

**THE IMPORTANCE OF INCORPORATING  
CRITICAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION INTO THE EARLY ELEMENTARY  
CLASSROOM**

by

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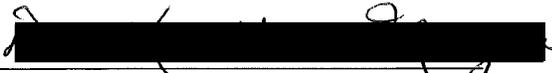
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CERTIFICATION OF THESIS/PROJECT CAPSTONE WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project entitled THE IMPORTANCE OF INCORPORATING CRITICAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION INTO THE EARLY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM by Samantha Valvo, Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science in Education, Literacy Education, is acceptable in form and content and demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.

  
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# **THE IMPORTANCE OF INCORPORATING CRITICAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION INTO THE EARLY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM**

## **ABSTRACT**

Early literacy experiences are critical for the development of young children. More specifically, quality literacy experiences are beneficial to children's understanding of the world around them (Ekvall, 2013). Exemplar critical literacy instruction was evaluated for its significance at the Pre-Kindergarten to second grade levels. Data came from a collection of current critical literacy research and the following themes were created: the need to foster information literate students, how to address emotional collisions in the classroom, the importance of deconstructing and reconstructing familiar texts, critical awareness in the areas of identity, race, and culture, and social justice dialogue and student emotions. Analysis focused on the two methods of critical literacy instruction, teacher-led discussions and student-engaged strategies. The most effective method, student-engaged strategies, was then further evaluated for potential lesson structure in the classroom. The results led to four findings. The first finding suggested critical literacy instruction could be incorporated into the classroom through teacher-led discussion and student-engaged strategies. The second finding revealed student-engaged strategies as the most effective way to incorporate critical literacy instruction into the classroom. The third finding discovered the most often used critical literacy strategy, using familiar texts to engage students in interacting with the text from a new perspective. The fourth finding supported New York State learning standards, which expects students to have critical literacy skills to demonstrate their college and career readiness as they continue into higher levels of education, thus all suggesting the importance of students learning critical literacy at the early elementary level.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

With the current changing student demographics within classrooms across America, students have been coming to school with a variety of cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and identities (Vasquez, 2017). Therefore, teaching literacy will need to keep up with these positive changes by constantly improving its practices. One possible way to do so is by incorporating critical literacy into current classroom literacy instruction (Ekvall, 2013). Reading instruction should be taught with the goal of creating lifelong learners who question the validity of information. Student engagement can be cultivated during literacy instruction when space for constructive conversation and learning is made which includes classroom discourse and peer dialogue. When effective critical literacy is neglected in the classroom, students fall prey to accepting and trusting all information presented to them without questioning validity, authorship, bias, or platform (Souto-Manning & Price-Dennis, 2012). Early literacy experiences are critical for young children's development. More specifically, quality literacy experiences are beneficial to children's understanding of the world around them.

The problem found within classroom instruction is the lack of critical literacy being taught to early elementary learners. In New York State, Common Core Curriculum is widely accepted as the school curriculum of choice. According to Vasquez (2017), the texts in which teachers use in the classroom are not the problem, but rather the lack of teaching and learning from a critical literacy perspective. The following research study will answer the question: How can teachers incorporate critical literacy pedagogy into literacy instruction? The study will investigate a variety of ways teachers can incorporate critical literacy pedagogy into the early elementary classroom. The goal of this research will be to synthesize research on critical literacy instruction to help inform teachers on influential discussion prompts and strategies that can be

used in the classroom to support critical literacy learning for early elementary students.

### **Background**

I have chosen this topic because of my experiences working with early elementary learners. During the summer of 2018, I taught summer school in a second grade classroom. The students were very close to each other and had been in school together since pre-school. These strong relationships created sibling-like tensions in the classroom. My students had difficulty accepting differences in others due to a lack of understanding. This led to frustration because many students were unable to communicate their emotions in a healthy way. I introduced critical literacy perspective into the Common Core curriculum I was using during reading instruction. The addition to the curriculum created whole group analysis and dialogue that promoted understanding differences in others and positive ways in which to express opinions and emotions. Classroom behavior changed over the course of the summer as students' empathy and compassion grew for their classmates and others due to the addition of critical literacy perspective within literacy instruction.

### **Terminology**

There were key terms which were used in this proposal and may require clarification. The first term was "critical literacy." This term referred to the ways that literacy is culturally, historically, and politically situated and assumed reading and writing to be embedded within one's social world and connected to identity, agency, and power (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015). The term "critical" was derived from the Greek adjective *kriticos*, the ability to argue and judge (Luke, 2012). As student's read, they should not be blind consumers to text. Students should take the information read and be able to form opinions on the material based on prior knowledge, discussion, and research.

The term “emotional collision” is an important term to identify for this study. In the classroom, there are moments in which student’s make comments or produce questions that are unrelated to the lesson objective. According to Kuby (2012), these moments of emotional collision can be crucial for fostering critical literacy abilities in students. She identified emotional collisions as moments that prompt dialogic conversations about critical literacy topics such as social justice.

Another term used in this proposal is “media.” Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis (2012) depicted media as cartoons, advertisements, songs, video games, movies, and television shows that are currently popular. Media can be used to “critically reposition” itself to be a tool that can be used in the classroom for more equitable teaching.

A final term that is necessary to define for this study is “information literate.” Teachers must prepare students to be effective managers of the information they read on a daily basis. This takes the form of being weary of author bias, date of publication, and intent of the text. In order to be information literate, students must be inquirers and researchers to understand independent learning and ethical uses of information.

### **Theoretical Stance**

Critical theory has been represented as evaluative, progressive orientation in education aimed at improving current social conditions. Improvements have had the potential to be made in the classroom through classroom dialogue, co-operative decision-making, and power-sharing within the school community. These improvements have had the goal of producing “rationally autonomous” students (Maddock, 1999). He also stated that original theorists Rousseau and Kant opposed social conformity and sought individual autonomy. Maddox suggested that critical theory illuminated a main concern in contemporary education: the ‘crisis’ in education. He

described the ‘crisis’ as being the present day policies in government that he believes have negatively impacted education.

Andreotti (2014) noted the four questions she had found critical theory to ask: Who decides if something is true? Where is this understanding coming from, where is it leading to, and how can this be thought of differently? These questions challenge imbalances in power and representation. She suggested that the theory emphasized the social, cultural and historical ‘construction’ of realities and highlights the current limits evident in education.

The proposed research synthesis is aligned with the International Reading Association (IRA) *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2010). The research focuses on Standard 1 Professional Knowledge and Standard 6 Professional Learning and Leadership. Standard 1 requires the candidate to understand the theoretical and evidence-based foundations of literacy processes and instruction. For Standard 6, it requires the candidate to recognize the importance or, demonstrate, and facilitate professional learning and leadership as a career-long effort and responsibility. Within this thesis, these two IRA standards will be addressed.

### **Rationale**

Today, students have come to school with a variety of cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and identities (Vasquez, 2017). It has been necessary for teachers to welcome these diversities into the classroom, one way in which to do so it through incorporating critical literacy into classroom literacy instruction. The purpose of this research is to address the question of how teachers can seamlessly implement critical literacy within their instruction to better prepare their students to be lifelong critical thinkers. This research is important to the field of education because it will contribute knowledge that is important to the current changing student demographics within classrooms across America.

Luke (2012) has viewed critical literacy pedagogy as having the potential to represent and reshape possible world views through language, texts, and their discourse structures. If a student can be information literate, deconstruct a text, and form valid opinions on ideas, then their perspective and worldview can be positively impacted through critical literacy pedagogy. The aim of critical literacy in the classroom is to develop student's capacity to use texts to analyze everyday experiences with a critical perspective lens to positively transform student's worldviews and social actions. Furthermore, the author stated that critical literacy is a cultural and linguistic practice. It takes shape through the understanding of how texts and discourses can be manipulated to represent and alter perspectives.

According to Labadie, Pole, and Rogers (2013), critical thinking happens when students analyze and evaluate evidence, arguments, claims and beliefs. With guidance from classroom teachers, critical thinkers can have a safe classroom environment to foster inquiry, questioning, problem solving, and collaboration. Students can then learn how to make judgments and decisions based on others' points of view, interpreting information, and drawing conclusions to become self-advocating critical thinkers. The authors concluded that integrating meaningful learning experiences that promote critical literacy skills is essential for cultivating 21st Century learners.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In order to address the research question of how critical literacy can be implemented into literacy instruction for early elementary students, a review of the empirical research studies on the topic was conducted. The literature review began with a search of the major databases ERIC, PsychINFO, and OneSearch. Keywords and phrases in the searches included critical literacy, critical literacy perspective, critical race theory, classroom scaffolding with critical literacy, critical perspectives and literacy methods, critical literacy and classroom discourse, social action and critical literacy, and guided inquiry of critical literacy and early elementary students.

The studies most relevant to this proposed research were grouped into five themes: Information Literate, Emotional Collisions, Deconstructing Familiar Texts, Critical Awareness in Identity, Race, and Culture, and Emotions and Social Action. The first theme dealt with the importance of teaching 21st century early elementary students to be information literate. The second theme highlights moments of emotional collisions in the classroom and how these moments should be used to further develop the critical literacy abilities of students. The third theme puts critical literacy pedagogy into practice as literature is deconstructed and reconstructed through classroom discourse. The fourth theme allows students to foster critical awareness through discussing identity, race, and culture in a positive classroom environment with the support of a classroom teacher. The fifth theme challenges students to put critical literacy pedagogy into practice through effectively putting their emotions into social action.

### **Importance of Teaching Students to be Information Literate**

Heider (2009) and Harwood (2008) examined the need for students to be able to manage information effectively as information literate individuals. Both researchers stated that teachers should take on the role of preparing students to be critical appraisers of information. Due to the

rapid growth of information over the last decades, with the help of technology advancements, it has made it impossible for educators to prepare students for the future without teaching them how to be effective information managers. Information literacy instruction has been a priority in many secondary schools due to the introduction of statewide literacy standards. Although these standards were written for grades K-12, information literacy is still not the focus in many early childhood classrooms. He noted the importance of information literacy instruction in early childhood education, even stating it is “the missing link” in education. He found that early information literacy instruction, using informational texts, and collaborative teacher–librarian curriculum planning can promote critical thinking and increase the ability to problem-solve. Both of these skills are important and necessary for the cultivation of lifelong learners in today’s Information Age.

Several researchers (Levy, 2016; Luke, 2012; Gregory, 2018) confirmed the earlier claim, a need for information literate students, made by Heider (2009) and Harwood (2008). Levy (2016) also focused on the role of the early elementary teacher and suggested that teachers have the responsibility to ensure that children grow up understanding that teachers’ own answers are not necessarily the best or only answer. In order to teach this, cultivating humility within the teacher–student relationship is necessary. Early elementary students need to learn from adults who are positioned as engaged in the learning experience alongside them, rather than being a separate level other than learner.

In order for teachers to encourage children to become lifelong critical learners, teachers must share the sense of curiosity with them and respond to them in a way that offers mutual interest in what is being learned (Levy, 2016; Heider, 2009; Harwood, 2008). However, not all teachers have found opportunities to engage their students in critical discussions in the classroom

for a multitude of reasons. Schmidt, Armstrong, and Everett (2007) examined the phenomenon called “distancing” in teachers. Unfortunately, teachers distance themselves from critical conversations in the classroom due to the literal questioning nature of standardized testing. The results of their study found that teachers and students can “do school” in this way and miss opportunities to think about and have rigorous conversations about issues presented in classroom texts. Although it can be easier and less time intensive to recite literal comprehension questions, the research revealed the importance of raising questions that are open to multiple perspectives.

Luke (2012) added another layer to the research of Levy (2016) and Schmidt et al., (2007) he put into question the binary relationship of the teacher and learner in order to transform the relationship to be more fluid. Teachers are learners and learners can also be teachers in certain situations. He advocated a dialogical approach to literacy based on principles of reciprocal exchange. The focus of his study was to unpack myths and distortions of classroom roles of teacher and students, while also building new ways of knowing and acting upon these roles.

Several researchers (Levy, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2017; DiStefano & Ness, 2018) have studied the ways in which teachers can create the binary power relationship in the early elementary classroom. Souto-Manning (2017) in particular conducted a case study in one early elementary classroom to shed light on how using generative text sets can help teachers scaffold critical literacy discussion in the early elementary classroom without creating a hierarchy of power. The study showed the classroom teacher encouraging her students to partake in critical literacy dialogue in the classroom through read-alouds of generative text sets. This moved classroom instruction away from teacher-led lessons to student-ran classroom discussions. Generative text sets are multimodal text sets that are created by the teacher through student

interests, tensions, and realities in order to build on learners varied experiences and access to topics. Through this view, it positions teaching and learning as sociocultural, historical, and political acts. Using both critical literacy and critical pedagogy as the studies frameworks, the study sought to inform teachers on ways to prepare their students for the diverse world setting through fostering critical literacy dialogue in the early elementary environment. Both teacher and students take on the role of critical thinkers. The study found that teaching with generative text sets can shift and expand the definition of literacy practices, introduce conversations on traditional power discourses and ways in which to counter-argue them, as well as explicitly addressing issues of discrimination, prejudice, power, and privilege within the literacy curriculum.

DiStefano and Ness (2018) further described this critical literacy dialogue suggested by Souto-Manning (2017) and the importance of its foundation in early learners. Young learners have wonderings that can be sculpted in the classroom, through critical literacy instruction, to be articulated as questionings. DiStefano and Ness (2018) claimed early elementary years were the essential time in which to build the academic language of question generation. Their case study focused on a Kindergarten classroom which introduced dialogue through first introducing hand symbols during discussion. In teaching students the hand symbols of simple and deep wonderings, and allowing opportunities for students to wonder, teachers built up student confidence and ability to generate the academic language of questions. Students were able to express their thoughts and ideas through connecting it to the hand symbol for wonder. Additionally, the simple and deep wonderings gave children an early understanding of classifications of questions. Some questions can be literally answered from the text while other questions require deep critical thought. By naming wonderings, giving a symbol for them, and

gradually introducing them into the curriculum, the organic wonderings of kindergartners observed by DiStefano and Ness (2018) generated enriched student-led critical literacy discussions in the classroom.

In order to create the relationships conducive to creating information literate students that Levy (2016), Souto-Manning (2017), and DiStefano and Ness (2018) observed, the teacher-created social environment of the classroom becomes a key factor in the equation. Stribling (2018) examined the role of the teacher in the creation of a critical literacy milieu in the early elementary classroom. In order to get to this form of environment, a classroom's social environment must be created by a classroom teacher through the grounding of the classroom in organic critique, reflection, and a goal for more equitable relationships and interactions scaffolded by the teacher.

Stribling (2018) researched additional areas of need in the classroom including the need for teacher modeled respect, problem-solving skills, and effective ways to talk about different issues in the classroom. Through teacher scaffolding, Stribling (2018) concluded that students become information literate when equipped with proper teacher scaffolding. As teachers modeled what critique and reflection founded in research should look like, students were able to do so as well in the classroom.

Following in the trend of creating information literate learners through a positive classroom environment, Harwood (2008) examined early elementary education pedagogy and its need to consider the potential role of critical literacy in preparing children to meet the ever changing and fast pace changes in the world. Media, technological, interactive, and corporate-constructed texts are fast becoming part of children's everyday experience. The study focused on the classic literary fictional character Cinderella. The study suggested that Cinderella is no longer

confined to the pages of a book; her image and persona appeared in a multitude of texts, including, video, posters, clothing, toys, websites, and other assorted materials in which children are exposed to on a daily basis. The study found that critical literacy can provide new and varied ‘lenses’ to understand experiences, explore multiple viewpoints, and uncover the influence of socio-political and power relationships in shaping perceptions and actions. Through critical literacy pedagogy, early elementary learners can become critical appraisers of the many texts they are exposed to and can break down learned stereotypes from classic literature in order to be individual creators of their own beliefs.

Similar to Harwood’s interest in popular media, specifically the Disney character Cinderella, Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis (2012) researched the need for critical literacy in the lives of early elementary learners due to the prevalence of popular media in their lives. The research discussed the importance of early elementary teachers fostering critical media literacy practices in the classroom environment. Through the use of critical media literacy practices, early childhood teacher educators created a process whereby preservice teachers learn how to critically reposition cartoons and other media texts, transforming them into tools for more equitable teaching. The study conducted a semester-long qualitative study in which a teacher educator engaged preservice teacher educators in critically reading the texts and contexts of media, while simultaneously discussing inequities in education and society. Harwood (2008) and Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis (2012) also discussed the need to address big topics of inequalities in ways that students could understand and are familiar with. In doing so with familiar fairytale characters, students were able to find systems of hierarchy, classify characters, and discuss who had a voice and who had less of a voice. Findings indicated that such media texts served as codifications of generative themes in which preservice teachers can start

acknowledging and addressing issues of inequity in their classrooms. Implications point toward the power and possibilities of early childhood teacher educators engaging preservice teachers in making curricula more accessible and equitable by repositioning popular culture media texts in early childhood classrooms.

In a more recent study, Gregory (2018) had similar findings to the case studies of Stribling (2018) and DiStefano and Ness (2018). All researchers examined the effects of teacher modeled strategies to help students become information literate. In Gregory's (2018) case study, the strategy she entitled the "Guided Inquiry Design Process" was examined in the early elementary classroom. Through the design process, students would choose their own learning contexts and construct new worldviews rather than having to take on the teacher's perspective or those mandated by the curriculum. Through following the design process steps, the case study revealed how students were free to think critically and form their own ideas beyond the traditional expectations of teacher-made ideas. Teachers were still able to offer input but through the guided inquiry process, student observations and ideas were valued more highly than simply teacher instruction. The design process constructed by Gregory (2018) consisted of the following six phrases: Explore, Identify, Gather, Create, Share, and Evaluate. His inquiry approach provided an environment for encouraging original research to answer questions and solve problems, and also developed the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas.

### **Using Moments of Emotional Collisions in the Classroom**

Kuby (2012) examined opportunities for critical literacy conversations in the classroom and found that these conversations naturally came up throughout the school day. She explored emotions in relation to social justice dialogue and shared vignettes to illustrate how emotions are

embodied and situated in the classroom. The study highlighted the term “doing emotions”, a view that sees emotion as a verb, something we do in relationship to one another. The analysis focused on moments of emotional collisions that prompted dialogic conversations about critical literacy topics. She originally thought emotional collisions were off task, but upon closer analysis, she realized these moments were the richest discussions during her time teaching 5 and 6-year-olds in a summer enrichment program in a suburban community in the southern United States. Situating teaching from a critical literacy stance, Kuby’s data demonstrated how children are curious to explore critical literacy topics. She concluded that it is beneficial for educators to embrace the emotional collisions as productive sites of critical literacy dialogue.

Bennett, Gunn, Evans, Barrera, and Leung (2018) agreed with the research of Kuby (2012) and conducted a study to see what critical literacy dialogue can look like in the classroom. Bennett et al., (2018) described what a classroom that incorporates critical literacy looks like in an early elementary setting including real classroom practices that teachers were using. The study revealed that there is no set script or equation that leads to a critical literacy classroom because culture is multifaceted and continually changing. Therefore, critical literacy in the classroom is not simply learning how other cultures celebrate a holiday, rather it is about engaging students in active listening, in which they respond to students’ conversations, make personal connections to students’ stories, and connecting these conversations to real world situations. In doing so, the classroom community is asked to challenge common assumptions and values, explore different perspectives, and reflect on differences in relationships of power during moments of classroom emotional collisions.

As Kuby (2012) and Bennett et al., (2018) called educators to challenge their assumptions of what is age-appropriate critical literacy conversations in the early elementary

classroom, Leland, Harste, and Huber (2005), also challenged traditional views of dominant discourse in the classroom. Early elementary students are often thought of as being too young to expose to topics relevant to culture today. This view suggests children need protection from complexity and unpleasant topics. As a result, the approach leads teachers and parents to choose stories that have simple plot lines and “happily ever after” endings. Through challenging these views, critical literacy develops in the classroom as students read for more than just making meaning and happy endings. Students venture into understanding complex issues of race, poverty, and war while also discussing ways in which to make the world a better place in the safety of the classroom environment. Leland et al., (2005) and Kuby (2012) had similar conclusions on the role of the classroom teacher. The researchers found that teachers who stepped out of their instructional boxes and created a critical literacy environment in the classroom allowed their students space to create understanding and make connections to real world experiences.

Reed, Saunders, and Pfadenhauer-Simonds (2015) also challenged traditional classroom discourse while inviting emotional collisions through the educational strategy entitled “Problem Posing.” This strategy was developed as a means to shut down repressive forces in education that keep individuals passive. The strategy started with drawing on the personal experiences of students to then generate social connectedness and mutual responsibility for the learning process, with potential for societal transformation. The problem-posing strategy intended to first uncover the problems that hide in plain sight. For example, students of different cultures had grown up in communities that are predominately multicultural but when they read children’s literature in the classroom, they found mostly white characters. In the classroom, the three step process involved listening to learners concerns, codifying issues into discussion starters for dialogue and critical

thinking, and taking action to address the concern. Reed et al., (2015) reminded educators that the strategy is called problem-posing, not problem-solving. Therefore, the solutions suggested during discussion may take time and much trial and error to turn into action. The strategy encouraged a dialogical approach in which everyone participates as co-learners, both educator and students. Reed et al., (2015) deduced that through encouraging students to think critically about societal issues in the safety of the classroom allows for critical growth within and outside of the classroom.

Labadie et al., (2013) advocated for moments of emotional collision dialogue in an elementary classroom to be first led by the classroom teacher. The study revealed the effects of critical literacy read-alouds in a Kindergarten setting. After introducing new critical literacy dialogue in the classroom, a teacher should be prepared to lead conversations. As students became more comfortable with the topics and dialogue etiquette, this is when teachers began to scaffold the conversation and had students take a greater lead. In a more long term sense, the study found significant implications of how elementary students were guided to examine critical literacy issues through classroom literacy instruction as well as how instruction strengthened student's engagement with texts. Their findings demonstrated ways that critical thought could start in early childhood, and how young children would develop critical thinking through a teacher's reflective and responsive scaffolding. Student's need teacher guidance through critical literacy dialogue, but are capable of these conversations. The research revealed how teachers, administrators, and others who impact what happens in classrooms, often underestimated the depth of children's potential for thinking and learning.

Doyle and Bramwell (2006) also suggested teachers be aware of the emotional collisions in the classroom, big or small, through being responsive of topics students asks questions about

and are dealing with personally. A teacher's awareness could facilitate strategic book selections in the classroom. Growing social-emotional competence in early elementary students could be done in a variety of ways, one being through dialogic book talks. When using dialogic reading with books that have social-emotional content, teachers focused conversations on developing an understanding of certain prosocial skills related to critical literacy: understanding differences, cooperation, and listening skills. Through dialogue, students gained confidence in their skills and began to see themselves as critical thinkers. Doyle and Bramwell proposed that these positive critical literacy experiences could stay with early elementary students into adulthood.

Sipe and McGuire (2006) also described moments of emotional collision as being uncomfortable and could even be portrayed through student resistance in the classroom, however, they found positive outcomes to have come through critical literacy dialogue that stemmed from these emotional collisions. They examined ways in which teachers could use student resistance to stories as teachable moments in the classroom to generate deeper comprehension and interpretation. In early elementary years, children learn to read the world as well as the word. When showing signs of resistance, students gave voice to their insecurities, questions, and anxieties. These moments created opportunities for classroom discussions in a supportive environment. The findings of Sipe and McGuire (2006) pointed to occasions of resistance as representation of success. Without some resistance in the classroom, students submit to the power of the text. With resistance, students revealed their engagement with the text and deeper critical understanding, therefore confirming Kuby's (2012) argument that emotional collisions prompted dialogic conversations about critical literacy topics.

Likewise, Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint (2006) examined a moment of emotional collision through the processes and practices used in one classroom conversation between two

female elementary students exploring issues of hairstyle, race, and identity. The case study suggested teacher support, similar to the claims of Labadie et al., (2013) and argued for a more responsive demeanor of classroom teachers to their student's conversations that occur throughout the day, mirroring the claims of Doyle and Bramwell (2006). Van Sluys et al., (2006) found that the female students drew on and used diverse text resources, funds of knowledge, and critical literacy practices during their conversation. Moreover, the study informed teachers how to experiment with ways to revise invitations to encourage more critical literacy discussion, supported by the classroom teacher, as well as exploring alternative ways to introduce new social practices into the classroom community.

### **Deconstructing and Reconstructing Familiar Texts and Ideas**

Sipe and McGuire (2006) observed children's responses to stories in the classroom. The first form of resistance to stories in the classroom is intertextual resistance. They found this to be possible to overcome after introducing multiple versions of a text to the classroom. The study focused on *Cinderella*, the students identified the Disney rendition as their familiar story and objected to other renditions such as *Rough Faced Girl*. This objection is called intertextual resistance because it is a matter of children's connections between a text they already know and a text that is new to them. The first version of a story that children hear tends to become the one by which every other rendition is judged. However, through teacher guided inquiry, children begin to understand that stories can be transformed by other authors and even by themselves.

Furthermore, this resistance can create a sense of authorship and ownership of critical literacy.

Hoffman (2011) also found that elementary students struggled with the skill of deconstructing familiar texts was difficult, therefore, he recommended teacher support during read-alouds to co-construct meaning in the classroom. In the study, classroom read-alouds were a

context with great potential for higher level critical literacy instruction in early childhood education. To reach this potential, students required teacher support, also suggested by Labadie et al., (2013). Comprehension of the literal information in texts was an important skill for students to learn. However, critical thinkers do much more than take in the literal. Students could also analyze meaning to identify and pull out important pieces of information, synthesize that meaning with their own background knowledge and experience, and interpret meaning from their unique perspectives. Teachers are needed to support, scaffold, and co-construct during this process in the early elementary levels. Reading critically is a transaction in which meaning is negotiated by both the text and reader. This does not come naturally to early learners, but readers can be apprenticed into interpretive approaches to text, which can better prepare them for higher level critical literacy demands.

In terms of reconstructing texts, Behrman (2006) suggested a strategy to incorporate into the classroom entitled “producing countertexts.” In the study, a countertext or counter narrative was a student-created text that presents a topic from a non-mainstream perspective. Producing countertexts can validate the thoughts, observations, and feelings of students and other underrepresented groups. The countertext can take shape through a personal response to the topic being learned or a conscious effort to write from another's point of view. This strategy identified students as members of a marginalized subgroup whose "voice" had been given legitimacy. This skill took critical literacy abilities to develop in students. Therefore, the successful use of the countertext strategy would require classroom conversation and teacher support. The recommended classroom conversations should be based on student inquiry and real world issues (Bennett et al., 2018) and conversation must be led by the teacher until it is appropriate to scaffold the lead to students (Doyle & Bramwell , 2006).

In Bourke's (2008) action research study, he examined a first grade classroom and their unique interactions with their fairy tale unit, including their deconstructing and reconstructing of classic fairy tale favorites. Bourke defined critical literacy as the act of approaching texts wearing a set of eyeglasses through which the reader examines and questions the familiar and comfortable. The process of problematizing texts to expose privilege and oppression occurred through the analysis of how texts benefit some people and harm others. In his study, he investigated student work as first graders re-wrote their favorite fairy tales while grappling with the question: Why are things the way they are? Critical literacy recognizes that all texts position the reader and proposes that multiple perspectives exist, Bourke examined this through his classroom study.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) suggested a variety of types of questions that, like Bourke's (2008) research, could be used to create a more critical literacy conversation in the classroom. Lewison et al., (2002) in particular created three dimensions of critical literacy questions that can be used in the classroom to dig deeper into the text and move beyond the literal. Disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and taking action help to develop critical literacy. In order to deconstruct familiar texts, Lewison et al., (2002) found two key questions for students to ask while reading: "How is this text trying to position me?" and "Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?" This can be done in the classroom through an active exploration of popular culture and media for purposes of analyzing how people are positioned and constructed by television, magazines, social media and more. In disrupting the commonplace, elementary teachers adopted a nontraditional role when they moved beyond the literal. Traditionally, the role of the educator is that of disempowerment as they are perceived as transmitters of knowledge. Lewison et al., (2002) had similar finding to Labadie et al., (2013) in

that with the fostering of language of critique, teachers and students became activists for critical literacy.

In a similar manner, Kim and Cho (2017) analyzed critical literacy in the early elementary classroom through the deconstruction of fairy tales. They argued that critical literacy practices using children's literature supported young children's problem posing in the classroom. The purpose of their investigation was to understand the possibilities of early critical literacy practices as a medium to help young children develop multiple perspectives and critically examine texts. Kim and Cho (2017) analyzed how the classroom teacher used fairy tales as a way to open up critical literacy spaces to facilitate the children's critical engagement with books and encouraged the interrogation of the ideological discourse in books. Through the creation of the safe classroom environment, students were able to consider diverse voices in the books and share their different views, all while having explored multiple interpretations and developed critical perspectives.

Martello (2001) examined another strategy to use in the classroom while deconstructing familiar ideas and texts. She examined drama in relation to a critical pedagogy which facilitated a questioning perspective towards texts and the social practices. Using data collected from preschool and early elementary classrooms, the study explored how drama is uniquely placed to address the aims of critical literacy. The specific drama practices used in the study focused on making meaning, the exploration of multiple perspectives, and on tensions between different beliefs or world views. Also referred to as "process drama", the kind of drama in the study is not product oriented, but rather is largely improvised with fictional contexts in which students are guided to explore the kinds of situations faced by individuals in the world, within a safe environment of an early elementary classroom. The importance of fostering critical literacy in a

safe environment was also researched by Bennett et al., (2018), Behrman (2006), and Kim and Cho (2017). The study also found that it is never too early to promote critical literacy awareness in the classroom that is guided and supported by a classroom teacher. The importance of classroom teacher led dialogue was also discussed by Labadie et al., (2013), Van Sluys et al., (2006), Hoffman (2011), Doyle and Bramwell (2006).

Clarke and Whitney (2009) also encouraged students to think critically about texts, themselves, and their worlds in a classroom community setting. The framework this study suggested for teachers to use in the classroom consisted of three parts: deconstruction, reconstruction, and social action. The researchers revealed that all texts are embedded with multiple meanings. One way to examine some of those meanings were to peel away the layers through the consideration of perspective, positioning, and power. The first layer of interpretative work suggested deconstructing issues of power, perspective, and positioning in a text. Although deconstruction means to take things apart, what the research suggested students doing at this stage were to pull back layers of meaning to identify multiple perspectives in a text. Next, students were encouraged to examine the perspectives that were not addressed in the texts. In doing so, students reconstruction identities of people who have been marginalized and devalued over the course of time, similar to the study conducted by Behrman (2006). This critical literacy skill could be done in the classroom through activities such as journaling, diary entries, and changing familiar stories. Lastly, within critical literacy exploration, after deconstructing and reconstructing texts, students could also connect these to larger social issues in the world and promote social action in the classroom.

Kim and Cho (2017) explored the idea of rejecting the assumption that knowledge exists in a vacuum. They argued that children are active participants in the learning process as they

create meanings together by interacting with their social members. Clarke and Whitney (2009), Behrman (2006), and Kim and Cho (2017) all suggested students question, explore, or challenge the power relations that exist between author and reader. Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text to gain diverse perspectives by examining issues of power, knowledge, and representation. The following questions were suggested to incorporate into whole class dialogue: Whose viewpoint is represented? Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted? How might alternative perspectives be expressed? Through the problem-posing approach, students are encouraged to read and write against texts while making meaningful connections to their own social context.

### **Fostering Critical Awareness through Identity, Race, and Culture**

Several researchers have suggested dialogue on topics such as identity, race, and culture can be fostered through critical literacy instruction in the classroom (Levy, 2016; Rogers & Mosely, 2006; Van Sluys et al., 2006; Sipe & McGuire, 2006; & Hurley, 2005). Sipe and McGuire (2006) in particular revealed the resistance some students may have to these discussions in the classroom when presented in stories. A student may not be able to see them self in the story or feel left out from stories due to the notion of identifying with characters. The research highlighted the importance of children being able to “see themselves” in stories. This may be especially crucial for children whose racial, ethnic, and cultural identity is not that of the “culture of power.” Even so, culture is not monolithic and is experienced differently by individual members of that culture. This can mean that although the presence of a character with a similar cultural background is in the text, there is no guarantee that identification will occur. Creating an atmosphere in which resistance is accepted and discussed can help develop critical literacy language and thought in the early elementary classroom.

Rogers and Mosely (2006) illustrated that white early elementary children can and do talk about race, racism, and antiracism within the context of the literacy curriculum when supported and guided in the classroom setting. The researchers used a reconstructed framework for analyzing “white talk” which one relied on literature in whiteness studies and critical race theory and drew on critical discourse analytic frameworks to show what talk around race sounds like for white second-grade students and their teachers. This research made several contributions to the literature through providing a detailed method for coding interactional data using critical discourse analysis and a lens from critical race theory and whiteness studies. The study also revealed the instability of racial-identity formation and the implications for teachers and students when race is addressed in primary classrooms. Ultimately, the research argued that racial-literacy development, like other literate process in the classroom, must be guided and supported by the classroom teacher to be effective.

Hurley (2005) also argued that children's identity dialogue is affected by the ways in which they see themselves in texts and media. The study revealed that fairy tales played an important role in shaping self-identity and the critical literacy dialogue of early elementary learners. The author suggested that the images found in fairy tales have particular importance for children of color due to the internalization of White privileging. The study presented a comparative analysis of the Disney version of six classic fairy tales characters: Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White, and Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp from the perspective of ideological/racial basis in the context of the goals of multicultural education. Findings from this analysis supported the need for the development of critical literacy skills in students as well as in their teachers.

Van Sluys et al., (2006) also revealed this need for a transformation of identity text and

discourse in the classroom. The study found that the female students drew on and used diverse text resources, funds of knowledge, and critical literacy practices during their conversation. More specifically, while analyzing practices using critical literacy frameworks, the research of Van Sluys et al., (2006) used Luke and Freebody's four resource model which included: code breaking, text meaning, text user, and text analyst practices. Through the use of this model the range and distribution of critical literacy practices of the students were highlighted. Moreover, the study informed teachers how to experiment with ways to revise invitations to encourage more critical literacy discussion as well as exploring alternative ways to introduce new social practices into the classroom community.

Levy (2016) also warned teachers of the possibility of unknowingly promoting stereotype text in the classroom. His research found text, in all its forms, offered powerful constructions of stereotypical gender (femininity and masculinity). He argued that in order to challenge stereotypical constructions of gender, it is necessary to become a resistant reader. This means to read a text looking for potential bias or agendas. This practice can be achieved through accessing different discourses that challenges the text in question. The author stated that promoting skills of critical reflection needs to be incorporated within early elementary literacy instruction in order to help students to consciously reflect on texts. In developing a critical awareness of stereotypical constructions in text, they would also challenge a dominant discourse and real world issue.

Lewison et al., (2002) contributed strategies that support the research of Levy (2016). In incorporating critical literacy in the classroom, interrogating multiple viewpoints help to encourage this level of thought. In the classroom, this can look like reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives, examining competing narratives and writing counternarratives to

dominant discourses, all while making differences visible and valued.

### **How Student's Emotions Can Create Positive Social Action**

Labadie et al., (2013), as well as, Rogers and Mosley (2006) examined critical literacy dialogue on social justice and the empathy it prompted in students. They analyzed the views and emotions of Kindergarten students on the critical literacy topic of social class. Using multiple texts, the researchers found students voicing common and naive societal views on social class, but also beginning to challenge some of these views. These moments of critical literacy were found to occur at points of tension in the conversation as well as points of disconnect between the students' lived experiences and those of the characters depicted in the texts. The research also saw that throughout the unit, students showed evidence that they related to the characters in the texts, whether they had had similar experiences themselves or were empathizing and imagining what the characters experienced. The texts offered a way for students to share about their own lives and about issues of social class that were important to them. Using their own perspectives also helped students to critique aspects of the books when there was a mismatch with their own experience.

Garner and Parker (2018) also found text to be an inviting way to start classroom critical literacy dialogue on social class. Similar to the findings of Labadie et al., (2013) and Rogers and Mosley (2006), Garner and Parker found that expert-recommended picture-books contributed to complex emotion dialogue in the classroom supported and scaffolded by a teacher. Emotion dialogue facilitated emotional competence, self-confidence, and prosocial behavior in the researcher's case study. They also found that teachers frequently exchanged emotion talk with students during shared book readings. This aided in the comprehension of emotions in relation to the story's plot, as well as, encouraged active participation in the book reading session. The

research of Bennett et al., (2018) also viewed critical literacy is an active and reflective approach to reading texts that involves exploring and constructing knowledge in order to better understand and challenge unequal social relationships. By analyzing attitudes and values represented in or omitted from texts, teachers and students can understand and then challenge long-held cultural, linguistic, racial, gender, class, and other biases.

Beyond using text to drive the social justice dialogue, Kuby (2012) had an additional approach to the practice. Kuby states that discussing social justice issues in early elementary classrooms is not widely accepted as appropriate. However, students are not blind to the current world in which they live. Her research dealt with finding ways in which to introduce the social justice topic into the early elementary classroom in an appropriate manner. According to Levy (2016) and Kuby (2012), students need spaces in schools to dialogue about social justice issues. Students witness inequities in their lives such as poverty, hunger, lack of healthcare and educational resources on a personal level and/or within their community. Bennett et al., (2018) suggested classroom teachers addressing real world issues that students face on a daily basis. Kuby found that the topic of social justice is not too mature for early elementary students when it is presented through the discourse of fairness.

Clarke and Whitney (2009) stated that early elementary students were not blind to the world around them, thus it was important for students to understand social justice and positive action. It was important that students saw themselves in a larger world beyond the walls of the classroom. This is why Clarke and Whitney suggested the final step in a critical literacy exploration needing to be one that builds upon deconstruction and reconstruction to connect to larger social issues. Activities such as reading different perspectives or writing from different perspectives could segway students into social awareness. Additionally, Lewis et al., (2002)

suggest taking action and promoting social justice through classroom activities such as challenging and redefining cultural borders through encouraging students to be border crossers in order to understand others and break down stereotypes.

Later, Levy (2016) and Martello (2001) suggested teachers incorporating lessons in which students can take on different perspectives in a safe environment, to better understand differences. Social action in the classroom can be both big and small, but taking classroom dialogue and critical literacy instruction outside of the classroom can leave a powerful impression on the students and their communities. Through widening student's critical literacy instruction, students can have a better understanding of others, a greater appreciation of diversity, and an awareness of how to live in a globalized world.

### **Summary**

Several researchers (Martello, 2001; Van Sluys et al., 2006; Harwood, 2008; Bourke, 2008; Heider, 2009; Hoffman, 2011; Kuby, 2012; Luke, 2012; and Garner & Parker, 2018) led to the research question of how teachers can seamlessly implement critical literacy within their instruction to better prepare their students to be lifelong critical thinkers.

In today's classrooms, teachers feel a pull towards literal questioning due to national standardized testing. However, beyond ensuring students perform well on yearly assessments, it is the role of the teacher to foster critical thinkers (Labadie et al., 2013). Ways in which to create critical thinkers is through the following five themes found in the research: the importance of teaching students to be information literate, using moments of emotional collisions in the classroom, deconstructing and reconstructing familiar texts and ideas, fostering critical awareness through identity, and using emotions to promote positive social action.

**Information Literate.** Heider (2009) and Harwood (2008) concluded that in order to become lifelong critical thinkers, students must develop their ability manage information

effectively as information literate individuals. Levy (2016) examined the importance of positionality in the classroom that Luke (2012) deemed the binary relationship of the teacher and students. Through a dialogical approach, teachers are no longer leading the classroom in learning but rather both students and teacher journey together as co-learners through classroom inquiry.

**Emotional Collisions.** Kuby (2012) analyzed opportunities for critical literacy conversations in the classroom and found that these moments came up naturally throughout the school day. She found that it was through moments of emotional collision, when student comments didn't fit the traditional literal mold, prompted dialogic conversations about critical literacy topics. Reed, Saunders, and Pfadenhauer-Simonds (2015) used "problem-posing" as a strategy to listen to student concerns, codify issues into discussion starters for dialogue and critical thinking, and taking action to address the concern. The strategy incorporated emotional collisions into critical thinking growth. Sipe and McGuire (2006) examined the role of the teacher as being the scaffolding force that leads student's resistance to certain topics into teachable moments to generate deeper comprehension and interpretation.

**Deconstructing and Reconstructing Familiar Texts.** Bourke (2008) observed first-grade students interactions with the fairy tale unit through their deconstructing and reconstructing of their classic fairytale favorites. He defined critical literacy as the act of approaching texts wearing a set of eyeglasses through which the reader examines and questions the familiar and comfortable. Through critical literacy, students are able to problematize texts in order to expose privilege and oppression through how fairy tale texts benefit some while harming others.

**Identity and Critical Awareness.** After students deconstructed a story to find those who are not heard in texts, students would be able to continue to foster this critical awareness through

identity, race, and culture (Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Hurley, 2005; Lewison et al., 2002). Rogers and Mosely (2006) found that early elementary students could and would talk about race, racism, and antiracism within the context of the literacy curriculum when they are supported and guided in the classroom setting by a classroom teacher. Lewison et al., (2002) warned teachers of the possibility of unknowingly promoting stereotype texts in the classroom. In order to combat this, teachers should promote skills of critical reflection within early elementary instruction in order to help students consciously reflect on texts. In developing a critical awareness of stereotypical constructs in texts, students would also be able to challenge the dominant discourse through identifying and addressing the real world issues in the text.

**Emotional Reactions and Social Action.** Clarke and Whitney (2009) stated that in today's society, early elementary students are not blind to the world around them, and thus it is important for students to understand social justice and positive action. Student reactions and emotions to the texts studied in class can create positive social action. According to Kuby (2012) and Levy (2016), students need spaces in schools to dialogue about social justice issues.

Of the five themes in critical literacy research, the most important aspect that will be addressed in the guidebook for educators will be strategies to help students work through their emotional collisions in the safe social environment of the classroom through deconstructing and reconstructing familiar texts. Using familiar fairy tale stories, teachers will be able to work through student emotional collisions and resistance to real world issues through examining the fairy tale texts for problem posing areas. Through these findings, students will be able to create a different version of the familiar text that questions these ideas and guides classroom inquiry through critical literacy discourse.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

According to Kuby (2018) and Bennett et al., (2018), critical literacy occurs organically in the classroom and changes from year to year based on the needs of the students. Several researchers (Martello, 2001; Van Sluys et al., 2006; Harwood, 2008; Bourke, 2008; Heider, 2009; Hoffman, 2011; Kuby, 2012; Luke, 2012; and Garner & Parker, 2018) also found commonalities in high quality critical literacy to be educating students to be information literate, allowing space for emotional collisions in the classroom, deconstructing and reconstructing familiar texts, fostering identity and critical awareness using literature, and allowing emotional reactions to help facilitate positive social action. Through these commonalities, the digital educator guidebook for critical literacy in the classroom was then designed using two areas of focus to engage students in critical literacy were teacher-led discussion prompts versus student-engaged reading and writing strategies. The following data collection section describes how the research studies were found for this study as well as the processes used to organize the information. The data analysis section provides an examination of all the research studies collected and identifies common themes throughout the research studies. The synthesis section summarizes what was found as a result of the data analysis and presents the summaries as findings.

### **Data Collection**

The search began with a search on ERIC, PsychINFO, and OneSearch using the terms critical literacy and early elementary classroom. The data for this research synthesis consisted of 33 research studies found through the data collection process of conducting an extensive search of the leading education databases for peer reviewed research studies. This search yielded over 22,000 results including the names of several researchers (Vasquez, 2017; Souto-Manning, 2017;

and Heider, 2009) who appeared to have frequently researched this topic, as well as multiple synonyms such as information literate, critical theory, social justice issues, and classroom dialogue which served as additional keywords to help guide a more extensive search. The search continued until an adequate amount of research was collected and categorized into five themes for data collection: the need for fostering information literate students, the potential for and how to address emotional collisions in the classroom, the importance of deconstructing and reconstructing familiar texts, critical awareness in the areas of identity, race, and culture, and social justice dialogue and student emotions.

### **Data Analysis**

The studies selected and categorized were more closely examined for the recurring themes, categories, and codes found in the data. Further analysis of these themes led to new findings in the study. The research articles and themes were funneled into the two overarching categories: critical literacy discussion versus critical literacy strategies. The 33 articles under the five themes were then categorized to see how many articles within each theme fit under either the category of discussion or strategies. Within the data analysis the ultimate goal will be to determine the researcher's findings of the importance of the two categories and if one category was found to be more beneficial in supporting student academic success and understanding of critical literacy instruction.

**Information Literate.** Of the five studies within this category, three studies (Luke, 2012; Levy, 2016; Andreotti, 2014) suggested *teacher-led discussion prompts* while the other two studies (Heider, 2009; Harwood, 2008) suggested *student-engaged strategies* to promote critical literacy instruction in the early elementary classroom. Andreotti (2014) and Luke (2012) called into question the purpose of the text based on the author's creative intent. Through

teacher-led discussion, students were able to approach complex critical literacy ideas such as inequality and power-relations through the aid of teachers who modeled the importance of being an information-literate individual (Andreotti, 2014). Information literacy was also modeled through the identification of author bias. In teaching children to consciously reflect on the sociocultural implications of a text, educators were also able to help them to not only develop their own awareness of stereotypical constructions of gender in text but also actively challenge a dominant discourse (Levy, 2016). Therefore, in teaching students to be information literate, teachers could introduce the foundations of critical literacy through teacher-led scaffolded discussion.

Heider (2009) and Harwood (2008) also focused on information literacy to aid in critical literacy instruction, however, both researchers decided a more hands on approach was necessary for student engagement with critical literacy skills. According to Heider (2009), information literacy is a survival skill in the Information Age. He concluded that students should be able to engage in learning activities within school libraries to learn more about authorship, authenticity, and potential for stereotypes. In teaching students to question information validity, Harwood (2008) agreed that students will be more prepared for real world situations. Through activities that allowed students to interact with their peers as they took on the role of author through author talks, students were able to become more information literate while examining bias, intent, and style of writing.

**Emotional Collisions.** Of the seven studies within this category, two (Kuby, 2012; Sipe & McGuire, 2006) suggested *teacher-led discussion prompts* while the remaining five studies (Reed et al., 2015; DiStefano & Ness, 2018; Stribling, 2018; Leland et al., 2005; Doyle, 2006) suggested *student-engaged strategies* to promote critical literacy instruction in the early

elementary classroom. Kuby (2012) analyzed opportunities for *teacher-led discussion prompts* in the classroom and found that moments of emotional collision came up naturally throughout the school day. She found that it was through moments of emotional collision, when student comments didn't fit the traditional literal mold, prompted dialogic conversations about critical literacy topics. This classroom dialogue approach was also found within Sipe and McGuire's (2006) study which stated that it was the role of the teacher to be a scaffolding force to lead potential student feelings of resistance to teachable moments. These teachable moments were found to generate deeper comprehension and interpretation.

*Student-engaged strategies* were favored by the following researchers while examining critical literacy building in the classroom. Reed et al. (2015) used "problem-posing" as a strategy to listen to student concerns, codify issues into discussion starters for dialogue and critical thinking, and taking action to address the concern. The strategy incorporated emotional collisions into critical thinking growth. Similarly, Doyle (2006) encouraged small group work through rotations to help students to have a social experience of listening to others, taking turns, and getting to know their peers. Through the use of dialogic reading with books with social-emotional content, teachers could follow the readings with related activities where social-emotional skills are modeled, coached, and cued while students engage in classroom activities. DiStefano & Ness (2018) found that students could bring their emotional collisions into the classroom through hand symbols of simple and deep wonderings. Lastly, student-centered activities were encouraged by Leland et al. (2005) and Stribling (2018) who found students engaged with their peers during classroom activities exploring diversity to be able to face emotional collisions head on through evaluating the prevalence of diversity in their classroom library and their peer's ideas on diversity.

**Deconstructing and Reconstructing Familiar Texts.** Of the eight studies within this category, two (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006; Vasquez, 2017) suggested *teacher-led discussion prompts* while the remaining six studies (Bourke, 2008; Martello, 2001; Hoffman, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2007; Behrman, 2006; Luke, 2012) suggested *student-engaged strategies* to promote critical literacy instruction in the early elementary classroom. Both Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint (2006) and Vasquez (2017) examined the importance of teachers introducing the skill of questioning the text through deconstructing the message first and then recreating the text with a critical literacy perspective. The studies informed teachers how to experiment with ways to revise invitations to encourage more critical literacy discussion in their classroom as well as exploring alternative ways to introduce new social practices into the classroom community.

The following researchers suggested that for students to learn more critical literacy foundations, they must interact with the text on an individual level without the role of the teacher skewing the potential perspectives of the students. Bourke (2008), Hoffman (2011), Schmidt et al. (2007), and Behrman (2006) highlighted the importance of *student-engaged strategies* with their own creative thinking in creating new literature based on their ideas from the familiar literature read in class. The process of problematizing texts to expose privilege and oppression occurred through the analysis of how texts benefit some people and harm others. Students were called to question why things are the way they are in familiar fairytale stories through the process of writing counternarratives. Luke (2012) examined student's ability to question perspectives heard within literature by creating individual character narratives to better understand the overall message of the piece. Through the art of drama, Martello (2001) suggested students should act out differing perspectives of characters to better understand the ideas, differences, and perspectives within literature studied in the classroom.

**Identity and Critical Awareness.** Of the six studies within this category, two (Rogers & Mosely, 2006; Lewison et al., 2012) suggested *teacher-led discussion prompts* while the remaining four studies (Hurley, 2005; Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Labadie et al., 2013; Maddock, 1999) suggested *student-engaged strategies* to promote critical literacy instruction in the early elementary classroom. Rogers & Mosely (2006) and Lewison et al. (2002) illustrated that white early elementary children can and do talk about race, racism, and antiracism within the context of the literacy curriculum when supported and guided in the classroom setting by a teacher. The researchers warned teachers of the possibility of unknowingly promoting stereotype texts in the classroom. In order to combat this, teachers should promote skills of critical reflection within early elementary instruction in order to help students consciously reflect on texts.

The following researchers found that in order to foster critical literacy skills such as identity and critical awareness, *student-engaged strategies* are necessary in the classroom. Hurley (2005) children's identity dialogue is affected by the ways in which they see themselves in texts and media. The study revealed that fairy tales played an important role in shaping self-identity and the critical literacy dialogue of early elementary learners, therefore, students must engage with their peers to further discuss identity and their own ideas of critical awareness. Clarke & Whitney (2009) encouraged students to think critically about texts, themselves, and their worlds in a classroom community setting. The framework this study suggested consisted of three parts: deconstruction, reconstruction, and social action. In doing so, students reconstructed identities of people who have been marginalized and devalued over the course of time, similar to the study conducted by Labadie et al. (2013) and Maddock (1999). Both researchers discussed the importance of students examining the identity of those they read about in literature in comparison to the identities of those within their home, school, and social communities.

**Emotional Reactions and Social Action.** Of the seven studies within this category, three (Kuby, 2012; Levy, 2016; Bennett et al., 2018) suggested *teacher-led discussion prompts* while the remaining four studies (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Gregory, 2018; Ekvall, 2013; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015) suggested *student-engaged strategies* to promote critical literacy instruction in the early elementary classroom. Kuby (2012) and Levy (2016) found that students need spaces in schools to dialogue about social justice issues. Bennett et al. (2018) found that it is never too early to promote critical literacy awareness in the classroom that is guided and supported by a classroom teacher. Therefore, these researchers confirmed the importance of *teacher-led discussion prompts* while also confirming the role of the teacher to be a creator of a classroom environment suitable for students to grow in their understanding of critical literacy through modeled and scaffolded instruction on emotional reactions and social actions.

The following researchers explored the necessity of *student-engaged strategies* to promote individual understanding of critical literacy skills. Clarke & Whitney (2009), Riley & Crawford-Garrett (2015), and Ekvall (2013) stated that in today's society, early elementary students are not blind to the world around them, and thus it is important for students to understand social justice and positive action. Student reactions and emotions to the texts studied in class can create positive social action. Through peer-engagement students could continue to grow in critical literacy skills. Gregory (2018) also concluded that students participating in classroom activities would support their understanding of critical literacy in a more meaningful way when they are able to brainstorm potential ways to positively act on their emotions to literature in order to facilitate social change.

Table 1

*Teacher-Led Discussion and Student-Engaged Strategies*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Information Literate (5)</b>	<b>Emotional Collisions (7)</b>	<b>Deconstructing &amp; Reconstructing Familiar Texts (8)</b>	<b>Identity &amp; Critical Awareness (6)</b>	<b>Emotional Reactions &amp; Social Action (7)</b>
<b>Teacher-Led Discussion (12)</b>	1. Luke (2012) 2. Levy (2016) 3. Andreotti (2014)	1. Kuby (2012) 2. Sipe & McGuire (2006)	1. Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint (2006) 2. Vasquez (2017)	1. Rogers & Mosely (2006) 2. Lewison et al. (2002)	1. Kuby (2012) 2. Levy (2006) 3. Bennett et al. (2018)
<b>Student-Engaged Strategies (21)</b>	1. Heider (2009) 2. Harwood (2008)	1. Reed et al. (2015) 2. DiStefano & Ness (2018) 3. Stribling (2018) 4. Leland et al. (2005) 5. Doyle (2006)	1. Bourke (2008) 2. Martello (2001) 3. Hoffman (2011) 4. Schmidt et al. (2007) 5. Behrman (2006) 6. Luke (2012)	1. Hurley (2005) 2. Clarke & Whitney (2009) 3. Labadie et al. (2013) 4. Maddock (1999)	1. Clarke & Whitney (2009) 2. Gregory (2018) 3. Ekvall (2013) 4. Riley & Crawford-Garrett (2015)

Both discussion and strategies were used in critical literacy instruction, of the 33 research articles, 12 included discussion prompts for teacher-led classroom instruction and 21 included strategies to actively engage students in critical literacy activities (see Figure 1). This data reveals that of the articles researched, the majority of the studies suggested critical literacy strategies as the most beneficial way to instruct students in critical literacy topics. Furthermore, within the five themes, Deconstructing and Reconstructing Familiar Texts was suggested by eight studies, the most studies out of all of the themes.

## Synthesis

Findings for this study suggested that between the two potential styles of critical literacy instruction, teacher-led discussion prompts and student-engaged strategies, the research analyzed found student-engaged strategies to be the most effective way to teach critical literacy in the early elementary classroom. Educators examined within the studies were able to successfully teach students the skills of critical literacy instruction through student-engaged strategies that focused on five themes: Encouraging information literate students, allowing emotional collisions during instruction, engaging students in deconstructing and reconstructing familiar texts, acquainting students with identity and critical awareness, and supporting emotional reactions and positive social action. Further analysis took place to identify the *lesson structure* of a class period focused on student-engaged strategies. For the purpose of this research, *lesson structure* is defined as the 40 minute layout of one ELA class including the beginning, middle, and end of the lesson. Within a *lesson structure*, teachers may include an introduction to the lesson, model a strategy, allow students to practice the strategy in groups, and then end the lesson with students independently working with the strategy.

Table 2

*Critical Literacy Lesson Structure of Student-Engaged Strategies*

Category	Information Literate	Emotional Collisions	Deconstructing & Reconstructing Familiar Texts	Identity & Critical Awareness	Emotional Reactions & Social Action
<b>Teacher-Led Discussion (12)</b>	1. Luke (2012) 2. Levy (2016) 3. Andreotti (2014)	1. Kuby (2012) 2. Sipe & McGuire (2006)	1. Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint (2006) 2. Vasquez (2017)	1. Rogers & Mosely (2006) 2. Lewison et al. (2002)	1. Kuby (2012) 2. Levy (2006) 3. Bennett et al. (2018)

<b>Student-Engaged Strategies (21)</b>	1. Heider (2009)	1. Reed et al. (2015)	1. Bourke (2008)	1. Hurley (2005)	1. Clarke & Whitney (2009)
	2. Harwood (2008)	2. DiStefano & Ness (2018)	2. Martello (2001)	2. Clarke & Whitney (2009)	2. Gregory (2018)
	<i>Structured Lessons (2)</i>	3. Stribling (2018)	3. Hoffman (2011)	3. Labadie et al. (2013)	3. Ekvall (2013)
		4. Leland et al. (2005)	4. Schmidt et al. (2007)	4. Maddock (1999)	4. Riley & Crawford-Garrett (2015)
		5. Doyle (2006)	5. Behrman (2006)	<i>Structured Lessons (3)</i>	<i>Structured Lessons (4)</i>
		<i>Structured Lessons (5)</i>	6. Luke (2012)		

The table above shows that in order to effectively teach the five themes and skills of student-engaged strategies, *lesson structure* is followed during the literacy class period for each skill identified. The *lesson structure* suggested by the student-engaged strategies are further explained below.

**Information Literate.** Two studies (Heider, 2009; Harwood, 2008) showed the *lesson structure* of information literate student-engaged strategies. In order to instruct students in the critical literacy skill of being information literate, Heider (2009) and Harwood (2008) crafted their *lesson structure* to require students to research a critical literacy question to answer one overarching question during the lesson. First, students used their critical thinking skills as they analyzed the data they collected. Harwood (2008) specifically had his students research *Cinderella*. Next, they synthesized their data with facts they found in informational texts in the classroom collection and school library. Lastly, the lesson ended with student's evaluation of their research process through reflection and whole-group discussion.

**Emotional Collisions.** Five studies (Reed et al, 2015; Stribling, 2018; DiStefano & Ness, 2018; Leland et al, 2005; Doyle, 2006) showed the *lesson structure* of emotional collision student-engaged strategies. Reed et al. (2015), Stribling (2018), and Doyle (2006) found the structure to work best for making room for emotional collisions through first listening in order to

uncover key issues or “generative themes” of the students’ community. After listening, the teacher codified the issues into discussion starters for dialogue and critical thinking in groups. The lesson ended with taking action to address the issues in a practical manner.

DiStefano and Ness (2018) had a *lesson structure* more specific to the Kindergarten classroom through generating their questions through hand symbols while reading a shared text to eliminate lesson derailing questions. Leland et al. (2005) also used a shared text in the *lesson structure* but additionally had the students create an art piece based on a scene from the story. Once the art piece was created, the students presented their creation to the class while the teacher proposed critical literacy discussion questions to the class based on student work.

**Deconstructing and Reconstructing Familiar Text.** Six studies (Behrman, 2006; Bourke, 2008; Martello, 2001; Hoffman, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2011; Luke, 2012) demonstrated that the *lesson structure* of deconstructing and reconstructing familiar text student-engaged strategies. They created a *lesson structure* around the activity of creating counter texts. Behrman (2006), Luke (2012), Hoffman (2011), and Schmidt et al. (2011) instructed students to read multiple texts of the same fairy tale. Next, students created a list of characters from the fairy tale and ranked the power and voice of each character, for example, how often the reader was able to receive the characters perspective. Finally, based on the information collected, students created journals, art work, scripts and other counter texts in which they would write in the perspective of characters who were not heard in the fairy tale.

Bourke (2008) and Martello (2001) more specifically focused their *lesson structure* on fairy tales around the overarching question ‘Could things have happened differently?’ Beginning with a summary of a focus fairy tale, he leads students into the discussion question. Once many different ideas have been briefly discussed, students were then asked to draft a script of the fairy

tale from the perspective of a character who was not a leading role in the original. This creative take on critical literacy allowed students to think outside of their familiar fairy tale box and address critical literacy issues on power-relations and perspective while reconstructing the text.

**Identity and Critical Awareness.** Three studies (Hurley, 2005; Labadie et al., 2013; Clarke & Whitney, 2009) showed the *lesson structure* of identity and critical awareness student-engaged strategies. The three lessons all structured around the question of how students are represented in fairy tales. First, students talked about how they identify based on race, ethnicity, and culture. In terms of fairy tales, students discussed the story in which they feel best represents their identity or can choose to discuss how there is not a story that they feel represents them. Next, students were asked to craft their own fairy tale based on their identity. Their stories included illustrations and writing that reflected their family traditions, home language, and other components of their race and culture. Students were able to present their fairy tales in a classroom gallery walk. Maddock (1999) did not provide a specific lesson structure, however, he did support the research of a lesson with the potential for a structure in which teachers engaged students in reciprocal discussion and the opportunity for full questioning.

**Emotional Reactions and Social Action.** Four studies (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Gregory, 2018; Ekvall, 2013; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015) showed the *lesson structure* of emotional reactions and social action student-engaged strategies. The lessons were all created around the central on social action in school by preparing students to share their findings on perspectives portrayed in fairy tale texts to other classroom grade levels. In sharing the data that they have collected, students were able to engage in a small scale social action project within their school. Their data had the potential to help other students in their school question the perspectives portrayed in familiar texts, thus fostering critical thinkers. Through the use of the

guided inquiry design process, students explored a critical literacy topic of interest, identified an overarching question, and began to gather data using school provided books and articles. Next, students created a display for their findings and shared their findings with others. Lastly, students evaluated how the process went in a whole-class discussion.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Application**

### **Results of the Review**

After completing a review of the literature to determine what research has been conducted on the importance of incorporating critical literacy into Pre-Kindergarten through second grade ELA instruction, the Principal Investigator has uncovered four key findings from this synthesis. The Principal Investigator sought to better understand the ways in which critical literacy instruction could be incorporated into the early elementary classroom. The first finding demonstrated that critical literacy instruction can be incorporated into the classroom through teacher scaffolded instruction and student-engaged strategies. The second finding revealed that student-engaged strategies were the most effective way to incorporate critical literacy instruction into the classroom. Through a more student-focused and hands-on approach, students are able to put critical literacy into practice in a level-appropriate manner to create the foundation of the critical literacy skills students are expected to display throughout their educational career in New York State. A third finding suggested that the most often used critical literacy strategy to be using familiar texts to engage students in interacting with the text from a new perspective. For example, in studying *Cinderella*, students engaged in critical literacy as they told the story in the perspective of an uncommon voice, Cinderella's stepsisters. This particular strategy helped to set the scene for student confidence in working with new critical literacy due to their familiarity and background knowledge of the texts. The fourth finding demonstrated the importance of students learning critical literacy at the early elementary level. According to New York State learning standards, students are expected to have critical literacy skills to demonstrate their college and career readiness as they continue into higher levels of education.

### **Application of the Results to a Professional Development Project**

The findings from this study have significance to all early elementary general education educators ranging from Pre-Kindergarten to second grade. The importance of critical literacy instruction was described throughout the study, thus supporting the idea that critical literacy should be introduced to students beginning as early as Pre-Kindergarten. General education educators ranging from grade levels Pre-Kindergarten through second grade will benefit from the results of the study and will also assist in lesson and curriculum planning to fit the state standards and critical literacy needs. These findings can assist educators in knowing about various forms of critical literacy instruction to use in the classroom that will be developmentally appropriate for early elementary students. The most appropriate form of professional development for sharing this new knowledge is through an educator guidebook distributed digitally through an online Google Site.

### **Design of the Professional Development Project**

The design of this professional development project was the form of a Google Site. This professional development Google Site is intended for general educators in grades Pre-Kindergarten through second grade because the research that supports this professional development has been conducted with early elementary students within this grade range. The Google Site contained a site map table of contents which directs educators to specific grade level pages to ensure the material is leveled appropriately. Each grade level page included six student-engaged strategies using differentiation to make the strategy most appropriate for striving students and exceptional students. Educator materials were supplied through lesson structure templates and student materials supplied through leveled activities were in downloadable PDF formats. Linked videos from the Common Core State Standards modules were also included as an additional way to observe critical literacy being expressed in the early elementary classroom.

Materials and videos were made further accessible to educators as quick links on the site map page, the first page seen by educators as they entered the Google Site. The Google Site also allowed educators 24-hour access to the site information as a resource in their own professional development library. Google Sites is a free resource and this form of professional development was made available to school districts at no cost. Google Sites does provide space for comments. Throughout the Google Site, teacher engagement was collected through the questions and responses proposed by educators who had visited the site. Teachers also had the opportunity to share the results of their lessons using critical literacy instruction through sharing photos, audio, and video to the linked Facebook group within the Google Site. In order to receive a certificate of completion for professional development, a teacher must have been successfully engaged on the Facebook group through uploading one video displaying use of a strategy in the classroom, commented on four other teacher videos, and rated their top picks for most engaging strategy then the teacher received a certificate of completion for professional development. The Facebook group provided an opportunity for teachers to collaborate with one another, share their findings through critical literacy instruction, and provide suggestions for the Google Site, which also were completion criteria. Educators learned about the Google Site through district administrators, literacy specialists, and through the collaborative Facebook group.

**Literacy Coaching Project Goals and Objectives.** The goal of this professional development project presented through Google Site and Facebook was to support educators who would like to incorporate critical literacy instruction into Pre-Kindergarten through second grade classrooms. To address this goal, the following learning objectives provide clarification and description. The first objective of this Google Site was for participants to learn about the research-based types of student-engaged critical literacy strategies and the influence that critical

literacy has on ELA instruction and student information literacy development across early elementary grade ranges, specifically for their own grade. The second objective was for participants to be able to collaborate and discuss the topic of critical literacy with one another through the Google Site and Facebook group connected to the professional development project. Educators utilized the Google Site to learn the strategies and comment on their understanding of the new information, then educators turned to the Facebook group to post video evidence of their own use of the strategies in their classroom and engaged other educators in conversation on their video posts. The Google Site provided a space for teachers to share their experiences with critical literacy instruction in their classroom, pose questions, and write comments to help encourage other educators all while in hopes of meeting the certificate completion requirements of one video post, three engaged comments on other educator video posts, and a rating of their top three strategies seen in educator videos. The Facebook group provided a space for educators to post video and audio clips of their instructional experiences using the strategies from the professional development project. Group discussion via Facebook posts helped create a collaborative and encouraging group of critical literacy educators. The accountability fostered among these educators benefitted student learning experiences in the classroom. The Google Site and Facebook group became a digital educator guidebook reference for educators to use when planning their own critical literacy instruction for the classroom.

**Proposed Audience.** This proposed professional development project is intended for an audience of general education teachers from grades Pre-Kindergarten through second grade. School districts, specifically administrators and the literacy specialist, will be given the link to the Google Site and the link can be dispersed to teachers. The link may also be displayed on school websites under the teacher resources section of the site, for all teachers to access. To

access the site, participants only need the link; there will be no password required for this site. The information for this professional development will be copyrighted but archived on the Google Site and will be accessible at any time. The teacher and student downloadable material will be presented in a PDF format which will allow teachers to download the material to print and save to their device but will not allow the format and content of the material to be changed by those accessing the material.

**Proposed Project Format and Activities.** The format of this proposed professional development project includes grade level pages for Pre-Kindergarten through second grade listing six student-engaged strategies to support critical literacy instruction (see Appendix B). The format of the strategies shared within the Google Site included recommended literature for the lesson, key learning skills, detailed description of the strategy, teaching tips for educators, and sample discussion prompts for the classroom. Each strategy also included video clip examples of potential lesson formats and discussion questions retrieved from the New York State Common Core modules. Standard aligned printable activities sheets for students and editable critical literacy lesson plans for educators were linked in each grade level for classroom use. Example anchor charts and other visuals were also be incorporated into each strategy listed for each grade level to meet the needs of diverse learners. Additional professional development for educators came through the explanation of the Principal Investigator's Table 1 and Table 2 from chapter three along with links to some of the original research gathered for this research synthesis on each critical literacy grade level page. The educators had access to all of the materials to use in their own classroom to promote critical literacy instruction. Participants in this professional development project also had access to the Facebook page in which to they had the opportunity to respond or enhance the content by adding their own comments, video, and

audio. In order to receive a certificate of completion, educators must have met the requirement of participation on the Google Site and Facebook group; thus promoting accountability and creating collaboration among colleagues and other professionals.

**Proposed Resources for Project.** Proposed resources for this professional development Google Site and Facebook group included online Internet access, a computer (or similar technology device) for participants, and a printer to print downloadable materials for the teacher and student. Google Sites is a free resource which makes this format a cost-effective form of professional development for school districts. Facebook is another free website in which educators can connect, collaborate, and keep each other accountable through their picture, audio, and video uploads of their critical literacy instruction in their classroom. In order to most efficiently provide the Google Site and Facebook group information to educators, the link itself was distributed among local school district administrators and literacy specialists. They were then granted access through their district as the Google Site shared with them through their school email address. After evidence of the fulfillment of the participation requirement pertaining to the Google Site and Facebook group, educators were also sent an official certificate of completion for their professional development records.

**Proposed Evaluation of Project.** To evaluate the effectiveness and usefulness of the content and format of the Google Site and Facebook group for professional development as well as to determine whether the project objectives have been met, the last page of the site contained a link to an online survey (see Appendix A) through Google Forms. Participants were asked to measure the effectiveness of the Google Site and provide their feedback in regards to the site's usefulness for their own professional development. The survey sought to determine if the information was clearly presented, if the types of critical literacy student-engaged strategies were

explained appropriately and effectively, if the educators would personally use these types of critical literacy instruction to support their own students' ELA instruction and critical literacy awareness, and if educators felt the opportunities to engage with other educators on the topic was meaningful to their professional development.

### **Project Ties to Professional Standards (Common Core and IRA)**

This professional development project ties to the *Professional Standards* of the International Reading Association (IRA). The research focuses on Standard 1 Professional Knowledge and Standard 6 Professional Learning and Leadership. Standard 1 requires the candidate to, "...understand major theories and empirical research that describe the cognitive, linguistic, motivational, and sociocultural foundations of reading and writing development..." (IRA, 2010, p. 5). Classroom teachers who voluntarily use this digital educator guidebook via Google Sites will meet this standard by learning more about major theories and empirical research on critical literacy to further understand student reading and writing development. For Standard 6, teachers are required to, "...recognize the importance of, demonstrate, and facilitate professional learning and leadership as a career-long effort and responsibility" (IRA, 2010, p. 15). Classroom teachers who voluntarily use this digital educator guidebook via Google Sites will meet this standard by demonstrating participation in professional development as a professional responsibility.

In addition to these IRA standards, this form of professional development ties to the New York State Next Generation Learning Standards (NGLS). The NGLS standards for reading addressed through this professional development project include the following five standards: KR1: Develop and answer questions about a text. (RI&RL); KR2: Retell stories or share key details from a text. (RI&RL); KR3: Identify characters, settings, major events in a story, or

pieces of information in a text. (RI&RL); KR6: Name the author and illustrator and define the role of each in presenting the ideas in a text. (RI&RL); KR9: Make connections between self, text, and the world. (RI&RL). The student-engaged strategies included in the digital educator guidebook involved five critical literacy themes, all of which included student reading in a plethora of ways. Teachers using the guidebook would expose their students to a reading of a class text with questions to follow, retelling familiar stories and also changing these stories to fit the needs of the classroom prompt, and identifying author role and purpose for creating the text.

The NGLS standards for writing addressed through this professional development project include the following four standards: KW1: Use a combination of drawing, dictating, oral expression, and/or emergent writing to state an opinion about a familiar topic or personal experience and state a reason to support that opinion; KW4: Create a response to a text, author, or personal experience (e.g., dramatization, artwork, or poem); KW6: Develop questions and participate in shared research and exploration to answer questions and to build and share knowledge; KW7: Recall and represent relevant information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question in a variety of ways (e.g., drawing, oral expression, and/or emergent writing). The writing strategies included within the guidebook engaged students in many different writing practices including writing their opinion on character perspective, developing questions to ask their peers during group discussion, and connecting their own experiences to the text in a written format.

The NGLS standards for comprehension and collaboration addressed through this professional development project include the following standard and three subcategories: KSL1: Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse peers and adults in small and large groups and during play; KSL1a: Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions, including listening to others,

taking turns, and staying on topic; KSL1b: Participate in conversations through multiple exchanges; KSL1c: Consider individual differences when communicating with others. Students engaged in critical literacy instruction will work on their collaborative skills with their peers as they discuss their ideas and opinions in groups, work together to create critical literacy reading and writing responses, and develop critical awareness through student-engaged strategies.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Overview of Study and Findings**

Reading instruction should be taught with the goal of creating lifelong learners who question the validity of information (Ekvall, 2013; Kuby, 2012; Levy, 2016). Student engagement was cultivated during literacy instruction when there is space for constructive conversation and learning. When effective critical literacy is neglected in the classroom, students then fall prey to accepting and trusting all information presented to them without questioning validity, authorship, bias, or platform (Souto-Manning & Price-Dennis, 2012). Early literacy experiences were found to be critical for young children's development. More specifically, quality literacy experiences are beneficial to children's understanding of the world around them. The problem found within classroom instruction was the lack of critical literacy being taught to early elementary learners. In New York State, Common Core Curriculum has been accepted as the school curriculum of choice. According to Vasquez (2017), the texts in which teachers use in the classroom were not the problem, but rather the lack of teaching and learning from a critical literacy perspective. This research study answered the question: How can teachers incorporate critical literacy pedagogy into literacy instruction? The study investigated a variety of ways teachers can incorporate critical literacy pedagogy into the early elementary classroom.

The first finding demonstrated how critical literacy instruction can be incorporated into the classroom through teacher scaffolded instruction and student-engaged strategies. The second finding found student-engaged strategies to be the most effective way to incorporate critical literacy instruction into the classroom. A third finding suggested the most often used critical literacy strategy to be using familiar texts to engage students in interacting with the text from a new perspective. The fourth finding demonstrated the importance of students learning critical

literacy at the early elementary level in order to prepare learners to meet the New York State College and Career Readiness anchor standards. The professional development project addressed the research question through exploring a multitude of ways in which teachers could incorporate critical literacy into early elementary literacy instruction through lessons structures and student-engaged strategies. The Google Site and Facebook group helped to share the information gathered through the study to other educators in order to support critical literacy instruction in the early elementary classroom.

### **Significance of the Findings**

The findings of this study were significant to educators because the findings help contribute new knowledge to support the importance of incorporating critical literacy instruction into the early elementary classroom. This study uncovered four findings: the first finding determined that critical literacy instruction could be incorporated into the classroom through teacher scaffolded instruction and student-engaged strategies (Andreotti, 2014; Sipe & McGuire, 2006; Bourke, 2008; Martello, 2001; DiStefano & Ness, 2018; Stribling, 2018). The second finding revealed student-engaged strategies as being the most effective way to incorporate critical literacy instruction into the classroom (Heider, 2009; Harwood, 2008; Hurley, 2005; Clarke & Whitney (2009). Through a more student-focused and hands-on approach, students are able to put critical literacy into practice in a level-appropriate manner to create the foundation of the critical literacy skills students are expected to display throughout their educational career in New York State. A third finding suggested the most often used critical literacy strategy to be using familiar texts to engage students in interacting with the text from a new perspective (Bourke, 2008; Martello, 2001; Hoffman, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2007; Behrman, 2006; Luke, 2012). For example, in studying Cinderella, students could engage in critical literacy as they

retell the story in the perspective of an uncommon voice, such as the Cinderella's stepsisters (Bourke, 2008). This particular strategy helped to set the scene for student confidence in working with new critical literacy due to their familiarity and background knowledge of the texts. The fourth finding demonstrated the importance of students learning critical literacy at the early elementary level. According to New York State learning standards, students are expected to have critical literacy skills to demonstrate their college and career readiness as they continue into higher levels of education (Levy, 2016; Gregory, 2018; Bennett et al., 2018). These findings indicated areas in which critical literacy instruction in the classroom influences student success and engagement with critical literacy topics. They are also significant to the field of literacy because they provided a summary of research to date including the types of critical literacy strategies studied and how to incorporate such into a lesson structure in the early elementary classroom. Furthermore, the findings also revealed gaps and limitations in the existing research.

### **Limitations of the Findings**

The findings for this study have limitations. One limitation is that they are based on the existing research, and existing research on critical literacy in the early elementary grades has proven to be somewhat scarce. The research the Principal Investigator was able to find was all on five main topics, the five themes within this study. The majority of the research gathered focused on students in general education classrooms. Therefore, a gap has been found within critical literacy instruction within the special education classroom and literacy academic intervention services. As time passes, perhaps additional research will be conducted in a range of early elementary classrooms, not only general education. Furthermore, the study focused on early elementary students and the classroom, however, the study did not look at how the presence of critical literacy instruction at the lower grade levels later affected critical literacy skills at the

higher levels of education.

### **Conclusion: Answer to Research Question**

The research question sought to answer the following: How can teachers incorporate critical literacy into early elementary literacy instruction? After conducting a review of current critical literacy research the Principal Investigator organized the findings into two common methods of instruction, teacher-led discussion and student-engaged strategies. Next, the method with the largest amount of research attached to it was further analyzed for how the lesson structure would look in a classroom. This methodology was successful in uncovering important critical literacy strategies and lesson structures to share with educators through professional development. Overall, the research question was successfully answered through the findings of critical literacy strategies to incorporate into specific lesson structures found within the research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The limitations of the findings of this research provide a basis for the recommendations for future research. The first recommendation is for more research that explores critical literacy instruction outside of the general education classroom, such as within the special education classroom and academic intervention services resource rooms. The literature used in the study concentrated on whole-class general education instruction. Additional information on students with disabilities and critical literacy instruction would benefit teachers with diverse student populations. A second recommendation for future research could be done to find differences in student critical literacy skills between students with early elementary instruction versus students who did not have critical literacy instruction until the upper grade levels. For example, a study could look into how critical literacy instruction in the early elementary classroom effects student critical literacy skills as they continue into higher grades in comparison to students who have not

had critical literacy instruction at the early elementary level. A third recommendation for further research could be conducted on the critical literacy skills of students portrayed in the current research used in this study, following students as they traveled through high school to determine the ultimate goal of the New York State standards for college readiness. This research would strengthen the importance of critical literacy instruction in pre-k through second grade as a foundation for further critical literacy instruction.

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**Appendix A: Evaluation for Professional Development**Google Forms Evaluation Survey

1. How accessible was this form of professional development?
2. How often do you think you will return to this Google Site?
3. Did you find the engagement with other educators through the Facebook group to help your critical literacy instruction in your own classroom? If so, how?
4. What did you find most/least helpful about this Google Site professional development?
5. If you could change anything in the formatting of the presentation, what would it be?
6. Were the student-engaged critical literacy strategies explained appropriately and effectively?
7. Which classroom strategy did you find to be the most effective for your students? Why?
8. As an educator, have you personally used critical literacy instruction in your classroom prior to this professional development? If so, did your results reflect the information on this site?
9. If you have not previously used critical literacy instruction with your students, would you be willing to incorporate it into instruction now that you have read this information?
10. Do you suggest any additional ways to share the materials within this professional development project (ex: through a freebie on Teachers Pay Teachers)?
11. After participating in this professional development, has your opinion on the importance of critical literacy instruction in the early elementary classroom changed? Why?
12. Have you referred the resources in the professional development to other educators?

Suggestions/ Comments:

## Appendix B: Google Site Strategy



## Fractured Fairy Tales

Early Elementary  
Critical Literacy

Genre/Text  
Fairy Tale/  
Sleeping Beauty

Skills  
Multiple Perspectives  
Different Points of View

Children's Literature Examples:  
*Ninja Red Riding Hood*  
by Corey Rosen Schwartz  
*Who Pushed Humpty Dumpty?*  
by David Levinthal  
*The True Story of the Three  
Little Pigs*  
by Jon Scieszka

**Strategy:** A Fractured Fairy Tale is a fairy or other folk tale that has been modified in such a way as to make us laugh at an unexpected characterization, plot development, contrary point of view, or modern language and events. In this activity, students will take a familiar fairy tale text and change the setting, characters, point of view, time period, and/or point of view.

**Teaching Tip:** Prepare students for the Fractured Fairy Tales activity through asking critical literacy specific discussion questions. Allow space for possible moments of emotional collision and ensure students that they are in a safe environment to explore perspectives and ideas of others.

Prompts:

- How would the story be different if it was told from the perspective of the witch/ or the prince?
- Change the story to modern times, how do you think the story would change? Would the spinning wheel still be apart of the spell?
- What if Sleeping Beauty was warned about the spinning wheel, would her fate have been different?

