, I worked to design and develop the website's content. At the end of July 2023, I launched the website and sent it to my team of five fifth grade teachers at Mississippi Heights Elementary. In August of 2023, I received feedback regarding the website and implemented the critiques/changes that came from the feedback in the Google form survey.

Summary

In this chapter of the Capstone, I determined that my capstone project would be a website filled with the theories behind critical literacy, the frameworks that support it, the critical literacy strategies that can be utilized in an upper elementary classroom as well as a brief list of diverse and multicultural short stories, novels, and poems that lend themselves well to critical literacy.

In Chapter four, I reflect on my analysis of the literature and discuss how the literature informed the development of my project. Finally, I discuss how the website was

interpreted and utilized by my peer teachers and how they embraced critical literacy in their classrooms. Finally, Chapter Four dives deeper into the results of the Google form survey that was sent out to the fifth-grade, fourth-grade, and third-grade teams of teachers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

The goal of this Capstone Project is to answer the question: *How can critical literacy strategies be implemented in an upper elementary classroom to create a generation of more informed citizens?* After much research and reflection, I have realized that critical literacy is more than just a set of strategies that can be implemented in a classroom, but rather an awareness or mindset of thinking critically about a text that must be taught to students. In Chapter One, I explained why critical literacy is an important skill that teachers should begin implementing in their classrooms, especially in elementary classrooms. Due to the vast amounts of information that adults and children have access to using their laptops, iPads, or cell phones, it is vital that we teach children to filter through this information and question its validity and purpose.

In Chapter One, I reflected upon my personal reasons behind this project as well as the professional significance that critical literacy has in my own fifth-grade classroom. In Chapter Two, I reviewed the literature regarding critical literacy and the concept of critical pedagogy that was introduced by Paulo Freire in the 1970s. I also discussed critical literacy and its various definitions that have been published as well as the ties it has to social constructivism and strategies that upper elementary teachers can utilize and adapt to fit into their own classroom needs. These strategies specifically led me to the idea for my Capstone Project which is described in Chapter Three. In Chapter Three, I described the website that I built which is intended for upper elementary teachers as a launching point for integrating critical literacy into their daily literacy practices. Chapter

Four will be a culmination of my thoughts and ideas as I have created this Capstone Project and the significance that critical literacy research has on the teaching profession, specifically in regard to elementary teachers.

Capstone Highlights and Reflections

In this portion of Chapter Four, I reflect on my journey throughout this past year as I dove into research about critical literacy and created this Capstone Project. Prior to this Masters program, I had no experience or knowledge of what critical literacy was or how it could be applied in an elementary setting. As I dove further into my research, I found a passion for promoting critical literacy as a literacy strategy. In this Chapter, I will discuss what I have learned as a researcher, learner, and writer. Despite this being the final chapter in this Capstone, I know that I am a lifelong learner and that my knowledge of critical literacy has only scratched the surface of the research that will continue to be done.

While I have an abundance of experience completing academic research, I have never completed a research project this extensive in both length and time. I found that I had no trouble finding quality, peer-reviewed sources about critical literacy. In fact, one of my biggest struggles was having an excess of sources and having to make decisions about what information was the most pertinent and how much detail to include within each subtopic in Chapter Two. The process of sifting through a plethora of sources and dissecting each article made me a more effective researcher and a more persistent learner.

As I began thinking about what format my project would take, a one stop shop website was the first idea that came to mind. I had no previous experience with website creation, however as an elementary teacher, I know that educators rely heavily on

technology as a resource. My biggest challenge throughout the process of developing the website was the design process. While wix.com was a great resource for a beginner like me, it took a lot of trial and error to create each new section or webpage. One of the easiest parts of my project creation was adding in the research information on each page of the website. I was able to copy and paste much of my research directly from my literature review and edit it slightly to make it more digestible for educators that are new to critical literacy.

Literature Review

The foundation for my literature review was largely based on research done by Paolo Freire (1970) in regards to critical pedagogy as well as Lev Vygotsky's Theory of Social Constructivism (1978). McLaughlin and DeVogd's book, *Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text* provided me with information on the four dimensions of critical literacy as well as the strategies that can be used in a classroom to teach, promote, and engage with literature through a critical literacy lens. When it came time to find more sources for the literature review and project, I used McLaughlin and DeVogd as a launching point and began sifting through the sources that they referenced throughout their book. The most influential sections of the literature review were the Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy, the frameworks that are used to teach new and practice critical literacy strategies, as well as the strategies themselves. My hope with including these sections of the literature review is that teachers would have a clear understanding of how critical literacy lessons can be structured and how students can take the strategies that were taught and apply them to their own reading. Overall, I hope the major takeaway from the literature review is that critical literacy is not a strategy that is taught once and

can be mastered. Instead, we want educators and students alike to think of it as a lens or a mindset with which to read literature.

Implications on Policy

Critical literacy is not an area of literacy that is widely talked about in an elementary school and there is no Common Core standard that requires students to examine power structures or inequity within a text. While I am confident that there are teachers out there who are working to develop their students' critical thinking and critical literacy skills, there needs to be a specific standard in the Common Core or individual state standards if we want curriculum developers, administration, and teachers to make it a priority. Digital literacy is a skill that more educators are talking about today and as previously mentioned, Minnesota does have one standard that specifically requires students to critically analyze multimodal texts. However, just because there is a standard requiring this practice does not mean that teachers have been properly trained in critical literacy practices. In order for critical literacy to become a more prominent aspect of literacy, every state needs to incorporate it into their ELA standards and curriculum developers need to promote it within their curriculum, especially in elementary school.

Limitations of Project

There are a few limitations that I see within my project. Primarily, the website is focused on critical literacy in grades 3-5 as that is my area of expertise, however CL can and should be incorporated into K-12 classrooms and beyond. Critical literacy will definitely look different in a primary classroom as it will involve students relying heavily on context clues and pictures to help understand the story. While my website does have a survey form in order to gain feedback from my teaching peers, this project is not

considered an action research project and does not contain any quantifiable data as to its effectiveness.

Another limitation to my project and current research on critical literacy in the elementary classroom is that it is very difficult to measure critical thinking and critical literacy skills. CL questions often do not have a concrete correct answer so it can be challenging to observe growth and achievement in this area. Due to the lack of measurable data, educators may be skeptical about bringing CL strategies into their classroom as they will not see an immediate improvement in critical thinking and CL skills. Instead, it will take many years of constant practice with critical literacy that will create a generation of more informed citizens and consumers of information.

Future Research

It is my hope that as the topic of critical literacy becomes more prevalent in elementary classrooms, there will be more large scale research projects that will study the effectiveness of critical literacy strategies in the classroom and their effect on overall comprehension and critical thinking skills. As I was completing my own research, it was challenging to find sources with quantitative studies done in an elementary classroom.

The more concrete research that is done, the more willing educators and administrators will be in considering critical literacy as a necessary addition to their curriculum.

Results

For my capstone project, I created a website full of critical literacy background information as well as strategies and books that could be utilized in an upper elementary classroom. This website will be shared primarily with my fifth grade team which includes

five members other than myself. On the website, there is a google form that my colleagues will use to give feedback about the content and functionality of my website. I can use this feedback to make changes to the website before sharing it with other grade level teams at my school.

Project Benefits

This website will specifically be helpful to my colleagues on my fifth grade team because none of them have any experience with critical literacy. I know that if I bring them a large paper or a professional development book to read on critical literacy, it is not easily digestible and would consume a lot of their time. However, this website is meant to be browsed for 20-30 minutes for teachers to get a solid idea of what critical literacy is and they can then immediately apply it to their reading lessons.

While this website was created as a professional development tool for my own colleagues and will not be used by a large audience, I personally feel that the impact it could have on the students in my community is incredibly powerful. If we can teach critical literacy strategies beginning at the elementary level, our students can and will use those skills throughout their academic career as well as in their personal lives. It will help them become informed citizens, consumers, and they will be able to engage with the world in a more responsible and sustainable way.

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