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# Using critical literacy with 4th and 5th graders in a book club format

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**USING CRITICAL LITERACY WITH 4<sup>TH</sup> AND 5<sup>TH</sup> GRADERS IN A BOOK  
CLUB FORMAT**

by

Danielle N. Barbato

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Reading Education  
at  
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Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ph.D.

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## **Dedications**

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my students who continue to surprise me each and everyday, and to my aide, Kelly, for never doubting me and always supporting me.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Valerie Lee for igniting my interest in critical literacy. It has truly changed my teaching. Thank you to Dr. Susan Browne for her guidance during this research. I would like to thank my family, friends, and loving boyfriend, Mike, for all of their support throughout this long process. I also would like to show appreciation for my classmates: M.M., C.H., T.S., K.H., and C.O. I could not have done this without any of you.

## Abstract

Danielle Barbato  
USING CRITICAL LITERACY WITH 4<sup>TH</sup> AND 5<sup>TH</sup> GRADE STUDENTS IN A  
BOOK CLUB FORMAT  
2018-2019  
Susan Browne, Ph.D.  
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to research how fourth and fifth grade students interact in a book club when presented with the provocative text, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999). Students were provided with an open forum to discuss controversial topics such as race and social class during one of the most difficult times in American history, The Great Depression. The study was an open observation of the evolution of the book club, individual student responses, and peer communication. The study evaluated (1) how provocative text play a role in the discussions that the students have, (2) how teacher questioning and prompting have an effect on student responses, and (3) in what ways does a book club format create community. It also examined (4) how does a book club give students the freedom to discuss and critically think about difficult topics.

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## Chapter 1

### Story of the Question

#### Introduction

“It is time to read our two page workshop article! Today, we will chorally read our article,” I excitedly stated to my fifth grade students. A few moans and groans echoed in the room as students reluctantly turned to the non-fiction workshop article in their black and white copied packet; students half-heartedly reading the passage out loud in a monotone voice; many students looking towards the windows or laughing at a friend, despite constant teacher reminders to be attentive.

Once the reading was complete I turned the student’s attention to the main idea of the passage, asking them, “What was this article mostly about?” As always, the usual hands sprang up and the same voices that are consistently heard in our classroom were heard yet again. These students were generally correct in their responses, leaving the other students unchallenged and just coasting on the thoughts of others.

Following whole group discussion, it was time for small-group centers, three to be specific. “Time to switch!” I yelled with bravado to my students. Similar to a well-oiled machine or (more precisely) robots, the students moved from one center to the next. The children fluidly moved from computers to independent reading, independent reading to my teacher center, my teacher center to the computers, and so on. During my teacher group students were expected to perform close readings of the text to which they sometimes have little connection.

A few weeks went by, and I began to think about uprooting our similar day-to-day routine. I was going to introduce my students to a book club and use a book that would

challenge them to think beyond the text, to make predictions and inferences, to question and contest their classmates, to discuss real world issues; creating tolerance for diversity. I wanted each of my students to be held accountable, feeling comfortable to share their experiences and personal connections, while gaining a new experience of reading an authentic text highlighting controversial topics.

I had very little experience using book clubs in the classroom. However, I believed that a book club would naturally lend it self to a positive learning community. I would be able to potentially create an environment where reader's could comfortably challenge and question their peers, share their thoughts, and discuss their personal connections to an authentic text, and where I would become a facilitator rather than the one controlling the discussion.

Silence filled the room as I stood in front of the class waiting for an answer. Who had heard of a book club? Not one hand was raised as eyes moved back and forth amongst each other with looks of confusion on their faces. I have to say I was not too shocked by this, since many of my students have been in Read 180, a reading supplemental program, for years.

After explaining the ins and outs of a book club and showing a video of the expectations of a book club, the students eagerly rushed to the back of the classroom, to our special reading corner. Each child was handed a brand new, never touched copy of *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (1999). The amazement in their eyes showed that they, more than likely, had never experienced anything like this. The students fanned the pages of the book, touched the cover, read the summary on the back of the book, and

some even began smelling the book. It was in this moment, that I realized critical literacy within a book club format was going to change my teaching forever.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research studied how students interact in a book club when presented with the provocative text, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999). Provocative text is text that discusses controversial topics, which elementary school students generally are not exposed to, such as social class, gender, immigration or racism, to name a few. This specific provocative text was significant to the study to determine the kinds of conversations that emerge and to conclude how teacher facilitation altered discussion in relation to the text. It was used to also encourage students to challenge themselves and their peers critically.

Students were provided with an open forum to discuss controversial topics such as race and social class during one of the most difficult times in American history, The Great Depression. The study was an open observation of the evolution of the book club, individual student responses, and peer communication.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate (1) how provocative text play a role in the discussions that the students have, (2) how teacher questioning and prompting have an effect on student responses, and (3) in what ways does a book club format create community. It also was to analyze (4) how does a book club give students the freedom to discuss and critically think about difficult topics.

Students should be given the opportunity to think beyond their cultural perspectives, specifically concerning race, socioeconomic status, gender, and global awareness. Through this way of thinking, students can question the world around them.

According to Freire's (1993) banking model, when the teacher deposits content with no relevance to students' lives, it lacks authenticity. It is dependent on rote memorization, regurgitation of facts without understanding contextual connections, and fails to give students the opportunity to analyze and critically think about the content. "Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into "containers" or "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher" (Freire, 1993, p. 72). Freire, similar to Rosenblatt, believed that through critical analysis of the text one could understand their reality and become a significant part of their democracy (Freire, 1993, p. 74).

The selected text, *Bud Not Buddy*, (Curtis, 1999) discusses difficult topics, especially from a 10-year-old character's perspective, creates the opportunity to transform a student's education. Students are no longer there to simply retain knowledge, but have the chance to participate in the connection between their world and someone else's, taking on another perspective different from their own.

Utilizing a book club format alters conventional teaching where the teacher provides information and the student recites the information, by allowing the teacher to step back into a facilitator role, giving the students the ability to discuss ideas and opinions with their group as well as ask questions and disagree respectfully (Jocius & Shealy, 2017). In a study about the use of book clubs with underperforming students it was found that students began to see themselves differently in relation to their literacy academics. For example, Dalia Jamal Alghamdi (2011) stated, "The study strongly demonstrated that enhancing the students' academic performance affects the students' self-identification (p. 93)." When students feel comfortable and safe they are willing to

discuss, disagree, make mistakes, and take chances. Therefore, “students no more see themselves as the recipient of the information from their teachers. They see themselves as people who can negotiate and co-construct knowledge.” (Alghamdi, 2011, p.93)

### **Statement of the Research Problem and Question**

In order to create empathy towards the many differences students’ face in today’s world, it is imperative that educators play a key role in teaching children tolerance and empathy. However, due to top-down school reform, educators are under immense pressure to prepare students to perform well on statewide tests, and are expected to follow specific standards, while also making sure students are college and career ready. Many teachers fear they will not have time or issues such as social class and race do not belong in the elementary classroom. However, my study begs to differ. Students thrive when given collaborative experiences, along with authentic text, which challenge them appropriately.

The research question for this study was to observe and analyze, what happens when fourth and fifth grade students are presented with critical literacy in a book club format? Students were asked to participate in a whole group book club and have an open discussion with one another, as the teacher played a facilitator role. Students used Flip grid to respond to controversial parts of the book as well as written journal responses. Flip Grid is a website used to create a video response. It is interactive and other students are able to see their classmate’s responses. However, in this study, due to the nature of the topics discussed, the videos were kept private unless otherwise given permission by the student. The students only completed two Flip grid responses and two journal entries.

Students completed comprehension worksheets and practiced their fluency using fluency strips. The teacher presented students with running records to record their fluency rates each week. A teacher journal was written in twice a week or if student discussion was intriguing or interesting. The students were recorded twice a week in order to analyze themes of their conversations. At the end of the study students were asked to complete a survey asking for their opinion on the book club and their thoughts on the book, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1993).

### **Story of the Question**

Since third grade I have wanted to be a teacher and have never wavered from the thought of emulating my third grade teacher, Mrs. Vitt. However, after teaching for seven years, I felt as though I was just simply going through the motions. Although instilling a love for reading was an area of strength for me, I felt frustrated, burnt out, and was unsure if I was truly making a difference. It seemed like most of my students struggled with comprehension. The parents frequently expressed their frustrations and asked me, how do I help my child understand a text, and to be truthful I was unsure how to respond in order to help them. It was then that I decided to go back to school in order to restore my love of teaching and to learn how to teach skills and strategies that aid in higher-level student comprehension.

Going back to graduate school gave me a fresh view of education and I felt empowered and ready to make a true change in my classroom, especially after my summer clinical class. The class challenged me and provided me the space to reflect on my previous teaching experiences. After many discussions in clinical seminar and spending late nights vigorously researching Paulo Freire, I could not wait to stir up my

classroom with provocative literature and deep discussion. I began to realize the benefit this would have on my students, and to believe that this was the reason I became an educator.

Two years ago I was given the Read 180 teaching position. Read 180 is a scripted supplemental reading program. For the first year of Read 180, I solely adhered to the program and rarely deviated from the script. After researching Paulo Freire in clinical seminar, I started planning lessons for the upcoming school year, which were completely altered from lessons in the past. I realized the children in my program often feel defeated and have very little confidence in their reading ability. Most of my students have never experienced high and challenging expectations, reading an authentic novel, participating in a book club, or being involved in higher-level discussion. Instead, they were accustomed to surface-level discussion, easy or low interest texts, and low expectations. The students were seen as having a deficit before even beginning to read or becoming immersed in a text. More often than not, the students did not see themselves as readers, and I so badly wanted that to change.

Similarly to many other teachers, I was always so afraid to approach controversial topics such as social class, race, gender, and inequalities. Often as teachers we shy away from this, because we can get into “trouble,” whether it is via concerns expressed by parents or administrators or we feel uncomfortable addressing controversial topics with such young children. I had always been a person who enjoys questioning the world around me, challenging others to think differently, and protesting intolerance. I could not believe I had not thought to push my students to these lengths before, and felt I had provided a disservice to my previous students. At this point, I was curious what would



happen if my students, specifically fourth and fifth grade students, were given the opportunity to discuss a provocative text, containing controversial topics, in a book club format.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter two of this thesis will present a literature review linking reader response with Freire's critical literacy theory, along with top down school reform, and critical literacy and reader response used together within book clubs. Chapter three will provide demographics of the state, community, and school in which the study was conducted. Detailed information about the research methodology, participants and the Read 180 program are also included in chapter three. Chapter four's purpose is to analyze data and present the research findings. Lastly, chapter five is the conclusion of the study and provides implications for practice and future research related to critical literacy within a book club format.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify what takes place when fourth and fifth grade students are presented with critical texts in a book club format. The literature review contains seminal research by Freire (1993) on critical literacy, critical pedagogy, emancipatory education, and the banking model of education, as well as Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Reader Response theory. Critical Literacy and Reader Response theories were used as the theoretical framework for this study. The review of the literature presents research on book clubs, specifically critical discussion, response, and social interaction, and the benefits of using critical literacy within a book club structure.

#### Critical Literacy Theory

Freire (1993), in his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, describes the traditional educational system to be very much robotic with a lack of emancipatory thinking and cultural relevance. He posits that students are often seen as accounts where knowledge is simply deposited. Freire (1993) calls this the “banking concept of education model” (p. 72). In this model the teacher has little regard for the cultural background knowledge and experiences with which students are entering the classroom. Students are seen as objects and the teacher is expected to “fill the students with contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality” (Freire, 1993).

Educational institutions have often been known to marginalize and silence specific groups of people, such as, “urban and rural classes,” by using a banking model of education as a way to suppress and determine their intelligence (Freire, 1993). Freire

(1993) adds, “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p.72). Freire promotes a shared learning experience between the teacher and the student (Luke, 2012). According to Freire and Macedo in their text, *Reading the Word and the World* (1987), literacy has the opportunity to be used “for the purpose of self and social empowerment or for the perpetuation of relations of repression and domination.” (p. 2)

Literacy is defined by Willis (1997) as the ability to read and write (p. 388). For many years researchers and educators have been trying to determine what is the best way to teach literacy (Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, Massengill, 2005). As Willis (1997) states, “Literacy has been the subject of heated debate for decades and schools have been used as vehicles for the control of access to literacy and the diffusion of literacy in the United States” (p. 390). In the 1970s, literacy-as-school knowledge had “revived” and the National Institute of Education was formulated to “determine the best educational methods” (Willis, 1997, p. 394). In the late 1970s, theorists such as, Rosenblatt, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin were redefining literacy as a “constructivist and cognitive” relationship where “background knowledge and experiences were considered along with the transaction between reader and text” (Willis, 1997, p. 391). In the 1980s the “back to basics” movement returned, which was the focus of fundamental literacy and played a large part in silencing specific cultures (Willis, 1997, p. 394). The 1990s led to national standards, which were “guidelines on what a student should know in a particular subject by a particular grade in order to better compete with nations worldwide” (Willis, 1997, p.

394). Today, modern day literacy instruction commonly incorporates a balanced literacy approach that combines a bottom-up and top-down approach.

Freire and Macedo (1987), explain an effective literacy program as one that embraces a student's "history, culture, and language" and eradicates social class (p.23). Readers in a free thinking literacy program naturally become "subjects" rather than "objects" as they would with the banking model (p. 24). By focusing strictly on decoding, phonics, mechanics, grammar and reading the word, teachers often separate the opportunities for students to comprehend the world. Habitually, a successful literacy program combines both phonics and phonemic skill instruction, reading the word, and comprehension of "historical context and ideologies," reading the world, while maintaining cultural significance of the values and beliefs of the readers that make up the classroom (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 3). In this instance, students are given the opportunity to liberally, creatively, and critically read and respond to texts and are not denied the chance to "transform the social and political structures that imprison them" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 159).

Given the appropriate autonomy and space educators have the potential, with the use of critical literacy, to transform their classrooms, discussions, and the educational system that has long oppressed students (Freire, Macedo, 1987). Although critical literacy lacks a finalized definition, Luke (2012) describes it as "the use of technologies or print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (p. 50) Luke (2012) also uses the Greek adjective *kriticos* to provide a layman's term of the word critical, meaning the "ability to argue and judge" (p.52).

Lee Heffernan (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000) realized the influence critical literacy could have on a classroom, even in a young third grade classroom such as hers (p. 54). Using the text, *White Wash* (Shange, 1997), a picture book about a young girl who is terrorized on her way home from school, with her brother, by a group of white kids who paint her face white and leave her brother with a black eye, Heffernan incited critical discussion among her students.

As her study progressed, Heffernan began to recognize the vast differences between discussions from the past and when she incorporated “social issues” into the classroom (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000, p. 17). “When she first began reading books that focused on social issues, Heffernan was surprised by the complex conversations that resulted” (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000). Students that Heffernan (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000) observed, rarely participating prior to the implementation of critical literacy, began to “find their voice” (p. 20).

Literacy and, in particular, critical literacy is the tool that supports marginalized students in recognizing how they can alter their society within the construct of their own world. However, literacy is often being used to ensure that working class and minority students are solely functionally literate, meaning they are only taught enough skills to function in school and out of school when in the work world (Giroux, 1987, p. 4). “Literacy is then tied to a deficit theory of learning and becomes a form of privileged cultural capital.” (Giroux, 1987, p. 4) Using critical pedagogy within a critical literacy context acknowledges student cultures, histories, languages, and understandings as strengths rather than weaknesses. (Giroux, 1987, p. 5)

Literacy does not in itself definitively provide “social, political, and economic freedoms,” but can certainly be a starting point towards the understanding of one’s culture, in relation to transforming their society (Giroux, 1987, p. 11). Per Freire (1993), educators should begin to think about the purpose of teaching children to become literate. Is it simply so they can remember the basics or are instructors attempting to provide the students with opportunities to read authentic literature with a critical lens, to question the word and the world, to take part in genuine discussion and in turn a chance to become active participants in democracy, and as teachers incorporating the cultural values, beliefs, and history of our student’s lives (p. 75)?

Freire, as well as other theorists such as Giroux, maintain a political revolutionary stance with regards to critical literacy, in which students become activists stemming from critical discussion (Giroux, 1987, p. 12). Educators in Comber and Simpson’s, *Negotiating Critical Literacies*, consider the appropriateness of this stance with younger children. Urvashi Sahni, for example, conducted a micro-ethnographic second grade classroom study in a rural North India primary school, and felt as if educators should be using critical literacies “to learn from children and reconceive society and politics in terms of relationships, circles of mutuality based on mutual respect and response, which cohere well with participatory democracy” (Sahni, N.D., p. 34).

Sahni worked with a second grade class. She specifically highlighted the results of her intervention with Rajesh. Rajesh was growing up as the only literate in his family, the oldest son, and fatherless, which may have had something to do with Rajesh’s lack of confidence in himself with consideration to his writing. When observed, he copied down work from the board or other students in the class. He took his time with his writing and

was known to have the best handwriting in the class, but struggled with writing from the heart and connecting to his own world (Sahni, N.D., p. 27-28).

Rajesh began making sense of his drawings, describing them, and eventually three months into the study started writing short narratives. He began copying less and became more aware of his personal experiences in order to create imaginary stories of a life for which he may have wished, such as a story about a father and an orchard, neither of which he had. As stated by Sahni, “he traversed social power boundaries and distances, positioning him socially, staked his claim to love and respect, and created a respectable place for himself in a socially distant world, with his writing” (Sahni, N.D., p. 26-27).

At the end of the study, Rajesh was a confident writer who immersed himself in developing and appropriating his own critical literacy. Although Rajesh did not necessarily take part in a political and social movement as defined by many key theorists, he crossed his own social boundaries by discussing ideas outside of his own realm and using his peers and teachers as support systems in the process (Sahni, N.D., p. 37).

**Linking critical literacy with Transactional Theory.** The change from New Criticism to Rosenblatt’s transactional theory altered the way students were reading and made it a cognitive experience based on the student’s background and lives. By recognizing this theory as a “cognitive model” in which focuses on personal connections to a text regarding student experiences and transferring those experiences to critical thinking, it eradicates the traditional banking model of education (Luke, 2012).

Rosenblatt and Freire were similar in their approach towards literacy playing a significant role in sustaining democracy (Connell, 2001). In Rosenblatt’s seminal piece, *Literature as Exploration*, she describes a reader’s aesthetic and efferent stance towards a

text (Rosenblatt, 1983). An aesthetic stance is taken when someone makes a connection to a text based off of his or her background knowledge and life experiences. An efferent stance is taken when someone is gaining information from a text, for example recalling important dates in an historical piece (Rosenblatt, 1983). By presenting both stances as a balanced interaction to be used during various types of literature and informational text, students will gain the “ability to make choices about their thinking, and read text in either stance” (Giouroukakis, 2014). As stated by Giouroukakis (2014), during the reading experience a balance of the two stances is significant in order to transition and make a deeper connection to the text (p. 26).

Connell (2001) explains in detail the relevance of Rosenblatt’s well-known transactional theory in classrooms and school curriculums (p. 39). “While text-based literary theories dominated until the 1960s, in the past three decades text-based theories have been challenged by a wide range of reader-based positions” (Connell, 2001, p. 42).

Rosenblatt strongly believed that reading was a social experience between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1983), which is why she accuses traditional classrooms of “promoting the invisibility of the reader” by not validating the uniqueness of individual student responses, which Vasquez (2010) highlights, “honoring student responses”, as one of the key proponents of critical literacy. Giouroukakis (2014) posits that Rosenblatt argues that readers first connect to a text through personal past experiences and then may take an efferent stance where they “analyze ideas and information” (p. 26). In this instance readers are taking ownership of the ideologies within the text, much like Freire (1993) expressed.



“A transactional approach to reading will benefit any class because it focuses the teacher’s attention to the organic nature of the learning process” (Connell, 2001). In an educational system dependent on standardization and scripted programs, it is paramount that the reader feels connected aesthetically in order to respond with an efferent stance and to maintain reader interaction with text (Giouroukakis 2014, p. 27).

McLaughlin and DeVogd present a third stance, a critical stance, linking Freire’s (1993) critical literacy and Rosenblatt’s (1983) Transactional Theory. “Reading from a critical stance requires not only reading and understanding the words, but “reading the world” and understanding a text’s purpose so readers will not be manipulated by it” (Freire, 1993, McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004). Making sure students have the appropriate “background knowledge” in order to read from a critical stance is vital to them becoming “open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective,” and who are able to participate in critical dialogue (McLaughlin and Devoogd, 2004, p. 56). The idea behind continuing Rosenblatt’s stance continuum is for students to make the “transformation to a world in which critical literacy is not viewed as a classroom activity, but rather as a stance used in all contexts of their lives” (McLaughlin and Devoogd, 2004, p. 62).

Park (2012) conducted a yearlong qualitative study that observed urban middle school girls in an after-school book club. They read the book, *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). The goal of the study included the examination of critical reader response and written response as a collaborative experience (Park 2012). “Reader-response pedagogies continue to shape much of middle and secondary literature instruction, however a more critical and culturally responsive version of reader-response pedagogy has begun” (Park,

2012, p. 192). “Reading and responding to literature critically involve paying close attention to the written text and its language; grappling with difficult issues and questions surfaced by the text; forming connections between and among texts; becoming aware of perspectives and interpretive lenses other than one’s own; and seeing oneself, other people, and the world differently” (Park, 2012, p. 194).

### **Effects of Top-Down Reform on the Use of Critical Literacy**

Teachers are among the oppressed and silenced when forced to adhere to specific standards and curriculum with very little say in the, “selection, organization, and distribution of teaching materials. They operate under demeaning and oppressive conditions.” (Giroux, 1987, p. 25) Giroux theorizes that in order for teachers to provide students the liberating pedagogical experience, the teachers first must receive this opportunity amongst their administration and peers to find their voice and develop appropriate critical curriculum, which emboldens both teachers and students. (Giroux, 1987, p. 25)

The theory of critical literacy is the cornerstone of helping both teachers and students to deeply consider their own cultural history with that of the past, present, and future historical context that they may learn throughout their schooling and to question it in comparison to their own. (Giroux 1987 p. 2) It is significant to note that critical literacy fits underneath the umbrella that is critical pedagogy, and is not strictly reliant on the knowledge of the leaders, such as the “experts, curriculum specialists, school administrators, and teachers,” but rather an interactive learning process between the leaders of the school, teachers and students, specifically drawing on student cultural beliefs, values, and previous knowledge.

However, with recent documentation such as NCLB, national standardization and efforts to establish teacher accountability have been the priority and have limited the ability to implement critical literacies into many classrooms (Riley, 2015, p. 417). Riley (2015) discusses how common critical literacy is becoming, but also explains the current challenges many teachers face, which include “the standards movement, the proliferation of high stakes tests, top-down school reform efforts, and the framing of educational practices in terms of workforce and postsecondary preparation” (p. 417). In doing this, Riley (2015) believes educational efforts move farther away from students becoming participants democratically (p. 417). “In an era of increased external mandates and top-down curriculum, there is increased need for teachers to analyze their school contexts in order to create meaningful opportunities for students” (Riley, 2015, p. 418). Kathleen Riley formed and studied an “adolescent literacy education study group with five teachers from various schools in a large urban area” and their use of critical literacy to transform their classrooms (Riley, 2015, p. 418).

Referencing Freire and Rosenblatt’s “literacy as sociopolitical action”, Riley (2015) highlighted Becca, a teacher who used her seniority to go against the constraints of strict standardization (p. 420). Riley (2015) writes, “Becca’s interview, the passion, and conviction that I sensed in her voice felt poetic” (p. 420). Working at a traditional, desks in rows, school, Becca focused her analysis on creating an opportunity for students to have productive discussions while reading and writing. Her students began to take ownership of their reading and writing and Becca leaned on her study group for feedback and advice (Riley, 2015, p. 421). Becca began to advocate for her students and classroom methods as well as mentor colleagues (Riley, 2015). “Becca’s case illustrates how taking

a critical literacy stance involves contending with the interpersonal and institutional reverberations that are inherent in practices that “disrupt the commonplace” (Lewison, Flynt, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382).

Expectations of teachers have risen, amongst them being the implementation of critical literacy to improve social justice as well as representing those who have been marginalized in literature and life. Unfortunately it is sometimes difficult to step out of the traditional teaching comfort zone (Jones & Enriquez, 2009). Rebekkah and Brooke, two graduate students and primary school teachers, participated in a four-year qualitative study. The study examined when, why, and how teachers implement critical literacies into their classrooms. Although both women were colleagues and friends their use of critical literacy varied tremendously, with Rebekkah utilizing the upward momentum of the “system” to teach with a balanced literacy approach rather than cross into critical literacy territory (Jones and Enriquez, 2009). Her hesitancy and fear drove Rebekkah to continue to teach in a traditional manner. Her students were given choices, spent a great deal of time reading and writing, therefore Rebekkah was always held in high regard (Jones & Enriquez, 2009). However, after being observed for two years, she was never seen challenging the students to question perspectives, “questioning authors perspectives, challenging privileged lives portrayed in children’s books, critiquing stereotypes, or engaging in multiple readings of a text from different perspectives” (Jones & Enriquez, 2009, p. 155).

Brooke, on the other hand, transitioned critical literacy into her classroom almost immediately after studying the theory in graduate school (Jones & Enriquez, 2009). Brooke quoted Duffy and Hoffman (1999) in her journal, expressing that “it is not the

method, but the teacher (p. 10)”. Brooke not only taught her students to look at their world and injustice through a critical stance, but using this stance in her life as well (Jones & Enriquez, 2009). Throughout her studies and experiences in the classroom, Brooke was “critical of the mandated literacy curriculum, claiming it restricts possible connections between students’ lives outside of school, and suggested reading materials for lessons and independent reading that did not promote multiple ways of living or alternative perspectives on the world” (Jones & Enriquez, 2009, p. 162). Therefore, Brooke used her own texts rather than the ones recommended by the curriculum (Jones & Enriquez, 2009).

Barone (2011) reflects back on a time when the reading curriculum in schools consisted of book clubs and reading response, however he references that “Today’s classrooms are curriculum driven and time stressed. Teachers are expected to teach reading programs, or a state or country-mandated curriculum and to match a pacing guide for instruction” (p. 7).

Going back to Freire’s (1993) banking model where teachers are the sole source to which students receive their education, teachers in this format are given suggested books and are provided with worksheets to distribute; thus, students are held back from deep collaborative discussion with both their teachers and peers. Barone (2011) recommends the possibility of using the “core reading program,” while also including time for student book clubs (p. 4).

Bourdieu (2000) urges teachers to challenge the usual teaching methods and contest those in charge of mandating conventional standards, by incorporating critical literacy into schools and classrooms. The importance and value of book clubs is

immeasurable, as Barone (2011) recognizes, “their value is relevant in today’s classrooms, and these opportunities allow students to practice reading, share connections to reading and negotiate meaning with student colleagues.” Participating in dialogue as a result of a personal connection to a text, an agreement, or disagreement with classmates and writing are paramount when monitoring a student’s comprehension and engagement, and have been proven to raise both (Pressley, 2003).

### **Book Clubs**

Book clubs are used in a variety of ways in educational settings, often allowing students a chance to choose a specific book, and then reading, discussing, and writing with peers about the book. Students frequently bring their wonderings, questions, predictions, connections, and critical perspectives to a whole group discussion, involving the teacher as a facilitator. However, the versatility of book clubs is beneficial to educators due to the varying contextual environments of each classroom (Barone, 2011, p. 3). Regardless of how a book club is set up, the ultimate goal is to have rich and critical conversations. “Frequently, these conversations enrich and extend the initial understandings that an individual student may have about his or her reading” (Barone, 2011).

Finding adequate time to implement book clubs is a limitation many teachers face in today’s educational system. Teachers are often compelled to teach specific programs in which students respond to “predetermined” and standardized questions, similar to Freire’s description of a banking model (Freire, 1993, Barone, 2011). “These programs tend to consume all instructional time available for reading instruction, and thus, students have few opportunities for individual or small-group reading and response,” in which the

importance of the reader's interaction with the text is ignored, and students are silenced (Barone, 2011).

O'Donnell-Allen and Hunt (2001) found student success after studying the use of The Book Club program. "The Book Club program is based on a project begun in 1989 by educational researchers Taffy Raphael and Susan McMahon and a team of classroom teachers" (O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001, p.83). The study used a pre-service teacher along with four to five students; their age was not specified. It examined the evolution of student achievement throughout the book club and a pre-service teacher's ability to attain a "teacher research mindset and methodology they could immediately apply in the book club setting" (O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001, p. 84).

The study quickly proved, with the use of a book club, the benefit of a teacher as a facilitator who is learning along side of the students, rather than an "expert who has all of the answers" (O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001, p.84-85). Not only was the teacher seen as a student, the students were able to see themselves as teachers. It became a collaborative, positive experience where everyone was learning from one another (O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001). "The Book Club project has reminded us of what can happen when students, teachers, and teacher educators document the process of learning, listen closely to one another, and act mindfully on the lessons we are learning together" (O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001, p.88). Book clubs combine theory and practice, can be an unpredictable experience, and is "capable of provoking more complex questions than easy answers" (O'Donnell-Allen & Hunt, 2001, p.88).

With a Rosenblatt (1978) theoretical framework, Thein & Schmidt (2017) presented a case study involving pre-service teachers documenting her use of critical

witnessing during an after-school book club. “For the past four years, we have co-directed Strong-Girls Read Strong Books, which is a weekly after-school book club that serves an average of 45 fourth-sixth grade girls in a diverse elementary school” (Thein & Schmidt, 2017, p. 313). They wanted to allow the girls a safe space to read and respond to literature with representation of strong women (Thein & Schmidt, 2017). The study lasted four-years, and the teacher often read to the girls unless the girls sometimes asked to read to the group. The girls were also asked to read both individually or with a partner at times (Thein & Schmidt, 2017).

The study specifically highlighted a girl named Daniela and her struggles in reading, yet her progressive strides from participating in the book club (Thein & Schmidt, 2017). In the beginning of the study, discussion was challenging for Daniela. “Interviews with Daniela’s teachers, we heard that Daniela was regularly positioned in deficit terms: stubborn, short on attention, difficult to manage, and from a challenging family situation. We were also told that Daniela was not a good reader and writer” (Thein & Schmidt, 2017, p. 316). However, despite her stigma, Daniela participated frequently during the book club to read out loud, made relevant contributions to the discussions, wrote, and loved to act out specific parts of the books (Thein & Schmidt, 2017, p. 316).

“By focusing on what the girls found to be important, a space was created where Daniela’s literacy strengths could emerge” (Thein & Schmidt, 2017, p. 318). The more comfortable she felt the more she was participating and involving herself in the discussion (Thein & Schmidt, 2017). In the book club Daniela “became a valued and insightful member of this community and began participating with greater confidence” (Thein & Schmidt, 2017, p. 318). Even if discussions, related to the book, were



uncomfortable or generalized as “inappropriate, they were welcomed into the book club discussions (Thein & Schmidt, 2017, p. 319). Thein & Schmidt (2017, p. 322) discussed the disadvantage of the “traditional positioning of the teacher as a distanced authority.” The study recommends that teachers listen closely to their student’s lives, experiences, and responses to literature, even if it may be uncomfortable at times and this can be done in a successful book club community (Thein & Schmidt, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Despite the many drawbacks teachers face with top-down school reform, which includes standardization, state testing, pacing charts, and the like, teachers have to keep in mind the benefit of using critical literacy in a book club format. Freire (1993) and Rosenblatt (1983) both wanted the oppressed to use literacy to rise, become aware, and take action to create change in their own lives and democracy. Teachers have that opportunity if they shy away from the banking model (Freire, 1993), where the teacher is the “expert” and the students are simply there to retain knowledge. Rather, transition to a facilitator role where students are not silenced or marginalized and have a voice.

## Chapter 3

### Context, Research Design and Methodology

#### Introduction

Chapter three provides demographics of the state, community, and school in which the study was conducted. Pseudonyms were used for the school name and town. Detailed information about the research methodology, participants and the Read 180 program are also included. Clems Elementary School is a diverse, rural school, located in New Jersey. Read 180 is a supplemental reading program available to the students at Clems Elementary. It is for general education students who struggle significantly with reading, but also for students with IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) who have difficulty with literacy.

Qualitative research, as well as teacher research is described, and a brief summary of the data analysis is also provided. *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (1999) was used in a book club format with fourth and fifth graders. A teacher research journal, student artifacts, observations, audio recordings, Flip Grid videos, and student journal responses were used to analyze data to analyze the results when students collaborate in a book club environment, centered around one age-appropriate novel.

**Community.** Aura Elementary School is situated in Elk Township, which is located in Gloucester County, New Jersey. It is an approximately 19.2 square mile rural town with an estimated population of 4,134 people. Data collected by the 2016 Census Bureau shows that 83% of the Elk Township population is Caucasian, 13% is black or African-American, 2% is Hispanic, and 2% is labeled other or considered non-Hispanic. The 2016 Census Bureau reports that 100% of children ages five to seventeen speak

English only at home, and 97% of adults over 18 speak English only at home, with 1% speaking Spanish and 1% speaking Indo-European. In Elk Township, 90.1% of adult residents have attained a high school graduate degree or higher, which is about the same as the overall rate in Gloucester County and New Jersey, while 24.4% of adult residents have received a Bachelor's degree or higher.

According to the 2016 Census Bureau, there are roughly 1,652 housing units in Elk Township, 89% of which are single-family units, 8% are mobile homes, and 2% are multi-family units. The mobile home percentage is nearly quadruple the rate of the county and state, which is about 2%. The median household income is \$68,542, which is fairly close to the state average of \$73,702, but well below the county average of \$78,592. The median value of owner-occupied housing units is about \$221,500 (US Census Bureau, 2016). In Elk Township, (delete) 7.9% of people are below the poverty line. Roughly 2% of children (under 18) and about 6% of seniors (65 and over) are living in poverty.

**District and school.** The Elk Township Public School District has only one school, Aura Elementary School. It is a PreK-6 district, exclusively; Elk students attend Delsea Regional High School upon graduation, along with students from neighboring Franklin Township. According to the NJ School Performance Report 2016-2017, the Elk School District serves a total of about 335 students, employs 34 teachers, and maintains a student to teacher ratio of 10-to-1. Roughly 51% of the student base is female and 49% are male. In regards to PARCC scores in 2016-2017, approximately 96% of students took the test, and about 52% met or exceeded expectations, which is comparable to the 55% of testers throughout the state who met or exceeded expectations. Interestingly, Aura

Elementary is showing progress in both English and Math with regards to state testing and median student growth percentile; however, students are absent for 10% or more of days enrolled and are in need of improvement in the area of Chronic Absenteeism (NJ Performance Summary Report).

Within the district 28% of the students are students with disabilities, with only 1% of students being English language learners. According to the NJ School Performance Report 2016-2017, 33% of the students are economically disadvantaged and 8% are homeless. As of 2016-2017, 71% of the students were white, 14.9% Hispanic, 11.6% black or African American, 1.8% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.6% are Asian, with 99.7% of the students speaking English as their home language.

**Classroom.** Ms. Barbato's Read 180 class contains a total of 40 students; however, only 20 were used in this particular study. There are a total of 20 students between the fourth and fifth grade classroom. There are nine students in the fourth grade; four are males and five are females. Three of the students are Hispanic, three are Caucasian, and three are African-American. Fifth grade has 11 students, eight males and three females. Two of the students are Hispanic, four are African-American, and five are Caucasian.

This study looks at Read 180, an 80-minute supplemental literacy replacement class in response to the research question, which asks what happens when fourth and fifth grade students are presented with critical literacy in a book club format. Students who struggle with reading are placed into Read 180. A variety of assessments are used to determine a student's placement in Read 180, including teacher observations, a reading inventory (which is taken on the Read 180 computer program), STAR testing, teacher

tests, and student classwork. The program itself is a scripted program where the students and the teacher participate in close reads using non-fiction and literature texts from their R Book. On the computer program students complete four individualized zones, which include word zone, spelling zone, reading zone, and writing zone. During independent reading students choose from the Read 180 library, and complete reading logs, as well as text-based questions in relation to their book. Students can be exited from the program when the teacher feels they are strong in all literacy areas such as, phonemic awareness, phonics, writing, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension in order to introduce them into the general education literacy classroom.

Dr. Ted Hasselbring, a team leader from the Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt University, the Orange County Literacy Project in Florida, and the development staff at Scholastic, Inc., developed Read 180 in 1985. Read 180 was first released in 1998, and was originally owned by Scholastic. It was sold to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2015. According to WWC (What Works Clearinghouse) Intervention Report (U.S. Department of Education) in November 2016, Read 180 was proven to have positive effects on comprehension and general literacy achievement, and potentially positive effects on reading fluency.

**Students.** Many of the students in the class, outside of their Read 180 period, have a difficult school day. It is also apparent that students struggle with reading according to their grades, the comments they make regarding reading, and their teachers expressing their difficulties in class. Attitude surveys were administered in the beginning of the year confirming student attitudes towards reading and writing. Most of the students often feel defeated, despise reading and/or writing, and have poor attitudes towards

reading. The students are sometimes scared to challenge themselves. However, many students work hard to progress and grow. The reading inventory on the computer program is taken four times in a school year, and students frequently look forward to seeing if their Lexile level improved. In the fourth grade, four students are between 300L-500L, four are between 500L-700L, and one is between 700L-900L. In fifth grade, three students are between 300L-500L, five are between 500L-700L, and three are between 700L-1,000L.

Participation in class is high and most of the students complete both their classwork and homework in a timely manner. However, other teachers and students often have the impression that the Read 180 classwork is “easier” than the general education classwork. This can be frustrating to hear for several students. Reading aloud, partner reading, Flip grid, book choice, writing on Chrome books, and writing choice are all used to help with engagement and attitude.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This specific research study was conducted using qualitative research. According to Cruz and Tandia (2017), the purpose of using qualitative research is to “describe a process or experience” (p. 81). Research inquiry questions or posited problems drive the methods that are used during the study. Unlike quantitative methods, which use statistical and numerical analysis, qualitative methods usually include (delete comma) interviews, surveys, case studies, vignettes, teacher journals, anecdotal notes, recordings, and “data as it emerges (Cruz & Tandia, 2017, p. 81).” As confirmed by Shagoury & Power (2012), “Research is a process of discovering essential questions, gathering data, and analyzing it

to answer those questions” (p. 2). This demonstrates why qualitative research methodology is often used during teacher research.

**Teacher research.** Teacher research is used to highlight a problem, which arises within the classroom and creates a sense of inquiry. As noted by Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) teacher research is “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 40). Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s (2009) diagram on page 39 presents teacher research implemented under the umbrella of practitioner inquiry, also including action research/participatory action research, self study, the scholarship of teaching, and using practice as a site for research. All of these have the “common characteristics of practitioner as researcher, assumptions about links of knowledge, knowers, and knowing, professional context as site for study, community and collaboration, blurred boundaries between inquiry and practice, new conceptions of validity and generalizability, data collection and analysis, publicity, public knowledge, and critique” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 38).

Teacher researchers use inquiry based research where questions or problems are posed and data is collected, while leaning on collaborative support from fellow colleagues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 40). Unlike other forms of practitioner research where the teachers, principals, and school administrators are the highlight of the research, in teacher research, “The practitioner himself or herself simultaneously takes on the role of the researcher” (p. 41). This gives the researchers the freedom to study their personal inquiries as well as make a difference for social change within their domain. Therefore, research will vary dependent on what each teacher or practitioner finds to be of importance in their classroom or school.

The criticism of this comes from traditional researchers, such as Huberman (1996) stating that “just because teachers may have intimate insider information about teaching does not negate the need for them to use rigorous and objective research methods” (p.131). Huberman (1996) describes teacher research as empirical research in which the researcher has flexibility and is “close to the particular situation and can actually watch it unravel” (p. 132). He insists that teachers should keep themselves well informed during the entirety of their research, while incorporating heavily researched articles to back up their findings (p. 136).

Despite the criticism of teacher research, it is something that has “reemerged” more recently, but has been around for quite awhile (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 5). Shagoury & Power (2012) have stressed “two principles that define the teacher-research movement today and that have been used widely in different education contexts” (p. 5). The first principle includes close observation of students at work and using these observations to drive instruction. The second principle Shagoury & Power (2012) express is the importance of teacher researchers “depending on a research community” (p. 6). Shagoury & Power (2012) believe there is never a certain time to begin researching in the classroom, but simply that “every time a student stares you down and challenges your knowledge is an opportunity to begin” (p. 7).

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of critical literacy within a book club format with fourth and fifth grade students. The study focused on the theoretical framework of Freire (1993) and Rosenblatt (1978). Using the provocative text, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), the study examined open discussion of controversial topics in a book club. The teacher read the book in a whole class book club, containing 9-10



students, with students sporadically participating to read pages of the book. The students completed comprehension worksheets, practiced fluency strips in independent small groups, along with running records once a week. They also completed two written journal responses as well as two Flip grid video responses. The first response stems from the main character's reaction regarding a sign about "sundown towns" that Bud encounters on his journey to find his father, and the second response is about the students' general feelings towards the adversities Bud had faced in his life during the book; with each student citing an adversity of his/her own. At the end of the study, students typed or wrote a response about their opinion towards both the book club structure and the book.

The qualitative methods used in this study were audio recordings twice a week, teacher research journals, written and video responses, and student artifacts such as (delete comma) comprehension worksheets and running records.

### **Procedure of the Study**

The study began with an informal discussion about student experiences in a book club format and their background knowledge on the issues and events that were presented in *Bud, Not Buddy* such as, racism, The Great Depression, and social class. Students next completed a KWL chart. The purpose of this chart was to understand what the students already knew about these issues and events.

Book club discussions vary from the traditional classroom discussions where hands are raised and students wait for their teacher to call on them. Because of the uniqueness of the whole class book club, students were taught how to participate during the book club. Students were instructed to simply have an on-topic conversation with one

another whenever they felt it necessary during the reading of the book, and there was an openness and freedom to their discussions.

Students read for approximately 25-30 minutes everyday, participating in active discussions, which included, but were not limited to personal connections, predictions, inferences, questions, comments, critiques of both characters and the author, and wonderings. Once a week students participated in smaller book clubs where they often re-read specific chapters, answered comprehension questions, practiced fluency sentences, and completed running record readings.

The students were presented with a writer's response question in the third week of the study. The question simply asked students to free write about their feelings towards the sign that Bud encountered that was unkind to Negroes, asking them to leave before sun down. A couple of NEWSELA articles were used to explain The Great Depression and Hoovervilles, but also to explain sundown towns. A video was used to clarify the severity of the sign that Bud saw. The written response was used as a platform for students to express themselves regarding this issue and anything else Bud was going through at the time.

### **Data Sources**

There were a variety of qualitative data methods used during the research. Students were observed while reading and discussing in both whole group book club and smaller group book clubs. These observations were recorded in a research journal along with personal thoughts regarding student progress and reactions, as well as interesting student talk. The journal was used on days that the students were not recorded. Recordings were transcribed and used to analyze themes found in student discussions.

Artifacts were collected such as running records, written student responses, and comprehension question worksheets. The artifacts were used to monitor student progress and gain an understanding of student beliefs. Lastly, two survey questions were administered; asking students to record their thoughts on book clubs, as well as the novel *Bud, Not Buddy*. This survey was given to students to culminate the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The teacher research journal, observations and anecdotal notes, along with the recordings, during both the larger and smaller book clubs were pivotal in the data analysis. They were used to identify specific discussion themes. The teacher observations and book club recordings specifically analyzed student talk, such as how many students were engaged in the conversation, what was said surrounding racism, social class, and adversities, who spoke the most or least, or who was talking in front of their peers. The teacher research journal entries were beneficial to recognize the evolution of the book club from the beginning to the end of the study. It was used to prove the community atmosphere that was created from the use of the book club. The artifacts collected were reviewed to ensure student understanding of the text and to document student thought.

The culminating survey questions were used as a chance for students to express their thoughts about *Bud, Not Buddy* and the book club. The questions included how the students felt about the book club, what they did and did not like, how they felt about the novel, and what they did and did not like. This provided me with an idea of what the students felt was successful or unsuccessful during our four-week book club experience. It also was beneficial to recognizing whether a community was formed or not. The data was analyzed to identify what the themes suggested.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

The findings from my study that examined the question, “what will happen when 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are presented with critical literacy in a book club format” is documented in Chapter four. The students in this study are in an intervention reading program called Read 180. They are one or more grade levels below in reading. Most of the students have shown, through attitude surveys, the feeling of defeat when it comes to reading and writing.

As students read and discussed the critical text, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) in a book club format the following three themes emerged: (1) race and racism, (2) social class, and (3) acknowledging adversities. Students seeing themselves in the text did not develop as a theme; however, a classroom learning community was formed during the book club, and was evident when analyzing the data.

#### **Discussions of Race and Racism: “Everyone is Supposed to be Together”**

The students discussed a variety of topics, but race and racism was a topic that was addressed frequently. The novel, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), was set during the Great Depression in 1936 and lent itself to this topic of discussion. The students seemed to feel fairly comfortable and familiar with discussions of race and racism, but at times unsure. This theme continued to resurface as I observed, wrote in my teacher research journal, and generated transcriptions of the audio recordings.

**Fifth grade conversations of race and racism.** Race first arose when reading about the Amoses, Bud's foster family, specifically Mrs. Amos. The Amoses seemed to have money and treated Bud terribly, while treating their own son like a king. A fifth grade African American student, Harry, shouted out, "She is a racist!" Other students shook their heads nodding in agreement, primarily the other African-American children in the room. I was not sure if one could be racist of their race. I pondered this comment all night, researched and read, and realized someone can absolutely be racist against their own race. They can think they are better than that person due to financial or behavioral expectations." With this comment, without even realizing, a fifth grade student had his teacher researching and learning new information about internal racism. Early on in our book club discussions, we had expanded our understanding of racism to include the idea of superiority within ones own race.

Once Bud escaped from the Amoses, he came in contact with Bugs, a friend from the orphanage, and they headed to a shantytown called Hooverville. Bud, Bugs, and Deza passed a group of white people sitting by a smaller fire.

"Right before we got into the cardboard jungle we passed the white people with the coughing baby at their own little fire. I said to Deza, "How come they are off along? They aren't allowed to sit around the big fire, because that baby is makin' so much noise?" They been invited, but when someone took them food and blankets the man said thank you very much, but we are white people we ain't in need of a handout" (Curtis, 1999, p. 77).

Students stopped reading to engage in an extended conversation about why the people would say such a thing. When Bud began to question why the white family was

not near the large fire with everyone else, this led the students to talk about possible racism. The students questioned whether the white family at the Hooverville was being racist or keeping their contagious baby away from the others. The following conversation portrayed the ability of fifth grade students to understand hatred and poverty, yet at times give people the benefit of the doubt. Charlie made the connection that the white family was broke just like the rest of Hooverville, and Cane recognized the comment as “rude, because they are trying to offer them something.” He later added, “They were just trying to help them and their baby, and like make sure they were okay.” Harry, a student who was often aware of racism during the study, shouted, “They are being racist!” Charlie, an African-American student, on the other hand, gave the white family the benefit of the doubt by stating, “I think the guy at the small fire only did that because his baby is sick and probably didn’t want to get the other people sick.” I then challenged Charlie by asking him, “Why would you deny food and a blanket if you are in trouble like that?”

This conversation happened as a result:

**Cane:** Wait, but all of the people are all the same...there is nothing different. They are all poor.

**Teacher:** True, they are all hungry, all poor, and they all don’t have great shelter.

**Charlie:** They don’t have shelter at all, because they didn’t want anything.

**Breana:** None of them know what is going to happen tomorrow.

**Teacher:** Right, and remember they mentioned the glow by the big fire showed the different skin colors? The Great Depression did not pick a race, however in this instance we may be seeing a bit of what Harry said, racism.

In this instance, the students recognized that the people of Hooverville were all living in poverty. Their race did not have a bearing on their level of insufficiency.

However, some of the students discovered that the comment made by the white family

was racist, while others believed they were being prideful. Breana made a reference to the next day being unknown since the people were unsure of their working condition and had to ride the rails. The students wondered why the family would deny anything when they had very little and their child was sick.

Racial discrimination and the discussion of race was a significant part of our book club discussions. Based on Curtis' portrayal of this time and our discussion, the students over time began to understand how African-American people were treated during the 1930s. This is something the book club format enabled to occur.

The fifth grade study group was also provided with a video of Melissa Harris-Perry discussing *The History of Sundown Towns*. In the video Harris-Perry (2014) discusses an incident involving a young girl who was selling encyclopedias. She was unfortunately killed, and the video concluded with a discussion of the Green Book, which was a guide of safe cities for African Americans. Following the video we gathered as a group and began discussing our thoughts. I noticed that the students were hesitant at first and tripping over their words. A few of the students knew it was racist to have a town that kept African American people out at night. However, they had trouble verbally expressing themselves.

The students used Flip grid to discuss their thoughts individually prior to sharing with the class. Flip grid is an interactive video recording website, which allows students to video record themselves. The students were asked to share their thoughts on the sign that Bud encountered, along with the videos that were shown. Many of the students kept to themselves, but as evident from their Flip grid responses they provided insight into their understanding of racism and hate. For example, Nick did not participate in the

following conversation, however recorded, “I think the sign was really hateful and only because they are a different skin color.” In the following conversation it is evident that the students wanted to discuss the topic, but were trying to organize their thoughts to express what they were feeling.

**Teacher:** Okay, so what are some of your thoughts about the sundown towns?

**Cane:** Well, I think it was kind of like racist because um like how it was kind of rude, because um how like they’re saying that they can only go out at night like it’s kinda rude though.

**Teacher:** Why do you think that?

**Cane:** Because um they think that like since they’re black that at night they could take people because they could see at night, which I don't get it, because everyone can see the same except if you’re blind

**Charlie:** Can I say something?

**Teacher:** Absolutely...I am just listening in, I asked the question and now I am listening.

**Harry:** I think the sign was racist because um because in that town it was uh not much black people. There was American people, but then I think Mr. Lewis was African American that’s why he stopped for Bud and when he saw Bud in the woods he was probably African American and was probably trying to get Bud out of the town that’s why he asked him where did he live at? Or where did he come from?

**Charlie:** I think they don’t like...black people

While Cane’s thoughts are a bit unclear, Harry made a comment about the race of people who are not African-American as being “American.” This led us into a discussion of what makes a person an American and if they have to be white to be American. I found it especially interesting that he referred to white people as American. The most interesting part about it was that it showed how Harry perceives the race that is often deemed as prevalent in our country, which is Caucasian or white. After discussing what



determines a person as American, the students came to the consensus that it is someone who lives, works, and goes to school in the United States of America. Cane also added, “An American is someone who cares about the country.” Harry, a young African American male, defined an American as a white person. In our country there are many white people in power, including myself. During his school day he encounters many white people in power, and this could have possibly been a reason why Harry referred to white people as Americans.

Charlie had trouble when referencing race as he often referred to it as religion.

**Charlie:** I don't think black and white people like each other, maybe because they always fight because they're different religions.

**Teacher:** What do you mean by different religions?

**Charlie:** Like different skin color.

**Breana:** (a white girl) they are just like us.

Charlie frequently described other races as religions. When asked what he meant by different religions, he replied “like different skin color.” Therefore, he clearly understands race, but continued to use religion when discussing race. It seemed as we continued our discussions Charlie was able to recognize race as skin color. Breana added that “they” or African Americans are just like us. She did not understand why black and white people would argue.

Breana was comparing black people to herself and recognizing similarities rather than differences and did not understand why they were being treated poorly due to their skin color. Charlie finished off our discussion by coming to the consensus that Lefty Lewis stopped at 2:30am to pick up Bud, because “he didn't want anybody stoppin' him saying that they're uh like...not welcome” The fifth graders had what I believed to be a mature conversation with a team mentality where they were all one, regardless of skin

color. These conversations pointed powerfully to role of school in supporting students' knowledge around what it means to be American and the part that critical texts can play in the process.

Following the video and article about sundown towns, the students were shown a video about Ferguson, Missouri's midnight curfew. This was put into place about two years ago when police shot Michael Brown. In my teacher journal I recorded a critical moment in our race and racism discussions. "When we were talking about the sign Bud saw, Harry said, "It was racist!" This led me to describing racism and being a racist and what it specifically means.

Harry was very disturbed by the article and videos. He said, "Some white people still don't like black people." He proceeded to explain an example from his own life, referenced Black Lives Matter, and also talked about Michael Jackson. Harry said he saw on YouTube that Michael Jackson changed his skin color, and his mom said it was because he did not like his black skin. Harry said, "I'm not sure why he didn't like his skin color."

I was so glad Harry had processed his thoughts and was able to express his personal feelings towards racism. By recognizing Black Lives Matter and Caucasian people still showing hatred towards African Americans, I think it proved his understanding of past and current racism. Harry personalized and questioned Michael Jackson's decision to change his skin color, to show his pride in his race.

However in a later conversation regarding race, Harry was still referencing a white person as an "American person" in an exchange about Miss Thomas and the band accepting Bud into their home. The students in this conversation were making

connections between the band member's races based on how the band members were treating Bud. They recognized and used Miss Thomas' concern for Bud to make predictions regarding her race.

**Harry:** An all American person wouldn't just let an African-American homeless boy in their house

**Teacher:** What do you mean by an all American person?

**Harry:** I mean just like an American...like a white person wouldn't let him in their house. He is homeless and they don't know what he is capable of, but since Bud said Herman E. Calloway is his father then I am guessing that Mrs. Thomas and them are African-American.

**Teacher:** Well, what makes you American...Do you have to be white to be an American?

**Harry:** Well, some white people want to be black

**Jackie:** Yeah, if they stay in the sun for a long period of time...

**Harry:** Did you know Christopher Paul Curtis is African American?

**Teacher:** Yes, I did. Look at the awards he won for writing this book.

**Charlie:** I think Miss Thomas is African-American, because the way she has been helping Bud and like in a good kind of way

**Teacher:** Yes, in a motherly kind of way

**Breana:** I think Miss Thomas is black, well African-American, because I agree with Charlie.

In this discussion Harry also provided his classmates with information regarding the author of the book. Although it was not a recurring theme, Harry was able to recognize an African-American as a role model. The reason it may not have emerged as a theme may have been a lack of facilitation on my part. As I observed the excitement in his face and voice, it was evident Harry was proud that he was reading a book written by an African American man.

**Fourth grade conversations of race and racism.** Similar to the fifth grade students, the fourth grade students were able to understand why Mrs. Amos was potentially showing so much hatred towards Bud. In my teacher journal I documented how “I talked less today and allowed the students to talk, and an actual discussion began to build.” I wrote, “I was intrigued by, Nelson, one of the few African-American students in the class who closed his book and began reading another book during the discussion of Mrs. Amos.” I wondered if the topic was possibly difficult for him since all but two of the students are Caucasian or Latino. Race is a challenging topic, and can sometimes make students feel scrutinized or isolated.

However, it did not seem as though it was lack of interest. Nelson expressed throughout our book club, as well as on his end of the study survey, how much he enjoyed reading the book with the help of his classmates. He also would rush back to the reading corner asking, “Can I read?” multiple times throughout our four-week study, proving it may have solely been avoidance of the topic that made him want to close his book. An excerpt from *Bud, Not Buddy* describes how Mrs. Amos spoke to Bud.

“I am not the least bit surprised at the show of your ingratitude. Lord knows I have been stung by my own people before. I do not have the time to put up with the foolishness of those members of our race who do not want to be uplifted” (Curtis, 1999, p. 14-15).

After reading this portion, Hadley, a white child, stated that she believed “Mrs. Amos was saying that she won't put up with Bud's foolishness, because she thinks he isn't acting like she thinks black people should.” Nelson closed his *Bud, Not Buddy* book and proceeded to open another book. Nelson was a student who expressed anger towards

the Amos' son, Todd, for the way he had treated Bud. However, I sensed that he felt uncomfortable talking about this specific topic.”

Race emerged again in our book club when Bud came in contact with Lefty Lewis, an African-American man, during his journey. Bud was walking on the road in Owosso, Michigan when he saw a car coming and hid in the bushes. Bud's experiences with police and the military were brought to the surface when he caught a look at Lefty. Bud had only seen white police officers; therefore he concluded that because of Lefty Lewis' black hat, he must be a soldier. The following was a fourth grade discussion that took place following this reading:

**Jani:** Wait, so back then cops were only white and the soldiers were black?

**Hadley:** He hasn't really seen any black cops.

**Teacher:** Right Hadley! Jani that is a great question...most likely at this time there were not many black police officers, but in Flint, Michigan the cops that Bud had experiences with or had seen were white. In 1936, the military was segregated, so both races were included in the military. Do you remember the word segregated?

**Jani:** Yeah, it means they weren't together

**Carly:** That was when white and black people were separated

**Aide:** There were black and white towns as well

**Glory:** What about that president...Martin Luther King?

**Teacher:** Oh he wasn't a president, but he did a lot to ensure that black people and white people were equal and together in peace.

**Carly:** Wasn't Abraham Lincoln the president who had black and white schools go together or was that a different president?

**Aide:** Abraham began getting rid of slavery. It was 100 years before the Civil Rights Movement even began. Lyndon B. Johnson and Kennedy were a big part of integration.

During this discussion students synthesized their thoughts of this time period by focusing on why Bud may have said, “But all the cops I’d ever seen were white” (Curtis, 1999, P. 98).

However it was a whole different story, when Bud came across a sign, at 2:30 a.m., that said, “To Our Negro Friends Who Are Passing Through, Kindly Don’t Let the Sun Set on Your Rear End in Owosso” (Curtis, 1999, p. 105). Both the fourth and fifth grade group had opinions on the sign, especially once we looked deeper into what were known as sundown towns. Students read an article and watched a video, which described sundown towns. The video even highlighted a story of a young African-American girl who was selling encyclopedias in a sundown town and was killed by a white man for being in the town past sunset. The students were in disbelief and their comments were telling of how they felt about towns such as these.

**Carly:** They just don’t want black people out at night

**Jani:** No they are allowed out at night, they just aren’t allowed in some towns

**Teacher/Aide:** Right...

**Hadley:** The sign is probably meaning that it is white property

**Aidan:** Why is what’s his name driving in a car if only white people are allowed to be there?

**Hadley:** Lefty Lewis...and he is just driving through I think

**Teacher:** Yes, just driving through, but why do you think Mr. Lewis stopped?

**Nani:** He didn’t want Bud to get in trouble

**Hadley:** He wanted to get him off white property probably, because it is white property

**Teacher:** Why? What could happen?

**Hadley:** Because they could arrest him or take him back to the orphanage

**Teacher:** They could...what do you think makes this sign nice or not nice?

**Carly:** It is just mean!

**Teacher:** Why?

**Jani:** Because everybody should be allowed there at the same time

**Carly:** Exactly what Jani said!

The students began to understand the severity of the sundown towns through a challenging discussion and a bit of facilitation on my part. Some of my white students seemed hesitant to speak out about what was happening in the text. This could have been because they were not used to discussing topics such as this one. Jani, an African-American boy, seemed to feel at ease with the conversation and grasped that Bud was unsafe in that area at that time of night. I prompted and continued the conversation to see if Jani understood why Lefty Lewis pulled over to guide Bud into his car. It was clear he comprehended what was happening between Bud and Lefty.

**Teacher:** Okay, so Lefty Lewis stopped at 2:30 in the morning...

**Jani:** To get Bud out of that property at night.

**Teacher:** Why do you think he would have to do that?

**Jani:** So they didn't do anything to him, because he is a black person and not a white person...If he was a white person he would just have let him be because he is allowed to be there, but he is a black person so he's not really supposed to be there and he wanted to get him out of there. So, he convinced him with food to get him out of there.

**Teacher:** Absolutely, because he knew that the white people could harm or hurt him right?

**Jani:** Yeah...I think everyone is supposed to be together.

Analyzing this data allowed me to see how sheltered the fourth graders are when it comes to discussions of race and racism. It felt as though Jani helped guide his classmates to the concluding reason why Lefty Lewis was so concerned about Bud being out at night in Owosso, Michigan.

The students learned a great deal about race and racism by the time we had reached the end of the book. When Bud met the band, he met all African-American band members with respect to one member who was white. This sparked a bit of a conversation between the fourth grade students about what was allowed in 1936 with regards to owning a piece of property.

**Kale:** Shouldn't black people be called brown people, because we aren't actually black?

**Jani:** I always wondered that too

**Teacher:** That is a great question!

**Sally:** Shouldn't it be light brown and brown?

**Hadley:** Or peach?

**Students in unison:** Yeah!

**Teacher:** Well can't we change it?

**Aidan:** I have a question...It says only white people can own property, so what about if black people wanted to have a house?

**Aide:** Herman is the leader of the band and he couldn't own his own property and had to put it in Dirty Deed's name.

**Jani:** Because he was white?

**Teacher:** Yes.

**Jani:** So if they didn't have Dirty Deed they wouldn't have a house?

**Teacher:** They likely would not have a place to practice and people wouldn't book them for shows.

It is so different from today that I think it was difficult for them to process that an African-American could not own property without the help of a white person. Kale began the conversation questioning why black people are called "black" when they are technically brown in color, which proved she was thinking beyond societies racial classifications.



**Fourth and fifth grade written responses to racism.** Following our discussions, both fifth and fourth grade students wrote their thoughts about the sign that Bud encountered as he was traveling to find his father. The sign, stating, “To Our Negro Friends Who Are Passing Through, Kindly Don’t Let the Sun Set on Your Rear End in Owosso” (Curtis, 1999, p. 105), was located in Owosso, Michigan. Many of the students wrote that the sign was racist, upsetting, disrespectful, and that the sign would offend many people, especially African-Americans.

In their writing, students believed African-American and white people should work together and get along. Sally stated, “The sign said black people can’t come in the night time, but they can come in the day. Bud is black, but that does not matter. You are who you are, and looks don't matter.” According to their journal entries most of the students understood that the sign was not appropriate, Nelson writing, “My thoughts is black and white should be together. It makes me feel offended, because black and white should always be nice to each other. If I was Bud I would be mad, because I would have to wait a whole day to go to Owosso, Michigan.”

The empathy that was shown through the student responses was significant in recognizing their understanding of racial discrimination. For example Cane responded, “My thoughts about the sign is that the other skinned people are just like us. They just don't have white skin, and they have darker skin. The sign is a giving answer that the people in Owosso think that it is okay to be mean to darker colored skin people.”

## **Economic Disparity**

Another theme that emerged with the help of the setting of the text was economic inequality. The text did a great job of showing how poverty, during this time, did not racially discriminate. The text was set during The Great Depression, which was a bit confusing for the students. Therefore it was imperative to build student background knowledge on this time period. I did this by providing students with articles, videos, and discussion.

The idea of economic disparity was also something many students were unfamiliar with. Although some of the students in the study would be considered economically disadvantaged, this topic did not come up in relation to their own lives. However, the students proved through our discussions and their written responses that they did understand the treatment of homeless people during the Great Depression. Many made personal connections to seeing people that are homeless.

**Fourth grade conversations on economic inequality.** When discussing the Great Depression and the events that took place, Aidan expressed remorse for the children that were going through the Great Depression. He stated, “I feel bad for all the kids in the Great Depression...they didn’t get to really have fun, and these days they don’t have to go through not eating a day or two.” This thought could have been explored further, since Aidan seemed to assume some children today do not have similar disadvantages to children in the 1930s.

The students also talked about their experiences with homeless people, however it was with a bit of prompting on my part. Nani began the conversation, “Well during this (Great Depression) the rich people went poor and the poor people were still poor.” I then

prompted with, “Good thought. Do you still see it today?” Hadley responded, “There are some homeless people out there. There are still homeless people today.” Jani following up with, “There are a lot.” Carly made an empathetic and mature statement about having to potentially “watch your children starve if you do not have food.”

Hadley entered the conversation again, but this time she talked about her experiences seeing homeless people in Atlantic City, and specifically spoke about seeing “one and he had a little fire going on and this big tent and cardboard and stuff. It kind of looked like he was trying to get things from the trash cans like other people’s garbage.” We ended our discussion with students like Aidan and Aldi agreeing with one another that they would also do anything to survive, such as look through people’s trash or using a package to create shelter.

The Hooverville was a small, but significant part of Bud’s journey to find his father. While there Bud found comfort in a young girl his age, named Deza, who was waiting for her father to return from finding work out west. They enjoyed time talking and even kissed each other. Bud confided in her, explaining what happened to his mother, about the home, and the idea of riding the rails with Bugs. The following excerpt ignited a short conversation between the fourth grade students.

“I guess I can’t blame you for wanting to ride the rails. My momma says these poor kids on the road all alone are like dust in the wind” (Curtis, 1999, p. 73).

Jani interrupted and shared his thinking, “So I think why they said that the poor people in the streets are like dust in the wind is because they go different places I think to find shelter. So it is like they’re going with the wind.” Aidan made a comparison to weather rather than comprehending the figurative language that was used. He stated,

“They’re going where the wind can’t reach them. So like if it snows and if it’s wet and windy you get cold. I guess whatever way the winds blowing they are going.” Jani responded, “No, yeah it means they are traveling like the wind because the wind goes all around the world and other people go all around the world to find shelter.” Jani was able to recognize that Deza’s mom was figuratively speaking and also helped Aidan to distinguish this as well.

Economic disparity emerged again when Bud and Bugs woke up early in the morning to jump on the train and ride the rails. Once all of the men and boys were charging the train, the other police officers were tearing down the Hooverville, throwing their belongings into the fire, and shooting holes into their pots and pans (Curtis, 1999). It was apparent, especially from the fourth grade study group, that this incident bothered many students and as I documented in my teacher research journal, “The students seemed to feel bad for the people of Hooverville, as did I.”

The students spent a great deal of time talking about what the police had done to the Hooverville. I began the conversation asking students what they thought about it. Carly immediately said, “Cruel” and Hadley stated, “Awful.” I asked Carly to explain why she had said cruel, and she replied, “Um, because I say cruel, because it is not really nice. I know that cops have a right to do that, but it is kind of a little rude, because they don’t have a lot. The cops should say don’t do this again and just say words instead of actually doing some really mean things.” In the following conversation Glory challenged Hadley with a different perspective on the whole situation.

**Hadley:** Yeah, they keep on...they are trying to destroy it so they won’t have anything to do, so the homeless people won’t have a place to live. It makes no sense.

**Glory:** It kind of does.

**Aide:** Glory explain...why does it kind of?

**Glory:** Because if the homeless go back to Hooverville, they are just going to try to get back on the train again, and then they know that they live there so the cops know that they are going to have to move farther and farther away the less chance they are going to jump on the train.

**Hadley:** Oh yeah...that is true, but it is still mean though. I would rather have shelter than having to move away and not have anything or be near the train.

As we continued to talk about the confrontation between the police and

Hooverville, Sally added, "It still does not make sense, because that is their property and the police were tearing it down and they worked hard on that, like all of their little tents and all." Carly adding, "They must have spent hours and hours trying to find materials."

This then led a student into discussing what she would do if she were homeless. In Hadley's world she presented it as what she would do to prepare incase she became homeless. She said, "If I ever went homeless I would pick out the most important things and it would be the bag I would take, like I would have a bag ready for if I ever lost my job. I would pack food, water, and a pillow, make it so you actually have at least some things." All of a sudden, Carly made a comment about Donald Trump and her concerns with another Great Depression and Hadley followed up with discussion about politicians having a large amount of money, but often not giving it to the poor.

**Carly:** Honestly, I feel like we are going to go through the Great Depression all over again, because Trump is kind of being a little suspicious. I question what Trump does and what he says. He does say some pretty bad things and it just makes me think we will have a depression again.

**Hadley:** You know what I don't get though how like people are voting for the government and stuff, for people to be in the government. I don't get it how they are like oh these are good people. I was getting my nails done last weekend they

had a T.V. and I saw they said Tom...Grover or something like that...Scott Wallace or something. I don't know what one, but they said he took private jets and things and I wondered how they got private jets, just because they are rich doesn't mean they won't lose any money....

**Teacher:** Yes, there are very rich and then very poor.

**Hadley:** They get all of this stuff and I keep on thinking why can't they help the poor? They are going to leave them there, they are like, oh you can survive, and I'm like why can't they help them? They have private jets and all of that money and they can help these people. Help them while they still can before they die.

Sally challenged Hadley a bit by talking about how people should watch what they spend their money on, and make good financial decisions before becoming homeless. Naomi added, "You can buy stuff that you want, but not all of the time." Aidan, a student who lives in the campground, a little bit later talked about what he would do if he were rich. He said he "would give the homeless like 10,000 dollars." Hadley agreed with Aidan and expressed how she would provide them shelter. Jani interjected saying, "Everybody can't give homeless people everything, like some people have to save their money." Hadley ended our long and in depth conversation with the suggestion to "buy the homeless food or get them to a doctor to make sure they are at least healthy, to help them out."

It was interesting to hear Hadley discuss politicians she had witnessed on the television that seemed to have a large amount of money. This tells me that Hadley is thinking outside of class, recognizing we still have people who are homeless today, and wondering who is helping them. Students were then showing empathy by discussing how they would help in the future. During the observation of this book club discussion, the students challenged one another, eventually taking their stance on the actions of the police officers.

Later in the book, when Bud was visiting Lefty Lewis' daughter's house he described himself as a light sleeper (Curtis, 1999). Jani was able to personally connect to being a light sleeper and said in the morning when his dad comes to wake him up, he can already hear him, so he is already up before he can come in and mess up the blankets. When we talked about this topic in the book club Carly thought Bud was a light sleeper, because he didn't have any parents, and Jani added, "He is scared, because he doesn't know who is coming."

We participated in dialogue about Bud's situation at the orphanage, the many kids that were in the home, the transition to the Amos' house, being on the lam, sleeping under a bush, and sleeping in a Hooverville, as possible reasons why Bud may have had trouble sleeping. At the end of the book, using observations, journal entries, and audio recordings as proof, the students had a deeper understanding of the effects of homelessness and economic disparity.

**Fifth grade conversations on economic inequality.** During the fifth grade conversations, trust was questioned as a result of social class. Discussions of trustworthiness surfaced when the woman at the Hooverville offered to watch Bud's suitcase. Bud was very skeptical of this, because Mrs. Amos also said she would watch his suitcase, but rummaged through it. The students were also unsure if Bud should give her his suitcase. Throughout the study the students showed their empathetic sides. Although surprisingly, the students did not think Bud should give the woman his suitcase, because she was homeless and they believed she was deceitful.

**Harry:** I wouldn't trust her...

**Teacher:** Oh, I don't know...I may not either

**Charlie:** Um, Oh, uh...I wouldn't trust them because they are homeless

**Harry:** Yeah... Yeah because they want things, so why would he sit his suitcase down there if they they're looking for food and clothing...and somewhere to sleep...why would she say there's no thieving, but they're homeless? They're gonna want something, so I would not keep my stuff...my suitcase there.

**Nick:** I think they are all thieves. I think they are waiting for people to come over like Bud, so they can steal their things.

**Teacher:** So Nick thinks that they are waiting for people like Bud to come...

**Jackie:** I think they're thieves, because sometimes they rob and steal and do bad things.

**Cane:** So one thing about why my parents don't give money to the homeless all the time is because sometimes like people aren't homeless, like they have money, but are trying to get more money.

**Teacher:** Yes, sometimes. I usually try to give food or water.

The students used the woman at the Hooverville to make text-to-self connections to times when a homeless person was untrustworthy. For some students, this could be where the thought of Bud not giving his suitcase to the woman originated. Although students stated that homeless people often steal, lie, and do bad things, which could be their perception based off of their personal experiences, it wasn't very clear what makes a homeless person more dishonest than a wealthy person. It could be due to biases they may hold regarding homeless people. Therefore, next time I would delve deeper during this conversation.

Even though the white family, sitting by the small fire in the Hooverville, saying, "we are white people, we ain't in need of a handout" (Curtis, 1999) was mostly a racial discussion in our fifth grade study group, social class also arose as students questioned their pride. The students expressed that the family was in the same predicament as the rest of the people in Hooverville, poor, with little food and little shelter. Cane discussed how, "back then the people said you are poor, you are rich, and chose what you are."



Charlie then asked, “So it would be based on how old you are?” I followed this comment with a conversation about social classes and how we still have wealthy, middle class, working class, and poor. My aide added that a lot of times people who were wealthier would not associate with people that were poorer and Harry responded, “Well, I would!”

Their empathy resurfaced, especially when Cane asked, “What if you did hangout with someone who was poor?” To which my aide responded, “I’m not sure, good question...remember when we read about the Titanic? Maybe they were really rich and lost all of their money and felt too proud to go with the poorer people.” Cane responding, “Yeah...well you could tell they were stuck up!” Charlie, a student who enjoys playing football, ended our conversation with a comparison of this being similar to “a famous football player losing his whole career and feeling bitter towards others.”

The topic emerged again when the people at the Hooverville promised Bud and Bugs, Bud’s friend from the orphanage, that they could have food if they did the dishes. The following is a statement made by a woman at the Hooverville.

“A woman handed me and Bugs each a flat, square, empty tin can. That m’ lords, is your china. Please be careful not to chip it. My china had the words JUMBO A&P SARDINES stamped into the bottom of it” (Curtis, 1999, p. 69).

We had a thought-provoking conversation as a result of this sarcastic comment about china. It took the students a bit of prompting to figure out what the woman was saying and to decipher the word from the country. I had to show pictures of a sardine can as well as real china. This helped students personalize the word and some of the students recognized that their parent or guardian had china in their homes.

For example, Anton stated that his “godfather and real father both have china and always say don’t break it, because it is really expensive.” Harry couldn’t understand how the people at Hooverville could have something as expensive as china and wondered if they “maybe found it in the trashcans and dumpsters.” Although he evidently understood their economic shortcoming, he was missing the sarcasm and thinking realistically.

Despite the discussion in collaboration with visuals, some of the students proved that they still did not grasp the idea that the people at the Hooverville did not have the means to eat off of china dishes. Eventually through continued discussion the students were able to grasp that the people were eating out of sardine cans.

As we made our way through the book, students in both my fourth and fifth grade study groups had small discussions about what they would do if they were homeless, such as dig through the trash for food, use cardboard to build a house, and how to stay safe from the weather. For example, the fifth grade students challenged Harry when he stated that he “would make a house out of cardboard.” His brother, Quany, told him “You will need something to make sure it don’t get wet,” while others agreed that it could rain or snow and then the cardboard would no longer become suitable for shelter.

When the police officers were burning Hooverville and shooting their pots and pans, the fifth grade students showed concern for the people of Hooverville. However, their conversation was not as long as the fourth grade discussion. I began the dialogue similarly to how I did for my fourth grade study group by asking the students what they thought about the police shooting the pots and pans, and burning their cardboard homes. Cane immediately shouted, “It was rude! If I were those homeless people I would have fought them!”

Harry thought it was really upsetting that they “shot up Hooverville, because the cops had a home to live in, but the people who lived in Hooverville didn’t have a place to live in after the cops shot the place up.” Izalea sensibly stated, “I think it is making it worse for the world, because they are shooting up their things and that is making it worse. That is not making people get jobs, and it is just scaring them.” Additionally, Jackie shared her frustrations with what the police officers had done, stating, “They just lost their homes and most of their stuff. Some of their pots and pans have holes in them and their homes are on fire.” The students were sympathetic of the people living in Hooverville, because they were being forced from their only shelter, no longer in possession of many of their belongings.

In many instances, Bud’s weight came up during discussion or in written responses. Throughout the book, many of the characters referenced how skinny Bud was, which led to the students commenting on why he may be so skinny. The students usually referred back to Bud being at an orphanage, being essentially homeless, and maybe not being able to eat very often. Lefty Lewis called Bud puny and right away knew he was from Flint, Michigan (Curtis, 1999) and students collectively said it was because he is tiny, he is a stick, he is skinny, and he is all skin and bones!

Some of the students during our conversation had predictions about why this may be or how Lefty Lewis immediately knew Bud was from Flint. Quany concluded that it was, “because he was skinny, cause in Flint...Flint is like...you are homeless and you don’t get to eat much or do much unless you are rich.” My aide challenged Quany by asking about Toddy’s family having money and Todd being pudgy. This helped Quany recognize that everyone in Flint was not homeless, and that Toddy was a privileged child.

Economic disparity was a significant part of our book club conversations due to the emphasis, within the text, on poverty, how the impoverished were treated, and the Great Depression time period. The student responses were telling of their empathy for the people of Hooverville. The answers represented their ability to bring the discussion to a higher level. The fourth grade study group included examples of political figures having money and failing to help the poor, while the fifth grade group caringly discussed the police officers shooting up Hooverville. It indicated that young children can and will have conversations about difficult topics when presented with the right environment, such as a book club.

### **Forming a Community with Collaboration Responses**

During our book club experience a significant pattern developed in the classroom that represented a learning community forming in both classes. The evidence from my research journal, observations, student audio recordings, student flip grid videos, and student journal responses proved that as the book club evolved, the students became more comfortable with the idea of making connections, making predictions, expressing their personal opinions, and challenging one another. Judging from the discussion prior to beginning the book club, many of the students had never been given an opportunity to simply read a book and talk about it without completing plenty of worksheets. We created a safe space with a variety of flexible seating, which included but was not limited to, pillows, blankets, camping chairs, medicine balls, and stuffed animals. The students gathered closely, in a circle, in order to create a sense of community.

**“We are family!” Fourth grade learning community.** The fourth grade study group, despite having little or no experience, began immediately reading and dialoging. Since Chapter 1 the students have made expressions, discussed their wonderings, questions, and predictions. The students felt empathy for Bud and expressed it. I observed, however, that the students were speaking to me rather than to the whole group. The students may have been doing this, because they are so used to the banking model (Freire, 1993). I encouraged students to speak to each other and “to embrace the idea of a book club” in hopes that the students “enjoy speaking with one another about higher-level topics, because they are a class that loves pushing and challenging themselves.”

By November 22<sup>nd</sup> the students began building onto one another’s thoughts and the book club seemed to be running smoother according to my observations and written notes. “The students respected one another and they had a great discussion about the way Mrs. Amos, Mr. Amos, and Todd were treating Bud.” On November 26, our book club made significant strides. The students were rushing back to the reading corner and begging to read ahead during independent reading time. I documented in my research journal that.

I have been allowing students to read ahead during independent reading time, since it is a higher level book it is nice for students to hear the reading twice, sometimes three times.

Students transformed conversation into action during our book club discussion on November 28<sup>th</sup>. This was something Freire (1993) considered as a significant piece of using critical literacy. It was stated in his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993) that, critical literacy without action is simply verbalism.

In the story Bud was having a meal with Lefty, his daughter, and his grand children. He was shocked at how much they were talking, since he was unable to talk at the orphanage or his food was taken away. This sparked conversation regarding the length of student lunches at our school. The intensity of the discussion was heightened as the students continued to talk and Hadley stated, “We barely have time to eat or play, because our lunch and recess are way too short.” I guided students towards thinking about possible actions that could take place in order to change this problem. Aidan shouted, “We could write a letter!” Jani said, “Yeah, write a letter to the principal, and have our class sign it!”

The students banded together, as a community, to search for ways to make their lunch and recess experience more enjoyable. The students began to brainstorm ways they could make the lunch line move faster, such as allowing older students to go first rather than the younger children or providing younger students with their lunch numbers on index cards to speed up the line. They also discussed possibly meeting with the principal in a group to discuss the issue.

By December, the students were recognizing the hardships Bud had faced in his life and how he was always hopeful. Jani stated, “Bud is always so positive even though bad things have happened to him.” I began to facilitate the discussion by asking students to reflect on what Bud has been through in his life. The students shouted out different challenges he had faced, such as, Hadley, “the Amoses,” Aidan, “his mom dying,” and Aldi, “losing Bugs.” Then I asked the students what they thought this meant about Bud’s character. The students provided me with an array of descriptive character traits including, brave, strong, positive, independent, and hardworking, indicating their

understanding of the character beyond a surface level. They referenced the independent reading center and described that independent meant doing something on your own.” We started to discuss adversity and what it means to have adversity in your life.

The discussion became personal and intimate. I observed a safe and comfortable community developing where students felt they could express their personal and at times upsetting challenges. First, the students were asked to respond on Flip Grid. They were asked to discuss a challenge they have faced in their life. Although the program allows students to listen to videos completed by other students, many chose to keep their videos private. This signified that some students did not feel completely comfortable talking within our book club group. However, as the following conversation proves, there were a few students who felt comfortable discussing difficult experiences. For example, Jani hesitantly, but willingly shared one of the most challenging hardships in his life thus far. By observing Jani’s behavior, it was evident that he was upset, but felt safe enough to discuss what was happening in his life.

**Jani:** I have had an adversity in my life...

**Teacher:** Would you like to share?

**Jani:** Sure...every four years I have to decide if I want to live with my mom and dad, the first time I had to do it I was only seven and my brother was four. I will have to do it again when I’m fourteen.

Following the conversation I kindly thanked Jani for sharing something so personal. I assured Jani this was certainly an adversity and something he would have to continue to overcome, but each time he does, he will get stronger. I also told him I think he is extremely brave to go through something like this.

Once Jani decided to share, a few other students grew the courage to speak up about an adversity in their lives. Aidan chimed in, “I never get to see my real dad and

only see my stepdad who lives with us...this is a struggle.” Sally, a Hispanic student, discussed the difficulty of having white siblings and different fathers. She stated, “It confuses people and I usually have to explain it to them.”

As the book club evolved, as observed, students became comfortable, opening up and wanting to share their connections to the text. Students who had shied away from reading in the beginning of book club were now asking to read, students were connecting to the text in a deep and critical way, questioning the author and one another, and racing back to the reading corner. Posing questions, which encourage deep and critical conversation, has proven to be beneficial in the discussions that emerge amongst fourth and fifth grade students.

As our book club experience came to an end in fourth grade, the students reflected back on their time. “The students began connecting events from the previous chapters, and were pretty bummed not to find out who Bud’s dad was. Judging from their reactions, they enjoyed the fact that Bud was staying in his mom’s old room.”

Students were surveyed and completed written or typed responses. The survey asked the students how they felt about reading *Bud, Not Buddy* and what they liked or disliked about it. They were also asked what specifically they liked or disliked about participating in a book club.

As written in Kale’s survey, she “disliked that Herman E. Calloway was mean, but liked that Bud found his grandfather.” She also stated, “I felt good about reading *Bud, Not Buddy*, because I liked how they put detail and it helped me be a good reader. I did not like when people was talking over each other in the book club. I like when we tell about our feelings.” Sally “felt sad when Bud was only six years old, because his momma



died.” She also was “happy because when the band went to the Sweet Pea Bud cried, because he felt he belonged there.” Sally did not like when Deza and Bud kissed at the Hooverville. Sally stated that the book club was, “the best and very good, because everybody respected everybody.”

Nelson, the student who earlier in the study closed his book during an uncomfortable racial conversation, concluded the book club expressing his joy for the book. He even wanted to extend his learning by writing *Bud, Not Buddy* Part Two. In his survey he stated, “I felt good. I liked *Bud, Not Buddy*. It was funny when Lefty Lewis got hit in his head with a wooden spoon. I liked the book club, because it was more easier. It was fun and easier to find out stuff all together. It is harder by yourself.”

**“I am reading first today!” Fifth grade learning community.** The fifth grade study group had a few similarities with the fourth grade book club, but overall significantly differed. When we began our book club, as written in my research journal, “the students did not look too excited when I explained the book club to them for the first time.” Breana asked, “Can’t we just read in small groups?”

Students in my fifth grade group significantly struggle with reading comprehension, decoding, and fluency as determined by various assessments, and are hesitant to participate in front of their peers. Therefore, Breana’s question was not unexpected. I wrote in my research journal, “The thought of reading out loud in front of their peers, and discussing their thoughts about a book made some of the students automatically shutdown.”

As I was reading, I observed many students who were distracted, looking around the room or at other students, and not following along in the book. The students were

reminded multiple times to follow along, and when they were prompted to participate in the discussion, there was silence. This could have been because the idea of book club was new and uncomfortable for some of the students.

As the book club progressed, I was asking fewer students to track the text. My anecdotal notes indicated that the students were continually raising hands although we watched a book club video, practiced speaking with one another, and the students were instructed to talk as if it was a conversation at the lunch table. I specifically stated in my research journal, “It is interesting to see how wired the students are to raise their hand, rather than participate in an authentic discussion with their peers.”

When we were discussing the horrible things the Amoses had done to Todd, similar to the fourth grade study group, the students were only speaking to me. They were not making eye contact with their peers. I wrote in my research journal, “We have been working on talking to the whole group and not just answering to receive a right or wrong response from the teacher.” In just a couple of days, my observations were proof that the students were progressing. “The students rushed back to the reading corner to make our book club circle. They could not wait to read.” Higher-level discussions were beginning to formulate and less students were reminded to follow along in the text.

With each day the students participated in the book club, the more excited they were about the book, reading out loud, giving their opinions, connecting to the text personally, and relating to their peers. Today, students were asking to read! I glanced up while I was reading to see every pair of eyes following along. Not once did I have to say, follow along please. This was an amazing moment in our book club.” The students were craving more and Harry asked, Can we keep reading?” Charlie also asked, “Can we read

during centers today too?” In my research journal I expressed, “Today felt really good in our little book club community. Most of my students have never received the opportunity to read authentic literature, and participate in the higher-level conversations I knew they were capable of.”

Collaboration was also a significant part of student success. Chad, a Latino boy, stated, “I think all the people are just going to run at the police!” When he found out he was correct a big smile came across his face. Chad and Jackie asked at the end of the book club on November 27, “Can we read the whole time in class today?” So we did. When we finished, Jackie and Izalea were wondering if the author got the idea for the book, because he was Bud as a child. They looked up information on the book and found that the book was historical fiction. My research journal reflects how proud I was of the student growth.

Similar to the fourth grade study, when we discussed Bud’s adversities, the students seemed comfortable at this point in the book club. Since most of the fifth grade study group enjoys and plays football, I used Shaquem Griffin, a one-handed National Football League linebacker, to help students understand the definition of an adversity. It was apparent students were beginning to understand what an adversity was when Izalea stated, “My mom is deaf and I help her communicate with others who have difficulty understanding her at times. It is really challenging, because I don’t know sign language well. Sometimes I can’t understand my mom. Students began sharing other adversities, such as a math test or a time they got into a car accident, and we related our adversities to Bud. We discussed how challenges usually make us better and stronger in the end.”

After reading during this specific book club on December 3rd, I observed that every student volunteered to read. “The students are so excited to read and cannot wait. They even get upset when I mistake the order.”

Nearing the end of our book club, I was able to reflect back on our experiences and realized how much the students progressed each day. Looking back particularly on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, Harry turned our discussion of foster homes and orphanages into a discussion of actions. “Harry revealed that a student in third grade is in a foster home and when he grows up and makes a lot of money he is going to donate money and things to the foster homes and orphanages.” This directed us to a discussion about what we could do at the end of the book in order to supply needed items to the orphanages or foster homes, especially to help a student in our own school. In my journal I discussed how Freire (1993) wanted students to transfer their discussions into actions.

Using their surveys as evidence, the fifth grade students enjoyed both the novel and the book club experience. However, they were often talking over one another and interrupting each other. The students had a tough time waiting for others to finish their thoughts. On Johnny’s survey he wrote, “I loved *Bud, Not Buddy*, because at the beginning it was good. At the end I do not like it, because Bud doesn’t find his dad. One thing I like about *Bud, Not Buddy* is that when it said Herman E. Calloway was the granddad. I felt great about the book club, because everyone reads good and is getting better and I liked reading it.”

Izalea wrote, “I feel that *Bud, Not Buddy* was sad, but happy because Bud has made bad decisions and sometimes I am the same way. I did not like that the Amoses did

not like Bud. I feel that we can get into groups, because when we are in the back we can focus. I like that we can all read and lay in comfy seats.”

### **Summary of Data Analysis**

Using the book *Bud, Not Buddy* in a book club format, brought forth a few themes. These particular themes were race, racism, and economic inequality. Although it was not a theme, learning communities were formed through a collaborative book club experience. I watched my fourth and fifth grade students become excited about reading out loud, observed students becoming more fluent, students self-correcting themselves, questioning each other, thinking deeper, discussing difficult topics such as race and social class, and working on decoding unknown words.

The fourth grade group was usually very eager about reading and learning, however the book club brought their discussions to a higher level. Their conversations were surprising at times, and it showed that the students could be challenged. The students in fourth grade liked the idea of helping each other get through the book by sharing personal experiences, making predictions, and critiquing the author and text.

The fifth grade group often had difficulty focusing on a book for a long period of time. Judging from observations, as well as attitude surveys, they are less eager about reading and learning. However, the book club changed their attitudes. Many of the fifth grade students enjoyed the community that was formed throughout the book club experience, and it left them hungry for more. The fifth grade group has certainly extended their love of reading, which was a result of this study.

An analysis of the data suggests that students will often take risks and discuss challenging and sometimes uncomfortable topics when they are talking with their peers.

The data indicates that when students discuss challenging topics found in texts they are able to understand literature on a deeper level and develop important sociocultural understandings about race and inequality. Also significant is the opportunity that discussion of critical texts provided in supporting reading progress. Students completed a reading inventory using the Read 180 program following the book club, and every student increased their Lexile level by 50 points or more. Chapter five is the close of the study and provides conclusions, implications for practice, and future research related to critical literacy within a book club format.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Conclusions, Implications and Limitations of the Study

#### Summary

The Newberry Award young adult novel used during the study was *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999) by Christopher Paul Curtis. In the text, a ten-year old orphaned boy, named Bud, goes on a journey to find his father after spending time in an orphanage and a foster home in Flint, Michigan. Using clues from flyers his mother left behind, Bud makes the discovery of a lifetime.

The book club took place for four weeks. Data was collected using teacher observations, including a teacher research journal written in twice a week. The research journal documented findings, personal reactions, and observations that guided in recognizing discussion commonalities. Audio recordings of teacher and student discussions, and student artifacts, such as journal and Flip grid responses were also collected. A survey was given to students at the end of the study to document how students felt about reading the book as well as participating in the book club. The data sources were examined to identify themes that arose during the study, specifically the audio recordings, teacher journal, and student journal and video responses.

All student responses in both the fourth and fifth grade classes were used to identify emerging themes in response to the novels. How teacher questioning and prompting influenced student response was also analyzed. Prior to the book club beginning, the students, along with the teacher, participated in an informal discussion regarding previous book club experiences. Students completed a KWL chart based on *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999), to document what they already knew about the time period and

the book and what they wanted to know. Following the conclusion of the book, the students completed the learned column. During the duration of the study students read the book in a book club format, participated in discussions, completed comprehension questions, wrote their thoughts in their writing notebook, and recorded video responses about racism, social class and adversity.

As my research concluded, I recognized the impact critical literacy could have on discussions that take place with fourth and fifth grade students. During the four-week study, students read *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) in a book club format. The conversations were observed, audio recorded, and documented in a teacher research journal to determine what themes emerged in the discussions. Student video and written responses were also used. The book club arrangement provided the students with a collaborative, comfortable, and safe experience.

During the analysis of the data, three themes emerged during student conversations: (1) race, (2) racism, and (3) economic disparity. The book *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), which was set during the 1930s, naturally brought about conversations of race, racism, and economic inequality. Although not considered a theme, students participated in a collaborative community where they challenged and questioned each other, discussed challenging topics together, and guided and supported one another.

Race and racism emerged many times during our conversations. They were combined in terms of data analysis, because they often coincided. Both study groups spent a significant amount of time discussing racism when Bud, the main character, came across a white family with a sick child who declined help from a black family by stating, “we are white people we ain’t in need of a handout” (Curtis, 1999, p. 77). Many of the



students questioned why the white family would think they are better than others in the Hooverville, especially because of their skin color. Hoovervilles were shantytowns, where people had a lack of shelter and food. A few students recognized this comment as racist, while other students believed it was because they did not want to lose their pride.

Conversations about racism developed again when Bud encountered a racist sign telling Negroes to avoid letting the sun set on their rear ends, in what was known as a sundown town. Students expressed their distaste for such a sign stating that the sign was cruel, racist, and rude. At times the discussions varied depending on their age group, however it was evident that some of the students understood racism better than others. The reason for this could potentially be because students have discussed this topic in school, at home, or have encountered racism.

Throughout the study, the students referenced race in a variety of ways. One student wondered why African Americans are categorized as “black” when they are really brown in color. Another student questioned “why can’t white and black people just get along, they are just different skinned people?” A fifth grade student showed his pride over Curtis (1993) being an African American author. Race and racism was often the center of our conversations and at times made some students, specifically an African American boy, uncomfortable to the point where he avoided the discussion.

Economic disparity was another theme that continually emerged during our conversations. Curtis, (1999) discussed poverty during The Great Depression in 1936 by referencing Hoovervilles and poverty stricken Flint, Michigan. The main character, Bud, was a motherless, orphaned boy who was placed in a foster home. He was treated terribly

by his foster family, and set off on a journey to find his father. Bud missed meals and his weight was referenced multiple times in the book, confirming his economic despair.

The students in both grade levels were empathetic to Bud's difficult experiences as well as the less fortunate people he met during his journey. At times the students even criticized politicians or the police for failing to help poor people. Students expressed anger towards the police for burning the shelters, which belonged to the residents of Hooverville. They also shot holes in their pots and pans. Students responded to this as "cruel," "mean," and "selfish since the police already had a home, but the people of Hooverville didn't."

The fourth grade group was usually very eager about reading and learning, however the book club brought their discussions to a higher level. Their conversations were surprising at times, and it showed that the students could be challenged. The students in fourth grade liked the idea of helping each other get through the book by sharing personal experiences, making predictions, and critiquing the author and text.

The fifth grade group often had difficulty focusing on a book for a long period of time. Judging from observations, as well as attitude surveys, they are less eager about reading and learning. However, the book club changed their attitudes. Many of the fifth grade students enjoyed the community that was formed throughout the book club experience, and it left them hungry for more. The fifth grade group has certainly extended their love of reading, which was a result of this study.

Lastly, a community formed through the book club format. Sitting in a circle each day and collaboratively discussing the book helped the students feel comfortable and safe. Students began to open up about personal challenges and triumphs. They made

connections, predictions, and the students even critiqued the author several times during our four-week study. By the end of each study group, the students were rushing to the reading corner and begging to read. As a result, their Read 180 reading inventory Lexile level scores all increased, and their love of book club continued with the novel, *I Am Malala* (2016). Many students confirmed their enjoyment in their end of study surveys.

### **Conclusions of the Study**

**Critical literacy.** Freire (1993), in his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, describes the traditional educational system to be very much robotic with a lack of emancipatory thinking and cultural relevance. Evidence of this emerged when the book club discussions first began. When a question was posed, the students raised their hands instantly, and almost robotically, only speaking to the teacher. This indicated that most students see their teachers as the expert and themselves as the “container” (Freire, 1993).

He posits that students are often seen as accounts where knowledge is simply deposited. Freire (1993) calls this “the banking model” (p. 72). Freire promotes a shared learning experience between the teacher and the student (Luke, 2012). In doing so, the students are exposed to personalized, authentic, and higher-level discussions as proved by this study.

As the study progressed, both the fourth and fifth grade students began to think and respond beyond the text, connecting in a way they never had before. With action being a significant part of critical literacy, the students turned their conversations into action when discussing and devising a plan for longer lunches and recess or when they were having a conversation about helping a student in their own school who is currently in foster care.

Freire and Macedo (1987) explained an effective literacy program as one that embraces a student's "history, culture, and language" and eradicates social class (p.23). Readers in a free thinking literacy program naturally become "subjects" rather than "objects" as they would with the banking model (p. 24).

The students often made personal connections in order to synthesize the information from the text. During the study, one student shared about a personal adversity, leading another student to share about theirs, and so on. This helped the students understand on a personal level what Bud was going through. Regardless of how a book club is set up, the ultimate goal is to have rich and critical conversations. "Frequently, these conversations enrich and extend the initial understandings that an individual student may have about his or her reading" (Barone, 2011).

Rosenblatt strongly believed that reading was a social experience between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1983), which is why she accuses traditional classrooms of "promoting the invisibility of the reader" by not validating the uniqueness of individual student responses. Vasquez (2010) determines, "honoring student responses" as one of the key proponents of critical literacy. Giouroukakis (2014) posits that Rosenblatt argues that readers first connect to a text through personal past experiences and then may take an efferent stance where they "analyze ideas and information" (p. 26). When the book addressed the homeless people living in the Hooverville, many students made connections to seeing homeless people in a variety of areas. They discussed their experiences with the homeless wanting money, food, or water. This drove students to potentially see homeless people as deceitful or "wanting things."

Many of our conversations were uncomfortable, however they challenged the students to think at a higher-level. “Reading and responding to literature critically involves paying close attention to the written text and its language; grappling with difficult issues and questions surfaced by the text; forming connections between and among texts; becoming aware of perspectives and interpretive lenses other than one’s own; and seeing oneself, other people, and the world differently” (Park, 2012, p. 194).

**Top down school reform.** The constraints of the Read 180 program limited the time that was available for the study each day. Read 180 can be time consuming by itself and when combining the time period with a book club, the class often felt rushed due to the anxiety and pressure of meeting the program standards. Recent documentation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), national standardization and efforts to establish teacher accountability has been the priority and has limited the ability to implement critical literacies into many classrooms (Riley, 2015, p. 417). Expectations of teachers have risen, amongst them being the implementation of critical literacy to improve social justice as well as representing those who have been marginalized in literature and life. Unfortunately it is sometimes difficult to step out of the traditional teaching comfort zone (Jones & Enriquez, 2009). It was difficult to let go of the “traditional” method of the teacher asks a question and the student answers, however the study proved the benefits of children discussing authentic literature with their peers.

Barone (2011) reflects back on a time when the reading curriculum in schools consisted of book clubs and reading response, however he references that “Today’s classrooms are curriculum driven and time stressed. Teachers are expected to teach reading programs, or a state or country-mandated curriculum and to match a pacing guide

for instruction” (p. 7). Bourdieu (2000) urges teachers to challenge the usual teaching methods and contest those in charge of mandating conventional standards, by incorporating critical literacy into schools and classrooms. Taking on a facilitator role was much more constructive, and allowing the students time and space to explore their thoughts and discuss with their classmates resulted in academic success.

The importance and value of book clubs is immeasurable, as Barone (2011) recognizes, “their value is relevant in today’s classrooms, and these opportunities allow students to practice reading, share connections to reading and negotiate meaning with student colleagues.” Participating in dialogue as a result of a personal connection to a text, an agreement, or disagreement with classmates and writing are paramount when monitoring a student’s comprehension and engagement, and have been proven to raise both (Pressley, 2003). Students proved to enjoy the help from their peers during the book club, as well as discovering with their classmates. They used their end of the study surveys to prove how they felt about participating in the book club. The students also showed their excitement for the book club format when they begged for extra books for our new read aloud book, *I Am Malala* (2016).

Teachers are often compelled to teach specific programs in which students respond to “predetermined” and standardized questions, similar to Freire’s description of a banking model (Freire, 1993, Barone, 2011).

Read 180 is a scripted program, and consists of predetermined questions. Although the program is beneficial and does use engaging texts, the formats of the workshops rarely change. This leaves children feeling disengaged as they continue to work on the same concepts, eventually becoming bored with the program. “These

programs tend to consume all instructional time available for reading instruction, and thus, students have few opportunities for individual or small-group reading and response,” in which the importance of the reader’s interaction with the text is ignored, and students are silenced (Barone, 2011). The students were highly engaged and participatory during the book club, and it was beneficial to observe student reading and thought.

Thein & Schmidt (2017, p. 322) discussed the disadvantage of the “traditional positioning of the teacher as a distanced authority.” The study recommends that teachers listen closely to their student’s lives, experiences, and responses to literature, even if it may be uncomfortable at times and this can be done in a successful book club community (Thein & Schmidt, 2017).

### **Limitations of the Study**

While implementing critical literacy into a book club was informative and has altered my current teaching philosophy, there were a couple of limitations. Read 180 is a reading intervention program, and is structured around a whole class and small group model. Whole group is expected to be approximately twenty minutes, with centers also being twenty minutes each. The small group rotations include the teacher, computer, and independent reading. The class is a total of eighty minutes.

It is often unrealistic to assume whole group and centers are always twenty minutes, especially since the students are transitioning from their classrooms, have to write their homework in, get their Read 180 folder, and get settled to start class. Therefore, reading only during the twenty-minute whole group, while stopping to discuss, did not give the students or teacher very much time each day. When the students became

comfortable in the book club, they were volunteering to read, which left even less time. Not only were the constraints of the program a limitation, but the study only lasting four weeks was as well. There may have been missed opportunities for students to discuss topics more in depth due to the time limit.

Generally, students complete workshops with the guidance of the teacher, which usually include about three non-fiction articles, but on occasion will include a fictional excerpt. In order to implement critical literacy into the classroom the novel had to be related to the prior workshop. Although *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) aligned with our previous workshop, which was an excerpt from *Bud, Not Buddy*, there was still a constant feeling of angst. This was because it was important to ensure the students completed the program each day. Due to the time constraint, the students often felt rushed, as did the teacher, and at times students were interrupted to move on to the next topic. For example, Aidan stated that he felt bad for the kids during the Great Depression, because they don't eat for two or three days, and today that doesn't happen." The students began reading rather than Aidan's thought being explored further. This may have had an effect on the data that was collected.

The second limitation would be background knowledge on book clubs. Being brand new to the concept of critical literacy, as well as book clubs, it was imperative to read extensive literature prior to beginning the study. However, this may be considered limiting, because it was not a familiar classroom activity. Sometimes the conversations were uncomfortable, and since it was a new experience there was some hesitation to extend specific discussions further.



## **Implications of the Study**

After completing this study and examining the data there were a few implications for educators and administrators. First, an implication for teachers is the need to fully understand the banking model and how it marginalizes many students. Educational institutions have often been known to marginalize and silence specific groups of people, such as, “urban and rural classes,” by using a banking model of education as a way to suppress and determine their intelligence (Freire, 1993). This book club experience with fourth and fifth grade students reading *Bud Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) indicated students’ ability and willingness to discuss race, racism and economic disparities in this country at a deep level.

Book clubs have an unpredictable time limit, and therefore are often frightening for teachers who are used to pacing charts. However, from observing the transformation students made indicated that the students were having conversations they may never have had if they were participating in a traditional classroom.

Administrators should consider lightening the stressful time limits that are pushed heavily on teachers. It is nearly impossible to give students a time limit on their thinking. The observations of students connecting to text, and through that connection, making predictions, questioning character motives, verbally expressing empathy for those in need, participating in higher-level dialogue, using accountable talk, and critiquing the author was paramount to students completing isolated skills and worksheets in a particular time.

Although there was extensive data collected from this four-week study, future research using multiple critical texts over a longer period of time could yield further

findings regarding the influence of provocative texts on student discussions around important issues. Researching how conversations are developed across multiple provocative texts could offer significant opportunities for examining student book club responses.

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## Appendix A

### Student Response Questions

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

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

What are your thoughts on what Bud is going through (*mother dying, orphanage, Amoses, Hooverville, Deza*)? You can include thoughts about the Great Depression as well if you would like. Make sure to include an adversity you have faced in your life.

The sign in Ossowo, Michigan stated, “To all of our Negro friends, kindly do not let the sun set on your rear ends.” Describe your thoughts about the sign Bud encountered?

**Appendix B**  
**Post-Study Survey Questions**

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

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

How did you feel about reading Bud, Not Buddy?

What did you like or dislike about it?

How did you feel while participating during the book club?

What specifically did you like or dislike about it?