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**“IF SOMEONE HAD STOPPED THE FIRST WORLD RACIST, THERE
WOULD BE NO RACISM TODAY”: EMPOWERING VOICES OF MUSLIM
AFRICAN AMERICAN ELEMENTARY STUDENTS THROUGH A CRITICAL
LITERACY (CRITLIT) PROJECT**

by

Faten Baroudi

A Dissertation

Submitted to the
Department of Critical Literacy, Technology, and Multilingual Education
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of
Doctor of Education

at

Rowan University
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Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved mother, Hadhom, and my father, Hassen, whose affectionate love, support, sacrifices, and fervent prayers have been my cornerstone throughout my life and this academic journey.

To my cherished brothers, Mohamed and Youssef, whose encouragement has been a source of motivation.

To my devoted sisters, Sondes and Aicha, whose constant support and unwavering affection and belief in me have provided strength and inspiration.

For all forgotten marginalized people all over the world, who taught me resilience and patience.

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Abstract

Faten Baroudi

“IF SOMEONE HAD STOPPED THE FIRST WORLD RACIST, THERE WOULD BE
NO RACISM TODAY”: SUPPORTING AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSLIM
ELEMENTARY STUDENTS THROUGH A CRITICAL LITERACY (CRITLIT)
PROJECT
2023-2024

Susan Browne, Ed.D.
Doctor of Education

The Critical Literacy (CritLit) project promotes using critical texts to engage readers in examining their lived experiences and understanding of social justice issues. This study used a qualitative participatory approach with a narrative design to research the students’ engagement in a book club using critical texts. Participants were fourth- and fifth-grade African American students who participated in a 4-week project at a weekend Islamic school in Philadelphia. I organized my study into four sessions. Three book club sessions were audio-recorded and observed. Field notes were taken; pre and post-interviews were conducted; student/teacher reflections were collected with students’ notes and handouts; and cultural artifacts were collected by the participants. Data were collected and transcribed, and themes were identified.

Findings show that engaging students in critical literacy enabled them to be critically conscious through deep analysis of social justice themes in the text. They also showed a connection between their personal narratives and systemic injustice expressing it through multimodality. Finally, they gained racial and cultural empowerment and envisioned change as individual and group responsibility. This study has significant implications for literacy education theory, methodology, practice, and policy.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the opening of the Brazilian Congress of Reading, Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, philosopher, and activist, said,

Reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world. Reading the world precedes reading the word and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. (Freire & Slover, 1983, p. 5)

Freire's assertion underscores the interconnectedness of literacy and social awareness, emphasizing that reading involves both interpreting texts and critically engaging with the sociopolitical realities they reflect. He emphasized that reading both the "world and the word" is essential, reinforcing the need to situate literacy within a broader sociocultural context (Freire, 1985). His earlier work also advocated for critical literacy practices that extend beyond mere language proficiency to include active engagement with and transformation of social realities (Freire, 1970).

Freire's insights are particularly relevant to contemporary debates on race and education, illustrating the crucial role of critical literacy in fostering informed citizenship and promoting social justice. This relevance is evident in current discussions about deconstructing race as a social construct and legislative efforts to restrict education on race and racism in the United States (Milner, 2021). These issues underscore the ongoing importance of Freire's framework in addressing modern educational challenges.

Freire's framework for critical literacy sheds light on broader debates surrounding race, education, and systemic inequalities, highlighting the urgent need for reforms to address disparities in resources and support for marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Consequently, Freire's focus on transformative education strengthens the call for systemic change to address these educational inequities (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; McLaren, 2003).

Educators can implement this framework by fostering reflective thinking through critical literacy instruction. This involves facilitating discussions where students analyze and question power structures in texts (Braden et al., 2020) and engage with the social issues embedded in their learning materials (Janks, 2014; Luke, 2012). Additionally, incorporating reading materials that connect to students' lived experiences bridges their realities with their educational experiences (Brooks, 2006; Castillo, 2003; Delpit, 2006; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Norris et al., 2012). Such an approach not only deepens students' understanding of their sociopolitical contexts but also empowers them to contribute to broader social change (Comber & Simpson, 2001). Ultimately, aligning educational practices with Freire's critical literacy principles enables educators to create a more equitable and transformative learning environment that effectively addresses systemic inequities.

Echoing Freire's principles, I use a CritLit project including book club and other activities such as artifacts collection, social justice map, and museum exhibit to help Muslim African American students explore and challenge power structure through critical reflection and dialogue. In this chapter, I will present the background of the study,

the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and my research questions. I will entail the chapter with key terms.

Background of the Study

The concept of literacy has evolved significantly from a narrow focus on print-based skills to a broader understanding of the diverse modes of information and meaning-making. Traditionally, literacy was defined as the ability to read and write conventional texts. However, contemporary definitions now include digital, visual, and multimodal literacies that reflect individuals' sociocultural contexts, the social and cultural environments that influence how people engage with and interpret information (Gee, 2015; Kress, 2010). This shift acknowledges that literacy is not merely a set of cognitive skills but also involves social and cultural achievements, emphasizing its application in real-world interactions (Gee, 1999, 2012).

Scholars offer different definitions of literacy. The skill-centered approach focuses on practical abilities required for functional literacy (Copeland & Keefe, 2011). In contrast, literacy-as-school-knowledge emphasizes its role within educational settings (Spring, 1994). Literacy is viewed as a social construction and shaped by social interactions and cultural norms (Gee, 1992). Critical literacy expands on these views by considering literacy as an emancipatory act (Freire, 1970), aimed at empowering individuals to critically engage with and transform their sociopolitical realities. This approach encourages the development of critical consciousness, or an awareness of the social and political forces that affect one's life and texts (Freire, 1970).

Critical literacy, therefore, goes beyond traditional reading and writing skills; it involves analyzing how texts reflect and perpetuate power dynamics and ideologies

within society (Street, 1984; Luke, 1995). By questioning texts, uncovering marginalized perspectives, and constructing their own knowledge, students become active participants in their learning. This engagement equips them to address social justice issues more effectively (Kincheloe, 2005; Luke, 2012; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

Moreover, critical literacy extends beyond the classroom to include community-based practices and out-of-school programs that foster critical consciousness and social justice (Freire, 1976; Behrman, 2006). I used Critical Literacy (CritLit) project to engage Muslim African American students in reading and discussions about social justice through selected critical texts (Alexander & Nelson, 2019; Lewis & Thompson, 2000; Muhammad et al., 2019; Reynolds & Kendi, 2020). This integration of critical literacy provided students with meaningful engagement and heightened social awareness, preparing them to navigate and transform their sociopolitical realities.

Problem Statement

The underrepresentation of people of color in educational materials, curricula, and instruction reflects systemic racism and significantly impacts students of color. This lack of representation deprives these students of crucial resources necessary for fostering motivation, engagement, and proficiency in reading (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009). When students, particularly African American and other students of color, cannot see themselves and their experiences reflected in the books they read, it sends them a negative message about their value both in school and society (McNair, 2008). This non-inclusion issue not only perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces dominant narratives but also marginalizes these students and affects their educational outcomes (McNair, 2008; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009).

The issue is further compounded by the frequent avoidance of discussions about race in educational settings, where color-blindness is often employed as a strategy to sidestep racial topics (Sue, 2019; Thomas, 2020). Even when race and racism are addressed, meaningful discussions are often superficial or lacking entirely (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998), leaving students feeling "non-visible" and disconnected from the material (Evans-Winters, 2005). This disconnection can lead to disengagement and diminished motivation among students who do not see their identities and experiences represented in their education (Morrell, 2006; Tatum, 2008). To address these challenges, it is essential to integrate literacy practices that embrace critical literacy and social justice issues. By doing so, educators can empower students of color to become active readers, critical thinkers, and engaged members of a diverse democratic society (Norris et al., 2012; Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the experiences of Muslim African American elementary students who participated in a month-long critical literacy (CritLit) project outside of school. The research focuses on these students' engagement with critical texts-such as picture books, poetry, and nonfiction-centered around social justice issues. By prioritizing the voices of marginalized students, the study aims to create an inclusive environment that allows these students to actively engage in discussions and co-create knowledge. Thus, this study seeks to provide insights into how such critical literacy projects can empower students and address their unique perspectives, thereby contributing to more equitable literacy practices.

The tenets of critical literacy that guided the CritLit project are: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) bringing multiple viewpoints, (c) emphasizing socio political issues, and (d) asking for action that promotes social justice (Lewison et al., 2006). Critical Literacy Participants (CLPs) were provided a space for engaging in critical dialogue and sharing their narratives. In telling their stories and recalling their lived experiences, they expressed social justice issues and articulated their experiences in unique ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

To address this purpose, I adopted participatory research with an embedded narrative approach to look at the CLPs' critical practices. These practices were expressed through their engagement in a month-long after-school project and explored through interviews, reflection, observations, book club discussions, and materials. Critical literacy practices were based on the critical literacy tenets supported the method design and answered the research questions.

Research Questions

My study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do CLPs respond to racial and cultural themes in critical texts?
2. How do CLP narratives reflect their lived experiences related to race and culture?
3. How does the CritLit project help CLPs envision social change?

Definition of Terms

Book club: In the CritLit project, book club refers to the sessions where students met to read books and examine issues critically, which is the main part of the CritLit project.

Critical consciousness: A term coined by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, critical consciousness is central to critical literacy, which emphasizes the importance of education as a tool for social transformation and liberation (Freire, 1970)

Critical literacy: Critical literacy is a practice that is meant to make readers read, question, reflect, and construct meaning through various modes of expression.

Critical text: Critical texts are books/literature that enable readers to read and examine the nature of texts while reading from critical perspectives (Albers et al., 2011).

Critical pedagogy: Critical pedagogy examines how socio historical forces shape the social construction of knowledge (Kincheloe, 2005).

Henna tattoo: A practice in which a paste made from the leaves of the henna plant is applied to the skin to create a temporary stain ranging from orange to dark maroon, which lasts for about one to three weeks. Henna has been used particularly in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, for celebrations, weddings, and festivals.

Hijab: A headscarf worn by many Muslim women as a symbol of modesty and privacy in accordance with Islamic principles.

Out-of-the-school: Refers to the community where the students live, learn, and develop.

Praxis: A key concept in Freire's theory that captures the dialectical relationship between consciousness and the world (Mayo, 2020)

Thawb: A long robe-like garment, often ankle-length, commonly worn by men in many Arab and African countries for daily wear, religious gatherings, or formal events

Chapter 2

Theoretical Frameworks and Related Literature

In this chapter, I present critical literacy as an overarching theoretical framework, including its tenets of disrupting the commonplace, bringing multiple viewpoints, emphasizing sociopolitical issues, and taking action that promotes social justice (Lewison et al., 2002). Furthermore, I review critical race theory (CRT; D. Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), along with the theoretical concept of artifactual literacies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2003), which served as frameworks to support the critical literacy approach. I combine these theories to frame unique literacy learning opportunities for Muslim African Americans in an out-of-school setting. In addition, I examine literacy research studies that highlighted students of color's voices, identities, and representation.

Theoretical Framework

The interconnected theories of critical literacy, CRT, and artifactual literacies served as the foundational framework for my study. They delve into readers' lived experiences, influencing their understanding and interpretation of social justice issues within critical texts. These theoretical approaches framed my research and contributed to the interpretation of the study's data.

Critical Literacy: Theory into Practice

Critical literacy served as the guiding theory for this study, drawing from seminal works by Freire (1970) and others such as Comber (2013), Janks (2013), Lewison et al. (2002), and Luke (2012), Vasquez (2019). Freire emphasized the dynamic process of perceiving the world and engaging with texts to understand and challenge power

structures. Critical literacy enables readers to connect text with real-world issues, encouraging them to rewrite the world through critical engagement (Freire, 1970, 1985). It is a transformative process that empowers students by positioning them as active readers and agents capable of unveiling the ideological dimensions of texts and societal practices (Behrman, 2006; McLaren, 1992). It goes beyond instructional methodologies, fostering critical consciousness and engagement with social justice issues (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Within this approach, students are viewed as knowledge producers, while educators facilitate conditions for critical dialogue and the production of countertexts (A. Brown & Begoray, 2017; Kinloch, 2010).

Lewison et al. (2002) outlined four tenets of critical literacy practice: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) promoting social justice. These dimensions encompass questioning existing knowledge, amplifying marginalized voices, and advocating for inclusive cultural borders (Giroux, 1993b; Luke & Freebody, 1997). These tenets are explained as follows:

- **Disrupting the commonplace:** This dimension examines how language and media influence perceptions and construct identities. It encourages questioning who controls the narrative and how they position consumers (Lewison et al., 2015; Vasquez et al., 2013). This approach views everyday experiences through new lenses, using language and other sign systems to uncover implicit modes of perception and consider alternative frames of understanding (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Shor, 1980). Critical literacy encompasses problematizing existing knowledge as historically contingent,

interrogating texts and integrating popular culture into education (Vasquez, 2000), and developing a language of critique and hope (Shannon, 1995).

- Interrogating multiple perspectives: This dimension considers diverse viewpoints within media content and text (Lewison et al., 2015; Vasquez et al., 2013). Educators are encouraged to adopt this dimension by engaging in reflective practices that acknowledge and explore contradictory viewpoints, using diverse voices to analyze texts, and actively seeking out marginalized perspectives (Farrell, 1998; Harste et al., 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1997). This approach contrasts with traditional schooling paradigms focused on definitive answers, instead promoting discomfiting open-ended inquiries that enrich understanding through the visibility of difference and the construction of counternarratives (Harste et al., 2000; Lewison et al., 2000).
- Focusing on sociopolitical issues: This dimension involves understanding the intricate interplay of social, economic, and political factors in shaping perceptions and actions (Lewison et al., 2015). Educators are urged to integrate this perspective by examining how sociopolitical systems intersect with language, power dynamics, and everyday practices in teaching (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1990). This approach redefines literacy as a tool for cultural citizenship and political engagement, advocating for increased participation and resistance among marginalized groups (Giroux, 1993a; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).
- Taking action to promote social justice: This dimension emphasizes the relevance of educational content to students' lives and community practices

(Vasquez et al., 2013). It requires integrating understandings from other dimensions of critical literacy, such as engaging in reflective action (praxis) to transform societal norms (Freire, 1970), using language to critique power dynamics and challenge injustice (Comber & Simpson, 2001), and analyzing how language can empower marginalized groups and reshape dominant discourses (Janks, 2010). This dimension also encourages cultural understanding and promotes cross-cultural dialogue (Giroux, 1993b).

Furthermore, educators play a vital role in guiding students through critical literacy practices, providing diverse texts, encouraging critical questioning, and facilitating discussions that challenge power dynamics (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; McNair, 2016). Critical literacy instruction includes various practices such as reading supplementary texts, producing countertexts, and taking social action (Behrman, 2006). It promotes student-centered learning, where students are encouraged to reflect deeply on texts and construct meaning from multiple perspectives (Dozier et al., 2006). Critical literacy also extends beyond the classroom, involving activities that promote criticality and problem-posing, such as museum exhibits and community projects (Caffrey & Rogers, 2018). Educators employ a range of strategies, including questioning, exposure to diverse genres, and interactive activities, to foster critical literacy skills (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Critical literacy encourages readers to question power inequalities and explore different perspectives, fostering critical consciousness (Janks, 2010; Nieto, 2002). Rooted in the Freirian tradition, critical consciousness involves critical reflection on sociocultural-political contexts and positive action to address inequities (Freire, 1970). Through critical literacy, students develop the ability to reflect on their identities and

experiences, leading to transformative learning experiences (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1987). Critical literacy views education as transformative and emancipatory, promoting deeper reflection and analysis to navigate complex social issues with empathy and agency (Freire, 1970). By empowering individuals to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for social justice, critical literacy disrupts existing power structures and fosters a culture of resistance and change (Van Sluys et al., 2006).

In conclusion, critical literacy aligns with the purpose of this study serving as a comprehensive framework for empowering marginalized students in addressing societal issues and promoting transformative learning experiences. Within this framework, I tried to encourage participants' critical reflection, action, and advocacy, ultimately leading to a more just, equitable, and inclusive society.

Critical Race Theory

CRT provides a powerful lens through which to examine issues of racism, power dynamics, and equity within literacy education. Originating from critical legal studies (D, Bell, 1992), CRT extends its focus to scrutinize societal structures and cultural norms perpetuating marginalization (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano, 1997). Solórzano (1997) defined CRT as a framework seeking to identify, analyze, and transform systemic aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of people of color.

Literacy scholars have utilized CRT to probe issues of equity and social injustice, particularly regarding race, racism, antiracism, and power dynamics in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Firstly, CRT underscores the centrality of race and racism, highlighting how racial factors impact educational experiences, such as access to quality curricula and the effects of tracking systems on school segregation. CRT posits the social

construction of race, arguing that race is not biologically inherent but rather a socially constructed concept used to justify oppression by associating physical traits with psychological and behavioral characteristics (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The theory also recognizes the normality of racism, suggesting that racism is a routine, ingrained aspect of societal structures rather than an aberration. Additionally, Counterstorytelling emerges as a pivotal method within CRT, providing a platform for marginalized individuals to challenge dominant narratives and validate their lived experiences. Also, CRT's interest convergence principle indicates that legal advancements for people of color often align with the interests of dominant groups, potentially reinforcing existing racial hierarchies despite legal changes. The concept of intersectionality further emphasizes that individuals' experiences cannot be understood through a single identity alone, but rather through the overlapping of various social identities such as race, gender, and class. Lastly, CRT values the voices of people of color, affirming that those who have directly experienced racism and oppression are best positioned to speak on their own behalf, offering crucial insights for addressing systemic inequalities (Oldfather, 1994; Thomson, 2011). By applying CRT, this study aims to center the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, such as Muslim African Americans, allowing students to challenge stereotypes, gain a sense of agency, and co-construct knowledge about their identities and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

Moreover, CRT offers a framework for understanding how race intersects with systems of power and privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In this scope, intersectionality is important in CRT because it offers an understanding of discrimination by emphasizing how multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, class, and

sexuality, intersect to shape individuals' experiences. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and has since been widely used to describe how different social identities intersect and overlap to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality suggests that individuals' experiences of oppression are shaped by the intersection of social identities and the power structures that underlie them. CRT emphasizes intersectionality, acknowledging the convergence of multiple identities and their impact on individuals' experiences and positions in society (Crenshaw, 1991).

One key aspect of CRT is its emphasis on storytelling and lived experiences as a means of uncovering the complexities of racism in society. This approach recognizes that traditional legal analysis often fails to capture the full extent of racial injustice, as it tends to prioritize abstract principles over the lived realities of marginalized communities. In parallel, narrative inquiry methodology shares a similar emphasis on the power of storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It views narratives as valuable sources of data that provide insights into individuals' experiences, perspectives, and identities. By collecting and analyzing stories through interviews or other qualitative methods, narrative inquiry can help to uncover patterns, themes, and meanings embedded within personal accounts.

When applying CRT principles to narrative inquiry, researchers prioritize centering the voices and experiences of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This is crucial because marginalized communities are often silenced or marginalized in mainstream discourse. By amplifying their narratives, researchers can challenge dominant narratives that uphold systems of privilege based on white supremacy.

Furthermore, storytelling serves as a form of empowerment for marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Recently, storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool in recent research, showcasing the transformative potential of narrative methods. By sharing their experiences, individuals reclaim agency over their narratives and contribute to broader conversations about social justice and equity. This aligns with CRT's emphasis on the importance of experiential knowledge in understanding and addressing racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Through the use of narrative inquiry informed by CRT, this study seeks to bring to light the complexities of racial, social and cultural dynamics. It does not only align with CRT's emphasis on the centrality of race and racism and the stories and experiences of people of color but also underscores the importance of challenging the normalized injustices and advocating for meaningful change.

Artifactual Literacies

Artifactual literacies serve as a vital component of the theoretical framework, expanding the concept of literacy to encompass the multifaceted ways individuals engage with artifacts in their everyday lives (Street, 2003). According to Pahl and Rowsell (2003), artifactual literacies acknowledge that everyone brings a unique story into their learning, emphasizing the significance of artifacts in mediating literate identities and experiences. The authors outline key traits of artifacts, highlighting their physical distinctiveness, creation, embodiment of stories and identities, and contextual value. These artifacts, whether created, found, displayed, or carried, can serve as conduits for expressing cultural, familial, and communal experiences.

Artifacts serve as powerful tools for student engagement and meaning-making in learning environments, bridging connections between home culture and literacy practices

(Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). The process of meaning-making involves the interplay between artifacts and lived experiences, facilitated by the symbolic nature of language within social contexts (De Saussure, 1916/1959; Gee, 2001).

Artifactual literacies prioritize readers' responses, stories, thoughts, communities, identities, and experiences, recognizing the significance of artifacts in shaping individual and collective narratives (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). Turkle (2007) underscored the emotional value of sharing stories about objects, emphasizing their role in marking connections and fluid life roles.

Integrating artifacts into educational projects, such as the CritLit initiative, can foster meaningful learning experiences rooted in students' lived realities and cultural contexts. Randall and Mercurio (2015) highlighted the significance of artifacts in shaping individuals' literate identities and experiences. By recognizing the value of artifacts in meaning-making and engagement, educators can create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments that honor students' diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In this study these literacies illuminate how artifacts including cultural symbols serve as a narrative tool that reflects the socio-political and cultural dynamics of the participants. This helps the researcher to gain valuable context about how participants navigate and interpret their social realities, thereby enhancing the study's ability to capture and interpret the complexities of their lived experiences.

Related Literature

Due to the interconnectedness between constructs and theories in my theoretical framework, I had to pivot my literature review methodology. Since my dissertation required me to connect theories with key concepts, I was not able to identify a mature

body of literature that would respond to comprehensive search criteria including critical consciousness, critical literacy, book club, CRT, and a critical perspective in literacy specifically for diverse students in K-12 U.S schooling. Therefore, to navigate the multidimensional nature of my topic, I employed a combination of targeted keywords to search for relevant literature in library databases, including the ERIC and ProQuest central databases. The process was iterative, involving refinement of search terms based on emerging insights and the evolving scope of the review.

In this section, I organize ideas around the three research questions. I first present how racism is reflected in literacy teaching practices and textbooks and how a critical perspective can fill these shortcomings. Second, I refer to studies that examined literacy practices including narratives surrounding race and identity and relate to students' connection with lived experience. Third, I introduce literacy studies focusing on empowerment through voices, racial identity, and agency in social change.

Manifestations of Racism in Literacy Research

Research studies have investigated the manifestation of racism in schools and literacy teaching in particular through the absence of discussions about race and racism (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Polite & Saenger, 2003; Rogers & Moseley; 2011). This may be reinforced by the lack of representation of diverse voices in textbooks and curricula (A. L. Brown & Brown, 2010, 2015; Hughes, 2022; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009; McNair, 2008).

Absence of Discussions About Race and Racism. The absence of race discussions in literacy classrooms, especially in primary education, can significantly impact students' overall educational experience and their understanding of societal

dynamics. Research has noted that when adults are silent about race or use “colorblind” rhetoric, they actually perpetuate a system where issues of racial inequality remain unaddressed and reinforce racial prejudice against children (Polite & Saenger, 2003; Winkler, 2009). This “colorblindness” approach not only disregards the diverse racial identities of students, but also fails to equip them with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate and challenge systemic racism (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 1995). As noted by A. M. García (1999), “By acting ‘as if’ we do not see color, we reinforce the distance between us, rather than the similarity” (p. 308). By ignoring racial differences, educators risk inadvertently widening the gap between students instead of acknowledging and bridging similarities.

Students’ conversations about racism can be silenced in different ways. First, children naturally engage with issues of race in informal settings like school playgrounds, lunchrooms, and unsupervised groups, yet adults often demonstrate remarkable resistance to acknowledging and addressing these conversations (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). Second, educators may avoid discussing race, which reinforces the disconnection between students of different racial backgrounds, hindering the development of empathy and cultural understanding among peers. This omission limits students’ exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences, thereby restricting their ability to engage critically with literature and understand its broader social implications (Polite & Saenger, 2003). Having conversations about race, different cultures, and beliefs is important because it exposes children to a more global perspective of the world around them.

Lack of Representation of Diversity in Textbooks and Curriculum. Another manifestation of systemic racism in literacy education is the stark underrepresentation of

people of color in the books used. This not only limits the diversity of perspectives available to readers, but also perpetuates stereotypes and marginalization. When literature predominantly features characters, settings, and narratives from majority cultural perspectives, it fails to reflect the rich diversity of human experiences, perpetuates educational disparities, and limits the development of empathy and understanding across cultural boundaries (McCullough, 2013). Hughes-Hassell et al. (2009) and Braden and Rodriguez (2016) used CRT to examine the presentation of people of color in books and curriculum and center race as the main construct. Hughes-Hassell et al. (2009) observed that the lack of representation of people of color in transitional books is a subtle form of racism that denies children of color the kinds of resources research suggests they need to become motivated, engaged, and proficient readers. Additionally, when Braden and Rodriguez (2016) examined the representation of Latinx characters in 15 picture books, they found that English was privileged in the texts, there were superficial references to cultural artifacts, and traditional female roles were prevalent. Thus, the authors called for making curricular decisions with critical attention to text selections and the engagement of young children in critical literacy in early childhood and elementary classrooms.

Other researchers have provided a critical lens on current educational materials in the United States. Hughes (2022) critiqued how U.S. curricula and textbooks often minimize or omit discussions of systemic racism and white supremacy, perpetuating a narrative that downplays the institutionalized nature of racial oppression. Hughes (2022) argued for a transformative approach to elementary social studies education that addresses systemic racism and white supremacy explicitly. This positioning calls for curriculum adjustments that incorporate primary sources and connect historical events to

contemporary racial inequalities, thereby equipping students with a critical lens to comprehend and challenge systemic injustices.

In their study, A. L. Brown and Brown (2010) found that fifth- and eighth-grade social studies textbooks presented violent practices against African Americans as limited to individuals' actions rather than as a broader, entrenched system of exploitation and control. This misrepresentation risks not only distorting students' understanding of history but also reinforcing hegemonic structures of whiteness within educational practices. Grice and Vaughan's (1992) study revealed a significant correlation between African American elementary school children's familiarity with their own history and their receptivity to literature depicting their ethnic group. This study's findings underscored the critical role of cultural relevance in educational materials, showing that when students had limited exposure to African American history, their interest in books featuring characters and themes from their cultural background diminished. Educators can leverage these insights by incorporating diverse literature and historical narratives into the curriculum, thereby providing opportunities for students to explore and celebrate their heritage while promoting literacy skills and critical thinking.

Researchers such as Hughes (2022) and A. L. Brown and Brown (2010) argued for a transformative approach to teaching about enslavement and racism that explicitly addresses systemic racism, with implications that antiracist education in K–5 social studies should include more accurate and comprehensive historical education for young learners. In his book *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi (2019) popularized the term “antiracist education” and addressed how to combat racism through education. By

reshaping historical narratives, people can actively work toward confronting and challenging present-day racial injustices.

Promoting a Critical Perspective in Literacy Education

Integrating race discussions into the curriculum and fostering a dialogue about race and racism in literacy classrooms not only enrich students' learning experiences, but also prepare them to become active participants in an educational environment where all students feel valued and empowered (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). Thus, applying an antiracist stance requires teachers to rethink their curriculum from a critical perspective that recognizes and challenges normalcy and systems of oppression. By critical literacy perspective I mean interrogating wider issues of social class, race, and ethnicity (Kinloch, 2007). Integrating a critical perspective emerges as a pivotal strategy for addressing systemic issues of representation, identity, and equity (Lewison et al., 2015; Morrell, 2002). A perspective that encourages students to read with a critical lens and write with a purpose and voice could support their ability to navigate and reshape complex social issues.

Braden et al. (2020) explored the significance of fostering critical discussions about race between families and teachers. These researchers engaged five Black families and their fifth-grade children in weekly discussions about social-justice-oriented children's literature, aiming to create intergenerational spaces for dialogue about race and racism. Findings revealed that participating parents were actively engaging in discussions with their children about police brutality, which allowed the families to delve into important aspects of Black identity and challenge societal norms and biases. By creating spaces for critical race discussions, the researchers aimed to promote understanding and

empathy among participants and their children while addressing systemic racial injustice. In a similar context, Daly (2022) suggested a strategy for elementary school students to explore race and racism to cultivate racial literacy, allowing students to engage with and understand complex racial issues. This strategy involved creating a safe space for dialogue incorporating diverse texts, using books and materials that reflected racial and cultural experiences, and facilitating critical conversations that reflected their identities and the societal structures around them. Additionally, linking the discussion of race and racism to students' personal experiences can make the topic more relevant and meaningful in literacy education (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

Applying a critical perspective in literacy instruction encourages students to acquire critical consciousness by questioning their world and asking who has power and privilege and who benefits from it. Promoting critical consciousness among students is essential for academic success and social awareness (Diaz, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Critical consciousness encourages students to critically examine the social, cultural, and political structures that shape their lives, which supports their empowerment to challenge inequities and advocate for social change (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Heberle et al. (2020) indicated that critical consciousness may promote thriving among adolescents experiencing marginalization based on their race, social class, income, gender, or other aspects of their identities. Adults such as teachers, parents, and mentors can promote critical consciousness in children and youth. Diaz (2021) highlighted the importance of fostering critical consciousness among elementary students, demonstrating significant improvements in academic performance and critical thinking abilities through strategies such as co-creation of knowledge, inquiry-based teaching, and critical literacy.

Bishop (1990) emphasized the transformative power of literature, particularly for young readers from marginalized backgrounds, in promoting empathy, empowerment, and cultural affirmation. She called for the importance of providing diverse and inclusive literature that serves as both “mirrors” reflecting readers’ own experiences and identities, “windows” offering insights into others’ lives and cultures, and “sliding glass doors” enabling empathy and understanding across differences. Wright et al. (2015) extended this discussion by advocating for the use of African American children’s literature, specifically as “mirror books,” to help African American boys develop positive self-identities through seeing themselves authentically represented in stories. They suggested that book clubs provide a space where diverse perspectives can be explored and discussed, allowing individuals to reflect on their own lives and respond to the experiences portrayed in literature, whether similar or different. Thus, integrating “culturally conscious” books for children from diverse groups helps children from all backgrounds develop empathy, understanding, and a more nuanced view of the world around them (Bishop, 1990). This approach has the potential to not only enrich literacy skills but also foster critical thinking, cultural awareness, and personal empowerment among young readers.

A body of literature has been growing revealed book clubs offer opportunities for students to engage students with the text, making the reading experience more meaningful (Browne et al., 2023; Hope et al., 2015; Jocius & Shealy, 2018; Skrlac Lo & Dahlstrom, 2020, Son, 2022). Critical literacy can be used as a means of engaging with texts in book club settings in ways that highlight social justice issues. For example, Browne et al. (2023) explored the use of critical literacy frameworks to engage middle-

grade readers in questioning societal norms, discussing power dynamics, and analyzing and critiquing societal issues. These authors emphasized intensive reading that provokes critical thinking and challenges conventional viewpoints; collaborative writing that encourages students to synthesize their interpretations of texts dealing with gun violence, integrate diverse perspectives, and the use of performance to give students opportunities to embody and express their interpretations of texts creatively. Additionally, in Hope et al. (2015) Black high school students joined a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) program to understand and address racial discrimination and inequality in their schools. Findings revealed that students experienced racial stereotyping, biased disciplinary actions, and a lack of support and diversity in the curriculum. In Browne et al. (2023) and Hope et al.'s (2015) studies, the authors provided students a space for critical engagement where they could effectively analyze and propose solutions for racial issues in education and society, illustrating the potential of participatory research in fostering critical consciousness.

Likewise, Jocius and Shealy (2018) presented a compelling argument for the importance of critical book clubs in promoting meaningful engagement with political, social, and cultural issues among students. Through the lens of critical literacy, the authors emphasized the role of book clubs in empowering students to actively engage with texts and societal issues, drawing from their personal and cultural realities. They introduced Project ONEE, a yearlong collaborative research project conducted in a third-grade classroom. Throughout the project, students participated in various activities, including four phases of book clubs, written, multimodal, and digital responses to literature, passion projects focusing on disabilities, and a buddy program with younger

students in a special education classroom. These activities aimed to develop students' critical thinking skills, empathy, and ability to interrogate stereotypes and representations of disability and difference. Findings revealed that critical book club activities can help students enhance their textual interpretation skills and also become more empathetic readers who challenge societal norms and advocate for social change. Likewise, Son (2022) investigated how critical literacy activities, specifically within a multicultural book club and through critical dialogue, provided an essential space for bilingual immigrant children in the United States to address their challenges. Through a case study over 19 weeks, the study showed how children were able to express their conflicts and struggles related to their diverse backgrounds. This research underscores the transformative impact of critical literacy practices in nurturing empathy, understanding, and resilience among immigrant children navigating similar challenges.

Additionally, Skrlac Lo and Dahlstrom (2020) discussed the establishment and impact of a graphic novel club for third graders in a suburban public school outside of Philadelphia. Findings showed that students participated authentically, reflecting their passion and purpose through individual and collaborative comic creations, book discussions, and feedback from both students and adults. The authors addressed criticism of comics as a literary medium by promoting its value among young readers and challenging stereotypes through a selection of texts representing various races, genders, religions, and genres.

This extant literature draws attention to the importance of fostering critical literacy skills in young readers to empower them as active participants in society who can critically analyze texts, challenge societal norms, and advocate for social change.

Whether in discussions between families and teachers about race, book club discussions, or classroom dialogues, these researchers aimed to create spaces where readers could explore complex themes and perspectives. This aligns with the main purpose of this study in supporting students reading, analyzing, and questioning texts including social justice issues, fostering critical thinking skills, promoting empathy, and empowering them to challenge societal norms and advocate for social change.

Using Literacy Practices that Reflect on Students of Color's Lived Experiences

There exists a crucial gap between what schools prioritize as important and meaningful and what young people themselves find personally significant in their daily lives (Mahiri, 1994), particularly between the educational curriculum and the lived experiences and interests of African American youth. Mahiri and Sablo (1996) further highlighted this disparity, noting that many urban African American youth did not engage in school-based literacy activities due to a perceived lack of relevance to their lives with writing. However, they analyzed the out-of-school literacy practices of two African American high school students and found that these youth utilized literate behaviors and strategies to assert their voices and interpret their social environments. This approach valued and incorporated diverse cultural experiences from students' communities and connects to the current study, where I explored the critical practices of Muslim African American children outside of school in responding to texts that deal with social justice issues.

Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge, and real-life experiences into educational practices to foster meaningful connections and a deeper understanding of the world

around them (Alvermann et al., 1999; Y. R. Bell & Clark, 1998; Daniels, 2002; Fairbanks, 2000; Knoll et al., 2009; McCullough, 2013; Norris et al., 2012). Additionally, research has emphasized the importance of cultural identity and its connection with students' lives (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Studies have shown that activities and projects connecting students with their cultural background can engage them and boost their learning outcomes (Hao & Brown, 2022; Singer & Singer, 2004).

Storytelling as a teaching practice can include sharing stories of experiences that shape diverse students' understanding of their perspectives on social issues. Shuman (1986) explored the dual roles of oral traditions and written texts in shaping adolescents' identities and their interactions with broader societal norms. He found that narratives had a significant impact on students' perceptions of social justice issues and their integration into school culture. Ladson-Billings (1998) also highlighted the role of storytelling in challenging dominant ideologies and empowering marginalized groups. Additionally, storytelling through various multimodal forms is one way to empower students to express themselves and connect to their cultural background (Abraham et al., 2021; Del Vecchio et al., 2017; Hao & Brown, 2022; Karam et al., 2021; Price-Dennis (2016). Through sharing personal experiences and perspectives, students can develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in society.

Hao and Brown (2022) explored how young Chinese American children engaged in culturally responsive literacy practices and multimodal practices during an online book club. Their findings showed that students made meaning through multimodal cultural interpretations of stories, including talk, discussion, and drawing. The study highlighted the importance of embracing linguistic and cultural diversity in language acquisition and

development, emphasizing the critical role of connecting literacy activities to students' lived experiences in promoting engagement, comprehension, and academic success. Using multiple forms of expression plays an important role in supporting students of color' literacy skills. Price-Dennis (2016) underscores the power of multimodalities in educational settings, particularly in supporting Black girls' literacies. By incorporating various digital tools and platforms such as digital memoirs, memes, and interactive presentations into the curriculum, educators can tap into students' diverse ways of expressing and understanding their experiences. These multimodal practices allow Black girls to explore and communicate complex issues related to identity, race, and social justice in ways that traditional print-based texts might not fully accommodate. Through these digital literacies, students not only enhance their critical thinking and creative skills but also challenge and reshape mainstream narratives that often marginalize their voices.

Additionally, research on stories of emergent bilinguals views biliteracy and bilingualism as valuable assets rather than deficits (O. García & Kleifgen, 2010). The deficit view characterizes the language, literacy, and cultural heritage of students of color as “deficiencies to be overcome in learning” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). On the contrary, researchers have advocated for a culturally responsive pedagogy that aims to foster students' academic success, cultural competence, and ability to critically analyze and challenge prevailing societal norms (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Abraham et al. (2021) organized bilingual family story workshops for Latinx children, utilizing storytelling and poetry to affirm their cultural identities. This initiative was designed not only to enhance students' language skills but also to validate their cultural backgrounds, promoting a sense of pride and belonging. This strengths-based approach not only celebrates linguistic

and cultural diversity but also enriches educational experiences by leveraging these assets to empower students. Similarly, Hao and Brown (2022) demonstrated the importance of creating spaces where Chinese American students could engage with literature and language in ways that resonated with their cultural experiences. Ellison (2016) initiated a digital storytelling project featuring African American families where participants shared poignant stories of experiences ranging from personal struggles to intergenerational connections. Through the use of digital media, this project captured the essence of familial storytelling traditions and highlighted the resilience and creativity within marginalized communities. Thus, the integration of multiple languages and visual methods with narrative has the potential to not only amplify the voices of marginalized individuals but also foster empathy, understanding, and social transformation, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Other studies have offered profound insights into complex social issues by giving marginalized individuals such as undocumented immigrants and refugees a platform to share their experiences and perspectives through storytelling. For example, Karam et al. (2021) presented narratives from a Syrian refugee family, intertwining personal stories with artifacts to convey the challenges and triumphs of their journey. In this study, the narrative approach not only served to shed light on the lived experiences of refugees but also challenged xenophobic discourses and amplified voices often overlooked in mainstream narratives. Likewise, Del Vecchio et al. (2017) held a photography storytelling camp to engage participants in capturing their experiences through artifacts such as photography and written captions. This study was conducted in the Hudson Valley region of New York State and used a multifaceted approach combining critical

place inquiry, youth participatory action research, and photovoice to investigate the lives of undocumented migrant youth. The researchers enabled participants to share their narratives while fostering trust, ownership, and community change, showcasing the transformative potential of participatory research methods.

Using artifacts is important because it supports narrative methods and aims to engage students with their cultural backgrounds and meaningful learning. For example, the Family Artifact Museum, proposed by Singer and Singer (2004), explored students' histories through collecting family artifacts. This project involved students gathering meaningful items from their families, such as photographs, documents, heirlooms, or objects with personal significance, and turning them into a museum-style exhibit. In the current study, students also participated in collecting and sharing artifacts. Thus using artifacts and stories promoted students' empathy and understanding of their identities.

Empowerment, Identity, and Social Change

Freire (1970) discussed the concept of empowerment within the context of education and social change. Empowerment in Freire's framework is not simply about acquiring knowledge or skills, but also about becoming active participants in the struggle for social justice. By empowering individuals to critically engage with their reality and advocate for their rights and interests, education becomes a tool for liberation and transformation. Freire (1970) highlighted the importance of empowering students, particularly those from marginalized communities, to critically engage with texts, language, and discourse to navigate and transform their social realities (Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2011).

Empowerment through identity promotes critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), cultural identity, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Freire's (1970) work was pivotal for developing critical consciousness among marginalized groups, which plays a significant role in empowering students of color and developing their racial and cultural identity. Cultural identity involves identification with and belonging to a particular cultural group, encompassing shared beliefs, traditions, norms, values, and behaviors (Ferdman, 1990). For racial minorities, habitus embodies resilience and cultural identity (Bourdieu, 1986), enabling them to challenge stereotypes and advocate for social justice within social fields where identity intersects with power dynamics. Racial identity is rooted in physical attributes and societal categorization, whereas cultural identity is shaped by shared cultural traits and personal affiliations, but both influence individual self-perception and community interactions.

The selection of culturally relevant materials in education holds profound significance for students' empowerment and identity development. McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) found that when students encountered literature that reflected their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, it validated their identities and fostered a sense of belonging. This validation is pivotal in affirming the relevance of their stories within the educational context and broader society, instilling a sense of pride and self-worth. Moreover, exposure to such materials not only engages students more deeply in learning but also expands their perspectives by encouraging empathy and understanding of diverse viewpoints. The researchers called for integrated culturally relevant texts into the curriculum, so educators can effectively nurture students' confidence, empathy, and cultural awareness, ultimately empowering them through supporting their development as

informed and socially conscious individuals. Through activities like read-aloud books, conversations, writing, and engaging in meaningful dialogues that challenge stereotypes, educators create individual quilt squares that reflect personal identities. This approach not only builds empathy and social consciousness but also empowers students and encourages them to critically analyze and address societal inequalities, embodying the principles of critical pedagogy that emphasize education as a transformative and liberatory process (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008).

In this context, McArthur and Muhammad (2017) delved into the experiences of 12 African American Muslim girls participating in a summer literacy program aimed at exploring and expressing their complex identities through letter writing. Grounded in Paris's (2012) theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy, the research revealed six predominant themes derived from the girls' letters: sisterhood and unity, shattering misrepresentations, empowerment, strength through faith, education, and speaking up for rights. Through thematic analysis, the study illustrated how these themes reflected the girls' efforts to navigate and advocate for their identities as Black, Muslim, and female in the United States. The findings highlighted the transformative potential of integrating culturally responsive practices in education, where letter writing served not only as a literary exercise but also as a vehicle for sociopolitical activism and empowerment among marginalized youth. Overall, culturally responsive education validates students' diverse experiences and identities and empowers them to contribute positively to their communities, striving for equity and social justice.

Research studies show the importance of integrating critical literacy into educational practices to cultivate a generation of socially conscious individuals capable

of effecting positive change in their communities and beyond (Caffrey&Rogers, 2018; Rogers & Labadie, 2015). Caffrey and Rogers (2018) recruited sixth-grade students to design a museum exhibit focusing on social justice themes like bullying, discrimination, environmental issues, health, and poverty. Through critical discourse analysis, the researchers examined how the students' artifacts and displays conveyed ideas and stances on social action. By engaging deeply with these issues and presenting them publicly, students became agents of change within their community. Similarly, in the case study by Rogers and Labadie (2015), a kindergarten student's journey through critical literacy practices demonstrated how young learners can develop a strong engagement with social action. The student's progression from initially conceptualizing a petition as "a helping paper thing" to actively writing, designing, and distributing petitions against bullying exemplified how critical literacy nurtures empathy, critical thinking, and active participation in addressing injustices. Her use of various genres such as posters, story rewrites, and plays to express anti-bullying messages illustrated how critical literacy education goes beyond traditional learning methods to empower students to become change agents from a young age.

In both studies, critical literacy was portrayed not merely as an educational tool but as a catalyst for personal and collective transformation. By encouraging students to critically analyze societal issues, express their perspectives through creative mediums, and take proactive steps toward change. Thus, critical literacy fosters the development of essential skills and dispositions necessary for meaningful social action.

This literature review highlights a notable gap in research concerning critical literacy and intersectionality, particularly in how concepts such as race, ethnicity, culture,

religion, and gender intersect for Muslim African Americans. Existing studies have used book clubs to explore students' engagement with critical literacy from a social justice perspective in Latinx, Chinese, and African American populations in the United States (e.g., Browne et al., 2023; Jocius & Shealy, 2018; Skrlac Lo & Dahlstrom, 2020; Son, 2022). However, there is a significant absence of direct investigation into the experiences of Muslim African American students within literacy studies. Little has been written on the influence of Islam on youth in Black communities (McArthur & Muhammad, 2017) and how the intersectionality of their racial, cultural, and religious identities impacts their understanding of texts and the world around them. There is also a need for research that explores critical literacy practices in non-school educational settings and how these practices can empower students from marginalized communities to develop critical consciousness and affirm their multifaceted identities. To address these shortcomings, this study used an out-of-school book club setting to examine critical literacy practices among children in a Muslim African American community. By emphasizing the critical consciousness and identities of the participants and integrating perspectives from critical theories, this research explored how critical literacy can be effectively cultivated to empower students and validate their diverse identities in different educational contexts.

In this chapter, I presented critical literacy as an overarching theoretical framework that, together with CRT and artifactual literacies, contributes to a comprehensive understanding of students' narratives and understanding of the theme in the text. Then, I reviewed the body of literature that focuses on the lack of representation of students of color in literacy education and the importance of integrating a critical perspective using storytelling, multimodal forms, and artifacts that connect students of

color with their lived experiences, I also presented studies that empowered students of color by highlighting their racial and cultural identities and preparing them to take action. The next chapter will present the methodological approach used in this study.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

In Chapter 2, I detailed the theoretical framework for this study and relevant studies that supported using critical pedagogies in literacy in an out-of-school learning setting. This chapter explains the study methodology, setting, participants, procedure, materials, data collection, and analysis. I also address positionality, ethical considerations, limitations, and the significance of the research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Muslim African American children (CLPs) and their exposure to critical literacy through a month-long CritLit after-school project. The focus was to learn from the voices of students who are not typically recognized in schools and textbooks. My research attempted to hear the marginalized voices of children while also valuing and acknowledging them. By creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere within the book club, I prioritized the perspectives and experiences of marginalized students, allowing them to contribute meaningfully to discussions, share their insights, and co-create knowledge alongside their peers. By centering these voices and experiences, I hoped to challenge existing power dynamics and contribute to positive social change.

The CritLit project was guided by the tenets of critical literacy mentioned earlier: disrupting the commonplace, bringing multiple viewpoints, emphasizing socio political issues, and asking for action that promotes social justice (Van Sluys et al., 2006). I provided the CLPs with a space for engaging in critical dialogue by using the language of critique and sharing their narratives (Lewison et al., 2002). In telling their stories and

recalling their lived experiences, they expressed social justice issues and articulated their experiences in ways unique to them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Research Questions

This study explored the following research questions:

1. How do CLPs respond to racial and cultural themes in critical texts?
2. How do CLP narratives reflect their lived experiences related to race and culture?
3. How does the CritLit project help CLPs envision social change?

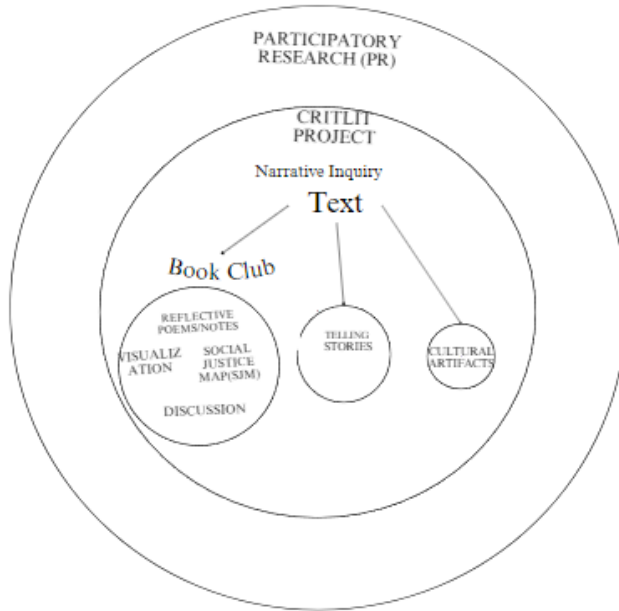
Methodology

The CritLit project includes a book club where participants engage in discussions around selected texts, allowing them to articulate and reflect on their perspectives, experiences and reflective oral and written responses to social justice issues. It also involves various artifacts and cultural symbols to express and analyze their experiences and racial and cultural identity. Additionally, the study features a Social Justice Map activity, where participants visually represent their understanding of social justice issues and their personal connections to these issues. Furthermore, a museum exhibit component provides a platform to present artifacts, reflecting their insights and narratives in the school hall. These activities collectively create a rich, multi-dimensional framework for understanding participants' perceptions and experiences. By incorporating these practices, the study sets the stage for applying participatory research and narrative inquiry methods to delve deeper into the participants' engagement with the activities and artifacts.

In choosing a design for my study, I used a combination of participatory research and narrative inquiry methods (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Participatory Research with a Narrative Inquiry Design



Participatory Research

Cargo and Mercer (2008) defined participatory research as an umbrella term for research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by the issue being studied for action or change. This form of research prioritizes cooperation and co-constructing meaning through partnerships between researchers and stakeholders (such as the partnership between a teacher and her students), valuing insider knowledge and lived experience (Jagosh et al., 2012). By partnering with individuals directly impacted by the subject under study, participatory researchers intend to initiate action or effect change within the situated context in which the research takes place (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Participatory research is collaborative between the researcher and stakeholders, but the degree of

participation can fluctuate at different stages of the study, including design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

While researchers normally design their own research and facilitate the research processes themselves, participatory researchers may discuss their decision-making with the participants (Vaughn et al., 2018). This approach ensures that the research reflects the participants' needs, priorities, and perspectives, and draws on their knowledge and experiences to promote participant empowerment and engagement (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Additionally, participatory research is action-oriented, aiming to generate tangible outcomes or promote social change through systematic inquiry and collaboration with affected communities (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Eckhoff, 2019).

One of the characteristics of participatory research is to empower children and challenge unequal power relations. When youth express their resistance regarding issues of oppression and justice, this can be a type of empowerment, offering both opportunities for action and constraints on possible actions. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2014) emphasized that children and young people can show agency and power through various tasks and actions within participatory research settings. These actions underscore the participants' abilities to assert themselves and shape the research process actively, highlighting their active participation and agency within participatory research endeavors (Eckhoff, 2019).

In the current study, the children altered or redirected the tasks they were engaged in by choosing their texts and tasks associated with the book club. The participatory research method also provided space for the student participants to choose not to respond, or to tell stories that might not be explicitly relevant to the book club topics. However,

these discussions were still relevant to the students' cultural lives and identities. These behaviors demonstrate children and young people's capacity to influence and impact the research process implicitly, underscoring the importance of recognizing their agency and contributions.

Another principle of participatory research is for the researcher to highlight the participants' voices throughout the study (Collins et al., 2018). Similar to providing the space for participants to show agency, this approach honors their voices and perspectives informally, which fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment through meaningful dialogue and exploration of their lived experiences (Glesne, 2011). Presenting children's voices often entails adult mediation and judgment, resulting in the presentation of viewpoints that may reflect the researcher's perspective rather than the genuine experiences of the child (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014). In the current study, I provided informal situations where the student participants could share their ideas generally, and used these as a springboard to more formal social justice activities and discussions. In this way, the study design enabled me to engage in active, authentic listening to children's voices and to acknowledge and interpret the diverse ways in which they expressed themselves.

Participatory research was an appropriate method for the current study for three main reasons. First, it allowed me to answer the research questions in a way aligned with the principles of researcher and participant collaboration and participant empowerment (Eckhoff, 2019). By engaging participants actively in the research process, I addressed the research questions while gaining insights and perspectives from those directly affected by the issues—the children in the book club. By involving CLPs in responding

to racial and cultural themes in formal and informal spaces where they reflected on their lived experiences and envisioned social change, I centered the voices and contributions of the community members themselves. These contributions included weekly sharing of social and cultural material artifacts and a final CLP exhibit.

Second, I applied participatory principles by involving the students in decision making for the book club. The CLPs selected books and discussion topics, and shaped activities that demonstrated their active contributions to the research. This process was consistent with participatory research's aim to empower participants by valuing their knowledge, culture, experiences, perspectives, and expertise (Beazley et al., 2011). In our collaborative process through the CritLit book club, I chose the main book, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram Kendi (2020), because of its connection with racism and social justice and to disrupt the CLPs' reading and meaning-making experiences. This disruption was intended to develop their critical consciousness and trigger the initial phase toward transformative action (Freire, 1970). I also let students choose picture books from a list of books borrowed from community libraries and choose the format they wanted (e.g., visual, oral, and written). Additionally, students brought cultural artifacts from their homes and shared these artifacts and the whole project with their parents and other students in their schools through the exhibit. By doing so, they fostered a sense of ownership and engagement that aligned with participatory principles.

In this study, I encouraged the children to share their thoughts, express their opinions, and engage in meaningful discussions, thus raising their voices and promoting empowerment. Thus, conducting a book club in an out-of-school context embodied the

principles of participatory research through active participation and empowerment of the participants (Eckhoff, 2019). In this context, where Muslim African American children were navigating the intersection of their racial, cultural, and religious identities, the participatory method helped me to ensure that their experiences were highlighted and understood throughout the research process. I enabled the CLPs to share their individual narratives and social narratives they encountered in their daily lives. Furthermore, the various situations and activities embedded in the CritLit Project (prolonged engagement including four 3-hour sessions over 4 weeks, totaling 12 hours) enhanced how the CLPs came to understand the stigma and stereotypes they had encountered through the books. Using participatory research, I generated new experiences and led the students to envision actions to address social injustices and inequities and to promote social change.

Narrative Inquiry

With the focus on highlighting the CLPs' voices in narrative discourse throughout this study and providing space for participants' agency, a narrative inquiry approach was a logical choice to embed within the participatory research methodology. Both methods emphasize valuing diverse perspectives and empowering participants by emphasizing and valuing their lived experiences and stories throughout the research process. I used the narrative approach to highlight the voices of Muslim African American youth by providing the space for them to tell their stories and understandings in connection to the book club theme.

The term "narrative" refers to "a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). In this way, narrative research focuses on storytelling in shaping our understanding of

events and experiences. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in a narrative inquiry approach, participants share narratives directly connected to their experiences. When researchers explore the stories people tell about their own lives, experiences, and contexts, they aim to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct their identities through storytelling. These narrative stories may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2016). An essential connection exists between narrative stories and individuals' identities, as these stories involve a sense of recognition or awareness about oneself. Storytelling, then, provokes one to think about identity and understand experiences in new and perhaps different ways (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

By embedding narrative inquiry within participatory research, I sought to highlight the multiple roles of narratives within the CritLit Project (see Figure 1). The books within the project reflected social justice themes and narratives. Similarly, the CLPs' stories reflected their lived experiences. These narratives encompassed their self-perceptions and perspectives of themselves and others. This focus on individual experiences and self-perceptions reveals the subjective nature of narrative inquiry.

I also employed the narrative approach to draw on diverse data sources to enrich my understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For example, my observation notes documented the CLPs' behaviors and interactions with the text and with each other, providing valuable context for understanding their narratives. Artifacts and reflective poems offered insights into participants' perspectives and social and historical contexts. Additionally, interviews served as the central data collection method, which is a key marker of narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000). Through the interviews, the participants expressed their stories, reflections, and interpretations connected to their lived experience and the major narrative themes we studied. The interactive process of interviewing enabled me to probe deeper into participants' narratives, clarify ambiguities, and explore the underlying meanings and emotions embedded within their stories.

Eckhoff (2019) presented participatory research principles and techniques suitable for engaging young children. In designing my study, I relied on the utility of narrative research practices as methodology, a tool for analysis, and a foundational aspect of my unit of analysis. The narratives of Muslim African American youth became the focal point of the study, illuminating their identities, struggles, aspirations, and environment within the context of their cultural and religious backgrounds. As a result, the CritLit project not only shed light on the diverse experiences of Muslim African American youth, but also empowered their voices and contributed to a better understanding of social justice themes in connection to their lives within larger societal contexts.

Setting

The study was conducted during the fall of 2022 at the Greatest Muhammed Ali Weekend Islamic School (pseudonym), a weekend school connected to a mosque in Philadelphia. The city is described as a dense metropolitan area with a wide range of diverse people and resources (Milner & Lomotey, 2013). It has a large Muslim population, including African Americans, Arabs, Pakistanis, Bengalis, and people from sub-Saharan and North Africa. It is vibrant and dynamic, with many mosques, halal food stores, and restaurants.

The mosque where this study took place was established in 1988 by members of the Muslim Students Association at the nearby university. It is in a historic building formerly occupied by a theater and serves a large and diverse Muslim population in the neighborhood. The Greatest Muhammed Ali Weekend Islamic School opened every Saturday, combining structured and unstructured teaching to provide Islamic education to youth living in the community nearby. At the time of the study, it had over 100 students aged 6 to 16 with distinct cultural, historical, and geographical characteristics contributing to their identities and experiences. The school was funded by community donations and student tuition fees. The school year was divided into fall, spring, and summer semesters, each ending with an assessment of the content courses. The school was staffed by five volunteer teachers specializing in language and Islamic education. The curriculum focused on memorization and interpretation of verses from the Quran, Arabic language and phonetics, foundational principles of Islam, and Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh). A typical day at the school followed this schedule:

- Before 9 a.m.: Students gather in the hall to play and run. Parents meet and talk.
- 9-10.30 a.m.: Academic classes on theoretical knowledge and practical application of Islamic education.
- 10.30 a.m.: Break for snacks and recreation.
- 10.45 a.m.-12.30 p.m.: Students gather with their teachers for the Dhuhr (midday) prayer, one of the five daily prayers in Islam.
- 1 p.m.: Extracurricular activities and opportunities for students to participate in community events related to donation, health service, and offering food.

The Weekend Islamic School played an important educational role by promoting cultural and religious identity within Philadelphia's diverse Muslim community.

Muslim African Americans in Philadelphia

Philadelphia has an estimated 300,000 Muslims (Suswell, 2022), of which African Americans make up a significant proportion. An estimated 80% of Philadelphia Muslims are Black, according to the local chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, compared to only 20% of U.S. Muslims (Caiola, 2023). The history of Islam in the city goes back to 1920, when the Moorish Science Temple was established as the twelfth Nation of Islam temple and the first in Philadelphia. Warith Deen Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad (former leader of the Nation of Islam), and Malcolm X were both appointed as ministers there, and the city quickly became a stronghold of the Nation of Islam. Cultural characteristics of the African American Muslim community include beards, Muslim names, niqab on women, rolled-up calf-length pants, kufis, izaars worn over jeans, and long T-shirts, which are all familiar sights in Philadelphia ("Philly: The Mecca of the West," 2020). The Muslim African American community's rich history and cultural influence in Philadelphia demonstrate the dynamic interplay between faith, identity, and societal change.

Study Participants and Recruitment

The participants in this study (CLPs) were four Muslim African American children in the fourth and fifth grades, aged 9 to 10. Three identified as girls and one as a boy. They were selected using purposeful sampling, which allowed me to select students who fit the elementary school reading level and had the potential to look at their experiences concerning the central issues and themes that emerged through analysis.

The head of the Weekend Islamic School shared the book club flier (Appendix A) and sent a recruitment email to parents who showed interest in their children's participation (Appendix B). Of the 100 students targeted, six registered to participate in the study. Of these six, only four students met the selection criteria and were willing to participate. Before starting the project, participants signed the Student Assent Form (Appendix C), and their parents signed the Guardian Consent Form (Appendix D).

Pseudonyms for the school and participants were used to maintain participant and setting confidentiality. The following sections describe the participants' profiles.

Fatimah

Fatimah was a 9-year-old who was identified as a girl and self-identified as a Muslim African American. Her parents came as immigrants from Mali and Guinea, and she told me that she spoke the Hausa language in addition to English at home. She demonstrated a deep commitment to her community through active involvement in volunteer activities at the mosque, such as providing dinners for the needy and health check-ups for the elderly. As she reported in the group pre-interview at the beginning of the project, despite facing persistent bullying throughout her schooling, Fatimah found inspiration in books, particularly fantasy fiction like *Harry Potter*, which allowed her to escape into worlds of imagination and magic. Her other interests, such as getting henna tattoos and spending time with her cousin, highlighted her appreciation for her culture and close relationship with her family.

Liyanna

Liyanna was a 9-year-old identified girl who also identified herself as a Muslim African American. In the pre-interview, she reported a strong affinity for comic books.

This interest suggested that she enjoyed visually dynamic stories and imaginative illustrations, which could be a source for inspiration. She seemed introverted and thoughtful, and was shy at the very beginning of the project, which was demonstrated by sitting slightly behind her group. However, as the project progressed, she became more engaged in discussions and initiating answers, which indicated not only her willingness to participate and connect with her peers but also her high level of thinking in her responses. Liyanna's perspectives on education as a powerful tool for potential change as expressed in the post-interview suggested how insightful she was. Also, her ability to connect knowledge and awareness with change was surprising. Liyanna's perspective on education as a transformative tool to fight racism supported the participatory research principle of centering young voices in discussions surrounding social justice issues.

Eman

Eman was a 9-year-old who identified herself as a Muslim African American girl. She told me that her parents were Sudanese, but she was born in the U.S. She expressed compassion, creativity, and pride in her cultural roots, and showed me her traditional clothes. She was comfortable in social situations and able to make meaningful connections through storytelling and friendships. In the interview, Eman expressed a stance against bullying and violence, demonstrating her values of kindness and respect for others. Her love for storytelling indicated a deep appreciation for the power of words and communication. Eman had a close bond with her family, especially her mother and grandmother, that influenced her character and worldview. She reported she wore a hijab because her grandmother who loved her told her to do so. This reflected a profound spiritual connection and a sense of identity rooted in faith and family values.

Yussef

Yussef was 10 years old, identified as a boy, and identified himself as a Muslim African American. He was family-oriented, which was evident from his commitment to spending time with his grandmother, who was in her eighties and used a wheelchair. Often, I saw him assisting with her wheelchair, and she appeared to be a strong support in his life. His grandmother's encouragement for Yussef to join the book club reflected her commitment to his personal and intellectual growth.

Yussef mentioned in the pre-interview that he liked watching *Spider-Man*, known for its thrilling adventures and dynamic storytelling. This preference showed that he was inspired by heroic tales. He exhibited strong communication skills during the project, and supported others when it came to explaining the meaning of words or helping his peers to correct spelling mistakes. Yussef also had a passion for basketball, particularly his allegiance to the Brooklyn Nets. He spent his free time playing basketball with friends in the neighborhood, indicating a sociable and active lifestyle. His interest in reading and drawing graphic novels showcased his appreciation for storytelling, poem writing, and visual artistry.

Procedure

The CritLit project took place over 4 weeks from October 16, 2022, to November 11, 2022. Each week included one 3-hour session. The study was divided into three phases: Phase 1 (participant recruitment, university consent, and pre-interview), Phase 2 (book club), and Phase 3 (material collection, post-interview, and exhibit). Each phase included activities and data collection.

Phase 1

After the research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), consent was obtained from participants and parents, and then a group pre-interview was scheduled. In the pre-interview, I asked the children to introduce themselves by sharing their names, where they resided, their likes and dislikes, and their interests. I then posed group questions from a set list and asked that they respond one at a time (Appendix F). I asked additional probing questions to delve deeper into their responses and gain a more comprehensive understanding of their perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The group interview aimed to foster a comfortable environment and address any questions or concerns from participants or parents while gathering pertinent information for the interview process.

Phase 2

The book club was held on Saturdays in the mosque during the time between Dhuhr and Asr prayers, allowing parents to conveniently pick up their children afterward. The book club sessions started after lunch at around 12:30 p.m. and concluded at 3:30 p.m., incorporating time for settling in, breaks, snacks, and activities. Integrating the book club with religious teachings on Saturdays aligned with Islamic traditions and cultural practices. During each session, students gathered on the carpet in a circle within the school's spacious hall. This setup provided a comfortable and communal environment conducive to reading, engagement, and conversation (Figure 2).

Figure 2

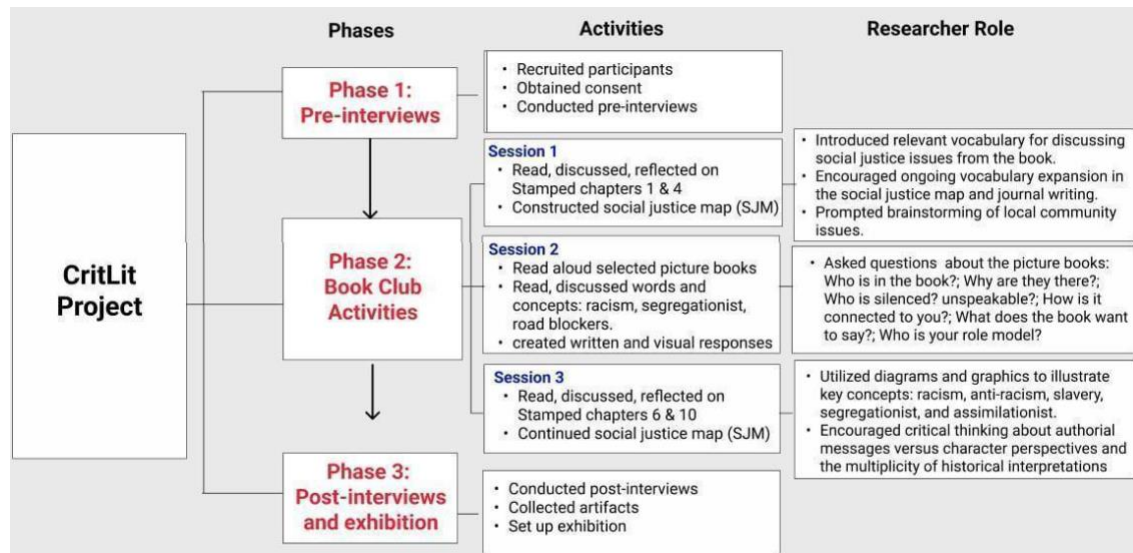
Book Club Setting



The book club activities enabled the CLPs to reflect on their prior knowledge and encounters with injustice through personal stories and the critical issues presented in the texts. These activities fostered their awareness and exposure of social justice issues, transitioning from personal to current social justice events in the larger society. These processes also led to their discussions and interpretations of the social justice theme and concepts, which aligned with participatory research and narrative research in giving voice and agency to the participants. The CLPs' participation in activities and the role of the facilitator-researcher are detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3

CritLit Project Design



During the first book club session, every child received a copy of *Stamped* (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020), along with a pen and a student reflection worksheet (Appendix H). They were given time to silently read Chapters 1 and 4 from *Stamped*, followed by a reading-aloud session. Afterward, they responded to probing questions and engaged in discussions regarding the concepts and main ideas presented in the readings. Toward the end of the session, they wrote down their reflections and created a Social Justice Map.

During the second session, CLPs selected picture books to read from a collection of seven titles gathered from public libraries in the city (Appendix E). This selection process aimed to empower the CLPs by allowing them agency in determining the stories they connected with. As a result of this choice, their involvement seemed to increase significantly. Each participant selected a book to read aloud and subsequently led a

discussion about it with the group. Afterward, they responded to the discussions by writing about their chosen books.

In the third session, participants read Chapters 6 and 10 of *Stamped*. Following the readings, students engaged in planned activities that included discussion, reflection, completing handouts, and finalizing their Social Justice Map.

As the facilitator of the book club and a participant observer, my role primarily involved asking probing questions to help them articulate their responses and demonstrate their connection with the text, such as the following:

- What does this word/concept mean to you?
- Do you know it? Have you seen it before?
- What does the author want to say in this section?
- Who is silenced?
- Undefeated?

The probing questions were essential because they were used to capture the participants' interaction with the text and each other.

Overall, the book club sessions provided participants with opportunities for thinking, reflection, responding, and envisionment. Moving forward, until the end of the project, CLPs continued their self-exploration and continued developing an understanding of social justice issues.

Phase 3

Phase 3 included the final session, in which I conducted a post-interview (Appendix F) and collected material artifacts (e.g., pictures, objects) that the CLPs chose to represent their cultural heritage in their communities. Each child brought photographs

from home and commented about what they represented to them. As culminating activities, the CLPs wrote a letter to the principal of their school to ask for stricter rules to stop bullying and racism and combined their materials (e.g., photographs, reflective poems/notes, Social Justice Map) from the project activities to present in a school community exhibition. They invited their parents and friends to the school to show their work.

Critical Literacy Texts and Materials

I used *Stamped* by Reynolds and Kendi (2020) as the main book for the club to promote critical thinking by examining beliefs and perceptions about race and racism. I believe this critical thinking would yield meaningful dialogue about racism and antiracism and help the children think about how to promote equity and justice in their communities. The book choice was a part of my reflexivity and vision of education as a transformative act. In other words, my choice reflected my awareness that the education of urban Muslim African American students should address social justice issues and be transformative and the literacy materials should be significant (Mahiri & Sablo, 2006).

In choosing this book, I followed the path of a similar study conducted in the area, in which a group of researchers and I participated in a community book club using *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. This book club gave students opportunities to engage with the novel, but also created meaningful conversations about issues of violence and the role of individuals as part of the community.

I also offered the participants a selection of picture books collected from the public library in their community (Appendix E). I asked each participant to choose one or two and produce a response through prose, poetry, and/or visualization. They selected

The Undefeated by Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson (2019), *Freedom Like Sunlight* by J. Patrick Lewis and John Thompson (2000), and *The Proudest Blue* (2019) by Ibtihaj Muhammad, S. K. Ali, and Hatem Aly.

All four books used in this study were considered critical texts because they invited readers to start conversations about racism and social justice and encouraged them to question why some groups of people are positioned as privileged and others are not.

The books met the following criteria for critical texts:

1. They don't make differences invisible but rather explore what differences make a difference.
2. They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who traditionally have been silenced or marginalized.
3. They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues.
4. They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people.
5. They don't provide "happily ever after" endings for complex social problems.

(Leland et al., 1999, p. 70)

Stamped

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You by Reynolds and Kendi (2020) is an award-winning nonfiction book that deals with the history of racist ideas in the United States and advocates an antiracist stance. The authors aimed to immerse readers in a historical context, presenting them with narratives and concepts rooted in the past to engage them with the complexities of race and racism. By employing this strategy, Reynolds and Kendi encouraged readers to adopt a critical perspective toward history.

They presented multiple perspectives to widen readers' knowledge about racism, help them adopt an antiracist stance, and challenge existing narratives about race and identity. Thus, selecting a book like *Stamped* was a way of disruption meant to expose elementary school students to knowledge, historical context, and nuanced perspectives on themes of race and culture. I do believe that engaging readers with challenging texts can help them develop critical thinking skills and dive deeper into meaningful discussions, leading them to think, question, challenge, and act. By doing so, students gain insights into current social, political, and cultural dynamics, which are essential to understanding the world around them. Thus, a critical engagement with social justice issues is crucial for participants' intellectual growth.

Picture Books

Supplementing *Stamped* with accessible easy-to-read books like picture books was a thoughtful strategy to support students' comprehension and engagement with the books. According to Fielding and Roller (1992), preceding difficult books with easier books on the same topic is a way to make difficult books accessible. The mix of challenging and accessible books gave students opportunities to be exposed to a range of social justice issues and to elaborate their understanding of the critical issue. Researchers have argued that picture books develop readers' imaginations because they connect readers with the world and present experiences they may encounter in their real lives. Kiefer (1982) defined a picture book as an art object that "is dependent upon the succession of pages to convey a message. This message may be presented solely in pictures or through a combination of pictures and written text" (p. 14). Also, high-quality design and art in picture books can be critical in developing children's sense of visual

aesthetics and their literacy abilities (Fish, 1970). In other words, the illustrations are important in a picture book to support the author's main idea on the page and help students visualize and better understand the topic.

Participants in this study chose three picture books to read and respond to:

1. *The Undefeated* (Alexander & Nelson, 2019): The book is a collection of poems about Black people in the United States. It is about the unspeakable events people went through during slavery and includes many influential figures in the struggle for civil rights.
2. *Freedom Like Sunlight* (Lewis & Thompson, 2000): The book is another collection of poems that celebrate the lives, experiences, and contributions of influential African American figures throughout history. Each poem celebrates and highlights a person's achievements, struggles, and impact on American society.
3. *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad et al., 2019): The book was co-written by Ibtihaj Muhammad, known for being the first Muslim-American woman to compete in Olympic fencing for the United States while wearing a hijab. Her experiences as an athlete and advocate for diversity reflect the theme of inclusion, self-acceptance, and family support. The story follows a young girl named Faizah on the first day of school as her older sister, Asiya, wears a hijab for the first time. Throughout the book, Faizah encounters questions and comments from her classmates about her sister's hijab, and she learns to respond with pride and confidence, guided by her mother's wisdom.

Data Collection

I used multiple qualitative data collection methods to answer my research questions:

1. Semi-structured group pre- and post-interviews
2. Observation field notes
3. Audio recordings of the book club sessions (including text selection)
4. Student/teacher Reflection
5. Student templates
6. Student-provided artifacts

I designed my study to rely on the utility of participatory research as a methodology and narrative inquiry as a tool for design and analysis. The integration of participatory research and narrative inquiry was woven throughout the research questions themselves, the analytical techniques employed, the framework guiding the study, and the unit of analysis, the narrative vignette. This approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and the broader sociocultural context in which they were situated.

Given the fact that participatory research encompasses research designs, methods, and frameworks that use inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by an issue being studied for action or change (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 1), I provided a complete overview of the methods used specific to the research questions and showed how narrative is woven through the questions, analytical techniques, framework, and unit of analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1*Alignment of Research Questions with Unit of Analysis, Methods, and Theoretical Framework**Framework*

Research question	Unit of analysis	Methods	Theoretical frameworks
Research question 1: How do CritLit participants (CLPs) respond to racial and cultural themes in critical texts? (PR)	Process Participants read and discuss the theme in the text with each other Product Narrative(individual, group) Excerpts	Observations Field notes Video recordings Artifacts Reflective poems, and social justice map produced by youth	Critical literacy, artifactual literacies
Research question 2: How do CLP narratives reflect their lived experiences related to race and culture? (PR & NR)	Process Participants interact with others and texts during book club sessions Participants reflect on their thinking about justice issues Product Narrative (individual, group) Excerpt	Interviews Artifacts Reflective poems and visualization produced by youth	Critical literacy, CRT
Research question 3: How does the CritLit project help CLPs envision social change? (PR)	Process Participants respond to the text and envision social change Participants brought cultural aspects to the project Product Excerpt	Photographs gathered from participants' archives Reflective Poems Students created stories, poems Social Justice Map	Critical literacy, Artifactual literacies

Note. CLPs = CritLit participants; CRT = critical race theory; NR = narrative research;

PR = participatory research.

Interviews

To better understand the students' literacy experiences and their understanding of social justice issues, I conducted semi-structured group pre- and post-interviews before and after the book club sessions. Each interview took about 45 minutes, was audio-recorded, and was transcribed. The interview protocol included a list of 18 questions that my PhD supervisor and I developed. The pre- and post-interview questions were different, but they complemented each other and related to students' reading experiences, opinions about life events, and connection to the reading materials provided in the project (Appendix F).

Questions 1 through 9 in the pre-interview protocol addressed the reading experience, school life, real life, and questions students might have encountered during the project. To see what changed and developed over the 4 weeks, the post-interview questions, 10 through 18, addressed the students' reflections on the reading materials provided in the book club. Specifically, the questions referred to the students' thoughts about influential characters, their lived experiences in connection to social justice issues, and the possibility of any change in the book's events. I asked readers about change in an attempt to make them reflect and think critically about how their perspectives differed toward the end of the CritLit Project. Therefore, I explored how readers develop their critical reading skills by referring to their experiences and making meaning of the world around them. Using the interviews in conjunction with observations, I was able to go deeper into participants' perspectives and meaning-making.

Participant Observation Field Notes

My role as a participant observer was to function as a participant while also observing the relationships and patterns among people and events over time (Jorgensen, 1989). While participating and facilitating in the CritLit Project, I took observation field notes on all four sessions, for a total of 12 hours. Before data collection, I created an observation protocol to guide and maintain my focus on the research questions because of my participation throughout the project. In alignment with my overarching theoretical framework, I observed the text-reader connection and lived experience: power dynamic through language use, making meaning through discussion, and opinions about social change (see Appendix G). While I facilitated three book club discussion sessions over 4 weeks, it was important to record the sessions, capture conversation details, and take field notes. The combination of my participant observations and recordings facilitated tracking the CLPs' words (i.e., narratives and stories), dialogues (i.e., reading discussions, conversational turns, interaction), and feelings (i.e., emotions, mood) expressed during discussion sessions.

Student/Facilitator Journals

The students were asked to keep journals about their experiences in the club. Hatch (2002) stated that journaling where participants keep a written record of their experiences and feelings throughout the research process can be used to supplement data collection. Thus, I captured additional data regarding students' understanding and responses to the text through journal entries they wrote at the end of each session (see Appendix H). Students were given a journaling template that included two sections: "What stood up for you in today's readings? What are the takeaways from the session?"

and “Connection to home, school, neighborhood, and the world.” Students were encouraged to write their opinions and reflections in the format they preferred; some preferred writing in their notebooks.

The purpose of journaling was for the students to express their understanding of the book club sessions. It gave them a vehicle to discuss feelings, perspectives, things they learned, and things they had not seen before. It also served as an evaluation of the book club sessions. Student journaling enabled me to examine their understanding of the text and how it connected to their real lives. As an observer and facilitator, I used my own weekly reflection to evaluate the sessions and make adjustments that were congruent with transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2000). For example, when students were asked to reflect or respond, they were allowed to respond in the way and the format they wanted (Appendix I).

Book Club Audio Recording

To thoroughly document the discussions held during our book club meetings, I utilized an audio recording device to capture the conversations. This process involved recording three separate discussion sessions. Each session was recorded in its entirety, focusing on the students' discussions about the book. The aim was to ensure that every participant's insights and contributions were accurately reviewed and analyzed. By concentrating on the students' dialogues, the recordings provide a view of their perspectives and interactions regarding the book, offering valuable material for evaluating the depth and engagement of their discussions. Alongside these audio recordings, I maintained detailed observation notes to capture a more holistic view of the discussions. These notes tracked various aspects of the students' interactions, including

their gestures, emotional responses, and reactions to one another. By documenting non-verbal cues and the dynamics of their interactions, the observation notes provide the context to the audio recordings, allowing for a richer understanding of the participants' engagement and the nuances of their discussions.

Student Reflective Materials

Material data consisted of the CLPs' creations connected to their everyday life and constructed meaning-making during the various CritLit Project texts and activities. The material data supplemented the other data collection methods and served as a way to highlight the students' voices regarding their perspectives and critical thinking regarding their experiences and the texts used in the CritLit Project:

- The CLPs brought photos from home that represented their cultural identities, such as dress, food, or décor, and enabled them to express their beliefs.
- Three poems and one visualization were created by the four students responding to the picture books.
- The CLPs wrote a letter to the principal of the school to ask for stricter rules about bullying and racism in the school.
- The CLPs created a Social Justice Map. At the end of each session, the students sat and recalled ideas and concepts in the project and presented them visually.
- The CLPs created an exhibition of their work that represented their group and individual contributions for the entire school and parents to celebrate their work.

Overall, these material data were an integral part of the students' critical literacy and highlighted their voices and meaning. Aligning with participatory research, the CLPs' constructed materials served to embrace their agency, their culture, and the connection between their unique experiences and those experiences in the CritLit project.

Data Analysis Approach

In this section, I present the ways I collected, organized, and stored the data to ensure confidentiality as well as how I followed Braun and Clarke's (2017) six phases of thematic analysis.

As previously noted, the data collected during the book club sessions included participant observations, field notes, audio recordings, and artifacts like reflective poems and visualizations created by the youth participants. CLPs shared their perspectives and experiences regarding racism. They also engaged in reflective activities such as writing poems or creating visualizations like drawings. For instance, Fatimah responded to Rosa Parks on the bus by drawing the scene as she heard about it in the media, while Yussef wrote a response to *The Undefeated* referring to the history of African Americans between the past and the present. Liyanna created a visual representation of her henna tattoo. These diverse forms of expression not only deepened CLPs' engagement with the material, but also fostered a sense of empowerment and agency as they navigated complex discussions surrounding race, identity, culture, and social justice.

My data analysis included participants' stories as well as their engagement and interaction with the text and their peers during book club sessions. I used narrative vignettes where participants reflected on their lived experiences regarding justice issues.

Methodologically, I used interviews to gather in-depth insights from participants, and the artifacts students created served as instrumental components for analysis.

Finally, as the research questions aimed to explore how the CritLit project facilitated CLPs envisioning social change, I looked at how the CLPs contributed to their projects. This process included excerpts or parts of participants' responses, reflections, insights, and visions for social change generated through their engagement with the CritLit project, such as written reflections, audio recordings, and visual representations. Also, artifacts including the Social Justice Map and photographs from CLPs' family archives offered participants opportunities to delve into critical inquiry and provided rich qualitative data for analysis and interpretation.

All forms of data were de-identified through the use of pseudonyms and saved as digital files on my password-protected personal computer. Audio recordings and field notes were transcribed. The material data (i.e., written reflections, poems, letters, Social Justice Map, photographs, and exhibition) were first digitized and then downloaded to the research files. I transcribed the students' written reflections and digitally scanned the students' visual materials.

Thematic Analysis

I used the thematic analysis approach, defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (Braun & Clarke, 2017, p. 297). I followed Braun and Clarke's (2017) six phases of thematic analysis, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Thematic Data Analysis Process*

Six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017)	Analysis processes	Alignment with participatory research (PR) and narrative research (NR)
1. Becoming familiar with data, checking for accuracy, initial noting	Check the accuracy of any transcripts with audio files Reading and rereading all data Making initial notes	Initial noting and reflecting on data segments that stood out to me about power, identity, and inequities (PR)
2. Generating initial codes	Identifying relevant data (relevant to the research questions and critical narrative approach) and assigning meaning-based labels (coding) Grouping the codes according to like meaning	Identifying data segments that address power, identity, inequities, and their related perspectives/stances (PR) Labeling (coding) the data segments in a meaningful way that aligns with power, cultural and racial identity, and inequities (PR) Within the codes, I identified the unique situational (i.e., contextual) aspects of each participant's story conveyed through the data (NR) Grouping codes according to power issues, identity, and inequities (PR)
3. Identifying themes	Combining groups of codes based on similar meanings	Combining like data according to power, racial and cultural identity, and inequities (PR)
4. Reviewing themes	Cross-checking data to make sure they are in appropriate groups	Cross-checking the tentative themes and topics (PR) and unique situations (NR) contained within the themes
5. Refining and defining themes	Determining theme names and definitions based on the data within each main group	Three tentative themes: 1. Stories of Inequity (NR) Disrupting everyday lives through critical narrative experience (PR) 2. Questioning Power (NR) Taking a critical stance toward history (PR) 3. Stories of Identity (NR) Consciousness about cultural and racial identity (PR)
6. Writing up the data	Final analysis by making sure data are appropriate for each theme Organizing the themes in a logical way	Critique themes and data to ensure the participants' stories are highlighted based on how the participants discuss power, cultural and racial identity, and inequities (PR) Organizing the themes to present the participants' stories and voices (NR & PR)

In the first data analysis phase, I familiarized myself with the data by skimming through the content, checking data accuracy of audio files and transcripts, and making initial notes. While checking for accuracy, I added my handwritten field notes about students' gestures or informal verbal responses using parentheses, enabling me to better understand the context, the data expressed verbally by the participants, and their feelings, mood, and tone. I also added my initial thoughts about the data where CLPs shared their insider knowledge about social justice issues to align with participatory research.

The second phase of Braun and Clarke's (2017) analysis process begins with generating initial codes. I identified data regarding the participants' insider knowledge, their constructed meaning-making about unequal power relations and challenging power relations, and their perspectives demonstrating the difference between silenced voices and absence in representation. Once I identified relevant data, I assigned meaning-based labels (coding). I focused on the participants' words in paragraphs, sentences, and phrases or images for this coding, as a code is a short phrase that represents a "summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 4). The next step in this phase was grouping the codes according to their meaning. This process reflected Saldaña's (2013) first- and second-cycle coding. Aligning with participatory research, I grouped the codes according to power issues, identity, and inequities.

Following Braun and Clarke (2017) third phase, I grouped the coded data according to their collective meaning. In this way, the codes were grouped into three major groups (i.e., tentative themes) that shaped my findings chapters. This process included looking for the nuances of meanings that the CLPs mentioned about power,

racial and cultural identity, and inequities, which addressed the participatory research focus. I then identified smaller subgroups within each of the larger groups.

In the fourth phase, I cross-checked the tentative themes generated by analyzing the CLPs' perspectives related to participatory research and identified unique situations where they encountered injustice reflected through personal and current stories contained within the tentative themes to align with narrative research. In the fifth phase, I defined each theme based on the subgroups or patterns within each main group. This phase consisted of capturing "something important about the data in relation to the research question [that] . . . represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Through this process, I defined three generated themes reflecting the overall data:

1. Disrupting the Commonplace: Stories of CLPs' lived experience (i.e., narrative research) that highlighted the voices of CLPs and offered them space for disrupting the commonplace (i.e., participatory research).

2. Interrogating Multiple Perspectives Through Social Justice Issues: Questioning power through the narratives (i.e., narrative research) within the texts of the CritLit Project, and the CLPs' reflections and critical responses to the texts (i.e., participatory research).

3. Empowerment through Social and Cultural Identity and Envisionment for Change: Stories, artifacts, and poems expressing cultural and racial identity (i.e., narrative research) came from relevant and irrelevant situations occurring during the CritLit project (i.e., participatory research).

The sixth phase consisted of writing up the generated findings by logically organizing the themes and the data within each theme to present the participants' stories and voices in a way that encompassed the aims of participatory and narrative research. Overall, I presented the themes in alignment with the participatory research methodology with an embedded narrative inquiry component. I sought to portray the participants' stories based on how the participants discussed and shared them regarding power, cultural and racial identity, and inequities. In this analysis, I used a blended approach, moving from an inductive approach to a deductive approach when cross-checking and defining the themes.

Method Triangulation

Method triangulation is defined as implementing different methods that “reveal different aspects of empirical reality” (Denzin, 1978, p. 28). Method triangulation in qualitative research refers to collecting data through more than one method (e.g., interviews, observations, or material data) and/or using more than one form of data analysis process (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002). Using these processes, qualitative researchers aim to identify various perspectives and understandings and highlight diverse voices (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2002). By using method triangulation, I aimed to go deeper into the students' experiences, narratives, and understanding of the theme. Using interviews, observations, and material data, I sought to maximize the participants' voices and to convey their constructed meaning-making throughout the CritLit Project and the social justice issues they discussed and experienced.

Reflexive Journaling

A key component of Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis process is the researcher engaging in reflexive practices. Braun and Clarke contended that to achieve reflexivity, researchers should be critical of their perceptions of the data and their experiences during the research. Through reflexive journaling processes, I sought to recognize if my ideas were taking precedence over the students' meaning-making and stories by noting my general thoughts about each CritLit Project session and asking myself critical questions (see Appendix I). While engaged in this process, I recognized how the experiences connected to my experiences and then tried to focus on what the CLPs said. In this way, I hoped to always share their stories and understandings rather than my own.

Positionality Statement

As an international student from a postcolonial North African Muslim country, my understanding of social justice has been profoundly shaped by my background and experiences. Growing up in a region that experienced the "Jasmine Revolution" against youth marginalization, I recognized the importance of understanding inequity and its ongoing impact on power dynamics and privilege. My experiences in a postcolonial society, where power and privilege issues were deeply embedded and where the banking system (Freire, 1970) was utilized within the educational sector, further influenced my perspective. As a Muslim woman living in the United States, I have developed a critical perspective on cultural sensitivity and inclusion in literacy research. This perspective, informed by my experiences with racism and stereotyping, has enriched my research by

highlighting the challenges faced by marginalized voices and advocating for their empowerment.

My positionality as a Muslim Arab multilingual woman from a postcolonial background has led me to approach my research through a critical lens, focusing on the intersectional social constructions of race, language, religion, gender, and culture. From the critical lens, I centered the experiences of marginalized voices, analyzing power dynamics, and promoting resistance to oppressive practices to foster social justice (Kincheloe, 2008). This approach has significantly influenced my research design and process, leading me to employ participatory and narrative methodologies that emphasize critical consciousness towards social justice. I have developed a profound appreciation for cultural and racial identity and a critical perspective on injustice and social justice issues.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the study by fully disclosing its nature, purpose, and requirements, ensuring participants' anonymity, and employing subjectivity and reflexivity. Before conducting the research or recruiting participants, I obtained approval from Rowan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in Summer 2022 (Appendix J). I distributed a recruitment flier (Appendix A) to students at the school, and the principal (Imam) sent a recruitment email (Appendix B) to parents who had shown interest in joining the project. Notably, two of these parents were from my morning language class. I spoke individually with potential participants and their parents, explaining the study's overall scope, providing details about the book selection used, and emphasizing that participation was voluntary. Participants were assigned pseudonyms,

and the study's location was described using pseudonyms and general descriptors to maintain confidentiality. Participants signed an informed consent form that detailed their involvement, potential risks, and benefits. Throughout the research process, I ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and data de-identification.

Additionally, multiple strategies were employed for data collection and analysis, including corroboration and triangulation through various methods, which established the trustworthiness and credibility of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Engaging with critical literacy, I aimed to encourage students' agency in research practices. They were active participants in the study, selecting picture books, engaging in activities such as constructing social justice maps, and responding to the texts through visual, oral, or written means. I also built rapport and trust with participants (Oliver, 2010). I emphasized our collaborative relationship in fostering an equitable and inclusive setting. Notably, two of my students (Fatimah and Yussef) were from my language class, while others were from the adjacent class, which facilitated trust-building. I further fostered a positive environment by sharing snacks like fries and chicken. During prayer times, the three participants, namely Liyanna, Fatimah, and Eman showed interest and joy in joining me in praying.

To enhance the rigor of the investigation, I used a research journal to reflect on my biases (Borg, 2001). This practice allowed me to systematically examine and address any potential biases that could influence the research process and outcomes, thereby contributing to the overall credibility and integrity of the study.

Limitations

As with any research, this study faced several limitations. As with any research, this study faced several limitations. One limitation was my dual role as both the facilitator of the CritLit Project and the primary data collector. In my role as a facilitator, I worked closely with the participating students to help them feel comfortable with both the project and myself. This involvement, while beneficial for fostering a positive learning environment, also created challenges in maintaining objectivity and avoiding overinterpreting, as my personal interactions with the students might have influenced how I perceived and recorded their responses.

Another limitation was the difficulty in scheduling one-on-one interviews with participants, it was not possible to conduct individual interviews, which led to holding group interviews instead. Group interviews can sometimes lead to more generalized responses, as participants may support their peers' views instead of opposing or saying something different. Also, students may be less willing to share their personal experiences or perspectives or refrain from revealing one story. They might have been more hesitant to share personal reflections in a group setting compared to a private interview.

A last limitation of the CritLit Project was the time constraint, as the project took place in only one month. Examining students' critical consciousness and reflection on social justice issues, the limited time allocated in this project may have hindered participants from delving into deep discussions. Additionally, transformation requires long practice and reflection, which may not have been possible within such a short period. Thus, students might have only a basic understanding, rather than the deeper, lasting insights and skills necessary to challenge systemic inequities in their communities.

However, these limitations are related to the context and offer areas for improvement in future research.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in various ways. First, it explores the role of critical literacy in shaping critical consciousness. By emphasizing the connection between critical literacy and critical consciousness, the research highlights how integrating critical literacy into education can empower marginalized students to become critically literate, active, and agents in society to promote social justice and equity.

Second, the research highlights how critical literacy practices in the lives of Muslim African American youth illuminate their unique experiences with social justice issues, providing educators with insights to create more inclusive and empowering literacy projects. By examining the intersection of race, religion, and culture, the research underscores how these factors shape students' identities and understanding of systemic inequalities, helping educators better address their diverse learning needs and enhance their critical awareness of power and privilege. Thus, understanding the convergence of multiple identities and their impact on individuals' experiences and positions in society (Crenshaw, 1991) helps educators better address students' learning needs and enhances their critical awareness of how systemic inequalities are maintained and reinforced through aspects of identity and issues of power and privilege.

Finally, this research study examines how an out-of-school project provides opportunities for Muslim African-American voices to be represented in book selections, and to engage in discussions about race and racism. Thus, the study underscores the importance of including marginalized voices and experiences in educational materials

and literacy practices. Supporting the calls of Leander (2011) and Mahiri (1994), the study advocates for bridging the gap between traditional school-based literacy instruction and the rich, out-of-school literacy practices within marginalized communities.

Integrating these vibrant community traditions into classroom learning not only addresses representation gaps but also fosters deeper understanding and engagement among students by valuing and reflecting on their diverse cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the methodology through which this participatory research study with embedded narrative inquiry was conducted. Narratives were created to express each participant's experiences in the CritLit project club. I operated as a participant observer who shifted between roles as the club's sessions progressed. I examined various data sources to highlight students' voices and meaning-making around issues of power, inequity, and identity through their participation in activities that developed their understanding of social justice issues and pertained to their cultural and racial identities. These activities provide rich data to respond to the research questions. I also explained my positionality as it guided the research project. Data will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings generated from participatory research and narrative analysis of the data gathered during the four-week CritLit project at the Greatest Muhammed Ali Weekend Islamic School. The CLPs engaged in various activities using four critical literacy children's books: *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020), *The Undefeated* (Alexander & Nelson, 2019), *Freedom Like Sunlight* (Lewis & Thompson, 2000), and *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad et al., 2019). This section addresses the following research questions: (1) How do CLPs respond to racial and cultural themes in critical texts? (2) How do CLP narratives reflect on their lived experiences related to race and culture? (3) How does the CritLit Project help CLPs envision social change? I gathered data through pre- and post-interviews, observation field notes, book club session audio recordings, student/facilitator journals, student template worksheets, and student-provided artifacts including cultural artifacts, photographs, reflective poems, artwork, social justice map, and museum exhibit.

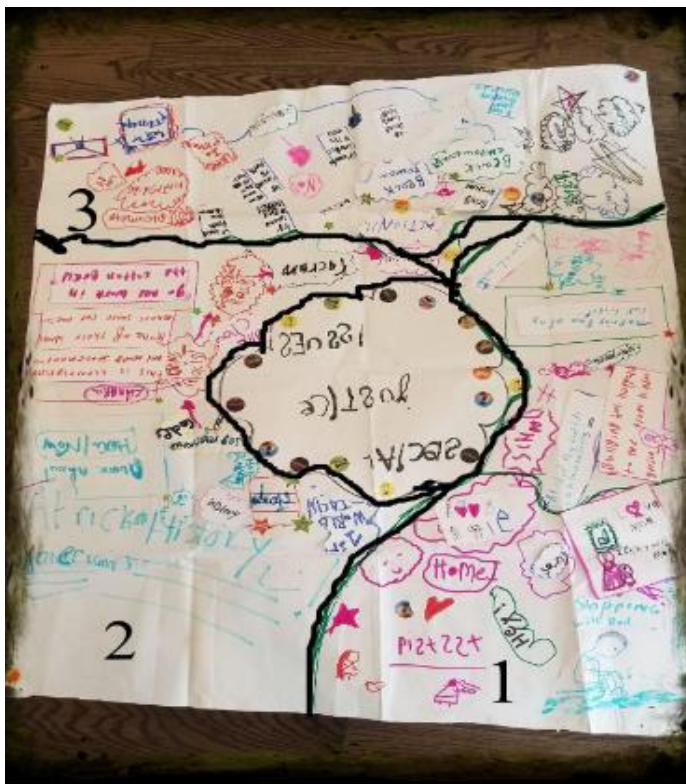
Three overarching themes emerged as pillars of this study: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) taking a critical stance toward historical narratives, and (c) empowerment through social and cultural identity and envisionment for change. In this section, I define each theme and present the data making up the theme. For each theme, I also present the individual narratives of the CLPs and group narratives I constructed based on the group discussions regarding the texts. Through their stories, the CritLit Project texts, and activities, the CLPs engaged critically with social justice issues and challenged dominant narratives. Embracing disruption, critical inquiry, and

empowerment, the CLPs were exposed to ideas encouraging them to consider future social change and transformation.

These themes were reflected in what I call the Social Justice Map that CLPs decided to create which facilitated narrative reflection, collaboration, and action (Figure 4). After each session, they collaboratively added text, drawings, and symbols to represent ideas from the session discussions. The construction of the Social Justice Map represents a comprehensive visual map of various dimensions of social justice such as their lived experiences, systemic inequalities, community strengths, and areas for advocacy.

Figure 4

Construction of Social Justice Map



This activity served as an opportunity for the CLPs to visualize their experiences and reflect on the text. Through the map-making activity, students engaged in the process where they were the storytellers and meaning-makers of their own knowledge.

Because the full map covers the three themes emerged from the data I broke down the content of the map into three parts represented by numbers in Figure 4. These parts will be discussed in the following theme sections.

Theme 1: Disrupting the Commonplace

Based on the pre- and post-interviews and discussions within the CritLit project, CLPs shared their stories which reflected their disruption of the normalized practices and systemic discrimination. As an element of critical literacy, disrupting the commonplace includes problematizing the studied theme using a specific group's particular values and beliefs (Lewison et al., 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Two main aspects of disrupting the commonplace emerged: (a) CLPs' personal narratives that served as evidence for their becoming critically conscious during the CritLit Project, and (b) group narratives in which the CLPs problematized social justice issues through engaging with the historical narratives and learning the language of social justices. Table 3 lists the topics of these narratives. In the following sections, I highlight how the personal and group narratives served as a platform for developing critical literacy skills and present the data that made up these aspects of critical literacy.

Table 3

Theme One: Disrupting the Commonplace: Narrative Topics

Narrative type	Topics
Personal narratives: Telling stories and becoming critically conscious	Normalcy of violence
	Normalcy and prevalence of bullying
	Normalcy of discrimination/colorism
Group narratives: Problematizing social justice issues	Defining racism
	Segregation, assimilation, and stereotyping

Personal Narratives: Telling Stories and Becoming Critically Conscious

The CLPs shared stories that reflected the systemic inequalities and power dynamics and perpetuate oppressive behaviors. Through their stories, the CLPs shared their understanding of the world around them and began engaging in analyzing their own experiences of oppression. It is through dialogue with others and reflections about their own experiences that individuals can deepen their understanding of the world around them and how they and others are oppressed (Freire, 1970).

The personal stories can be seen as a part of the students`reading the world that precedes reading the word in Freire`s expression. It enables students to read the world through a critical lens and facilitates students to connect their lived experiences to the texts that will be studied in the next book club discussion sessions. By relating CLPs stories to the theme of racism, discrimination, and bullying presented in the selected materials, students will be able to see the relevance of social justice issues in their own lives. Making this connection between what the students experienced from

discrimination, colorism, and bullying and what they will read cultivated their engagement with the material, as they provoked their connection between their experience and the characters' struggles and their own experiences of oppression or resilience. When students see their real lives reflected in the texts, they are more likely to question societal norms and engage in critical discussions about inequality and injustice. This critical view that stems from personal experience makes reading an active process of engagement, where students' voices reflect their thoughts and envisionment for change.

The CLPs' personal narratives about becoming critically conscious included disrupting the commonplace by challenging the normalization of violence, bullying, and discrimination or colorism (Table 4).

Table 4

Theme One: Disrupting the Commonplace: Participant Narratives

Topic	Narratives
Normalcy of violence	"Shooting in the Neighborhood Is Like Firework!" (Yussef) "Reflection on the George Floyd Incident" (Yussef) "Reflection on Breonna Taylor" (Eman)
Normalcy and prevalence of bullying	"You Should Go Back to the Jungle!" (Yussef) "Calling Me a Parrot!!" (Fatimah)
Normalcy of discrimination/ colorism	"I Had Like ... a Scratch on My Arm!" (Liyanna) "Get Away from Me!" (Eman)

Normalcy of Violence. CLPs shared three personal stories conveying a sense of normalcy around gun violence that served as ways to become critically conscious.

Yussef: *“Shooting in the Neighborhood Is Like Firework!”* To begin, Yussef shared his experience of hearing gunshots in his neighborhood, which caused him some confusion about why people were shooting other people and nothing ever happened to address it. His teacher, who was also his aunt, confirmed to him that such incidents were common throughout the city.

Yussef: I remember I was sleeping and then I woke up to gunshots, like seven gunshots, it was like “Boom, boom, boom, boom!” and then it was a quick stop. Then another “boom.” And then another seven gunshots, “Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.” But then like 20 minutes later, no cops were, and still no cops were there.

Facilitator: And do you talk about it in the classroom?

Yussef: Yeah, I spoke about it inside the classroom. Okay. My teacher, who is my aunt, told me most of that stuff happens everywhere around the city.

Facilitator: Yeah. And how do you feel about that?

Yussef: Technically, for me, it was at the same time normal, but at the same time not normal.... I heard fireworks, so okay, the sound of fireworks. It’s like, it’s technically almost like, just on the gunshots.

Facilitator: Okay, And how is it not normal?

Yussef: So it’s not normal! I don’t get why people run around here with guns shooting innocent people.

In this narrative, Yussef seemed to grapple with how gun violence was normalized in his community. In the end, he concluded that “it’s not normal!” He also commented about his lack of understanding regarding shooting, that it was somehow normal or okay in the current world. This reflection serves as a reminder of the urgent need for societal introspection and reform, challenging individuals and communities alike to confront and dismantle systemic injustices.

Yussef: “Reflection on the George Floyd Incident.” After being asked about any other instances of violence in his life, Yussef conveyed his shock about George Floyd walking down the street in one moment only to be killed a short time later:

It was in 2021 or ... 2020, I think, when the officer was holding him like this [holding his wrists behind his back] and he was choking and he put him on the sidewalk [kneeling as if to recreate the scene]. Like ... he pulled him over like he was just walking and then he ended up dying! I think his name ... I don’t remember ... I think it was in 2020. I don’t feel good about it! ... It was shooting these people because they could possibly be the criminals.

Through this account, Yussef revealed his disapproval of the incident in his statement, “I don’t feel good about it!” The statement “shooting these people because they could possibly be the criminals” seems to show Yussef’s awareness of racially biased acts in society. This awareness implies the normalcy of such events and reflects Yussef’s becoming critically conscious.

Eman: “Reflection on Breonna Taylor.” During the initial interview, Eman recounted her knowledge of an incident of violence on the news. Her narrative included

her perceptions of the event and revealed what she understood as the police using race to target certain people:

Yeah, I saw this on the news. It was basically about this girl and this guy. They were both sleeping. Her name is Breonna Taylor. And ... you know, they were both sleeping at home. And these police officers, they were like investigating a crime. I think it was about drugs. And they weren't wearing police uniforms, just regular clothing. They had a gun and they went into the house because they thought they were the ones who had the drugs or committed the crime. And they came in and both of them [Breonna and the guy] were really scared because they didn't look like police officers, but they had a gun and they were scared. And the guy [with Breonna] pulled out a gun to protect himself and his partner, and the police officer shot back. They just assumed because of their race, or the color of their skin.

Through Eman's retelling of the news report, she seemed to focus on the fear and injustice faced by the two adults when confronted by the police. Her statement about assuming something (perhaps guilt) because of race also serves as a form of societal normalization of these types of events and the media's representation of them.

Normalcy and Prevalence of Bullying. In their pre-interviews, the children shared their experiences and discussed the frequency of bullying. Within their narratives, the CLPs recognized and questioned the prevalence of bullying within their school setting and as an inevitable part of their school lives. Two student narratives were related to bullying and/or racism.

Fatimah: “Calling Me a Parrot!!” Similar to Yusef, Fatimah recalled a time when she faced bullying at school and decided to confront the person who bullied her:

Bullying happened to me in my school from kindergarten to first, second, and third, and it is still in my class, and they are still bullying me. I was in third grade, and it was almost the end of the year. So like, these two people right next to me, it was like one boy and one girl, and they were like making jokes. And then the boy, like he was making, he was the one making jokes. And then he said, and then he called me a parrot. So I kind of got mad at that ... So I stood up and I was like, “Why are you calling me a parrot?” And then the teacher thought I was the one who started it. So they, so then they like, so then I was the one who got in trouble and then they moved my seat. Okay? And then like, but I was still mad at the, at the boy and the, and the and the girl, because they were laughing when that happened. But then the teacher noticed that. So then they got in trouble for lying.

Through Fatimah’s recollection of her experiences with bullying, she challenged the unfair treatment she received, questioning why she was targeted and standing up for herself. By advocating for herself and through the teacher’s action, Fatimah began to gain awareness of bullying prevalence and how individuals responded to these situations, whether positive or negative.

Yusef: “You Should Go Back to the Jungle!” In sharing about his prior experiences, Yusef recounted a bullying experience and what caused him to feel sadness and injustice.

Yusef: What happened was, I was in second grade and there was, like, this group of bullies, and I don’t like them. And I got left back in

second grade because of them. But one of them was Hispanic. And then they were talking. And then they came up to me and said the Ng-word, then he, I have a lot of hair on my arm, and then he said, “Look at this monkey!” And he said, like, the Ng-word. “You should go back to the jungle.” Oh, okay. So then, I stood up. So I was going to say something back to him and I said, “I didn’t jump the border.” Then there was a fight. A fight. Okay. And then he ended up saying that I started it, and then I got in trouble. It was like at the end of the school year. So then I ended up having to get left back, and so did my friend. So most of my friends left back.

Facilitator: How do you feel about that?

Yussef: I don’t feel good. And I saw him, though. He also stayed back in second grade, though he ended up having to move. So we were the “other” kids. One of the kids ends up getting kicked out of the school.

Facilitator: Did you tell the principal about that?

Yussef: Yeah, I told my mom, and then she ended up going to the principal. And then they had a meeting about no bullying. And then if anyone was caught being racist, then would be immediately kicked out of school.

Through Yussef’s recounted experiences, he revealed instances of facing racist language and bullying, both of which left a negative impact on him. Despite feeling offended by such incidents, Yussef acknowledged his use of racist language without

critically analyzing it. His encounters with bullying included racial slurs like the “Ng” word and derogatory remarks suggesting he resembled a monkey and he should “go back to the jungle!” Yussef reported these instances and his feelings about them, which, in his understanding, made a difference in how the school and his mother addressed such issues. Unfortunately, Yussef also explained that racist language and bullying remained prevalent in his school, especially during conflicts between students of different races. Taken together, Yussef’s critical awareness about bullying events in his life included disapproval, discomfort, and voicing to others that the events were occurring.

In both Yussef’s and Fatimah’s narratives, bullying, like violence, seemed to be a part of their everyday lives. Engagement in our CritLit Project discussions seemed to bring these stories to the forefront of our work together, representing the students’ abilities to identify their own experiences of injustice and become even more aware of these situations in their lives.

Normalcy of Discrimination: Shades of Friendship. The background experiences of the CLPs encompassed narratives of shades of friendship, as determined by a person’s shade of Blackness, other aspects of color, and building friendships. These narratives presented by Liyanna, Fatimah, and Eman provide an insight into the complexities of friendship amid discrimination shaped by skin color and shade. Their experiences showed how socially constructed notions of skin color influenced acceptance and exclusion, even within the same race. In their reflections from the initial interviews, the students shared experiences of exclusion, being different, rejection, and the many emotions that came with these experiences.

Liyanna: “I Had Like ... a Scratch on My Arm!” In her first story, Liyanna shared about reaching out to a new girl in school and then seemingly being betrayed and rejected.

Liyanna: In kindergarten, there was this little girl. A girl who just transferred into the school, like, a few days ago. Right. And it was like the beginning of the year. But she transferred late. So I was pretty bored, and during lunchtime, because my friends weren't there that day I asked her if she could sit with me at lunch, and she said sure. So when we were sitting at lunch, right then, one of her other friends made [a call/text] on her phone, and they were like, they told her not to hang out with me. I didn't really hear what they said, but all I heard was something about me, I don't know. But something ...

Facilitator: Like what?

Liyanna: [Making a circle gesture with her finger to her face, looking hesitant or reluctant] I didn't hear what they said.

Facilitator: And what makes you think it's about you?

Liyanna: That time I had a scratch on my arm. So it was pretty big. And maybe they were talking about it. Okay. And so after that, then the next day I totally forgot what happened. And I asked her if she could sit with me for lunch again. And then she said no. Okay. So I was like, maybe they said something about me that wasn't true. Just to make her not like [me].

Facilitator: How do you feel about that? Did you tell your mom or your teacher?

Liyanna: No ... I mean, I did tell my teacher, but she said it wasn't really a big deal, and she said that not everybody wants to be friends with other people. So I just continued hanging out with my other friends.

In her second story, Liyanna highlighted an experience of being discriminated against based on her physical traits and dark complexion:

When I was much younger, I had brown skin, and it hurt me deeply that other Black girls didn't like me or want to play with me because they thought I hated all white people and those with lighter skin. However, as I grew older and my skin became darker, my friend's attitude towards me shifted, and she started to be my friend.

While Liyanna's accounts describe experiences of being rejected and discriminated against based on her dark complexion, her decision to report the first incident showcases her defiance against these prevailing norms. Liyanna also demonstrated resilience in navigating the situations. While Liyanna showed some emotions in these excerpts, she also provided a glimpse into how the people around her started to change regarding accepting her despite the shade of her skin.

Fatimah, too, shared her ability to confront and rectify instances of discrimination:

Fatimah: [Remembering a story similar to Liyanna's] One girl wanted to join us and play, but my friend ... revealed secretly that she didn't

like to play with her because ... her skin is *too dark* [intonation rise] compared with other Black girls, and she made fun of her.

Liyanna: For me, skin color doesn't matter as much as your personality, like who you are.

Through Fatimah and Liyanna's narratives, they acknowledged the existence of skin tone bias, which is called "colorism" among their peers. Colorism is defined as inter- or intra-racial discrimination based on skin color stratification, as investigated by Flake (1998) in *The Skin I'm In*. Brooks et.al's (2008) explained how too dark-skinned, dark-skinned, and light-skinned shades vary and how shade represents the Black girl's image and the self-representation relative to skin stratification. Such bias may lead to societal distress, as it influences friendships in both classroom and playground settings. The participants' acknowledgment of having "too dark" skin coincided with the societal norm and preference for lighter skin tones that have been internalized by some Blacks (Bishop, 2010). Liyanna's stories highlighted experiences of exclusion and prejudgment based on "a scratch on her arm" or her darker complexion, as she interpreted it when she pointed to her face. Likewise, Fatimah recounted a similar situation where she witnessed a girl being excluded and ridiculed because of her darker skin tone. She highlighted how these biases exist and are normalized; her stance reflected her understanding of the harmful impact of such biases. This internalized feeling regarding colorism comes from community norms that show the pervasiveness of skin color biases, even among those who share similar racial backgrounds.

Liyanna and Fatimah's awareness of how skin tone matters in society gives some insights into how they perceived the complexities of racial dynamics and the importance

of coming to their own opinions. Liyanna showed resilience as she continued to navigate these challenging social dynamics and built friendships with those who eventually accepted her. As she explained, “For me, skin color doesn’t matter as much as your personality, like who you are”. Also, it is important to note that this opinion could be derived from her experiences as a dark-skinned girl.

Eman: “Get Away From Me!” Eman shared a similar story of a time when she tried to build a friendship and was confronted with rejection.

Eman: When I moved to the new school and wanted to join a white girl. I tried to come and play with them or do something with them. She told me, “Get away from me!” ... I was *sad* [raises intonation]. I went back home and told my mom the story.

Facilitator: What did your mom say?

Eman: My mom said, “It doesn’t matter what skin color you are, she’s probably jealous, like, you’re Black and you can make different friends with different skin color.”

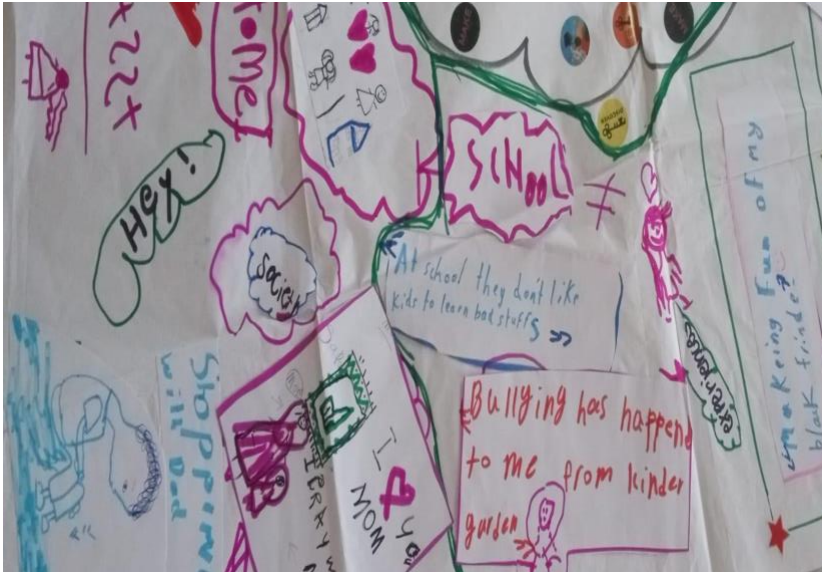
Eman’s experience of seeking support from her mother after facing racial discrimination highlights how the CLPs sought out others to help them make sense of their experiences regarding violence, bullying, and color-based discrimination. By reaffirming to Eman the beauty and pride inherent in her Blackness, her mother encouraged her to challenge societal norms based on skin color. Likewise, Yussef told his mother about the bullying incident in school, and she reported it to the principal to take action. Familial support that empowered the CLPs to advocate for themselves seems to have helped them gain awareness of the commonplace forms of social injustice. Also,

reporting bullying experiences to the teacher or the principal, as in the cases of Liyanna and Fatimah, indicates that students spoke out about these experiences. These instances reflect a growing recognition of issues that were once tolerated or ignored. Participants exemplify the importance of individual agency and collective action in challenging and transforming attitudes and practices that perpetuate discrimination and injustice. As these narratives continue to be shared, they inspire others to join in the effort to create environments where every student feels valued, supported, and heard.

By sharing their experiences and perspectives, the four CLPs began to challenge the acceptance of violence, bullying, and discrimination as normal, and this served as a beginning point for their critical consciousness development. They put down their reflection on the social justice map in the initial phase I call part 1 (Figure 5). I invited participants to draw and write phrases and pictures connected to their lives at home and school. By recalling their lived experiences and stories, participants engaged in self-reflection and introspection, identifying both positive experiences and instances of injustice or inequality they encountered. This reflection enabled them to connect their personal experiences with broader social justice themes, fostering a deeper understanding of how these issues manifested in their daily lives.

Figure 5

Social Justice Map Part 1



Participants shared their drawings and phrases, and collaboration emerged as they collectively built the map. By visually representing their experiences, participants were able to continue gaining awareness of injustice and the emotions accompanying it. For example, one participant wrote, “Bullying has happened to me from kindergarten,” and drew a person crying to express the ongoing experience of bullying she witnessed and her hopeless response to stop it. Also, another participant reflected on talking about social justice issues as the following sentence: “At school, they don’t like kids to talk about bad stuff”. Thus, the narrative reflection may let participants think about their lived experiences and move toward a collective understanding, as well as to exchange ideas and perspectives, enriching their understanding of social justice issues and fostering a sense of solidarity among them. Through dialogue and sharing, participants not only

validated each other's experiences but also gained new insights and perspectives that contributed to their social justice awareness.

The inclusion of both positive and negative experiences on the Social Justice Map connected to the complexities of social justice issues and their impact on individuals' lives. The visual representation not only illustrated individual experiences but also highlighted commonalities and differences among participants. Through this collaborative process, the map became a collective narrative that reflected diverse perspectives on social justice issues, fostering a deeper awareness and understanding among participants.

Group Narrative: Problematizing Social Justice Issues

Through reading and discussing *Stamped* during the CritLit Project, the CLPs explored dominant narratives about race and racism that are prevalent in society in general and critically analyzed them in their historical context. By reflecting on their experiences and perspectives, they developed a deeper understanding of racism and its impact on society. The group narrative related to disrupting the commonplace included various historical narrative texts and activities supporting their understanding and problematizing of racism. These data included two main narrative patterns: (a) defining racism and (b) segregation, assimilationist, and stereotyping.

Defining Racism. In the initial activities, students reflected on the title of the main CritLit Project book, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*. During the book club discussion, the CLPs offered insightful definitions of racism as a normal personal attribute or perception grounded in personal encounters, primarily addressing individual attitudes and behaviors related to racism. CRT scholars broadens this understanding by

contextualizing racism within systemic and institutional frameworks. They expand on the current study participants' insights by highlighting how racism extends beyond personal interactions to become ingrained in societal structures and power dynamics. This broader perspective helps to situate personal experiences of racism within a larger, systemic pattern of inequality.

Facilitator: What is racism?

Liyanna: It is when people think bad about other people

Yussef: It's more than ...when people think bad about any race.....okay and people of a certain race or just because of their race or their cultural background.

Eman: Likethe people judge you because of skin color like when people have different skin color or hair ...and when they are hostile because of what you re' wearing.

Facilitator: What do you mean by judge?

Eman: Judged means when somebody ...likes being rude to you to what you're wearing. Some people make judgments of people's skin tone and they use them as slaves.

Facilitator: What do you mean by slaves?

Eman: Slaves means.... like colored people.

Yussef: (Responded to Eman) It's not only about color, it's also about the different eyes, different textures that we don't have, also eye color, hair, or their face is different.

Liyanna characterized racism as “think[ing] bad about other people,” while Yussef expanded this definition to encompass negative judgments “because of their race or their cultural background.” Eman underscored the role of physical attributes like skin color in fostering racism: “People judge you because of skin color ... or hair ... because of what you’re wearing. Some people make judgments of people’s skin tone and they use them as slaves.” Yussef broadened the scope in his response to Eman: “It’s not only about color, it’s also about different eyes, different texture that we don’t have, also eye color, hair, or their face is different.”

In their definitions of racism, Liyanna and Eman demonstrated a nuanced comprehension of how social experiences had informed their understanding of systemic inequalities. That might be referred to as the beginning for understanding these complex issues and reflecting their perspectives and experiences. Their use of evaluative verbs like “think” and “judge” seems to convey their own perceptions of others’ roles in upholding racist ideologies. Like Liyanna and Fatimah, Eman showed her awareness of judgment based on arbitrary factors such as “skin color” or “appearance”. Thus, the language the CLPs used appears to reflect their understanding and awareness of how marginalized individuals are referred to, silenced and interpreted. While the students' definitions revealed their attempt to identify racism, Critical Race Theory (CRT) frames their knowledge and gives it a broader context by placing participants' definitions within the whole systemic and institutional structures. In other words, defining racism showed that the individual experience proved that the issue is entrenched in societal norms and power dynamics.

Segregationism, Assimilationism, and Stereotyping. After discussing the book title, CLPs read the following quote from *Stamped* to discuss other concepts such as segregationism, assimilationism, antiracism, and stereotyping:

Segregationists are haters. Like, real haters. People who hate you for not being like them. Assimilationists are people who like you, but only with quotation marks. Like ... “like” you. Meaning, they “like” you because you’re like them. And then there are antiracists. They love you because you’re like you. (Kendi & Reynolds, 2020, pp. 3-4)

CLPs’ responses to the text demonstrated their attempts to grasp the concepts of segregationists and assimilationists related to race and racism.

Facilitator: What are segregationists?

Yussef: Segregationists are people who want Black and white to be separated and they want the Black to get their own rights. So, these people don’t like, they don’t like white and Black to get equal rights.

Facilitator: What about assimilationists?

Eman: I don’t know what it means. But I think it means, like ... I think it means, like ... the people that didn’t want the Black people to be in touch.

Facilitator: Okay. Be in touch with whom?

Eman: Like, be in touch with each other. Like, they don’t want each other to like, get a plan so they can stop this.

Yussef: I think it means like, you know, if you're not like them, then they're not gonna talk to you.

This group narrative shows how Yussef and Eman were making sense of the terms. Both seemed to be attempting to grapple with new concepts based on their prior knowledge and how the author presented the ideas.

Yussef's definition of segregationists as those "who desire racial separation and oppose equal rights" and Eman's interpretation of assimilationists, as "the people that didn't want the Black people to be in touch" can be attempt to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts as people that tried to perpetuate separation and inequality in the society. These definitions led to CRT's insights into the complexities of racial dynamics and institutionalized inequality.

In the following conversation, the participants continued exploring social justice concepts such as stereotyping and how these terms were related to segregationist, assimilationist, and antiracist perspectives.

Fatimah: What is the word stor ... sterrr ... stereotyped?

Yussef: Stereotyped, you mean?

Facilitator: Can you define the word "stereotype"?

Yussef: Yes, stereotyping is basically when you're judging people who are different from you, have disabilities, or we're just a different race.

Eman: It means someone telling lies to people. I think maybe stereotype someone because she was [wearing] a hijab.

Facilitator: People make stereotypes because of what?

Fatimah: Depends? Okay. It probably depends on the type of things they are doing.

Facilitator: Okay. And who are the stereotypes?

Fatimah: Okay, okay. Asians ... African Americans, okay. So these are stereotyped.

In this conversation, the participants grappled with the concept of stereotypes and tried to articulate their understanding. For example, Fatimah initially struggled with the pronunciation of “stereotyped,” indicating a potential unfamiliarity with the term. Yussef stepped in to help clarify the word, explaining that it involved making judgments about people who are different, particularly based on factors like disabilities or race. Eman added to the discussion by suggesting that stereotypes involved “spreading lies about people.” She referred to wearing a hijab, which might allude to her personal experiences. When I probed the participants to think deeply about why stereotypes exist and who they affect, Fatimah suggested that stereotypes depended on the actions or characteristics of individuals, identifying specific groups like “Asians and African Americans” as being stereotyped. This statement reflects a broader understanding of how stereotypes are often formed based on superficial traits or perceived behaviors attributed to entire groups, rather than on individual merits or diversity within communities. Fatimah’s insight underscores the impact of stereotypes on marginalized groups, highlighting their potential to perpetuate bias, discrimination, and systemic inequality. The children’s definitions of stereotyping reflect a growing awareness of how broad and generalizations about groups can perpetuate discrimination. Their definitions echo CRT scholars focus on how stereotypes are used to justify and maintain racial hierarchies and reinforce systemic

racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Thus, the children's discussion highlights how stereotypes impact marginalized groups by reducing individuals to a set of perceived characteristics.

When students attempt to understand and problematize racism, they offer thoughtful definitions of racism, segregationism, assimilationism, and stereotyping. By engaging with social justice concepts through Critical Race Theory (CRT), they delve deeper into the exploration of systemic racism, institutional power dynamics, and societal structures that perpetuate racial inequalities. This engagement with CRT enhances and expands their initial insights, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how these issues function within broader societal frameworks.

Conclusion

The theme of disrupting the commonplace signifies the CLPs' prior experiences, their understanding of social justice issues, and the related status quo, beliefs, systems, and practices that represented their awareness of inequality. Their personal experience brought about their understanding of oppression, racism, and societal attitudes and behaviors that normalized these experiences in everyday life, such as in school and the news. Their group narratives show their understanding of racism as a historical product (Shor, 1980) through defining and discussing related concepts.

Theme 2: Taking a Critical Stance Toward Historical Narrative

Reading from a critical stance requires reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives (Lewison et al., 2000; Nieto, 2002), which includes acknowledging issues and topics with various and nuanced historical viewpoints and interpretations. In exploring the theme of creating a critical stance, this section discusses two distinct yet

interconnected topics. First, the CLPs’ narratives encompassed connections they made between their personal experiences and the texts through their narratives (which included their verbal discussions about the texts, their written responses to the texts, and their visual and multimodal responses about the texts): “The Woman Who Stopped Slavery” (Fatimah), “Rosa Parks: The First to Stand up” (Eman), “We just have to wait to tell” (Yussef). Second, the CLPs’ group narrative involved analyzing and discussing power dynamics presented by a text on Zurara, “the First World Racist” in the *Stamped*. The CLPs’ meaning-making was shaped by their personal experiences and by examining the historically situated texts, focusing on who benefited in the portrayal and who was marginalized or excluded. In the following sections, I provide the data related to these aspects of critical literacy (Table 5).

Table 5

Theme Two: Creating a Critical Stance

Topics	Narratives
Personal narratives: Making connections to a developing critical historical stance	<p>“The Woman Who Stopped Slavery” (Fatimah’s poem) in connection with Harriet Tubman from <i>Freedom Like Sunlight</i></p> <p>“Rosa Parks: The First to Stand up” (Eman’s picture) in connection with Rosa Parks from <i>Freedom like Sunlight</i></p> <p>“We just have to wait to tell” (Yussef’s poem) in connection with <i>The Undefeated</i></p>
Group narrative: Analyzing power dynamics to a developing critical historical stance	<p>“The First World Racist” from <i>Stamped</i></p>

Personal Narratives: Making Connections to a Developing Critical Stance

As part of book club activities, the CLPs responded to selected picture books in various ways. Their responses consisted of personal narratives through drawing and writing reflective poems that celebrated characters in history. This narrative exploration served as a way to gain access to the CLPs' understandings, how they were constructing meaning, and their perspectives on the social justice ideas they encountered.

Throughout the CritLit project activities, the CLPs engaged in making meaning by connecting bullying, violence, and discrimination faced by historical figures to their personal experiences. These connections seemed to evoke the CLPs' empathy regarding the historical figures' struggles and efforts to achieve equity. The CLPs' multimodal forms of expression, such as writing reflective poems and creating artwork, enabled them to explore the significance of these figures' actions. They also critically analyzed historical narratives, questioning biases and understanding the broader societal contexts in which these figures operated. By connecting deeply with these historical figures, students not only learned about history but also discovered how their own identities and experiences intersected and positioned them with larger movements for social change.

Fatimah: “The Woman Who Stopped Slavery”. The CLPs continued their critical examination of the history of racism in America by exploring more texts about abolitionists such as Harriet Tubman and other Black activists whose legacies inspired their discussions on race, identity, and social justice. Fatimah chose to read the poem “Harriet Tubman Speaks” from *Freedom Like Sunlight* (Lewis & Thomson, 2000):

North Woods Were strange
To me, a stranger,

When Lady Freedom took my hand. And she said, “Brown girl,
Brown girl, the danger
Still hunts beyond the Promised Land” (p. 8)

The poem captures Tubman’s resilience and her unwavering commitment to the ongoing quest for equality, which is central to the narrative of African American history and the struggle against oppression. Fatimah expressed a strong connection to Tubman:

Facilitator: Why do you choose to read and respond to the poem about Harriet Tubman?

Fatimah: I watched the trailer, okay.... Harriet Tubman is the woman who stopped slavery traveling through a bunch of states.

Facilitator: Okay. How did you get the information?

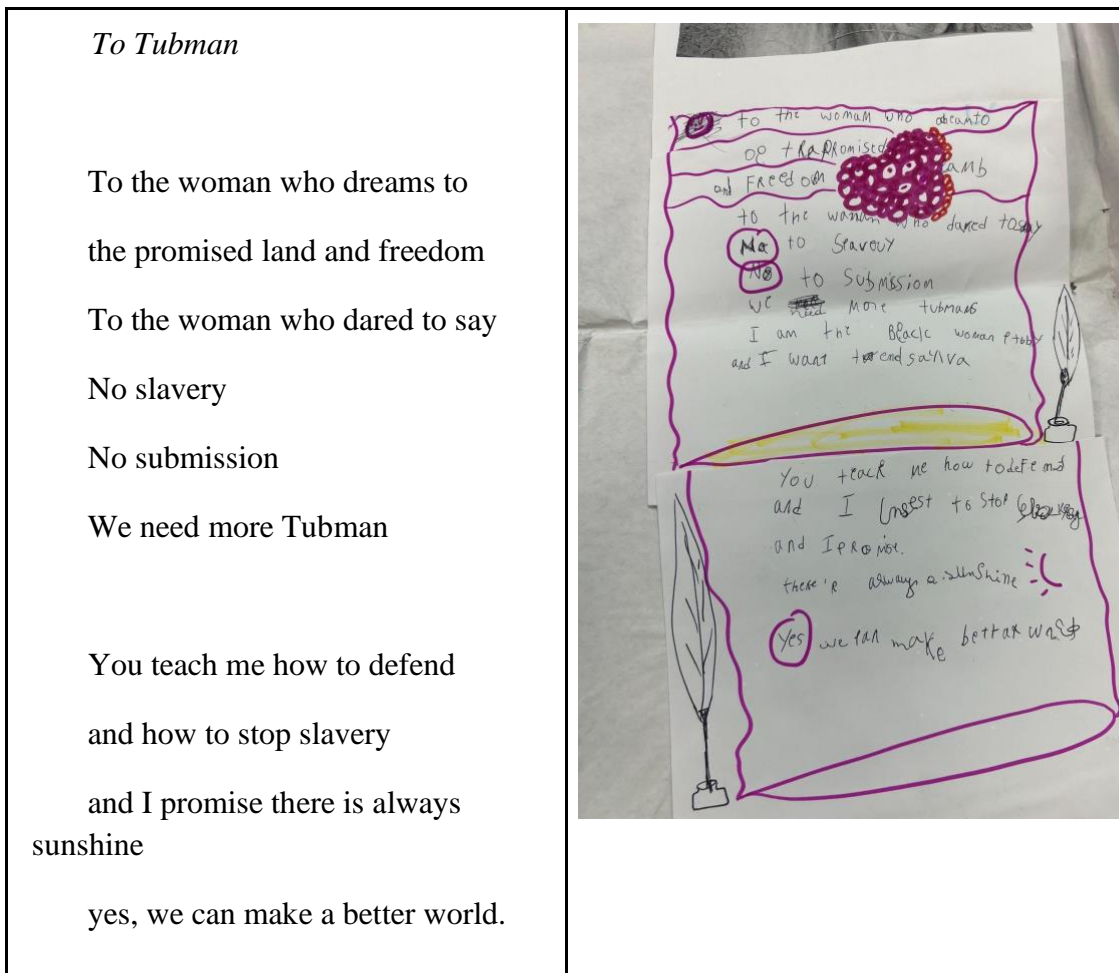
Fatimah: My mom told me the story. I dressed as that girl in Black History Month. I dressed like Harriet Tubman ... I want to be like that woman who stopped slavery.

Fatimah’s connection to Harriet Tubman reflected her family’s influence. Her mother seems to shape her understanding: “My mom told me the story.” This demonstrates the role of family in shaping individuals’ perceptions of history and perhaps their evolving identity. Due to her experience with her mother’s storytelling, Fatimah seemed to develop a deep admiration for Tubman’s bravery and activism. This led her to aspire to imitate Tubman’s courage in standing up against slavery. Fatimah also engaged with a multimodal text about Harriet Tubman (“a trailer”) outside of the CritLit project. Her choice of a different textual representation (i.e., a poem about Tubman in *Freedom Like Sunlight*) indicated her interest in learning more about Tubman. In addition, Fatimah

demonstrated her desire to follow Tubman’s legacy when she “dressed up as that girl in Black History Month” to “be like that woman who stopped slavery.” Fatimah responded to this poem by writing her own poem, including a visual (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

“The Woman Who Stopped Slavery”: Fatimah’s Response to Freedom Like Sunlight



In Fatimah’s multimodal form, she ascribed the characteristic of bravery to the historical figure of Tubman. Her focus on desires (i.e., dreams) and action in her words “To the woman who dreams to/ the promised land ... to the woman who dared to say No ...”

reflected her belief in women's power to transform and envision a better future. At the end of the first stanza, the phrase "We need more Tubman(s)," then, serves as a call for Fatimah and other women and activists to follow Tubman's example of bravery and commitment to fight for justice. In Fatimah's final stanza, "You teach me how to defend and how to stop slavery," she highlighted how the texts and her personal experiences had taught her to be brave and stand up in the ongoing struggles for justice and equality. Fatimah closed her poetic rendition with "and I promise there is always sunshine" and "yes, we can make a better world," suggesting the possibility of a better future and seeming to allude to the line "Lady Freedom took my hand" as a source of empowerment in the original poem.

Eman: "Rosa Parks: The First to Stand Up" Eman chose to read and respond to the poem "Rosa Parks" in *Freedom Like Sunlight* (Lewis & Thomson, 2000):

It was an Alabama day

For both the Many and the Few.

There wasn't really much to do; No one had very much to say

Until a bus, the 4:15,

Drove by. But no one chanced to see

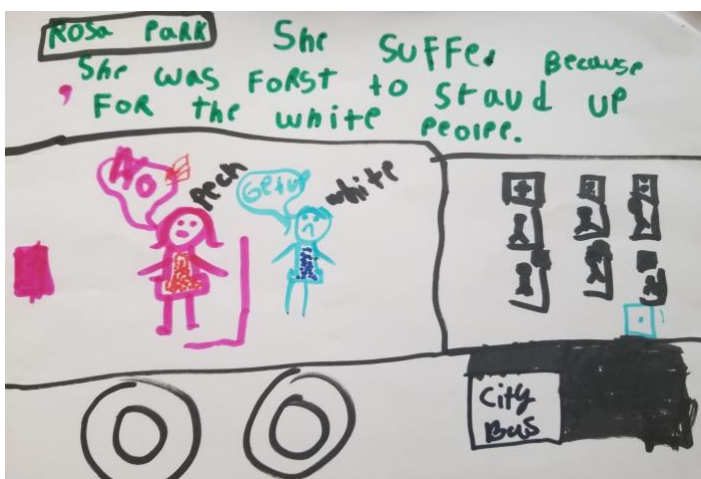
It stops to pick up history. The doors closed slowly on a scene (p. 820).

This poem describes the moment when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus in 1955. The text underscores the absence or invisibility of certain voices, particularly those of marginalized individuals like Rosa Parks and other African Americans impacted by segregation and discrimination.

In her journal, Eman described Rosa Parks as “a good person who defeated them by challenging the rules.” The statement brings attention to the enduring relevance of challenging unjust rules and advocating for equality. Eman connected to Rosa Parks’ courageous act of defiance by drawing a picture of the scene (Figure 7). She stated “She suffer because she was forced to stand up for the white people.” Eman’s art exemplified her ability to connect historical events with personal reflection. She drew a white man on the bus saying, “Get up,” while Parks replied “No.” This artistic representation not only captured the pivotal moment of Rosa Parks’ defiance but also highlighted the importance of her individual act and invited viewers to empathize with the courage it took to challenge segregation in the Jim Crow era. Eman’s illustration vividly portrayed the power dynamics and injustice inherent in racial segregation, prompting viewers to consider the broader implications of Parks’s act of resistance in the word “No.”

Figure 7

“Rosa Parks: The First to Stand Up”: Eman’s Response to Freedom Like Sunlight



By portraying Rosa Parks as a courageous figure, Eman disrupted dominant narratives that portray African Americans as submissive in the face of oppression. She commemorated an act of bravery and emphasized its relevance to contemporary issues of inequality and discrimination. By visually capturing the intensity of the confrontation on the bus, Eman prompted discussion about personal and collective responsibilities for challenging and dismantling systemic discrimination. Furthermore, Eman's portrayal underscored the transformative potential of historical narratives in shaping our understanding of social justice. By engaging deeply with Rosa Parks's story, she reinforced the notion that every act of resistance contributes to broader movements for social change. Thus, Eman's artwork not only honored Parks's courage, but could also motivate others to take a stand against injustice in their own lives and communities.

Through visualizing the scene, Eman took a critical stance that sought to uncover and challenge societal injustices, encouraging deeper reflection on the complexities of civil rights movements. By learning from Rosa Parks's actions, Eman not only honored her legacy but also engaged in critical inquiry into the mechanisms of oppression and the possibilities for social change. Eman's reflection and artistic representation of Rosa Parks exemplified a critical stance that disrupts traditional narratives and promotes a deeper understanding of historical figures' roles in challenging injustice and advocating for equality. Her visual representation not only commemorated a pivotal moment in civil rights history, but also served as a powerful narrative tool for uncovering and reinterpreting history through reflection, empathy, and critical inquiry into societal norms and injustices.

Yussef: “We Just Have to Wait.” Yussef chose to reflect on *The Undefeated* (Alexander & Nelson, 2019). As we engaged with the book and discussed the images, Yussef attempted to identify the individuals depicted on the cover:

There are many, many often more than characters ... so famous ... famous African American in history. There are, like a lot of people who do, like, trying to stop racism and slavery by using speakers and saying stuff to hope like being in telling people that Black Lives Matter. [Pointing to some figures] This picture is about the people who want to stop slavery, or lie there are sports [figures], and most of them are activists. Hmm, there was Michael Jordan, Muhammad Ali. I forgot his name ... Like a bunch of famous musicians. Musicians. Jazz is famous in African American culture. ... They are ... also activists in this picture.

In his explanations, Yussef connected recent social justice events and movements aimed at combating racism and recognized pictures of influential leaders and activists in history. Yussef’s background knowledge was represented in our dialogue about the images in this picture book. When asked why the illustrator included a happy image of young boys and girls at the very end of the book, Yussef explained that the boys and girls were happy “to ... like, to be with their families, because they got split from their families and showed the future. Before, like, they were, they were like all slaves, and they were forced to do work.” In this response, Yussef showed some knowledge of how social injustices impacted people’s situations and emotions. However, he saw a chance for change and happiness represented.

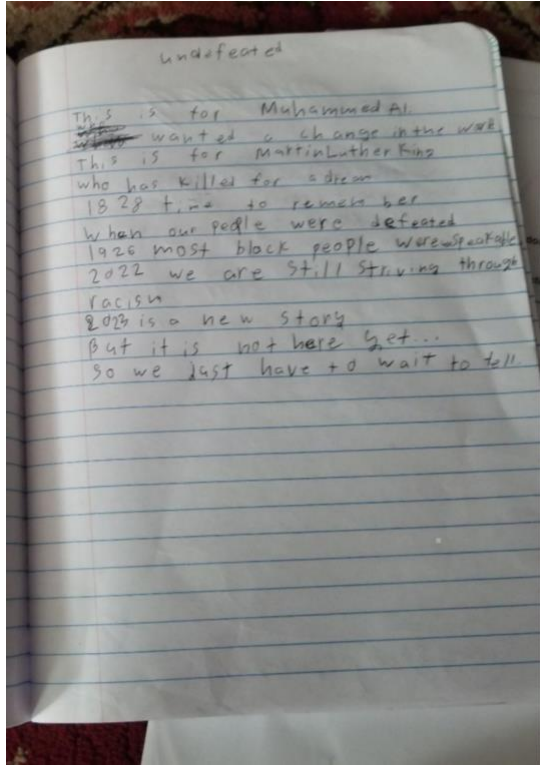
In *The Undefeated* (Alexander & Nelson, 2019), the authors paid tribute to individuals who overcame adversity and contributed to the progress of history, inspiring readers to recognize the power of perseverance and the potential for positive change:

This is for the unforgettable
The swift and sweet ones
who hurdled history
and opened a world of possible (p. 1)

After our picture discussion and reading of the text of *The Undefeated*, Yussef created a poem to demonstrate his understanding and thoughts surrounding these people who dared to stand up against social injustices (Figure 8).

Figure 8

“... We Just Have to Wait to Tell”: Yussef’s Response to The Undefeated

<p>This is for Muhammed Ali who wanted a change in the world</p> <p>This is for Martin Luther King who has been killed for a dream</p> <p>1828 time to remember when our people were defeated</p> <p>1926 most black people were unspeakable</p> <p>2022 we are still striving through racism</p> <p>2023 is a new story to tell</p> <p>But it is not here yet ...</p> <p>So we just have to wait to tell.</p>	
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In Yussef’s poem, the thematic resonance with historical racial struggles and figures is obvious. By referencing specific years and historical events, he contextualized the ongoing fight against racism within a broader historical narrative. Yussef intertwined historical references to the struggles of African Americans, invoking figures like Muhammed Ali and Martin Luther King Jr. as symbols of resilience and resistance. For instance, in the line, “1828 time to remember when our people were defeated” and the following lines, Yussef highlighted the passage of time, grounding the poem in historical reality. Mentioning the years reinforced the idea that the fight against racism is ongoing and multifaceted. Yussef’s poem, much like Fatimah and Eman’s responses, shows

engagement with historical narratives that underscore the importance of perseverance and activism in the face of systemic injustice.

Yussef's interpretation of *The Undefeated* and his ability to easily connect with and evoke the characters mentioned in the poem can be attributed to his connections to his home culture and the influences of activists and leaders who have made significant changes. He shared a collection of pictures from home that served as tangible links to the past and a reminder of the struggles and triumphs of African American history (Figure 10). These images included depictions of influential figures such as Muhammed Ali (a Muslim African American boxer and activist) and Martin Luther King Jr. (an African American leader and activist), who were celebrated in the poem for their resilience and perseverance. By growing up surrounded by these images and stories, Yussef seemed to have developed a deep appreciation for African American history and the individuals who have shaped it. This familiarity with the struggles and triumphs of the past may have enabled him to easily connect with the themes and characters presented in *The Undefeated*. Furthermore, his family's collection might serve as a source of inspiration and motivation, reinforcing the importance of activism and social change in the face of adversity.

Figure 9

Yussef's Album Collection



The first image in Figure 9, featuring Muhammad Ali, captures the spirit of resilience and determination, qualities reflected in Yussef's poem. The presence of this image of Ali in Yussef's room may have influenced his admiration for the boxer and activist and his inclusion in the poem. The second image is a frame in Yussef's room, reflecting his engagement in artifactual literacies, where cultural objects and pictures serve as embodiments of cultural identity and heritage. This depiction of jazz musician Maceo Parker may have sparked Yussef's recollection of them in discussing *The Undefeated*, showing how his surroundings and personal experiences informed his creative expression. Overall, Yussef's engagement with cultural artifacts, such as the pictures in his room. These artifacts became symbols that Yussef integrated into his poetry, drawing connections between his personal surroundings and the broader themes explored in texts like *The Undefeated*. Through this process, Yussef not only honored cultural icons, but also shaped his creative voice to advocate for his cultural identity.

Moreover, Yusef's poem reflected a critical stance toward historical narratives. By acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali in his poem, Yusef challenged simplistic or dismissive portrayals of African Americans in history. His portrayal emphasized their agency, resilience, and activism, offering a more nuanced perspective that countered stereotypes of negativity.

Throughout the CritLit project, CLPs engaged in making connections between their personal experiences of bullying, violence, and discrimination and the struggles of historical figures for justice. This process cultivated empathy as they recognized parallels between their own challenges and the historic fight for equity. By expressing their reflections through multimodal forms like poems and artwork, CLPs showed and deepened their understanding of historical contexts and societal biases.

Overall, by making connections with historical figures, CLPs not only learned about history, but also actively participated in creating narratives that challenged injustice and promoted empowerment. By intertwining personal experiences with cultural artifacts and historical insights, they developed a deeper understanding of their own identities and their roles as change makers.

Group Narrative: Examining Power Dynamics

Exploring the writings of Gomes Eanes de Zurara in *Stamped* empowered CLPs to critically examine power dynamics within historical narratives, as well as fostering a critical understanding of how history is constructed through different lenses and how dominant narratives can shape perceptions of race and identity. Zurara's "The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea" is one of the earliest recorded instances of writing about Black individuals in a way that defended their ownership as slaves.

Reynolds and Kendi (2020) wrote in *Stamped*, “Zurara was the first person to write about and defend Black human ownership, and this single document (The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea) began the recorded history of anti-black racist ideas” (p. 7).

I captured the students’ engagement with this analysis that might help them identify those who had been missed or misrepresented, revealing the deep-seated roots of racism in European colonial endeavors. Through this process, I encouraged the CLPs to question historical narratives and engage in uncovering untold stories, amplifying marginalized voices, and challenging prevailing perspectives in the text.

Yussef wrote in his journal on the passage, “If someone had stopped the first world racist, there would be no racism today,” which makes the title of this dissertation. He expressed a belief that racism could have been prevented if addressed at its start. This view reflects a desire for a different historical outcome where racism did not take root and perpetuate over time. Yussef’s reflection ties into the idea of uncovering history. By suggesting that stopping the “first world racist” could have prevented racism, Yussef contextualized racism within its historical roots.

Another reading passage from *Stamped* recounted various racist ideas regarding Africans, depicting the ideology promoted by Zurara to serve colonial impetus. The CLPs were directed to read and respond to the text below:

A quick recap of racist ideas (so far)

Africans are savages because Africa is hot, and extreme weather made them that way.

Africans are savages because they were cursed through Ham, in the Bible.

Africans are savages because they were created as an entirely different species.

Africans are savages because there is a natural human hierarchy and they are at the bottom.

Africans are savages because dark equals dumb and evil, and light equals smart and ... White.

Africans are savages (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020, pp. 49–50)

CLPs discussed and analyzed the ideas as articulated in the text. I asked them to think critically about this perspective and how it impacted the way history was written and reported.

Yussef: Savages [repeating the word on the page], such a word! It made me feel so weird in the entire, because I am African and I feel like [the authors are] saying this to me, to us.

Fatimah: The thing is, they are saying it to us because we are African, we don't want racism. I say no to slavery, towards freedom ... stop racism! So everybody can go to freedom.

Liyanna: I think what they are doing by saying that is [Africans are at] the bottom of race. I feel so sad. Africans don't want to be enslaved ... hmm, they wanna be free.

Eman: I feel sad hearing that because I lived in Africa when I was a baby, and it is really hot, as it is dry weather, that means that my family is dumb!

Liyanna: None of these statements makes sense.

Yussef: This is stupid. Whaaaaat?! *Dumb* ... This is stereotyping and wrong statements!?

In the conversation, Yussef reacted strongly to the term “savages,” stating, “Savages, such a word! It made me feel so weird ... because I am African and I feel like [the authors are] saying this to me, to us.” His focus on the language signaled Yussef’s knowledge of the personal impact of racist language on individuals of African descent. Fatimah’s rejection of racism and slavery, “I say no to slavery, towards freedom ... stop racism! So everybody can go to freedom,” showed her advocacy for equality and the eradication of racial discrimination. Liyanna expressed sadness at the racial stereotyping in the text, stating, “I think what they are doing by saying that is [Africans are at] the bottom of race.” Liyanna also pointed out that Africans wanted freedom. The group conversation about this passage illustrates a collective effort to critique racist language and stereotypes.

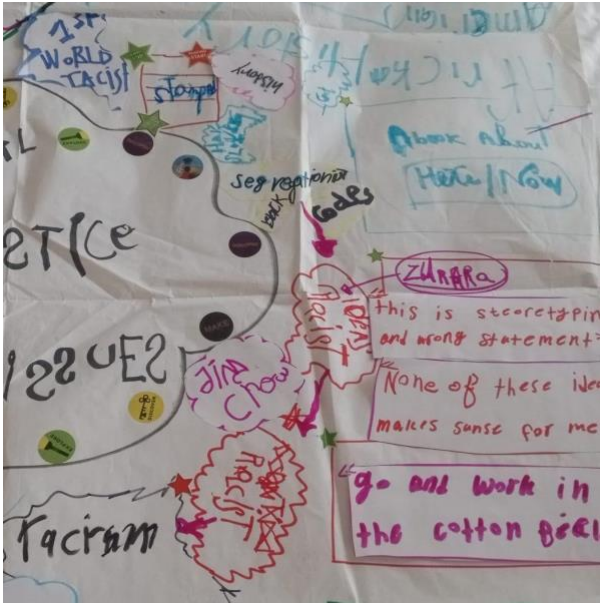
Yussef, Fatimah, Liyanna, and Eman are deeply engaged with discussing these racist ideas within a historical narrative, revealing intricate connections to power dynamics. Yussef’s reaction highlighted the profound psychological impact of language in historical texts that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, illustrating how such narratives uphold hierarchical power structures that marginalize and stereotype certain groups. This examination shows how language serves as a tool of oppression and sustains societal inequalities. Fatimah’s rejection of racism and her advocacy for freedom and equality challenged entrenched power dynamics that historically favor privileged groups. Liyanna’s expression of sadness and disbelief at racial stereotyping directly confronted narratives positioning Africans at the bottom of a perceived human hierarchy, questioning

power dynamics that perpetuate racial injustices. Eman's personal connection to Africa further deepened the exploration of historical narratives by highlighting individual experiences within the broader context, revealing a personal dimension of systemic injustice, and contributing to a critical examination of racist ideologies in history. Together, their discussion critiqued existing power dynamics within historical narratives and emphasized the importance of challenging stereotypes, raising marginalized voices, and striving for a more inclusive and truthful representation of history that acknowledges and rectifies systemic injustices.

Moving from oral response to visual, the CLPs brainstormed and drew their responses to the same excerpt from *Stamped* in Part 2 of the map activity (Figure 10). The process deepened students' understanding of societal power dynamics and their positions within the narratives of racism and oppression. However, the focus was on the language of injustice and societal power dynamics. By visually representing abstract ideas, the Social Justice Map transformed complex concepts into tangible representations that facilitated meaningful dialogue and critical reflection.

Figure 10

Social Justice Map Part 2



By actively engaging with these concepts and applying learning language of critique from *Stamped*, this social map supported the CLPs' language development related to critique and hope (Shannon, 1995), which can equip students with the necessary skills to critically analyze and question aspects of society such as racial inequality. The students continued to gain self-awareness about racism. This visual representation facilitated meaningful dialogue and collaboration as students collectively grappled with complex ideas and critically analyzed their own experiences. In Figure 6, we see Yussef grappling with his understanding of the language used, writing, "None of these ideas make sense for me." He also used an expression "Go and work in the cottonfield" that he explained informally as used when students fight and insult each other which refers to the historical context of racism. This approach enabled me to see the students' thinking, and in this case, to see Yussef interrogating different perspectives

from different texts_in this case, the ideas presented in *Stamped*. interrogate different perspectives “The First World Racist, Zurara”, and problematize social justice issues “The First World Racist, Zurara”.

Throughout the map activity, participants not only reflected on their experiences but also problematized racism. By visualizing their stories and engaging in dialogue with peers, participants gained a sense of empowerment through their construction of their knowledge about social justice issues. They shared experiences and developed an awareness of the need to challenge injustice. The Social Justice Map activity encouraged participants to critique or challenge societal norms

The Social Justice Map was not just a mere visual representation, but a narrative-building tool that enabled students to problematize social justice issues by weaving together personal reflections, collaborative dialogue, and critical engagement with complex ideas.

Conclusion

The CLPs connected personally with historical figures through picture books such as “The Woman Who Stopped Slavery” (Fatimah) “Rosa Parks: The First to Stand Up” (Eman), and “We Just Have to Wait to Tell” (Yussef). They recognized a deeper empathy for the experiences of those who fought against oppression and inspired them for commitment to advocating for equity and inclusivity in contemporary society.

Through their exploration of the narrative, presented in *Stamped*, the CLPs not only uncovered hidden truths and interrogated multiple perspectives but also critically examined historical and societal issues. By questioning racist language and perspectives, systemic biases, and power dynamics embedded within these narratives, participants

broadened their awareness and understanding of history from diverse viewpoints. This process enabled them to challenge dominant historical narratives that often marginalize or erase the contributions and struggles of marginalized communities.

Ultimately, through their critical literacy practices, the CLPs not only expanded their historical awareness but also positioned themselves as critical thinkers. They demonstrated a readiness to challenge entrenched beliefs, advocate for marginalized voices, and may contribute to a more just and equitable future.

Theme 3: Empowerment through Cultural and Racial Identity and Envisionment for Change

In this section, the findings related to how CLPs' cultural and racial identities shaped how they understood their world, their place in the world, and their potential to create positive transformations. In alignment with the two preceding themes, I present the data according to personal narratives and group narratives. The CLPs' personal narratives around empowerment and resilience included stories they constructed: "If Anyone Doesn't Accept Me as Who I Am, It Doesn't Matter to Me" (Liyanna), "Red Henna Doesn't Suit Black Skin" (Fatimah), "She was trying to take my headscarf off!" (Eman), and "Why Are You Wearing a Dress? Are You a Girl?" (Yussef). These personal narratives showed the importance of challenging norms deeply entrenched in cultural practices. Concurrently, the group narrative revealed collective voices for change demonstrated in a letter to the principal and a social justice exhibit. The following section will present these findings, outlined in Table 6.

Table 6

Theme Three: Gaining Empowerment and Envisionment for Change

Topics	Narratives
Personal narratives: Gaining Empowerment	“If Anyone Doesn’t Accept Me as Who I Am, It Doesn’t Matter to Me” (Liyanna) “Red Henna Doesn’t Suit Black Skin” (Fatimah) “She Was Trying to Take My Headscarf Off!” (Eman) “Why Are You Wearing a Dress? Are You a Girl?” (Yussef)
Group narrative: Moving from disruption to taking action	Individual Envisionment for Change Collective Action: Letter to the Principal, Social Justice Exhibit

Personal Narratives: Gaining Empowerment

Empowerment encompasses artifacts, whether they are personal stories, cultural symbols, or historical accounts. Through artifacts woven in narratives, empowerment emerges not only as a personal journey, but also as a collective endeavor to redefine societal norms and foster meaningful change. In their exploration of empowerment through racial and cultural identity, CLPs navigated through their identities shaped by societal norms and personal beliefs.

Liyanna: “If Anyone Doesn’t Accept Me as Who I Am, It Doesn’t Matter to Me.” The book *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad et al., 2019) resonated deeply with Liyanna because it reminded her of a significant moment in her life when her grandmother encouraged her to wear a hijab for the first time:

This book reminds me what ... when, when ... when, like, my grandma said to mom I would wear a hijab, and I like my grandma. When I was a baby, she took care of me. Then I started wearing it [hijab] when I go to school.

When Liyanna read *The Proudest Blue* aloud to the other participants, the listeners were drawn in by the story and illustrations. However, the mood shifted when they reached a scene where the main character, Asiya, faced bullying from her classmates. This moment prompted reflection and discussion among the listeners about the themes of bullying, discrimination, and the importance of standing up for one's identity and beliefs. After the read-aloud, the CLPs engaged in a discussion. Liyanna expressed her identification with the main character and judgment toward Asiya's classmates in the story. She ended the comment with her own response:

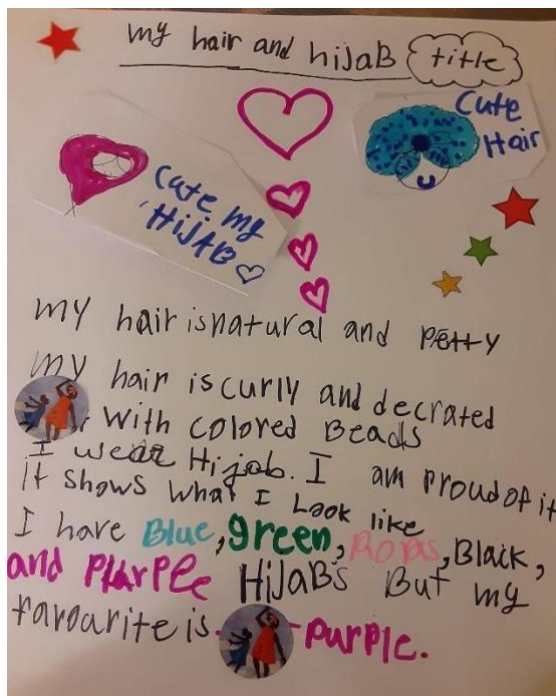
I think that's not good and Asiya must be sad ... I am Muslim African American, and I don't want people to judge me about that [wearing a hijab] ... because I do good things to satisfy God, and if anyone doesn't accept me as who I am, it doesn't matter to me.

Liyanna's identification with Asiya's story allowed her to see herself within the book's illustrations and explore her identity as a Muslim African American girl. She asserted her resilience and self-acceptance by declaring that acceptance from others did not influence her, even though she saw the situation as "sad." In the response, Liyanna affirmed her cultural, racial, and religious identity, conveying the multiple facets that contributed to her sense of self. This portrayal of herself highlights her cultural consciousness, identity, and position on the situation.

In addition to the discussion, Liyanna chose to respond to *The Proudest Blue* in a visual and textual representation (Figure 11). Her choice of words in describing her hair as “natural” and “pretty” and her hijab as “colorful” reflected her appreciation for her natural beauty and cultural identity. These descriptors also convey a sense of self-acceptance and pride in her appearance. Through the use of colors in her drawings, she visually expressed her happiness and confidence in talking about herself.

Figure 11

Liyanna's Response to The Proudest Blue



Liyanna’s portrayal of her comfort in wearing the hijab illustrated how her lifestyle aligned with her cultural beliefs, and perhaps that these two aspects of her life were connected. She demonstrated a strong sense of identity and self-assurance. Her statement “It shows what I look like” underscored the importance of her hijab as a

symbol of her identity and individuality. By proudly affirming her racial and cultural identity as a source of pride and empowerment, Liyanna emphasized celebrating her diversity. Liyanna’s response to the text served as a powerful example of empowerment in the CritLit Project through her confident expression of her racial and cultural identity, highlighting the transformative power of embracing one’s heritage.

Fatimah: “Red Henna Doesn’t Suit Black Skin.” Fatimah showed her new hair beads while keeping her hijab on, symbolizing the connection between her cultural identity and personal expression (Figure 12). Let us note that hijab usually covers the whole hair; however, Fatimah was so proud of her new beads that she decided to keep them out from hijab which she was not used to doing.

Figure 12

Fatimah: Beads Coming out of Hijab



In many cultures, including Muslim African American communities, the hijab holds significant cultural and religious significance. By choosing to wear her hijab,

Fatimah affirmed her identity and adherence to her faith and cultural traditions. Additionally, the beads she proudly displayed represent more than just a fashion accessory. In many African cultures, beads are used as a form of expression, communication, and cultural identity. By incorporating beads into her attire, Fatimah not only enhanced her aesthetic but also physically demonstrated her connection to her African heritage.

Fatimah's use of henna tattooing also reflected a cultural and spiritual connection to her community (Figure 13). Through this tradition, she participated in a ritual of joy and celebration and strengthened her bonds with her family and community members. The henna tattoo on her hand was more than a decorative design: it embodied her cultural identity and served as a source of empowerment.

Figure 13

Fatimah's Henna Tattoo



I asked Fatimah, “Why do you choose black instead of red henna?” Fatimah’s explanation of why she preferred black henna signaled her awareness of how her cultural identity intersected with her racial identity. She stated, “Red henna does not suit Black skin.” This statement seems to convey the unique ways in which cultural practices are adapted and interpreted within different racial contexts.

The henna tattoo was a powerful symbol of cultural pride and self-expression, affirming Fatimah’s place within her community while also asserting her individuality. This understanding not only affirmed her connection to her heritage, but also could be a way of demonstrating personal empowerment, challenging external perceptions and stereotypes, and proudly displaying the beauty and diversity of her culture.

Yussef: “Why Are You Wearing a Dress? Are You a Girl?”Yussef had an experience similar to Asiya’s in *The Proudest Blue*, and the reading helped him to recall his story:

When I was in first grade, I had to dress up like my dad was dressed up. It was like a white long gown, because we were gonna go to Friday pray early, so my dad came and picked me up, and he told me to change the clothes in the school bathroom, since we didn’t have enough time. Okay, so I went to the bathroom ... then when I walked out it was a bunch of boys and then ... then ... they said ... laughing at me and then and then ... [he paused, showing irritation] they all, and then one of them grabbed it ... insane ... from my hand. One of them said, “Why are you wearing a dress?(Thobe) Are you a girl?” I told them what it was. They just walked away. I went downstairs to my dad and I told him what happened.

His choice to tell the children what his garb was aligned with Asiya's step of not listening to the schoolboys gossiping. Like the story in the book, Yusef's experience at school highlighted the intersection of cultural identity and societal perceptions in a situated context. Yusef's peers' reactions demonstrated a form of bullying and perhaps a lack of understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity. The bullying became gender-related with the comment "Why are you wearing a dress? Are you a girl?" His story illustrated that gender norms can also clash with cultural practices and societal perceptions. This incident emphasized the challenges individuals face in maintaining their cultural identity in environments where it may not be fully understood or accepted.

Eman: "She Was Trying to Take My Headscarf Off!" Eman recalled a similar incident that touched upon her religious and cultural identity:

One girl came up to me, "Why are you wearing like that?" I said that it is a part of my religion. So she was trying to take it off my head. She was trying to take my headscarf off! I don't even know her. I thought she thinks I am bald ... Some people think this way.

Eman's experience, too, highlighted the intersection of religious and cultural identity with social interactions. In this case, her religious attire served as a visible marker of her identity, prompting the girl's question. Of interest is Eman's response, attributing the girl's actions to a misconception about her appearance, suggesting that she saw the incident as a misunderstanding rather than a deliberate act of disrespect. However, this situation also reflects the broader challenge of navigating social interactions when one's identity is visibly different from the mainstream.

In summary, the CLPs' personal narratives exemplified how empowerment through personal racial and cultural identity involves self-acceptance, resilience, assertiveness, cultural understanding, and an attempt to understand others' responses. By embracing and asserting their identities, these young people acted with empowerment as members of their communities.

In our discussion of the word "identity" during the last CritLit Project meeting, the following exchange ensued:

Yussef: Identity is like who you are and like, where you are from. It's like an ID card, because I need that to go to other places. What I like about you ... like your personality. ... Like everything about your person. Okay.

Facilitator: Can we change our identities?

Fatimah: Some people do think so, because my mom kind of ... likes changing her religion.

Yussef: Yeah, because her mom is to be pushed.

Fatimah: [Looking at Yussef and replying angrily] No! She was not!

Facilitator: Okay! Okay! [trying to avoid the uncomfortable atmosphere]

Yussef related the word to an identification document he was familiar with in daily life. Then Fatimah and Yussef touched upon the concept of changing identities. Fatimah suggested that her mother change her religion, but Yussef said that she was "pushed." Yussef's response, though somewhat speculative, implies an interpretation that changes may be driven by external pressures or circumstances.

When asked to collect cultural artifacts related to their identity, the CLPs actively engaged in the process. They sought assistance from their families to provide as many pictures as possible, including family-stored photos and pictures of their homes (Figure 14).

Figure 14

Collection of Home Cultural Artifacts and Decor



These images convey a sense of home culture that combines antique elements such as vases and religious practices of the family. In addition to the participatory role that CLPs played through collecting artifacts, the students' families assisted them. This collaboration with their families was a good opportunity for CLPs to celebrate their culture, beliefs, values, and religious practices. During the activity, their enthusiasm about collecting these cultural artifacts and bringing them to life was evident. The

cultural artifacts supported different CLPs' identity narratives and contributed to the development of their cultural awareness, helping them rethink and explore their cultural identity and heritage.

Group Narrative: Moving from Disruption to Taking Action

Through the various activities in the CritLit Project, the CLPs began to take proactive steps to address issues of violence, bullying, and racism outside of the project in the larger school environment. Taking action and promoting social change involves recognizing systemic issues and working toward positive transformation in society (Lewison et al, 2002). Three main products represented the CLPs' work to "stand up" against social injustice. First, the CLPs expressed individually their envisionment for change. Second, they wrote a letter to the principal explaining what they thought was important regarding promoting a safe and inclusive school environment. Third, the CLPs put together a school exhibition demonstrating their conscious awareness of racism and its pervasive nature.

Individual Envisionment For Change. I engaged the CLPs in a discussion about what they wanted to highlight the ways of making change.

Liyanna: We can stop this [racism]. That's like standing up for ourselves

Fatimah: Doing our best to stop racism.

Liyanna: People ... should not judge any other people.

Fatimah: We should more strict about racist [actions] toward people who [are] just trying to follow their religion

Eman: Like trying to stop it [racism] by just loving everybody for who they are, not liking what they have and what type of things they can afford

Liyanna: ...Like protests ...like protest for some for something...mmm black people matters.

Fatimah: Like fighting for rights, there are wrong rights when you like, when people are just rude to all people like me to everyone that's colored.

Yussef: Like gun shootings. Students shouldn't have guns because they can kill some students and students still have a lot of life ahead of them. Bullying is not supposed to be there! Everybody should be friendly in our classroom and everything.... There should be more strict rules about bullying. Whoever bullies should get a lesson, and then like all the bullying should be stopped, and this is the only way that our world can be fixed.

Eman: Educate them.

Yussef: Proving that you can do something you can.

Fatimah: And we can see that we can do better stuff.

The students' envisionment for change encompassed the behaviors they did not want to see or experience and those they did want to experience. The CLPs' envisionment for change is centered around several key ideas. First, they emphasized the importance of personal actions and behavior. Eman highlighted the need to "love everybody for who they are," stressing that people should not be judged based on their

skin color or material possessions. Liyanna and Fatimah also underscored the necessity of diminishing judgment and fostering acceptance and open-mindedness. They advocated for actions like protests and movements, such as Black Lives Matter, to defend and fight for rights, challenging unjust norms and striving for equity. Yusef argued that bullying should be met with lessons for the perpetrators and emphasized the need for more proactive measures to create a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Additionally, he contended that students should not have access to guns due to the risks they pose, further advocating for a safer school environment. Eman also stressed the importance of education in combating racism and bullying. She seems to see education as a powerful tool for raising awareness and promoting understanding.

The CLPs' dialogue reflected an awareness of the power of actions, knowledge, and education in driving change. They showed a growing consciousness about their role in advocating for systemic equity and justice ("we can stop by standing up for ourselves"), envisioning a school culture that values diversity and celebrates inclusivity ("bullying is not supposed to be here"; "students shouldn't have guns"). The students' dialogue also expressed a proactive approach to combating stereotypes and envisioning racial change within their school community (more strict rules, more education). Their demands for different behaviors, rules, and more education all indicated a recognition of the power of awareness, actions, and knowledge in challenging preconceived notions and promoting understanding. This initiative underscores their commitment to fostering a more inclusive and respectful environment where diversity is celebrated and stereotypes are actively dismantled. Moreover, their efforts reflect a growing consciousness among

students about their role in advocating for creating a school culture that values diversity and justice.

CLPs provided insights into their personal and group agency and how this agency could be leveraged to foster empowerment and positive change. In Part 3 of the Social Justice Map (Figure 15), displayed in the middle of the exhibition, students mentioned phrases such as “saving Black people,” “being rescued,” “Black empowerment” and “Black power” suggests a sense of awareness and recognition of social situations. Students expressed their notion of personal agency, indicating a sense of responsibility, capability, and positive intention to make a difference, as well as an active engagement with issues of social justice. Furthermore, the mention of their letter to the principal demonstrated agency in identifying injustices and taking proactive steps to address them through dialogue and advocacy in their own lives.

Figure 15

Social Justice Map Part 3

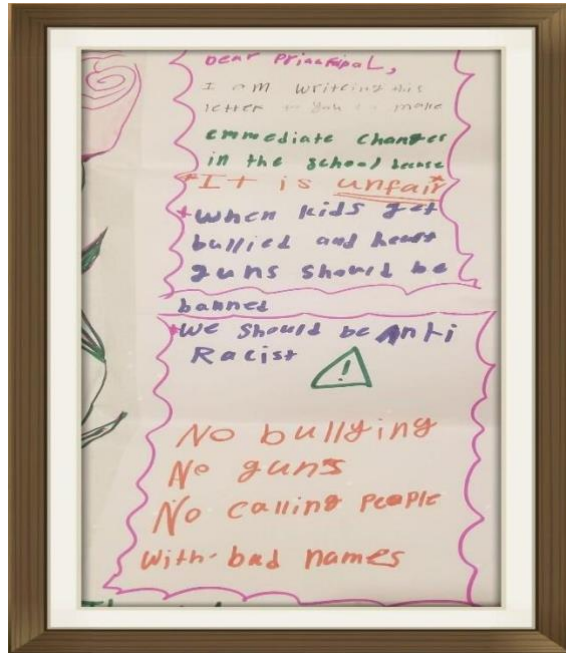


Collective Action: Letter to the Principal. The CLPs’ first collective action against social injustice was writing a letter to the principal (Figure 16), in which they advocated for implementing specific measures to promote a safe and inclusive school environment. Their letter emphasized the importance of standing against bullying, racism, and racist language (“No bullying, No guns, No calling people without names”). The letter served as an outward demonstration of the power they were now aware of (“this is unfair”) and had a responsibility to use (“we should be anti-racist”). This also suggested a shift toward a more inclusive and appreciative mindset where diversity was seen as a strength rather than a limitation. Earlier in the project, Fatimah told the others that she wanted to be like Harriet Tubman and stop slavery; by the end of the project, she said that she wanted to stop racism. This shift is reflective of the shift I witnessed in all of

the CLPs. Interestingly, their ideas seemed to encompass both their own experiences and those they read about in the CritLit Project texts.

Figure 16

Group Letter to the Principal



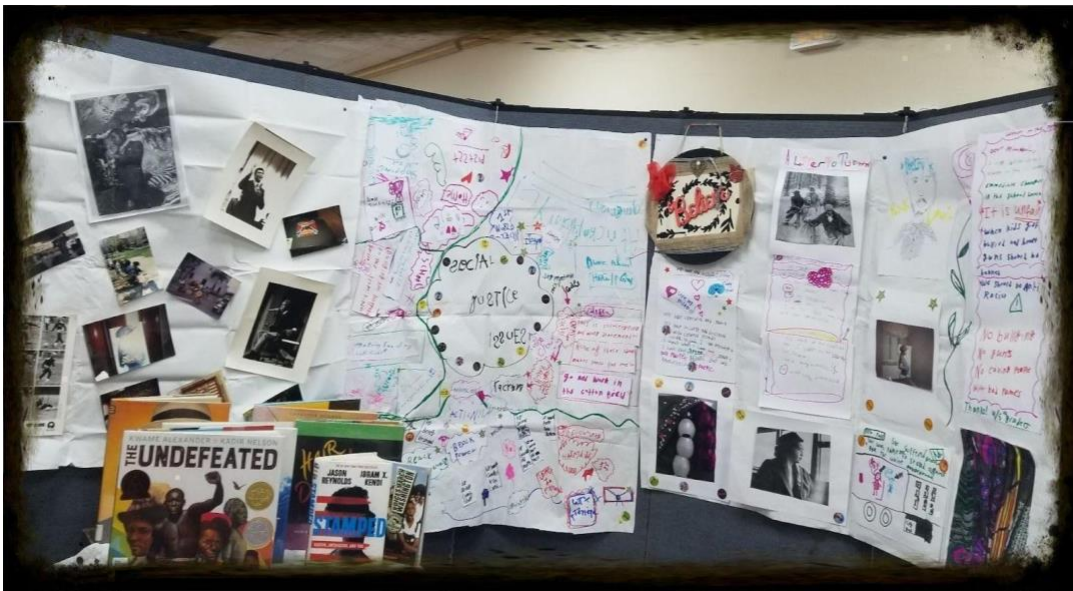
The students' dialogue about perceptions for change and their letter showed their combined thinking about addressing racism by fostering inclusivity, encompassing educational initiatives, policy changes, and a shift in attitudes and behaviors. The language the participants used in this discussion also reflected what they encountered in the mentor texts used during the CritLit Project, all of which seemed to connote more consciousness and a way to convey what type of change they desired. Furthermore, the use of the pronoun "we" throughout the letter expressed their collective effort and the

need for communal action to address systemic injustices. This collective approach highlights the importance of solidarity and collaboration in effecting meaningful change.

Collective Action: Social Justice Exhibition. The CritLit project exhibition highlighted how the CLPs' understanding and empowerment developed through exposure to and engagement with critical literacy activities focused on the connection between culture and language. The CLPs created galleries showcasing their work to share their perspectives with their parents, peers, and school teachers and leaders. This exhibition (Figure 17) included the social justice map, reflective poems, cultural artifacts and photographs. By constructing these galleries, they not only demonstrated their understanding, but also encouraged imagination and envisioned change. This process also represented their roles as critical readers and innovative writers as they actively engaged with the material.

Figure 17

Setting Up Social Justice Exhibit



The exhibition served as an interesting experience for the CLPs and an opportunity to share what they had learned regarding social justice and racism. Their multimodal products reflected a commitment to adopting an antiracist perspective and contributing to a broader dialogue on combating injustice within their school community. Their exhibit also became a platform for expressing their collective vision for a more equitable and inclusive school community. Through this culminating activity, they articulated a shared commitment to dismantling systemic barriers and promoting social justice. In doing so, they not only confronted the realities of racism, but also empowered themselves to become advocates for meaningful social justice change.

Conclusion

The narratives shared by CLPs of self-acceptance despite cultural norms highlight the importance of embracing one's identity and advocating for inclusion and cultural

understanding. By engaging deeply with cultural symbols, historical accounts, and personal stories, the CLPs not only embarked on a personal journey of self-discovery, but also contributed to disrupting societal norms and promoting justice. By writing a letter to the principal and creating a social justice exhibit, they demonstrated a collective voice for change. The exhibition of their work also showcased their understanding and empowerment while serving as a catalyst for dialogue and action within the school. The CritLit Project thus empowered CLPs to take proactive steps against violence, bullying, and racism in their school and community. Moving forward, their empowerment and vision for change promise to continue shaping a more inclusive and safe learning environment.

Summary of the Chapter

The study findings revealed that the CritLit Project enabled participants to engage with critical texts to develop critical language, advocate for change, and gain empowerment through cultural and racial identity (see Figure 18).

Figure 18

Summary of CritLit Project Activities, Narratives, Outcomes, and Alignment with Critical Literacy Tenets

ACTIVITIES	PRODUCT/ NARRATIVES	OUTCOMES	CRITICAL LITERACY TENETS
Reflective Practices (Session 1)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You Should Go Back to the Jungle! (Yussef) 2. Reflection on Breona Tylor(Eman) 3. Calling Me a Parrot!(Fatimah) 4. I had like... a Scratch on my Arm! (Liyanna) 	Recalling personal stories to gain an understanding of societal power dynamics and develop a language of critique.	<p>Disrupting Commonplace</p> <p>Interrogating Multiple Perspectives</p> <p>Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues</p> <p>Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice</p>
Engagement with critical texts and development of language of critique (Session 1)	Racism, Anti-racism, Segregationists, Assimilationists, and Stereotyping	Examination of "Stamped," and power dynamics and acquiring language of critique to analyze and critique societal norms.	
Collaborative Brainstorming, and Visual Representation (At the end of every Crit Lit Session)	Social Justice Map	Enriching comprehension of social justice issues and connection to lived experience	
Discussion of Social Injustice Issues Session 3	Stamped: "The First World Racist"	Interrogating perspectives and creating effective responses to social issues, fostering critical perspective and advocacy.	
Engagement with Picture Books (Session 2)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Woman Who Stopped Slavery: A Tribute to Harriet Tubman (Fatimah) 2. Rosa Parks and the Ride to Equality (Eman) 3. Echoes of Triumph: A Verse of Persistence (Yussef) 	Using prior knowledge and personal connections to historical figures to express responses to "The Prouddest Blue," "The Undefeated," and "Freedom Like Sunlight" through visual art and reflective poems.	
Empowerment and Resilience (Session 3&4)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "If anyone doesn't accept me as who I am, it doesn't matter to me." (Liyanna) 2. "Red Henna doesn't suit black skin" (Fatima) 3. Why are you wearing a dress? "Thawb" Are you a girl? (Yussef) 	Gaining insight into racial and cultural identities, fostering resilience.	

In the CritLit Project, CLPs were engaged in a cyclic process of praxis(reflection and action) upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1970). They recalled personal stories and insights, fostering a deeper understanding of societal power dynamics. They deeply engaged with the critical text *Stamped*, which encouraged them to examine historical narratives in connection to their own experiences. They interrogated multiple perspectives in the texts to find out “Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?” (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Through reflective practices, participants used collaborative

brainstorming and visual representations to further enrich their comprehension of social justice issues. They also utilized their prior knowledge and personal connections to historical figures when engaging with the picture books *The Proudest Blue*, *The Undefeated*, and *Freedom Like Sunlight* when expressing their responses through multimodal forms like visual art and reflective poems. This process facilitated the development of skills necessary to critique societal norms and empowered them to confront unjust practices and advocate for positive change within their school communities (Lewison et al., 2002).

The CritLit Project promotes critical consciousness and reflection, laying a foundation for envisioning meaningful change. By fostering a deep understanding of social justice issues and encouraging students to explore their racial and cultural identities, the project empowers them to imagine a better future. This process cultivates their ability to critically analyze the text and develop their empathy and resilience to become more aware of the complexities of societal issues. Although the immediate outcomes of their learning may be subtle, the seeds of advocacy and social responsibility take root in their mindsets, influencing their future decisions and actions. Thus, the CritLit Project encourages students to engage in critical literacy, empowering CLPs to initiate efforts that promote social justice and create an impact that transforms their environments and inspires future generations. By developing critical literacy skills, students learn to analyze the language and structure of the text and interrogate the power dynamics that influence narratives and societal norms (Comber, 2013). Thus, critical literacy not only supports individuals to grow intellectually but also cultivates their sense

of collaboration, agency, and unity for a more just and inclusive society, where voices echo action and transformation.

Throughout this chapter, I presented the narratives of four participants who engaged in reading, discussing, and reflecting on social justice issues. The first emerging theme is disrupting the commonplace, highlighting how participants became conscious through challenging normalized beliefs and behaviors related to racism, discrimination, and oppression. The second theme focuses on taking a critical stance toward historical narratives, illustrating how participants interrogated the representation of race and culture in historical texts, enabling them to connect personal experiences to broader social contexts. The third theme is empowerment through cultural and racial identity and envisionment for change, which emphasizes how participants embraced their identities to envision and advocate for social change, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility.

Next chapter, I will discuss these findings by revisiting the guiding research questions for this dissertation connecting them to the literacy tenets that serve as the overarching theoretical framework. The discussion will explore how each question contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the CritLit project's impact on CLPs' critical consciousness, personal narratives, racial and cultural identities, and engagement in social change. By linking the findings to existing literature, I aimed to illustrate how these findings align with critical literacy tenets, highlighting the significance of CLP's lived experiences in the broader discourse on social justice issues.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

The underrepresentation of people of color in literacy materials and the lack of discussion about race and racism perpetuate systemic racism, hindering children's access to essential resources for academic development (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Nieto, 2008). Discussions of race are often avoided in education, further marginalizing students of color and impeding their ability to engage with content (Thomas, 2020). Societal biases equating Blackness with inferiority compound these challenges, affecting African American students' literacy development. To address these issues, adopting a critical literacy perspective is crucial, aiming to challenge power imbalances and empower students of color as active, critical thinkers. Such an approach seeks to disrupt dominant narratives and foster social change by centering marginalized voices and experiences in the curriculum.

In this qualitative participatory research inquiry, I explored the experiences of Muslim African American elementary students participating in a month-long critical literacy (CritLit) out-of-school project, focusing on their exposure to critical texts (picture books, poetry, and nonfiction) centered on social justice issues and personal artifacts representing their culture. By prioritizing the voices of marginalized students often overlooked in educational settings, I aimed to create an inclusive environment where these students could actively contribute to discussions and knowledge co-creation. Guided by principles of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002) such as disrupting norms, embracing diverse perspectives, and promoting social justice, the CritLit project provided a platform for students to share their personal narratives, engage in critical dialogue, and

express social justice concerns unique to their experiences. Through this approach, I sought to empower the African American Muslim youth participants to challenge existing power dynamics from their own experiences and those within the social justice texts. I wanted their discussions of challenging these dynamics to foster positive social change within their lives and their existing educational landscape.

I used the following questions to guide this inquiry:

1. How do CLPs respond to racial and cultural themes in critical texts?
2. How do CLP narratives reflect their lived experiences related to race and culture?
3. How does the CritLit project help CLPs envision social change?

The methodology for this study was participatory research, defined by Cargo and Mercer (2008) as an umbrella term for research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by the issue being studied for action or change. Participatory research aligns with empowering children and challenging unequal power relations. By involving children as active participants, the study ensured that their voices, needs, and perspectives were central to the research process. This approach fosters genuine dialogue and ownership, allowing children to express their experiences authentically and influence the outcomes of the study. Through collaborative inquiry, participatory research also seeks to generate actionable insights and promote social change, making it particularly suitable for engaging children in issues of justice (Eckhoff, 2019).

The participants in this study were four Muslim African American children in fourth and fifth grades, ranging in age from 9 to 10. Three of them self-identified as

female and one as a male. Fatima, Liyanna, Eman, and Yussef represented an example of Muslim African American identities and experiences. Their interests in literature, community service, and family connections showed their engagement with both cultural heritage and contemporary influences. Through their stories, they offered insights into resilience and the ways children navigate and contribute to their communities. To fully grasp the experiences and perspectives of these participants, it was crucial to employ a variety of data collection methods. Given the complexity and depth of their stories, a diverse set of instruments was used to capture aspects of their engagement and reflections.

In order to increase the trustworthiness of this participatory narrative inquiry study, I used multiple data collection methods to answer my research questions, including pre/post-group interviews, observation field notes, book club session audio recordings (including text selection), student/teacher journals, student templates and notebooks, and student-provided artifacts. These methods were appropriate for participatory research as a methodology and narrative inquiry as a tool for design and analysis.

I used the thematic approach to analyze the data and identify, generate, and interpret patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2017). In analyzing the data, I first immersed myself in the content, verifying accuracy and noting subtle details like gestures and informal responses. Following Braun and Clarke (2017) methodology, I identified codes reflecting insider knowledge and power dynamics, which were then grouped into themes centering on power, identity, and inequities to align with the critical literacy tenets. These themes were refined through narrative exploration, resulting in three overarching narratives: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) taking a critical stance toward historical narratives, and

(c) empowerment through social and cultural identity and envisionment for change. By blending participatory research with narrative inquiry, I emphasized participants' voices and experiences while transitioning from an inductive (data-driven) to a deductive (theory-driven) approach. This approach aligns with critical literacy by encouraging reflection on how power structures influence knowledge production, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of societal inequities. Thus, it invites a critical examination of power dynamics embedded within the research context.

Regarding the first theme of disrupting the commonplace, the CLPs demonstrated critical consciousness by challenging normalized oppression in personal narratives. The participants' personal stories dealt with topics like the normalcy of discrimination, bullying, and violence. The group narratives referred to problematizing racism through developing critical language in activities and discussions, particularly focusing on racism and antiracism, segregation, and stereotyping. For the second theme about taking a critical stance toward history, CLPs engaged in personal narratives that highlighted the connections between their personal experiences and historical narratives. In the group narratives, they analyzed power dynamics in the texts. Their interpretations are connected with their personal experiences and knowledge as well as a critical examination of the historical text. Lastly, empowerment through cultural and social identity and envisionment for change involves both personal and group narratives. CLPs reflected on their cultural and social identities through the texts that empowered them and envisioned change through group discussions and activities aimed at challenging societal norms and advocating for justice.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, I address each research question and discuss the related findings and how they connected to the relevant literature, drawing further connections to the conclusions and the theoretical framework guiding the study (Table 7).

Table 7

Research Questions, Critical Literacy Tenets, and Discussed Findings

Research question	Critical literacy tenets	Discussed findings
1. How do CritLit participants (CLPs) respond to racial and cultural themes in critical texts?	Disrupting the commonplace Focusing on socio-political issues Interrogating multiple perspectives	Demonstrating critical consciousness towards social justice issues Challenging the normalization of discriminatory behavior Forming a critical stance toward the historical narrative in the text
2. How do CLP narratives reflect on their lived experiences related to race and culture?	Focusing on socio-political issues Interrogating multiple perspectives	Making explicit connections between their experiences of racial and social injustices and the broader societal incidences Expressing connections with historical figures through multimodal literacies Revealing the complexities of identity and belonging, shedding light on how race and culture intersect with their everyday lives
3. How does the CritLit project help CLPs envision social change?	Taking action to promote social justice Focusing on socio-political issues	Empowering CLPs to envision and enact social change individually and collaboratively Envisionment for race, culture, and religion

RQ1: How Do CLPs Respond to Racial and Cultural Themes in Critical Texts?

In this study, the CLPs demonstrated critical consciousness toward social justice issues. They challenged the normalization of discriminatory behavior and took a critical stance against it. According to Freire (1970), consciousness is a process through which individuals become critically aware of the sociocultural and political contexts that have shaped their experiences and perspectives. This awareness empowers them to reflect on these influences and act to transform their social realities, striving for equity and justice, especially when they are young experiencing marginalization based on their race, social class, income, gender, or other aspects of their identities (Heberle et al., 2020). Freire's theory emphasizes that through critical reflection and action, individuals can overcome oppressive conditions and work toward a more just society. In the context of the CritLit project, this process involved questioning accepted norms, recognizing the impact of systemic injustices, and taking informed, deliberate actions to challenge and change these inequities. For instance, when recalling their experiences, CLPs questioned the normality of bullying, discrimination, and violence based on their understanding of oppression, racism, and societal attitudes and behaviors. Their initial action was generated through the analysis showing their awareness and rejection of language and instances of racism.

The CLPs also showed critical consciousness by forming a critical stance toward the historical narratives in the texts. They actively engaged in personal and group multimodal narratives, verbally, in writing, and visually, to critique and challenge perspectives on power dynamics in the texts. They explored diverse perspectives presented in the texts, analyzing how social structures and discourses shaped characters' identities and opportunities (Nieto, 2002). When analyzing "the first world racist" in

Stamped, the CLPs rejected the racist language and stereotypes directed toward Africans and demonstrated awareness of their harmful impact. By discussing and reflecting on how they might have internalized negative stereotypes associated with being African American, the participants were able to critically examine the validity of these problematic beliefs (Behrman, 2006; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). This process enabled them to develop critical consciousness, as they began to question their world and consider who holds power and privilege, and who benefits from it. For instance by stating that “If someone had stopped the first world racist, there would be no racism today.” Yusef tried to understand racism is a historical product that affects today's lives. His initial consciousness might reflect his uncovering the ideology that promoted racism (Deane, 2020; Moje et al., 2000; Vasquez, 2000). This supports the idea that critical reflection is significant in understanding social justice issues (Norris et al., 2012).

These findings aligned with critical literacy theory’s tenets of disrupting the commonplace, identifying multiple perspectives, and focusing on socio-political issues (Lewison et al., 2002). By challenging normalized discriminatory behaviors and questioning entrenched societal norms, participants actively disrupted the status quo and exposed systemic injustices. They problematized racism and understood it in its historical context (Shor, 1980). Their critical engagement with texts and personal narratives reflected interrogating the texts by asking questions such as “How is this text trying to position me?” (Luke & Freebody, 1997). In the study, participants also developed the language of critique and hope (Shannon, 1995) by discussing concepts such as “racism”, “antiracism”, “segregationism”, “assimilation”, and “stereotyping” to learn how language

shapes identity, constructs cultural discourses, and supports or disrupts status quo (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1990).

Simultaneously, in interrogating multiple perspectives, the CLPs explored diverse and contradictory perspectives and analyzed how social structures and discourses shape identities (Lewison et al., 2015; Nieto, 2002). They reflected on the voices of those who had been silenced or marginalized (Harste et al., 2000) to understand the power dynamics in the texts. In exploring how social structures and discourses shape identities, students critically analyze texts from various perspectives to reveal underlying power dynamics. For instance, by examining Zurara's historical accounts of Portuguese colonization, students can investigate how his colonial-era perspective reinforces power structures that marginalized colonized voices. Contrasting Zurara's viewpoint with contemporary analyses from the authors helps students understand how dominant narratives are constructed and how marginalized voices are often silenced or distorted. This enables students to question who benefits from these narratives and how they perpetuate systemic inequalities, thereby fostering a deeper critical consciousness about the interplay of power and identity in both historical and contemporary contexts (Harste et al., 2000) This interrogating multiple perspectives dimension fostered a deeper understanding of social issues, promoted critical reflection, and empowered participants to advocate for meaningful social change. Without focusing on sociopolitical issues, students can neither interrogate viewpoints nor disrupt the commonplace. Reflection on such issues enables students to go beyond the personal to understand the sociopolitical systems to which they belong (Boozer et al., 1999), students challenge the normalcy of violence, discrimination, and bullying by questioning its legitimacy and power relationships (Anderson & Irvine,

1993). Through these practices, CLPs demonstrated the principles of critical literacy and built a more nuanced and proactive stance on addressing societal injustices.

The finding that participants demonstrated critical consciousness throughout the project resonates with the results found by Hope et al. (2015), where students engaged in critical consciousness by recounting experiences of racial stereotyping, discrimination from teachers and staff, lack of institutional support for a positive racial climate, and insufficient racial diversity in curricular offerings. Like the students in Hope et al.'s study, the CLPs not only showed awareness of racism but also actively engaged in critically interrogating its negative implications and exploring potential solutions for improving their schools. Likewise, this finding is consistent with the results found in Diaz (2021) where students engaged in reading and writing with social justice themes, fostering their ability to question and understand social realities (Freire, 1973; Freire, 1978). Thus, critical literacy empowers students by helping them recognize and address social injustices within their community and school, thereby contributing to their academic success and the development of critical consciousness.

RQ2: How Do CLP Narratives Reflect on Their Lived Experiences Related to Race and Culture?

Through their narratives, the CLPs made explicit connections between their experiences of racial and social injustices and systemic issues prevalent in society. They recalled experiences of discrimination, bullying, and violence, which revealed their understanding that personal encounters with social injustice are part of a larger, systemic context. Their narratives often reflected on recent incidents, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as portrayed in media and news. Their reflection highlighted how

individual experiences of discrimination and racial violence are interconnected with broader societal issues. This finding conforms with focusing on the socio-political issues dimension in critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002) where participants made a connection with the personal to understand the sociopolitical systems to which they belong (Boozer, et al., 1999).

Additionally, the finding of connecting the lived experience with social justice issues reminds us of the CRT tenet that sees racism deeply interwoven in society's fabric to the point that it appears normal and ingrained in our lives and daily interactions (Delgado & Stefanic, 2000). Thus, CLPs challenged the normalization of injustice and uncovered hidden forms of racism and discrimination embedded within dominant narratives.

Another finding of the study was that as students engaged with critical literacy and connected with historical figures through using multimodal and multilingual practices (Lau, 2012), they deeply explored and reflected on race and culture. This exploration extended beyond traditional text to include a variety of communication forms such as images, gestures, sound, and music. Multimodality, which refers to the use of diverse semiotic resources—such as images, body language, and speech—to create meaning (Jewitt, 2008), enabled students to engage with and understand complex concepts of race and culture through multiple channels. By integrating these varied modes of communication, students were able to form richer, more nuanced connections with the content, enhancing their engagement and understanding of race and culture. The CLPs engaged with their picture books through visual, written, spatial, and expressive modes to investigate historical figures, racial struggles, and activism. Thus, utilizing multiple forms

of communication beyond traditional text, students engaged with their picture books and historical subjects through visual art, reflective poems, and photographs. For example, students created artwork of Rosa Parks, wrote poems reflecting on Harriet Tubman and the book *Undeclared*, and shared their personal valuable photographs of the jazz Saxophonist Maceo Parker and the boxing legend Muhammad Ali. This multimodal approach responds to historical figures best aligned with their personal preferences and connections to the characters. It not only accommodated diverse learning styles but also enhanced students' engagement and understanding of the historical figures and themes, facilitating a more profound critical analysis of race, culture, and activism. Through these narratives, students moved from understanding and critical consciousness to connecting with influential historical figures they considered role models for change. This result can be related to artifactual literacies using artifacts to communicate their personal histories, perspectives, experiences, and identities (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). Critical literacy supports multimodal and multilingual practices should be used to build curriculum across the content areas and across space and place (Comber, 2013).

Another finding that emerged from this study is that participants revealed the complexities of identity and belonging, shedding light on how race, religion, and culture intersected with their everyday lives. Moreover, their exploration of different identities, such as being Muslim and Black, enriched their understanding of how multiple identities intersect and influence experiences of discrimination. This intersectionality often shapes how participants perceive themselves and are perceived by others, and how they understand injustice (Crenshaw, 1991). CLPs navigated the dual impact of stereotypes and biases stemming from both racial and religious contexts, confronting societal

expectations and challenges that arose from their intersecting identities. For example, in their stories, Liyanna and Yussef tried to explain to others confidently that they used religious dress and other cultural artifacts such as henna, beads, and hijab to express part of their religious identities. Fatimah's story of incorporating beads alongside her hijab underscored her nuanced decision to reconcile personal expression with religious norms. By engaging in narrative research, the CLPs began to gain awareness of and contemplate the complexities of their own identities and those of their CritLit peers. Thus, using artifactual literacies helped students to articulate their cultural artifacts and connect with their personal and collective histories, encouraging empathy, critical reflection, and interpretation. Students not only explore personal connections but also recognize broader cultural contexts and historical narratives that shape their identities (Turkle, 2007). Thus, artifactual literacies can support students in developing a deeper understanding of the complexity of their identities, enhancing their learning experiences through meaningful engagement with multimodal expressions and cultural artifacts.

The finding that CLPs drew connections between lived experiences and social justice issues conforms with Chun's (2009) and Browne et al, (2023) study, where students were able to relate text to issues like stereotyping, violence gun racism, and racial profiling, finding these connections particularly resonant. This is also consistent with McArthur and Muhammad's (2017) research on how Muslim African American girls navigated their identities through literacy. The High school Black Muslim female engaged in writing to future generations of Black Muslim girls, and their raised themes of sisterhood and unity, challenging misrepresentations, empowerment, and strength through faith, education, and advocacy. While their study utilized culturally sustaining

pedagogy and focused on advocacy through letter writing, my research expanded on these themes by employing a broader critical literacy framework. By integrating critical literacy principles, my work aimed to show that literacy can be a transformative tool for both personal growth and collective social change among marginalized youth.

RQ3: How Does the CritLit Project Help CLPs Envision Social Change?

The CritLit project significantly enhanced the capacity of CLPs to envision social change, individually, collaboratively, and in understanding race, culture, and religion in general. On an individual level, the project fostered a strong sense of personal responsibility in the CLPs, as demonstrated by their commitment to principles such as “loving everybody for who they are” (Eman) and “educating themselves” (Liyanna). This personal responsibility helped them emphasize proactive steps for social justice through empathy and self-awareness. By taking personal responsibility, CLPs showed their commitment to dismantling prejudiced notions and biases. This continuous learning process might enable them to better understand and confront systemic racism.

Collectively, the project provided a platform for the participants to voice their concerns and proposals and work toward social change. Through the CritLit project, students engage in reflective practices and collective advocacy that confront and reframe societal norms and power structures. For instance, by creating their letter to the principal articulating their vision for a safe and free bullying and racism school, they demonstrated their proactive stance in advocating for their rights. Also, integrating their cultural and religious perspectives into the CritLit project helped students not only address existing biases but also offer new viewpoints that challenge dominant discourses. Their actions, such as writing letters to school administrators and producing cultural artifacts, serve as

concrete interventions that question and redefine dominant narratives. Through these efforts, students not only advocate for their rights and a more inclusive learning environment but also reshape discourses around identity and social justice. Overall, the CritLit project empowered CLPs to engage in praxis—reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1970). By providing a platform for participants to act, the project aligned with the core principle of participatory methods—valuing the active involvement of those directly impacted by social issues. These ideas of envisionment and participatory approaches to fostering student agency align with findings from previous studies by Rogers and Labadie (2015) and Caffrey and Rogers (2018), which provided valuable insights into how critical literacy practices can empower students to engage in social action and advocacy. For example, in Rogers and Labadie’s study, participants developed a petition to actively address bullying through posters and petitions. Although both studies used critical discourse analysis and qualitative case studies that differ from the narrative design that aligns with my current study in underscoring the importance of participatory methodologies in promoting student voice and agency in addressing societal issues.

In addition to their envisionment for change, Muslim African Americans navigate and express their identities through a dynamic interplay of cultural and religious identities, advocacy, and creative expression. They celebrate their dual heritage by integrating Islamic practices with African American cultural traditions, as seen in personal choices like wearing beads with a hijab to reflect both beauty and religious wearing. Also, their advocacy includes addressing racism and colorism and challenging the societal norms pervading in their communities. Additionally, they use storytelling,

literature, and art to share personal narratives and explore the intersections of race, religion, and culture. This envisionment of societal issues enriches their own understanding and contributes to a broader, more nuanced dialogue about identity and equity.

Students' envisionment for race, culture, religion, and colorism through their projects exemplify critical literacy by engaging with both sociopolitical issues and taking action. According to Lewison, et al., (2002), critical literacy includes examining and challenging the power dynamics and societal structures that influence our understanding of these issues. By addressing topics such as racial inequality and cultural diversity, students engage in socio-political discourse, literacy has become a form of cultural citizenship and politics (Giroux, 1993). This engagement reflection with enact a commitment to reshaping the dominant narratives and advocating for marginalized voices. Moreover, the CritLit project encouraged students to take action including thinking about solutions and advocating for change. Through their collaboration, creative, and participatory efforts (stories and cultural artifacts), students act as border crossers challenging cultural boundaries and fostering empathy across different contexts (Giroux, 1993), thus actively participating in the broader dialogue about identity in relation to equity, and social justice. This culturally situated approach demonstrates how literacy can serve as an ongoing act of consciousness about cultural identity and resistance, promoting personal and societal transformation. By actively engaging in discussions and taking individual and collaborative actions, students significantly engage in reflection and action that are deeply connected to their own cultural contexts. This practice involves understanding and addressing issues of equity and social justice through their unique

cultural perspectives and experiences. Thus, they contributed to broader dialogues on identity and justice by influencing and transforming existing discourses through their culturally situated insights and creative expressions (Janks, 2000). Thus, the CritLit project allowed students to question and disrupt prevailing discourses related to race, culture, and religion.

Implications

The study has several implications across theory, methodology, practice, and policy. Theoretically, it suggests refining frameworks to address intersecting identities and systemic power dynamics better. Methodologically, it explored the experiences and stories through integrating narrative inquiry with participatory research. Practically, it advocates for educators to integrate critical literacy strategies and create inclusive, reflective learning environments. In policy, the study promotes a curricular agenda that encourages critical thinking and connects students with their personal experiences in broader social contexts.

In Theory

I used a combination of critical literacy (Harste et al., 2013; Janks, 2013; Lewison et al., 2002), CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; D. Bell, 1992), and artifactual literacies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2003; 2011) as the theoretical framework undergirding my study. Critical literacy was a promising conceptual framework. It included working with participants to “take everyday ideological constructions of social relations, of class, race, and gender relations, and to question them through reading, writing, and dialogue” (Luke et al., 2009, p. 12). It helped interrogate inequalities of power in relation to textual practices (Janks, 2010; Nieto, 2002). I integrated CRT to position race as a site of

exploration within broader structural systems in order to explore issues of injustice, oppression, access, power, and privilege and better understand individuals' experiences and cultural knowledge. The use of this theory indicates there is a need for a deeper examination of racialized discourse. Lastly, my use of artifactual literacies emphasized the role of material objects and artifacts in literacy practices and learning processes (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). Artifacts such as texts, images, and objects are not just passive elements but active agents in shaping and representing cultural meanings and identities. Researchers need to consider how cultural artifacts reflect and perpetuate historical and societal narratives related to race and ethnicity and how they reinforce or challenge dominant discourses and power structures. Thus, integrating artifactual literacies into my theoretical framework alongside critical literacy and CRT enriched the study by providing a nuanced understanding of how material culture and artifacts participated in shaping critical literacy practices and experiences related to social justice issues. This integration of critical theories not only enhances the study's findings but also underscores the importance of bridging theoretical insights with practical applications.

This use of critical theories like these can help educators rethink how addressing social justice issues using a theoretical foundation with a critical perspective can encourage students to think beyond the school and reflect on the world to transform it. Reading the word through reading the world (Freire, 1970). Connecting practitioners' experiences to theory and research would improve the literacy field. Educators and researchers need to collaboratively work together to bridge the gap between theory and practice and improve literacy for social justice.

In Methodology

I used participatory research with an embedded narrative approach grounded in narrative inquiry to highlight participants' agency and voices. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry allows participants to share their lived experiences and stories, contributing to a better understanding of the topic. Participatory research and narrative inquiry empower participants by engaging them in shaping the research process and ensuring that their narratives are heard. The combination of these methods can widen the scope of research by centering the narrative voices of marginalized students, emphasizing social justice issues. Further, it enriched my methodology by emphasizing participant agency, contextual understanding, validity, ethical considerations, and potential for transformative impact.

In Practice

One significant implication of this study is the importance of integrating critical pedagogy that emphasizes a collaborative and dynamic learning environment where teachers and students engage in dialogue as co-learners (Giroux, 2010). Such an approach values critical reflection through prioritizing inquiry experiences that enable students to explore, discuss, question, and critique systems of power and oppression (Crowley & King, 2018). Also, it helps them analyze and challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and marginalization, as demonstrated by the CLPs' analysis of historical and contemporary racism and discussions about bias. Although translating critical pedagogy theories into concrete classroom practices sounds challenging (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004), implementing a critical inquiry-based method helps students develop a sense of care for both themselves and their surroundings (Cleovoulou & Beach,

2019). Students can use dialogic learning, facilitated discussions, and reflective journaling (Norris et al., 2012).

Critical pedagogy encourages teachers to incorporate discussions about race and racism into the classroom as a means to empower students and challenge systemic inequalities (Freire, 1970). By fostering an environment where these topics are addressed, educators can help students benefit from engaging in conversations about race and racism with their teachers and peers (Howard, 2004). This includes critically examining and confronting oppressive structures, revising historical narratives and confronting systemic issues (Hughes, 2022). Therefore, integrating race and racism discussions into educational practices not only supports the principles of critical pedagogy but also contributes to creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

The critical pedagogy practices not only foster a deeper understanding of societal dynamics and personal experiences but also enhance students' engagement with topics they find authentic and meaningful (Mirra et al., 2015, p. 55). To do so, it is crucial to integrate culturally responsive literacy resources that reflect diverse cultural backgrounds and identities while avoiding stereotypes, ensuring that reading materials resonate with the real-life experiences of diverse students (Brooks, 2006; Castillo, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Norris et al., 2012). Teachers and practitioners may integrate "Funds of knowledge" to learn about the lived experiences and practices of their students and their families (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Using multicultural literature serves as a powerful tool for empowering students to start conversations around social issues (Souto-Manning, 2009), enhance students' understanding of different cultures (Colby & Lyon, 2004), and promote social action skills based on their cultural identities (Chen & Browne, 2023). As

a result, students become more adept at identifying and addressing issues of bias, stereotyping, and oppression. This enhanced awareness contributes to creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, empowering students to advocate for change and participate in social justice efforts. Additionally, it prepares them to be proactive, thoughtful citizens who can engage in meaningful actions to transform oppressive systems and contribute positively to society.

Another significant implication of this study is the need for a thorough critical examination of intersecting identities to disrupt dominant narratives and empower students through transformative, agentic work aimed at achieving equity and justice. This entails delving into various aspects of identity, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Intersectionality makes room for the exploration of individual stories and worlds that can both reinforce and counter systems of oppression (Collins, 1990). By understanding these intersections and how they affect students' perceptions and experiences, educators can more accurately address the unique challenges and needs of their students, creating an educational environment that acknowledges and respects diversity. This critical approach involves analyzing how traditional narratives and stereotypes might marginalize certain groups and actively working to challenge and deconstruct these biases.

Educators should “embrace youth identities and cultural practices while also maintaining a clear eyed critique of the ways in which youth culture and community practices might be problematic and reproduce systematic inequalities” (Paris&Alim, 2014, p. 85). Thus, it is important to balance respect for youth identities and cultural practices with a critical examination of how these practices might perpetuate systemic

inequalities. For instance, by integrating resources and instructional practices that reflect diverse identities and experiences, educators can help students see themselves as represented and valued in their learning materials. This fosters a more inclusive classroom and empowers students by validating their personal experiences and promoting a sense of belonging.

The findings of this study also support the need to implement clear and effective critical literacy instruction that incorporates a culturally sustaining pedagogy, that seeks to perpetuate and foster-to sustain- linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012, p.1). A teaching instruction that empower students to become knowledge makers and active readers, capable of nuanced analyses of power dynamics and social practices (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 1995). This approach involves engaging with the stories of marginalization experienced by students of color through incorporating social justice themes as it encourages students to explore oppression and diversity while ensuring they see themselves and their communities reflected in educational materials (Souto-Manning et al., 2020). Such critical engagement helps in envisioning better futures and fosters innovative, agentic work aimed at dismantling injustices. By discussing and defining complex social justice concepts, particularly issues of race and racism, students can reject the “colorblindness” that often conceals the realities of marginalized groups (A. M. García, 1999). This promotes inclusive environments that encourage critical thinking and prepare students to actively contribute to building equitable and just societies.

In Policy

Education policies should promote collaboration among stakeholders such as curriculum designers, educators, researchers, policymakers, parents, and community members are paramount to ensure that the cultural identities of diverse students are respected, in the classroom and beyond. This approach encourages critical thinking and helps students understand the relevance of their personal experiences in broader social contexts, supporting the development of critical literacy skills and preparing them to address real-world issues.

Moreover, policies should support structures that allow students to actively engage in decision-making processes within schools, such as student-led initiatives, community projects, and opportunities for students to contribute to policy discussions. In addition to the school setting, expanding the learning environment to include community centers, libraries, youth organizations, cultural centers, and religious centers can be a place for community and global group projects. Such projects allow students to collaborate on broader social justice issues and exchange ideas for making change. Also, the integration of interactive digital tools, such as virtual reality and online forums, digital literacy and digital activism engage students in meaningful interaction in the world (Amgott, 2018), ensuring that the principles of critical pedagogy are effectively implemented.

Implementing professional development programs for educators are crucial to suggest strategies for recognizing and incorporating students' diverse backgrounds into their teaching and facilitating discussions on social justice. One example is helping pre-service teachers critically analyze social constructs such as race, ethnicity, gender,

culture, and religion, and recognize how these factors shape students' learning experiences (Howard, 2003). Most importantly, pursuing the ongoing professional development through workshops and conferences is crucial, as these learning environments empower students to challenge stereotypes, advocate for social justice, and thrive in their communities (Lewison et al., 2002). Thus, education policies can embrace these endeavors and create a more inclusive and responsive education system, where students are prepared to understand, critique societal issues and drive positive change.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the findings of the current study, future research could explore several promising avenues. First, investigating the interplay between critical consciousness (recognizing and challenging social injustices within texts), and cultural consciousness (awareness of how cultural contexts shape interpretations of the text) enhance our understanding of how these skills interact and reinforce each other. By employing experimental method, researchers can explore how these dimensions influence students' reading and critical thinking skills. For instance, examining how students' cultural backgrounds affect their critical engagement with texts. This might offer valuable insights into how to design curricula and teaching strategies that foster both critical and cultural awareness. Second, expanding participant demographics to include parents would shed light on the role of familial support in fostering students' development of critical thinking and cultural competence. Ladson-Billings (1995) referred to cultural competence as it pertains to helping students uphold their community and heritage through language and other cultural customs. Third, conducting longitudinal studies with students would provide valuable insights into the development of these skills over time

and their implications for educational achievement. Ultimately, such research studies could inform policy decisions regarding ways to enhance critical thinking skills and cultural competence among students, potentially benefiting education systems.

Final Thoughts

In my role as a researcher participant in the project, listening to the stories of Yussef, Fatima, Liyanna, and Eman was a profoundly transformative experience. Engaging with their narratives of anger, rejection, and consciousness not only evoked strong emotional responses but also deepened my understanding of their lived experiences as Muslim African Americans. Their stories reshaped my approach to social justice issues, highlighting the importance of creating safe spaces for sharing personal narratives and engaging in critical discussions about texts. This experience reinforced the significance of embracing diverse perspectives and recognizing students of color as critical thinkers and agents of change. I learned that critical consciousness, beginning with an awareness of lived experiences and develops over time. From a young age, students are capable of questioning, analyzing, and reflecting on critical texts. Moving forward, I am committed to nurturing my inquiry stance and collaborating with colleagues, scholars, and students to integrate these insights into my practice. This approach will help foster a more inclusive and humanizing framework for literacy research and education.

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Appendix A
CritLit Project Flier



The flier features a green leafy background. At the top left is the Rowan University logo. The title 'CritLit Project' is in large green font. A bulleted list of questions and project details follows. The location is redacted with black scribbles. Contact information for the primary and co-investigators is provided. A disclaimer about IRB approval and confidentiality is at the bottom.

Rowan University

CritLit Project

- Are you interested in participating in a research study about critical literacy?
- Are you in 5th, 6th, or 7th school grade?
- Do you live in West Philly?
- Do you want to participate in a book club project?
- Do you want to improve your reading/critical thinking?

- *Project aim:* To gain insight into out-of-school literacy through critical and responsive reading practices in a culturally sustaining learning environment.
- The study includes interviews, observation sessions, reflections and artifacts.

Time: Fall 2022 (Every Saturday)
Location: [REDACTED]

How to register?
Contact us:
Primary Investigator: Susan Browne/Email: brownes@rowan.edu
Co-Investigator: Faten Baroudi/Email: baroud92@rowan.edu
Phone#: 8563432065

The project has been approved by Rowan university IRB (PRO-2022-193)
No compensation for this study.

- The research team is committed to maintaining the confidentiality, integrity, and security of your personal information. Therefore, all information shared with us will solely be utilized for the purpose of this study and within the permissions, you accord to us.

Version #: 4
Version Date: 9/20/2022

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DO NOT REMOVE
Creation/Revision Date: 02/07/2018



Appendix B

Recruitment Email

Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne



Recruitment Email

Dear parents/guardians,

We are writing to ask for your participation in a research project about *A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project* that will be held at ██████████ Weekend School in Fall 2022. This study aims to provide opportunities for your child to gain out-of-school literacy practices in a critical and culturally responsive sustaining learning environment.

To do so, we are seeking to invite about five to ten students to participate in observation sessions, interviews, and collecting reflections/artifacts .

If your child is in fifth, sixth or seventh-grade school living in West Philly and decides to participate in this study, he/ she will be asked a series of questions and responses to literacy practices in and outside school and observed during the book discussion sessions. The data will not include any reference to names or other identifiable information.

Only the Rowan University research team will have access to the data that will be kept confidential and anonymous. Results will be used in an aggregate form. Also, there is no compensation for participating in this study. There are indirect benefits to the educational community as the students will get the opportunities to activate their reading and critical skills.

If you have any questions about the study, please email or contact us thank you in advance for your support of this research study.

Best regards,

Dr Susan Browne
Rowan University
Herman D. James Hall, Room 2066
201 Mullica Hill Road,
Glassboro, NJ 08028
856-256-4500 ext. 3830
brownes@rowan.edu

Faten Baroudi
Rowan University
Herman D. James Hall
Glassboro, NJ 08028
856-343-2065 ext. 3830
baroud92@rowan.edu

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Version Date: 9/20/2022

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Appendix C

Student Assent Form

Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne



ASSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Study: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project

Principal Investigator: Dr Susan Browne
College and Department: College of Education, Department of Language, Literacy & Sociocultural Education
Co-Investigator: Faten Baroudi

- A. Who are we and why are we meeting with you?**
I am Faten Baroudi, the Co-Investigator, and a PhD candidate at Rowan University in the College of Education. I am working with Dr. Susan Browne, the Principal Investigator who works at Rowan University. You're invited to be in this study because you are in fifth, sixth or seventh grade and living in the West Philadelphia area. I want to hear your thoughts and responses to book club activities. I want to hear your voice because I believe it is important and interesting to have students like you in this study.
- B. What is this research study about?**
This research study is an out-school project that aims to provide you as a fifth, sixth or seventh-grade student with opportunities to read, discuss, critique and connect books and supplementary texts with social justice issues.
- C. Why have I been asked to take part in this study? How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?**
You are being asked to take part in this study because you are registered in Fall 2022 CritLit project held at Masjid Aljamia Weekend School, and you are in fifth, sixth or seventh grade living in the North West Philly area.
- D. Who can be in this study? And who may not? How long will the study take?**
Five to ten students registered in the Critlit project are included in this study. All other registered students will not be asked to participate in this study. The study will take place for three months in Fall 2022.
- E. What will happen to me if I choose to be in this study?**
You will read and respond to literature, be asked questions during the pre and post-interview, be observed during the discussion sessions and provide written reflections and artifacts.

1

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PI: Dr. Susan Browne

F. What are the benefits of participating in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. The project will support your literacy and language skills. The activities will be interesting and engaging. The finding will provide insight into critical literacy that will be beneficial.

G. What are the risks of participating in this study? Will I feel uncomfortable if I take part in this study?

There are minimal risks involved in your participation in the research project, which means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. If some interview questions about connection to your privacy involve any discomfort, you can pick the questions you want to share and skip questions if you are not comfortable sharing responses. You can also discontinue participation in the study at any time.

H. What if I don't want to take part in this study?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to take part. No one will get angry or upset if you do not want to take part in the study. Just inform me if you do not want to take part in the study and remember, you can change your mind later if you decide you do not want to be in the study anymore. If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

I. Will I be given anything to take part in this study?

You will not receive any form of payment for being in this research study

J. What if I have questions?

You can ask questions at any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to me or you can talk to someone else at any time during the study. Here are the telephone numbers to reach us:

If I have questions about the study I can call the Principal Investigator or Co-investigator at:

Dr Susan Browne
Rowan University
Herman D. James Hall, Room 2066
201 Mullica Hill Road,
Glassboro, NJ 08028
856-256-4500 ext. 3830
brownes@rowan.edu

Faten Baroudi
Rowan University
College of Education
201 Mullica Hill Road
Glassboro, NJ 08028
(856)-343-2065
baroud92@students.rowan.edu

If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call:

2

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Rowan University
PRO-2022-193
Approved on 9-27-2022

Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne

Office of Research Compliance, Institutional Review Board
Rowan University Glassboro/CMSRU (856) 256-4058

K. What are my rights if I decide to take part in this research study?

I understand that I have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. I understand that I should not sign this form unless I have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of my questions.

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been talked about. All of my questions about this form and this study have been answered.

I agree to take part in this research study.

Subject Name: _____

Subject Signature: _____ *Date:* _____

Signature of Investigator or Responsible Individual:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study, including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subjects and those of his/her parent(s) or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____



Appendix D

Guardian Consent Form

Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne



PARENTAL/GUARDIAN PERMISSION FORM FOR MINORS TO TAKE PART IN A SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Study: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project

Principal Investigator: Dr Susan Browne
College and Department: College of Education, Department of Language, Literacy & Sociocultural Education
Co-Investigator: Faten Baroudi

You are being asked to give permission for the minor.....to take part in a research study. This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide key information that will help you decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study.

Please carefully read the key information provided in questions 1-9 and 16 below. The purpose behind those questions is to provide clear information about the purpose of the study, specific information about what will happen in the course of the study, what are the anticipated risks and benefits, and what alternatives are available to you if you do not wish to participate in this research study.

The study team will explain the study to you, and they will answer any questions you might have before volunteering to take part in this study. It is important that you take your time to make your decision. You may take this consent form with you to ask your family member or anyone else before agreeing to participate in the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask the study team and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to participate in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.



Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

The Principal Investigator, Dr Susan Browne and the co-investigator, Faten Baroudi will also be asked to sign this informed consent.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The study aims to gain insight into out-of-school literacy so that educators can better promote critical and responsive reading practices in culturally sustaining learning environments.

2. Why is the minor being asked to take part in this study?

We are inviting your child to be a part of the research study because we believe that he/she/they fit with the criteria of upper elementary/middle school level and we appreciate you sharing his/her/theirs lived experiences, responses, and opinions.

3. What will the minor be asked to do if he/she takes part in this research study? Your child will be invited to engage in responding to literature, and pre and post-interview questions, be observed during discussion sessions and provide written reflections and artifacts.

4. Who may take part in this research study? And who may not?

Participants should be students in fifth, sixth and seventh grades who will register in CritLit project in Fall 2022. Others who do not register are excluded.

5. How long the study may take and where will the research study be conducted?

The study will take place at Masjid Al-Jamia Weekend School in West Philadelphia for three months in Fall of 2022. Your child will participate for 12 sessions, specifically, two hours per session 120 minutes per session.

6. How many visits may take to complete the study?

A total of 12 visits will be needed for observing your child, including two visits for a student interview(pre-post the project).

7. What are the risks and/or discomforts the minor might experience if he/she takes part in this study?

There are minimal risks involved in your child participating in the research project, which means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. If the interview questions about your child's responses involve any discomfort, he/she/hers can pick up the questions wants to answer or discontinue participation in the study at any time. Any information that is obtained in connection with the study and that can identify your child remain confidential. Information that can identify your child individually will not be released to anyone outside the



Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne

study. Information collected will be de-identified and used to aggregate form in presentation and publication.

8. Are there any benefits to the minor if you choose to give permission for the minor to take part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to your child for participating in this study. The project will support your child's literacy and language skills. The activities will be interesting and engaging. The finding will provide insight into critical literacy that will be beneficial.

9. What are the alternatives if you do not give permission to the minor to participate in the study?

Your alternative is not to allow your child to participate in the study.

10. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?

The study includes from five to ten participants.

11. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect the minor and whether you are willing to allow the minor to stay in this research study?

During the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to allow your child to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect your child, you will be contacted.

12. Will there be any cost to you or to the minor to take part in this study?

There is no cost for participating in this study.

13. Will you or minor be paid to take part in this study?

You or your minor will not be paid for your minor's participation in this research study.

14. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?

All documents collected and recorded data will be kept in a password-protected computer with denied access to strangers and without links to any identifiable information to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Only the Principal investigator Dr Susan Browne and the co-investigator Faten Baroudi will have access to the data.

Your personal information will be de-identified. De-identified means that any research data collected during this study will not include any personal information collected or be linked in any way where your identity can be known. Any future use and analysis of the research data collected about you in this study will be de-identified, as permitted by law. All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. Presentations and publications to the public and at scientific conferences and meetings will not use your name and other personal information.



Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne

15. What will happen if you do not give permission to the minor to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to have your child participate or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter your child into the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

Dr Susan Browne
Rowan University
Herman D. James Hall, Room 2066
201 Mullica Hill Road,
Glassboro, NJ 08028
856-256-4500 ext. 3830
brownes@rowan.edu

16. Who can you call if you have any questions?

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the Principal Investigator:

Susan Browne
856-256-4500 ext. 53830

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research Compliance
(856) 256-4078– Glassboro/CMSRU

17. What are your or minor's rights if you decide to take part in this research study?

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read the entire information about the research study, research risks, benefits and the alternatives, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed.

All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered and I agree to volunteer to participate in the study.

4

Version #: 5
Version Date: 09-20-2022
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Rowan University
PRO-2022-193
Approved on 9-27-2022

Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project
PI: Dr. Susan Browne

Subject Name: _____

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature: _____ Date _____



Appendix E

Picture Book List

Picture Book List

1. Alexander, & Nelson, K. (2019). *The Undefeated*. Versify, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
2. Bass, H., & Lewis, E. B. (2015). *Seeds of freedom: The peaceful integration of Huntsville, Alabama* (First edition.). Somerville, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press.
3. Burleigh, R., & Jenkins, L. (2004). *Langston's train ride*. New York: Orchard Books.
4. Johnson, D., & Johnson, K. (2007). *Hair dance!* New York: Henry Holt.
5. Latham, I., Waters, C., Qualls, S., & Alko, S. (2018). *Can I touch your hair?: Poems of race, mistakes, and friendship*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books.
6. Medina, T. (2018). *Thirteen ways of looking at a black boy*. Oklahoma City: Penny Candy Books.
7. Muhammad, I., Ali, S. K., Aly, H., & OverDrive, I. (2019). *The proudest blue: A story of hijab and family* (First edition.). New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Appendix F

Pre- and Post-Interview Protocol



Student Interview Protocol

Pre-interview

1. How would you describe yourself as a reader?
2. What type of book(s) do you enjoy most? Explain.
3. What book, song, movie, or television show has had a big influence on you?
4. What made the book, song, or movie important/interesting to you?
5. Please, reflect on one of the recent events happening in your district, city, or world that makes you angry, sad, satisfied, afraid, and/or thoughtful. Which? Explain.
6. How would you describe reading in your school?
7. What kinds of opportunities does the school provide you to discuss current social issues (poverty, discrimination, violence, crime, unemployment, education, etc...)
8. Where do these discussions take place? How do you engage in these discussions?
9. What would you like to talk more about in your school?

Post-Interview

10. How do the selected materials speak to your age, gender, and culture?
11. Who is silenced/heard here?
12. Whose interests might be served by the text?
13. What do you identify with?
14. Who is the defeated? Who is the undefeated? Which character taught you the most?
Why? What is your reaction? What are your feelings?
15. How is the voice of the author reflected in the story?
16. Which story teaches you about life? How does it teach it?
17. What could you change in one of the stories? Do you have any sort of different ending?
18. How does this change connect to your real life?

Appendix G

Observation Protocol



Observation Protocol

Dimensions of critical literacy:

1. Disrupting the commonplace
2. Focusing on sociopolitical issues
3. Interrogating multiple viewpoints
4. Taking action and promoting social justice

Text -reader lived experience/cultural identities	Power dynamics(language use)
Student-student: meaning-making	Social change

Appendix H

Student Reflection Worksheet and Handout



Student Reflection





1. What stood up for u in today's readings?

2. What do u want to talk more about?

Student handout

Session 1 & 2

Connection

Appendix I

Facilitator Reflection Sheet



Facilitator Reflection

1. What is the takeaway from this session?
2. Text appropriateness/ connection to students lived experience
3. Guided questions/problem-solving tasks/dialogical learning
4. Lesson strengths/ weakness
5. students' learning/discussion?
6. Further adjustment of the lesson

Appendix J

IRB Approval Notice



DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier: FWA00007111

Rowan IORG/IRB: Glassboro/CMSRU

IRB Chair Person: Dr. Ane Johnson

IRB Director: Eric Gregory

Effective Date: September 27, 2022

Notice of Approval - Modification

Study ID: PRO-2022-193

Title: A Critical Inquiry into an Out-of-School Critical Literacy Project

Principal Investigator: Susan Browne

Study Coordinator: Faten Baroudi

Study Expiration Date: --

Sponsor: Internal

Submission Type: Modification

Submission Status: Approved

Submission Approval Date: September 27, 2022

Review Type: Expedited

Expedited Category:

Description/Summary of Modification:

Changed the location wording in the following:

5. Study site: letter of support
6. Study procedure: recruitment email, flyer, SBER 6.3 section
7. Informed consent: assent form and consent parental permission

These were changed because the location of the study changed.

HIPAA Alteration or Waiver of Authorization

The alteration or waiver of authorization has been reviewed and approved under review procedures according to the requirements found at 45 CFR Part 164.512(i).

ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.
- 2a. Continuing Review: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses in approval, submit a continuation application at least eight weeks before the study expiration date.
- 2b. Progress Report: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses, an annual progress report is required at least 21 days prior to the expiration date.
- 3a. Expiration of IRB Approval: If IRB approval expires, effective the date of expiration and until the continuing review approval is issued: All research activities must stop unless the IRB finds that it is in the best interest of individual subjects to continue. (This determination shall be based on a separate written request from the PI to the IRB.) No new subjects may be enrolled and no samples/charts/surveys may be collected, reviewed, and/or analyzed.
- 3b. Human Subjects Research Training: Proper training in the conduct of human subjects research must be current and not expired. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator and the investigator to complete training when expired. Any modifications and renewals will not be approved until training is not expired and current.
4. Amendments/Modifications/Revisions: If you wish to change any aspect of this study after the approval date mentioned in this letter, including but not limited to, study procedures, consent form(s), investigators, advertisements, the protocol document, investigator drug brochure, or accrual goals, you are required to obtain IRB review and approval prior to implementation of these changes unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. This policy is also applicable to progress reports.
5. Unanticipated Problems: Unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
6. Protocol Deviations and Violations: Deviations from/violations of the approved study protocol must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
7. Consent/Assent: The IRB has reviewed and approved the consent and/or assent process, waiver and/or alteration described in this protocol as required by 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50, 56, (if FDA regulated research). Only the versions of the documents included in the approved process may be used to document informed consent and/or assent of study subjects; each subject must receive a copy of the approved form(s); and a copy of each signed form must be filed in a secure place in the subject's medical/patient/research record.
8. Completion of Study: Notify the IRB when your study has been completed or stopped for any reason. Neither study closure by the sponsor nor the investigator removes the obligation for submission of timely continuing review application, progress report or final report.
9. The Investigator(s) did not participate in the review, discussion, or vote of this protocol.
10. Letter Comments: There are no additional comments.

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