MAKING SPACE FOR CRITICAL LITERACY: 
HOW TEACHERS AND A PRINCIPAL MAKE SENSE OF CRITICAL LITERACY 
IN A PRACTITIONER INQUIRY COMMUNITY

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Lori, Sammy, Susan and Tommie, the four amazing teachers who participated in the critical literacy endeavor with me. They have forever changed the lives of their students by learning with students.

I am from thankfulness that God brought these four amazing women into my life and the lives of students at Lewis Woods Elementary School.

I am from gratitude that the four of them love their students with such zeal and compassion.

I am from appreciation that they chose to be vulnerable with their students and me. I am so glad that I chose to be vulnerable with them.

I am from love of these four amazing women and teachers.
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While I have sat in a variety of positions and places over the last three years reading, thinking and writing, my husband Michael has supported this work by loving and encouraging me through acts of service. He has cooked, and washed and folded clothes, done the grocery store runs, and taken care of the gardens. As my chair told me that I successfully defended my dissertation, I looked to Michael, who was sitting at the far end of the oval table. Love and pride emanated from him. It was in that moment that I realized how much he had sacrificed for me. I will always be grateful.

I want to acknowledge my committee who challenged my thinking about critical literacy, research, and inquiry communities. Gerald Campano, my chair, pressed me to tell a story. He kept me focused on my data holistically by prodding for the critical incidences. He also helped move me from data analysis to writing. If he hadn’t, I might still be analyzing the data! Susan Lytle, a committee member, challenged my thinking about critical literacy and inquiry communities. She and Gerald spoke of critical literacy as a way of being in the world. Early on I heard their words, but did not really understand. I now know what they mean. Stephanie Jones, my third committee member, along with Susan Lytle challenged me to be vulnerable in the inquiry community alongside the teachers. Stephanie asked me how I was enacting critical literacy. That question stuck with me and helped me get fully immersed in critical literacy as a participant.

Finally, Nicole Maule, my friend, was both a friend and critical friend. She encouraged me throughout my course work and dissertation. She supported me by critically reading my writing and providing feedback. She sat in on inquiry community meetings and took field notes. She also participated in some data coding. I valued our conversations about my research and the relevance our conversations had to our work at Lewis Woods Elementary School.
ABSTRACT

MAKING SPACE FOR CRITICAL LITERACY:
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IN A PRACTITIONER INQUIRY COMMUNITY

Terri L. Harpster
H. Gerald Campano

Noticeably absent from the critical literacy field are accounts of critical literacy written from the experience and perspective of school leaders. This qualitative practitioner study examined the enactment of critical literacy by four elementary teachers and an elementary school principal in a small rural school in south central Pennsylvania. A critical literacy practitioner inquiry community was an important feature of this study, an importance that cannot be overstated. The interdependence of critical literacy and the inquiry community enabled the participants to disrupt notions of learning, teaching, and leading and what it means to be a student, teacher, and leader. This practitioner action research study contributes to the field of critical literacy in important ways. The study took place in a small rural elementary school in south central Pennsylvania, and the participants/co-researchers were all White, female, Christian educators of predominantly White students. During the study, the participants transformed learning, teaching, and leading by developing stances of critical inquiry and spaces of mutuality. The transformation changed the roles of teachers, learners, and leaders. The participants also confronted the state’s system of accountability and educator effectiveness, and through that confrontation re-imagined their own professional identities. I am the principal, co-researcher, and author of this work.
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CHAPTER 1: “THERE’S GOT TO BE MORE…MORE TO TEACHING THAN THIS”

The fourth grade teachers had just walked their students to specials. Two of the fourth grade teachers, Lori and Tommie, were standing in the hallway discussing their desire to have a greater influence on the lives of the students they teach. They shared their aspiration to do more than teach students how to read, write, and think. As I joined them, one of them said, “There’s got to be more…more to teaching than this.” As I processed what they were saying, I began to think about transformative pedagogy, a theoretical framework for teaching and learning that has the capacity to reposition teachers and students in the world. (T. Harpster, personal communication, 2014)

Introduction

Following the event described in the opening vignette, I reflected on Lori’s and Tommie’s discussion about their ambition to transform the lives of their students. I could not help but think about my own yearning for my work to be more transformative. My interest in education as a means to transform the lives of students began early in my career as a teacher of elementary school students in first through fourth grades. In addition to my interest in leadership, I was interested in literacy generally and students’ development as readers and writers more specifically. For several years during my nine-year teaching career, I was assigned the “lowest” group of readers for third and fourth grade language arts instruction. It saddened me that many of the eight, nine, and ten year old students I taught did not identify themselves as readers. It was obvious to me why the children had such negative perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. They never became proficient at “breaking the code” and spent most of their time at school struggling through text too difficult for them to read. The system had repeatedly confirmed for these students that they were neither readers nor writers.

A traditional basal reading program was the vehicle in which students were taught to read and write. There was an anthology which consisted of fiction and nonfiction stories and poems. Many of the stories were excerpts with accompanying vocabulary lists, specific reading skills, workbook pages, writing assignments, and summative assessments. Quite frankly, the program was boring—boring to teach, boring to learn, and ineffective for too many students. Unfortunately, early on in my teaching career I did not know enough about the development of readers and writers to provide my students with alternative experiences. In my sixth year as a teacher, I
participated in a guided reading workshop. Students reading texts at their instructional level with the support of a teacher made so much sense to me. That workshop transformed me as a teacher of reading immediately, and later as an instructional leader and principal. That workshop led to the eventual development of my school’s current reading and writing programs.

While guided reading was just one part of our program’s multi-context framework, it was and continues to be a critical piece because it is in that instructional context where students begin to identify themselves as readers of text. While my desire for my work to be more transformative continued to influence my leadership, I was introduced to transformative pedagogy and critical literacy during two different graduate courses as a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania. Transformative pedagogy refers to any number of pedagogical practices that “changes the way people see themselves and the world” (Brown, 2004, p. 84). Willis (2007) asserts that students describe this as “becoming different” (p. 258). I will discuss transformative pedagogy in greater detail in chapter two. It was at this time that my ideas about literacy changed in two important ways. First, my definition of literacy expanded to include many other forms of literacy, not just traditional text. Second, the importance of literacy changed from reading and writing to learn and access desired ways of living to critically reading and writing to access and change the world. I began to see critical literacy as the catalyst for transforming lives and as a result, the world.

Critical literacy is a theoretical and pedagogical framework for teaching and learning (Vasquez & Felderman, 2013) that examines the world and the word for “unfairness, injustice, and openings for change” (Jones, 2014, p. 5). Gee (2001) argues that “reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening, and interacting, on the one hand, or using language to think about and act on the world, on the other” (p. 714). Janks (2010) posits that placing the word “critical in front of literacy signals a move to question the naturalized assumptions of the discipline, its truths, its discourses and its attendant practices” (p. 13). Critical literacy confronts issues of injustice related to gender, race, religion, social class, sexual orientation, and other social constructs.
As the researcher and school principal, I wondered what critical literacy would look like in a racially and culturally homogeneous, predominantly working class elementary school in rural Pennsylvania. All the accounts I had become familiar with were in culturally and racially diverse communities. I wondered what issues would emerge as teachers enact critical literacy with third and fourth grade students in the school I lead and how we would respond to these issues. I considered how the professional and personal growth and identity of teachers might be affected as they enact critical literacy for the first time. I was curious about the consequences for my own development and identity as a principal and researcher. And, I was anxious about the reaction of people from our school and broader (parent) community. We were raising questions about typically unquestioned norms of our community, questions potentially linked to the class, cultural, familial, political, racial, and religious identities of our students, their families, and our community beyond the walls of our school.

The “canned” critical literacy jargon that I had recently become familiar with was comforting as it provided me with language to respond to questions about the nature of the study knowing that most people in my community were unaware of critical literacy. Some of the jargon provided me an answer to a question without the likelihood of a confrontation about social justice issues at a time when I was feeling fairly uncertain as to how to respond to such tensions.

This avoidance is no small thing as it emphasizes the importance of this work in a culturally, linguistically, and racially homogeneous community. Homogeneity suppresses the beliefs and attitudes associated with many social constructs because it reduces and narrows potential conflicts that emerge in communities around issues of diversity. Without the tension and conflict that often leads to an examination of beliefs and attitudes, humans tend to be left unaware of their contribution to the “-isms” that inequitably distribute power to people on the basis of social constructs. Left unexamined, humans tend to propagate their own beliefs and attitudes through their children.
Research Questions

Four teachers and I embarked on a journey, what I am going to call the critical literacy endeavor, as the word endeavor signifies a struggle or striving which I think best captures our initial experience with critical literacy. We sought to collectively engage in transformative pedagogy. We thought it would be intentional work that would facilitate the positive development of students’ identities, provide students with skills of critique so they could more critically read texts and the world, and be more meaningful work for us. Our endeavor was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and a school principal develop stances of critical literacy and inquiry?
2. What tensions emerge as a result of developing critical literacy and inquiry stances? What is done with the tensions?
3. Do stances of critical literacy and inquiry shape the professional identity of the educators (four teachers and a principal), and if so, how?
4. How does critical literacy and inquiry transform learning, teaching, and leading?

Background and Context

Lewis Woods Elementary School is the lone elementary school in a small school district located in northeastern United States. The school district is situated in a mostly White, rural community comprised of a borough with approximately 1,800 residents and a township of 6,500 residents. The median income of borough residents is $46,381 with a median borough resident age of 35 years. The median value of borough houses is $107,087, and 57% of residents over age 15 are married. 89.3% of residents over age 25 have earned a high school degree or higher: 12.8% a bachelor’s degree or higher. The unemployment rate is 5.1%. The most common industries are manufacturing (23%) and retail trade (12%). The most common occupations are production (18%) and material moving (9%). In 2013, 10.1% of residents were living in poverty.
Regarding religion, just over 28% of the residents adhere to Protestantism, almost 22% to Catholicism, and nearly 48% are of no adherence (Advameg, Inc., 2016).

Of the district’s approximately 1,300 students, the Lewis Woods Elementary School serves 492 kindergarten through fourth grade students. The racial composition of the school is almost 96% White, with an English Language Learner (ELL) population of less than 1%. Nearly 37% of the elementary school students participate in free and reduced meals. The special education population is almost 15%. One hundred percent of the schools’ classes are taught by highly qualified teachers. The elementary school’s 2013-2014 Pennsylvania School Performance Academic Score was 82.1 out of a possible 100; it ranks first of the district’s schools and in the middle of the county’s elementary schools.

I began attending this same school as a four-year old when I started kindergarten. While the names, faces, and buildings have changed, the demographics of the school population remain fairly constant. Similar to our current teachers, most of my teachers were White, Christian females. With the exception of one Catholic church, the many community churches were and still are Protestant. Like the community, stability describes the people in the school district. Teachers tend to get hired early in their careers and remain employed as teachers until they retire. There have only been three superintendents since 1990, and while the current board of directors is fairly new overall, several board members recently retired after more than twenty years of service. Stability can be a positive attribute in organizations. However, it can also breed complacency and narrow-mindedness.

This study examined the critical literacy work of five educators: Lori, Sammy, Susan and Tommie, four teachers who teach third and fourth grade students at Lewis Woods Elementary School, and me, the school principal. The five of us formed an inquiry community for the purpose of engaging in critical literacy practitioner action research. We learned about critical literacy pedagogy while enacting it. The critical literacy and inquiry community was an important collective space where we read about, discussed, and learned about others who have used critical literacy pedagogy; where we planned instruction through the lens of critical literacy; where we discussed
and examined the issues that emerged in relationship to critical literacy work; and where we disrupted the notions of what it means to learn, and teach, and lead in the midst of an era of hyper-accountability.

The impetus for the study was the desire we each had to create educational environments that were more conducive to the transformation of those we lead. We were engaging in critical literacy work for students—to have a greater positive influence on their developing identities and to develop in them critical dispositions. However, the critical lens shifted inward to our own identities as educators and contributors to the system in which we all work. This self-critical lens was often in the foreground of our work in our inquiry community. Critical literacy was a way to talk about the power that dehumanized us as educators. In the end it was our stories of transformation that emerged most profoundly from the work, even though the teaching and learning in each of the participants’ classrooms was also transformed. It was the unpacking of our own identities in the safe space of the inquiry community that contributed the most to our critical literacy understandings and developing stances.

The teachers did plan and engage in the critical analysis of text with students. Some of this planning and reflection on students’ engagement occurred within the inquiry community. Yet, critical literacy became a conduit for unpacking and discussing our own varied feelings of powerlessness and dehumanization as educators in the midst of top-down accountability and educator effectiveness. Fortunately, our identities did not die a slow death in discussion. By leveraging Christian beliefs, collective resiliency, and professional autonomy, we repositioned ourselves as educators, claimed untapped power, and re-humanized our identities and work. Critical literacy work also made us aware of our own top-down perceptions of the roles and relationships of and between students, teachers, and school leaders. This study was initiated by my and the teachers’ own impulses to transform the lives of those we lead—teachers and students. Put another way, we were doing something for, a favor for, teachers and students. In fact, the two greatest things we can do for those we lead is to unpack and examine our own identities and beliefs, then collaboratively create environments that are conducive to critical
literacy and inquiry work. Implicit in doing things to or for others is the notion of power. We suggest instead, doing things with, alongside others. Mutuality best captures this idea, and provides a context most favorable for critical literacy and inquiry work.

Our own transformed professional identities and this concept of mutuality will be described fully and storied in Chapters Four and Five. Next, I will discuss the rationale and significance of this study then provide a review of the literature that informed this study.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Lewis Woods Elementary School is a kindergarten through fourth grade school with a population of 492 students. Lewis Woods has a unique language arts program, at least in our intermediate unit, as it is the only school where teachers do not have a basal reading program, and instead use a balanced literacy framework and authentic literature for the planning and delivery of reading and writing instruction. The school mission statement, as quoted on its website, is “Love and Literacy: The two greatest gifts we can give a child.” For more than two decades I have believed that fostering the development of students as readers and writers is some of the most important work of an elementary school. However, Luke (2003) challenges my thinking as he asserts that the teaching and the writing of texts are political acts. Furthermore, Macedo (2003) posits that unless literacy practices lead “to the creation of critical capacities used for self-defense and liberation” they simply lead to cultural reproduction (p. 13). Comber (2001) expresses concern about the inequitable access children in different schools have to “differential distribution of literacies” and the purposes for “learning, reading, writing and speaking” (pp. 177-178). So even in my school’s meaning-centered classrooms we fall short of creating dispositions in students (and leaders and teachers) that critically analyze texts and the world for issues of power (Janks, 2010). Lori, Sammy, Susan, Tommie, and I have a desire to equalize our students’ access to multiple literacies, to model for students and facilitate their development of more critical dispositions. Consequently, we hope to provide a different message to students about the purpose of schooling generally, and learning, reading, writing, and speaking more specifically.
The impetus for this study was twofold—my own developing interest in critical literacy and, as stated earlier, the four teachers’ interest in the transformation of the lives of students (Willis, 2007). Early on, I understood transformative pedagogy generally, and critical literacy specifically, to be pedagogies of teaching and learning. As such, I thought them to be enacted in classrooms by teachers. Therefore, my participation early on was as a co-learner with the four teachers, as the school leader and researcher. As the school principal I could provide support and resources. As the researcher and doctoral student, I could recommend literature and provide examples from literature I had reviewed.

As the critical literacy and inquiry community read more accounts of critical literacy and discussed the work in relationship to the work of the four teachers in the inquiry community, Lori, Sammy, Susan, Tommie, and I realized that educators do not singularly transform lives. Rather, using transformative pedagogies educators provide a context in which students are encouraged to be reflective of their own lives and critique the world, the texts, and the people who influence their developing identities and positioning in the world. Hagood (2002) asserts that critical literacy provides a context in which students have opportunities to transform their own lives.

If teachers and students are to engage in the work of critical literacy, a safe and transformative culture (Christensen, 2009; Luna et al., 2004; Willis, 2007) is needed in order to challenge the power dynamics at work that benefit some and disadvantage others (Janks, 2010). As the building leader, my role initially was to ensure there is safe space for teachers to engage in the work of critical literacy so they can ensure there is safe space for students to engage in the work of critical literacy. By providing critical literacy space, and the time for teachers and I to discuss and reflect upon their enactment of critical literacy, I thought I was creating an environment that enabled empowered teachers to create environments that were conducive to the empowerment of students (Luna et al., 2004).

Early on, I participated in the study as the researcher, studying teachers and their enactment of critical literacy. Damico’s (2003) dissertation study discusses the idea of research for teaching instead of research on teaching. Segall (2002) asserts that praxis-oriented research
must allow participants to learn or do something within the context of the research that they could not do apart from the research (p. 29). As a result of this study, Lori, Sammy, Susan, Tommie, and I engaged in work that we would not have engaged in apart from each other or the study. The research created a critical literacy cycle of learning, planning, enacting, and reflecting that was continuously informed by the recurrence of the cycle. Similar to assessment for learning (Wiliam, 2011), research for teaching places the researcher as a “co-inquirer” and “co-learner” in the study (Damicco, 2003).

A key dimension of this study was the critical literacy and inquiry community which fostered professional learning and personal growth as the participants engaged in the learning and work of critical literacy. The four teachers made a choice to engage in this work, a topic they knew little about prior to August of 2014. Their interest in the work stemmed from their interest in helping students transform their lives and potentially the world. Campano, Ghiso, and Sanchez (2013) suggest “that nourishing critical impulses ought to be a central component of the curriculum and the ongoing professional learning of teachers, part of…a high-quality education in a participatory democracy” (p. 121). Transformative pedagogy was the impulse of the four teachers and me. This study provided a context for the nourishment of our own critical impulses and provided circumstances that led to the nourishment of student impulses in each of the teachers’ classrooms. However, some unexpected transformations happened.

The significance of the study rests in the transformations that occurred as a result of the study. What was initially critical literacy work for students became critical literacy work with students. In the process of developing environments conducive to this work, we found that spaces of mutuality disrupted the normalized roles of students, teachers, and leaders. As a result, students not only connected with social justice issues but acted upon their impulses to do something. The professional identities of the teachers were challenged and transformed in unexpected ways enabling them to re-imagine their role and their work as teachers. My own professional identity was challenged and transformed causing me to re-conceive learning,
teaching, and leading, as well as what it means to learn, teach, and lead in the sector of public education.

**Contributions to Critical Literacy Research and Literature**

This study contributes to the research literature in several important ways. The school, and the community in which it exists, is an important context for critical literacy work. The location and resulting demographics of our community and school in rural Pennsylvania makes this study unique. The school’s predominantly White racial composition matches the racial composition of the community. Over 50% of the borough’s residents report either Protestant or Catholic religious adherence. Many of the school’s employees are Protestant, and all five of the study participants are Christian. In terms of political affiliation, the citizens who reside in the community are mostly conservative, and like many rural communities in Pennsylvania, vote mostly Republican. Many of these characteristics, White, working class, Christian, and conservative, are normalized in our communities, and therefore, unquestioned and unexamined.

Typically, studies of critical literacies have taken place in urban and suburban schools with students of color and immigrants—students who are historically marginalized (Campano et al., 2013; Christensen, 2009; Jones, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). For the critical literacy community, this study demonstrates the place for critical literacy work in rural environments with elementary students who are predominantly White and their teachers who are White and predominantly female. There are many attributes relevant to our school community that advantage some while marginalizing others, such as age, class, familial composition, gender, and religion. Critical literacy addresses issues of power, dominance, access, and diversity (Janks, 2010), issues applicable to any community regardless of racial diversity. A tenet of critical literacy is that reading, writing, and education are social and political acts, and as such are not neutral. Reading, writing, and education are no less political in a rural community of White elementary students than in an urban community of Black high school students.

The fact that race did not emerge as an issue in the inquiry community or the classrooms is an important non-finding that speaks to the concept of Whiteness, a concept silently dangerous
in our community where White is normalized, and therefore unnamed. While acceptance and respect of difference is taught and valued in our school community, the students and staff of our school, as well as most of the families in our community live and work in environments of homogeneity. Many of the normalized characteristics mask our differences. We lack discourse about what makes us truly unique. Many of us lack personal experiences with diversity, and as a result, our beliefs are left unexamined. Given the composition of people who live in the United States, the number of issues related to difference, and the connectedness of humans around the world, educators have a responsibility to broaden students’ experiences and understanding and acceptance of diverse ways of being the world. Texts, in the broadest sense, are a mechanism for expanding educators’ and students’ experiences. Critical literacy is a promising approach for the development of critical dispositions in citizens of a democratic nation.

The school principal/researcher engaged in critical literacy work with teachers adds another unique dimension to this study. There have been studies by teachers of elementary school students engaged in critical literacy work (Christensen, 2009; Jones, 2006; Vasquez, 2004) and by university faculty engaged in the work of critical literacy with students and teachers (Campano et al., 2013). However, I could not locate any studies of school principals engaged in critical literacy work. Therefore, an elementary school principal leading and facilitating critical literacy work is a notable contribution to the field. Critical literacy pedagogy will need the leadership of building principals in urban, suburban, and rural schools if it is to gain a foothold in K12 education. Kathleen Brown (2004) has noted the lack of this type of work in education and proposes a leadership model for the development of transformative leaders. Three theories—adult learning, transformative learning, and critical social are interwoven with three pedagogies—critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy praxis to create a model for the development of leaders committed to social justice and equity. Brown emphasizes the importance of leadership if education is to take up the cause of social justice and equity.

The age of the students added an interesting dimension to this study. Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman (2010) discuss the role of teachers as identity agents in adolescent identity
development: “Teachers can be purposeful co-constructors of adolescents’ identities when they use a transformative pedagogical approach that involves fostering collaborative learning and empowering students to think creatively and critically” (p. 76). Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman argue that the role of teachers as identity agents has been absent from the conversation about development of identity (p. 77). Intentional or not, teachers play a role in identity development through the environments and experiences they create for students and the relationships they have with students. These scholars further suggest that “when teachers use a transformative pedagogical approach in their classrooms, they increase their capacity to be effective identity agents through their motivation of students to take active roles in identity development” (p. 77).

Teachers are agents of identity development, but identity development for students begins prior to adolescence. I want my elementary school teachers to be aware of and intentional about their role in students’ developing identities. And, just as teachers play an important role in the identity development of their students, principals play a role in the professional identities of teachers. As the principal of Lewis Woods Elementary School, I have the responsibility to create the space for and foster the development of critical dispositions in teachers. I believe that teachers with healthy professional identities, including critical dispositions, are more likely to be intentional about their own role in students’ developing identities and critical dispositions. Therefore, I foster the development of healthy professional identities and critical dispositions in teachers so that teachers will play a positive and intentional role in developing the identities and critical dispositions of their students.

Finally, this study took place in an era of increasing educator accountability for teachers and principals. The nation’s hyper-focus on educator accountability and the new Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System was a central tension that emerged as a result of this work. The positioning of educators during this era of standardization and high-stakes testing had a prominent role in the discussions of the critical literacy inquiry community and the transformation of the professional identities of the participants.
In Pennsylvania, the quality of teachers and principals is now quantified on a scale from zero to three. This numerical representation of teacher quality is a combination of teachers’ practice scores and their students’ data, including the school performance profile, proficiency rates on the state assessment, and student value-added growth. Lori and Tommie, during one of our inquiry community discussions, shared a tension they were feeling as a result of their perception of the dissonance between critical literacy work and the Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System. Both discussed their identity as teachers and how the accountability system is causing them to question, “Who am I as a teacher?” Teacher-researchers Luna et al. (2004), graduate students and teachers studying their own enactment of critical literacy, discuss how their identity as educators evolved as a result of critical literacy work:

One of the ways our group practiced critical literacy was by focusing on our relationships in order to create an environment where we felt safe enough to challenge the hierarchical language and power relationships that characterize typical professional development and teacher education contexts...Our work together is helping me understand my place in the world, how that place is historically, socially, and discursively shaped, and how my place in the world shapes my teaching and learning (p. 76-77).

If one of the reasons we engage students in critical literacy is to increase their awareness of identity and what influences its development, then it only stands to reason that critical literacy work provides teachers with opportunities to explore their own identities and possible tensions that will lead to identity awareness and potentially disruption. I anticipated and looked forward to changes in my identity as a leader, too. Beginning in 2014-2015, principals in the state of Pennsylvania were to be held accountable for the achievement of the students in their schools as measured by the state assessment. Principals were also to be held accountable for the alignment of teachers’ value-added growth scores in relationship to the teachers’ observation/evaluation scores. Historically, I have led with a philosophy that if we do what is best for students, state proficiency rates and value-added scores will be good enough. Well, this is the moment of truth. How much influence will my own “effective educator score” have on my evaluation of teachers? Will the proficiency and growth of students, as measured by the state assessment, influence my
evaluation of my teachers’ practices? My evaluations of teachers will speak to the validity I place on the Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System and my integrity as a school principal.

Levitt (2008), in reference to students critically examining their own learning suggests that “educators...have as much to offer as to gain” (p. 48). I suggest educators have as much to gain as to offer when engaging in critical literacy work. As these four teachers and I claimed ownership of the educational experiences we provide students, we inherently explored who we are as educators and our capacity to influence the lives of our students beyond the brick and mortar of our school in the face of an educator evaluation system that none of us believe in. Campano et al. (2013) ask: “How do we all account for the infinite worth, the millions of zeros, of every student in this data-driven era of educational accountability?” (p. 121). I validate and broaden their question by asking: How do we all account for the infinite worth of every student, educator, and leader in this data-driven era of educational accountability?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I first offer a description of literacy as a social and political act, much more than reading and writing, as it continues to be defined in many educational contexts. Then I discuss critical literacy as “a coming together” (Jones, 2014, p. 6) of teaching and learning, of teachers and students, and of relationships and the environment that create the important context for critical literacy to take place. Following a rationale for critical literacy, I describe the different orientations to critical literacy, before examining the relationship between critical literacy, identity, and empowerment. After a discussion about the importance of inquiry communities to critical literacy work, I illustrate the conceptual framework for the study.

Literature Review

Literacy Defined

I would guess that if I asked all of my elementary school teachers to define literacy, most, if not all would say that literacy is the ability to read and write. In Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary (Literacy, n.d.), literacy is defined as “the ability to read and write” and “knowledge that relates to a specified subject”. Hillary Janks (2010) dedicates the first chapter of Literacy and Power to discussing the meaning of the word literacy. Janks asserts that many countries do not even have a word for literacy, and that the origin of literacy was “formed as an antithesis to the word illiteracy” (p. 1-2). The terms literacy and illiteracy presume a binary opposition; an either/or that a person can or cannot read and write. Janks (2010) challenges this binary notion of literacy by questioning whether the reading of words is enough to be considered literate, or if understanding what is read is a requirement to be considered literate. Luke, Woods and Dooley (2011) argue that “comprehension remains the longitudinal goal of school reading instruction” (p. 158). This argument suggests that literacy is more than reading the words.

I have a granddaughter, Paige, who lives in Virginia whom I get to see about once a month. She was introduced to books and read-alouds as an infant. When Paige and I are together, we spend a great deal of time reading, writing, and talking about books. I have a video
of her “reading” the pictures of a book, mimicking my reading of the text as the pictures triggered her memory. From her perspective, she was reading. However, as her understanding of reading evolved, she realized she could not read the words. She would sit on my lap pointing to a section of words, saying “Read that.” We would take turns reading. I would read the words to Paige, and Paige would “read” the pictures to me. During one of the weekends I visited her while she was four and in pre-school, I was driving and she was riding in the back seat looking at a book. Paige called out to me from the back seat in a very sad voice, “I can’t read Nana.” My heart sank thinking about what she understood about literacy, a word she doesn’t even know yet. For Paige, literacy meant that she cannot read. This event caused me to consider again what literacy means and to whom. What “reading” meant to Paige for the first few years of her life was an interpretation of a book, the text and pictures; the very act of reading was similar to her interpreting the world in which she lives. As Paige grew older and started school, her understanding of “reading” narrowed. She learned without anyone telling her that in order to read, she must be able to decode (my word, not hers) the words.

Traditionally, I would suggest that many teachers and school educators have thought of literacy as cognitive skills to be taught and learned. The Big Ideas in Beginning Reading website (University of Oregon’s Center for Teaching and Learning, 2014) provides information and resources for the skill development of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension—the five big ideas in beginning reading. The National Reading Panel ascribes to these five big ideas, and their report “continues to be the cornerstone of the federal literacy policy” (Shanahan, 2006, p. 5). Nowhere, in either of these two sources, is literacy described as having a dimension other than cognitive. On the other hand, Freire (1970) states about adult literacy:

Insofar as language is impossible without thought, and language and thought are impossible without the world to which they refer, the human word is more than mere vocabulary—it is word-and-action. The cognitive dimensions of the literacy process must include the relationships of men with their world. These relationships are the source of the dialectic between the products men achieve in transforming the world and the conditioning which these products in turn exercise on men. (p. 212)
Janks (2010) argues that literacy is both “a set of cognitive skills and a set of practices” (p. xiii). Freebody, Luke, and Gilbert (1991) suggest that “reading refers to variable social practices that are interactively constructed by... parents, teachers, and students in classroom...” (p. 435). (Green (2002/2014) proffers what he calls a “robust understanding of literacy” that brings together “three strata literacy which are language, meaning, and power” that correspond to the “operational, cultural, and critical dimensions of literate practices and learning” (p. 69). Within this model of literacy, Green advises addressing all three dimensions equally. He also suggests that the cultural dimension could be a starting point from which the operational and critical dimensions could be “organically drawn in” (p. 69). Discussing reading instruction broadly and comprehension instruction more specifically, Luke et al. (2011) argue that comprehension is a cognitive, but also social and intellectual phenomenon, and that narrow understandings of comprehension are insufficient for literacy education for diverse and marginalized students (p. 158).

Finally, Gee (2001) defines literacy within a context of discourse. Gee (2001) believes that all humans, barring disorders, acquire a primary discourse which is what Gee calls an “oral mode of language.” This primary discourse is acquired through familial socialization. Secondary discourses involve social institutions, such as schools. In schools, students’ primary discourses are extended, and the compatibility between the students’ primary discourses and the institutions’ secondary discourses advantage some students and disadvantage other students. So it is within this context that Gee defines literacy as “control of secondary uses of language” (p. 6).

The authors I have chosen in my development of a working definition of literacy for this study all share a belief that literacy is much more than the ability to read and write. While their definitions vary and are contextualized in a variety of ways, they all agree that literacy has social, cultural, and political dimensions: dimensions historically left out of our nation’s federal and state literacy policies. This exclusion is a political act in and of itself. Janks (2010) argues that “literacy is tied to questions of power and that how we choose to teach literacy is political” (p. xiv). It is this political dimension that transforms literacy into critical literacy.
Critical Literacy: A Coming Together of Teaching and Learning, of Teachers and Students

A great deal of educational research concerned with justice explains how such structures work to maintain injustices for groups of students, typically with well-intentioned teachers unaware of how such inequities are produced. The teacher habitus and professional discourses may ensure that such thinking and analysis remains unconscious (Comber, 2005, p. 48)

Possibly the greatest barrier to more equitable educational outcomes for historically marginalized students is well-intentioned teachers unaware that the teaching of literacy, using even contemporary and progressive approaches, serves to maintain the very inequities we hope to eradicate. Often teachers teach within the same schooling structures that produced their own ideologies, ideologies that are subconscious, and as a result unexamined. Luke and Freebody (1997) argue that “the functions and uses of literacy are never free standing and are always restricted.” They further suggest that “instructional approaches run the risk of mirroring or reproducing these sociocultural restrictions and constraints rather than elucidating and transforming them” (p. 4). The transformation of sociocultural restrictions and constraints is the work of critical literacy, one student at a time. Rationalizing critical literacy, Freebody (1992) asserts: “We are no more ‘successful’ readers if we are prey to manipulative texts than we are if we cannot decode” (1992, p. 7). Freire (1970) claims:

Learning to read and write ought to be an opportunity for men to know what speaking the word really means: a human act implying reflection and action…a primordial human right and not the privilege of a few. Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of…ultimately participating in society’s historical process. (p. 212)

Critical literacy works from an assumption that the contexts of literacy instruction are social, and these social contexts are not neutral. Rather, the social contexts position particular groups of learners advantageously or disadvantageously. Historically, the learners who have been disadvantaged have been from groups marginalized because of race, social class, and gender, to name a few. So the critical piece of critical literacy serves to examine and denaturalize what has become natural or normative: language, curriculum, texts, pedagogical approaches,
discourse, relationship between teachers and learners, school and classroom policies, practices and norms.

Janks (2012) is adamant that there still exists a need for critical literacy. Regardless of the flattening of the world by the Internet, “macro- and micro-politics” (p. 150) continue to shape the world and people’s lives. Concerned that some may think that the time for critical literacy has come and gone, Janks asserts that even:

in a peaceful world without the threat of global warming or conflict or war, where everyone has access to education, health care, food and a dignified life…In a world that is rich with difference, there is still likely to be intolerance and fear of the other…Even in a world where socially constructed relations of power have been flattened, we will still have to manage the politics of our daily lives. (p. 150)

Jones (2006) declares that “critical literacy…does not exclude many typical forms of literacy teaching and learning in progressive pedagogies…such as the read aloud, shared reading, independent reading, reading share and process writing” (p. 65), all instructional contexts in which my teachers deliver reading and writing instruction. Jones asserts that the difference is the work educators do within these sites of teaching and learning and how educators think about that work (p. 65). Comber (2001) postulates about such work: “Critical literacy is not a finite set of practices” (p. 174). Teachers must make the time and help students “take analytical stances, to research how things are, how they got to be that way and how they might be changed and to produce texts that represent the under-represented” (Comber, 2001, p. 174).

Janks (2010) claims that the word critical enters the discourse of literacy to “signal analysis that seeks to uncover the social interests at work, to ascertain what is at stake in textual and social practices. Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged?” (pp. 12-13). Janks uses the word critical to focus on power. Among the practices of critical literacy is examining or uncovering power along with perspective and positionality (Jones, 2006). Anderson and Irvine (1993) also assert that critical literacy has a dimension of power: “Critical literacy is learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (p. 82).
In order for teachers to devote the time for critical literacy, they have to believe in its value for students and students' learning, beyond the traditional notion of learning to read and write. Once teachers acknowledge its value, there are a multitude of spaces in the curriculum to be found for critical literacy. Vasquez (2004) contends that a “critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived” (p. 1). Critical literacy is not something to be taught. She thinks of it as a framework used by “teachers to incorporate a critical perspective into our everyday lives in order to find ways to help children understand the social and political issues around them” (p. 1). More specifically, Freebody, Luke, and Gilbert (1991) urge educators to consider that school reading practices contain “multiple levels of cultural selection,” (p. 453) including the selection of texts and features of the lessons. All the choices teachers make “call upon and build schemas for social and individual action, as well as schemas for what counts as appropriate school reading” (p. 453). Instead, Freebody et al. (1991) urge educators to “remake reading instruction as discourse critique, an instructional agenda that sets out to engage students in the critique of texts, help students understand how texts position them, and...read one text against another” (pp. 453-454).

But, it is Jones (2014) who, despite believing that defining critical pedagogy may "not only be impossible but also not useful" (p. 6), offers what may be the most important ideology of critical literacy. The "collaborative coming together" (p. 6) of teaching and learning and of teachers and students that creates the environment and the relationships in which the critical analysis of text, pedagogy, curriculum, schools, communities, and the world can take place.

**Orientations to Critical Literacy**

One of the most cited and universally accepted orientations to critical literacy is the Four Resource Model (Freebody, 1992). The model was originally developed in 1990 to “validate the literacy practices being used by teachers and to provide opportunity and the vocabulary for productive development” (Luke & Freebody, 1999, Changing the Terminology, para. 1). Originally, the word “role” was used as a metaphor to emphasize the reader instead of a set of skills (Freebody, 1992). Later, the word “role” was reconsidered and replaced with “families of practices” (Luke & Freebody, 1999, Changing the Terminology, para. 1). *Families* denotes that
the four practices are dynamic in relation to one another and practice denotes something that is
done, in this case in classroom and community contexts (Luke & Freebody, 1999, Changing the
Terminology, para. 2). Another reason for the change from roles to families of practice was to
“foreground literacy as a social practice, and as such, necessarily tied up with political, cultural,
and social power and capital” (Luke & Freebody, 1999, Changing the Terminology, para. 2). The
families of practice that make up the Four Resource Model are described as:

a repertoire of practices that allow learners, as they engage in reading and writing
activities, to break the code of written texts…to participate in understanding and
composing meaningful written, visual, and spoken texts…use texts functionally…and
critically analyze and transform texts. (Luke & Freebody, 1999, Mapping the Dimensions,
para. 3)

Janks (2010) integrates several critical literacy models to include decoding the text,
making meaning from the text, and interrogating the text (p. 21). Decoding the text is associated
with functional or operational literacy. Making meaning from the text is associated with the
comprehension of text. Interrogating the text is associated with critical literacy. Janks’ (2010)
model shares with the other models the notion that literacy is socially constructed and as such,
can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Each model recognizes the need to address the basic
or functional part of literacy, the skill we know as alphabetic principle and the practice we know to
be decoding. Each model also addresses the goal of reading—comprehension, or the practice
Luke and Freebody (1999) refer to as “understanding by participating” (Mapping the Dimensions,
para. 3). This phrase suggests a social and collective nature of comprehension in classrooms.
Each model also includes a critical dimension whereby learners critically examine texts for the
ideologies, dispositions, and orientations of its authors.

The critical dimension in Janks’ (2010) model includes four interdependent
“conceptualizations of the relationship between language and power,” and while all need to be
equally balanced, one is often foregrounded (p. 23). The conceptualizations include domination,
access, diversity, and design (Janks, 2010, pp. 23-26). Domination refers to the maintenance and
reproduction of power through language, symbolic forms, and discourse. (p. 23) Access has to do
with the ability to have dominant forms. Access and domination are potentially dichotomous
because providing all students access to dominant forms could serve to maintain and reproduce the dominant forms, but denying access to the dominant forms serves to maintain and reproduce marginalized groups (p. 24). Diversity refers to the differences in “discourses linked to a wide range of social identities and embedded in diverse social institutions” (Janks, 2010, pp. 24-25). Diversity within a group provides multiple perspectives from which to critically examine texts for “perspective, power, and positioning” (Jones, 2006, p. 57). Design, the final conceptualization, refers to the “importance of human creativity and students’ ability to generate an infinite number of new meanings” (Janks, 2010, p. 25).

Vasquez (2010) created an interesting conceptual representation of her understanding of Janks’ (2010) model. Vasquez places domination, access, diversity and design in smaller circles within a larger circle. The four conceptualizations surround a smaller inner circle that represents the “world as text, socially constructed and never neutral” (p. 18). Arrows are used to show the interdependence of domination, access, diversity and design. Other arrows encircling the inside and outside of the larger circle depict the fluidity of the four conceptualizations. Vasquez (2010) emphasizes the important work that comes after the critical analysis of text. She believes that “critical analysis without actions seems to keep us in the same place as when we started…It is the action piece…that helps us to participate differently in the world” (p. 17).

Jones (2006) outlined a conceptual framework using the metaphor of eyeglasses “which allow one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable” (p. 67). The conceptual framework included “a critical literacy lens focused on three interrelated layers: perspective, positioning and power; and engages in three foundational tenets: deconstruction, reconstruction and social action” (p. 67). Perspective refers to the ideologies of the authors of text. Positioning refers to the value placed on the experiences of people, some experiences seemingly have greater social and political power than others. Power refers to the language practices that exist hierarchically in society in relation to power differences. Jones makes what she calls a “key argument” throughout the book: “Critical literacy practices are best grown from what students do and say, and from what
we know about our students, their families, and their communities” (p. 63). Jones is emphatic when she states, “critical literacy: starting with lives” (p. 63).

**Critical Literacy, Identity, and Empowerment**

In a four-year critical ethnographic study of young girls in and out of school, Jones (2012) found that connection-making in narrative texts caused second grade girls to align themselves with the characters of the text, making it very difficult for the girls to critique the text. Jones argues that the Four Resource Model (Luke & Freebody, 1999) needs to be extended to foreground critical literacy work; that identity work is needed to position students “as valuable with lives worthy of being included in texts” (p. 219). Jones suggests that readers may need to feel a sense of “entitlement in order to position themselves as text analysts” (p. 197). Without this work it may be very difficult for students to “suppress their desires for a book character’s perfect life” (p. 219), a position that interferes with their interest in critiquing and changing the text. Jones asserts that the work of critical literacy requires empowerment of students.

While Jones (2014) does not define identity (p. 6), Hagood (2002) offers a traditional definition of identity “as a fixed, autonomous self who thinks rationally and logically, defines him/herself, and develops a stable sense of self over time” (p. 249). Furthermore, Hagood asserts that “categories such as nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, and religious persuasion are examples of identity—producing mechanisms for naming people and for organizing ways of thinking about selves. These categories group people and stabilize notions of their identities” (p. 249). Specific to critical literacy is the influence the text has on the reader’s identity. Hagood suggests “the common thought is that readers learn about their own identity from the identities they read about in texts” (p. 251). The problem with this idea from a critical literacy perspective is that “the identities for emulation…serve to perpetuate dominant, mainstream images of the status quo” (p. 251).

In contrast, post-structural theory critiques “the stability of identities and identity categories” (Hagood, 2002, p. 255). As an alternative, poststructuralists claim that identities are always in flux—“constant moving, mobility, traveling, and journeying of the self” (Hagood, 2002, p.
254). Post-structural theory posits that individuals are subjects as they position themselves against structured identities produced in texts: “Rather than concentrate primarily on the power of texts to produce multiple identities that are then proffered to readers…the reader as a subject marks the site of a struggle for existence, knowledge, and power” (Hagood, 2002, p. 255).

Hagood (2002) studied an adolescent as he “continuously shifted and changed meanings of material practices around him, subsequently shifting and changing himself as a text” (p. 259). Hagood finds critical literacy problematic if it assumes that identities are formed by texts without any push-back or opposition by the self. Hagood suggests a critical literacy “that examines the complex interrelations of formations of the self of both terms (identity and subjectivity) in order to grasp better…how readers get produced and objectified in identities and how they construct new ways of being as they position themselves as text” (p. 260). Hagood asserts a critical literacy approach that recognizes identity and subjectivity as “different concepts that begin with different premises and work in conjunction with one another” (p. 261).

In a micro-ethnographic study conducted on four second grade students in rural North India, Sahni (2001) describes children’s appropriation of literacy, their development as writers, and their empowerment. Sahni defines appropriation as “making one’s own” (p. 19) and offers a more child-centered definition of empowerment. Sahni pushes back against a traditional macro-political definition of empowerment as the “acquisition of critical knowledge about basic societal structures” (p. 31) and instead offers a more child-centered version of empowerment as “growth in autonomy and a realization of self-hood” (p. 31). According to Sahni, children and perhaps women in North India are too far removed from societal power to even consider it “within their reach” (p. 31). Though the social structure of society “impinges on their lives, imposing limits and constraints, it is still too distant to matter” (p. 31).

At the start of Sahni’s (2001) study, students were in school and classroom environments that this researcher describes as “alienating, unresponsive and uncaring” (p. 21). As Sahni states: “parents, teachers, principal, and children all felt disrespected, unsupported, unrespected to” (p. 21). Reading instruction was mechanistic and children did not compose text. As an intervention,
the classroom and curriculum were reconstructed to be responsive to the needs of the students.

Sahni describes part of the reconstruction this way:

We reconstructed the social structure of the classroom…we constructed a connective ideology and transformed the political structure of the classroom from a chain of oppression to several circles of mutuality. There were spaces of inclusion, participation, addressal, and response. (p. 22)

Following the intervention, the most notable change was the restructured relationships. Sahni (2001) claims: “The children learned to write because they had someone for whom to write…They wrote because the relationship mattered to them and they wanted to nurture it; the relationship nurtured their growth as writers and persons” (p. 34). Sahni (2001) asserts that the relationship between the teacher and children mattered more than the literacy, even though both were developed simultaneously. Sahni states:

Given the power difference in any student-teacher relationship, this relationship assumes special significance in terms of its empowering or depowering potential. A teacher occupies an important power-space in a child’s world and she can be empowering or depowering depending on how she uses her power-space. (p. 34)

While the traditional and “adult” definition of empowerment focuses on societal power structures, Sahni (2001) suggests it is people “who empower and depower each other in their daily interactions with each other” (p. 33). This version of empowerment foregrounds relationships rather than structures, along with children’s autonomous imaginations:

Empowerment is better understood in relation to the self and to people in immediate contexts…Empowerment involves transformatory action…but instead of direct social transformation, for children, empowerment takes the form of imaginative self-transformation and creative symbolic action in their own lives…an imaginative narrative and poetic invention of possible worlds and possible selves. (p. 33)

Like Sahni (2001), Willis (2007) claims that teachers can empower students by creating environments conducive to the transformation of students’ identities. Willis (2007) asserts that transformative learning pedagogy can be used as a way to develop social capital. Willis defines transformative learning as:

the process by which people examine problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. It can be provoked by a single event – a disorientating dilemma – or it can take place gradually and cumulatively over time. Discourse is central to the process. We need to engage in
conversation with others in order to better consider alternative perspectives and determine their validity. (p. 358)

There are four dimensions to transformative learning: healing, organic, unitary and critical. For the purposes of this study, I want to focus on the critical dimension, described by Willis (2007) as “processes through which a person or people come to an awareness of and become resistant to oppressive and unequal power relations in various life situations they encounter” (p. 360). It is this critical dimension of transformative pedagogy that relates to this study and the work of critical literacy. Through the three dimensions of learning identified as rational, emotional and social, Willis (2007) claims that teachers can promote social capital. Through the rational dimension, teachers and students attend to any forms of dominance. The emotional dimension involves the use of stories where characters are modeling resistance against domination. The social dimension is addressed through acts of justice identified by the group. Willis contends that “the presence of social capital seems to be a strong indicator of refined and humane social relationships generated from the ongoing learning of fairly constant reflection, critique, and consequent choice for action” (p. 374). It is empowerment that I think provides the link between critical literacy as a means to examine power and principals, teachers, and students as potential agents. So what does critical literacy look like in elementary schools?

Critical Literacy in Schools

In a four-year practitioner research study, Campano et al. (2013) used the lenses of critical literacy, realist theory, and organic intellectual theory (pp. 101-103) to understand how third and fourth grade boys “mobilized their cultural identities for critical ends” (p. 98), what the authors define as “organic critical literacy” (p. 98). In this test-driven, all-boys research site, the partnership between a university and the school focused on literacy and engagement, seeking to “challenge the myth that boys are disinterested in reading” (p. 105). It was within this partnership and research work that curricular space for organic critical literacy through students’ reading and writing was made.
The two structures established for the study were teachers’ inquiry groups and students’ literacy engagements. Campano et al. (2013) assert that “as practitioners adopt an inquiry stance in their work, they engage in research that has as its goal some element of change, often involving shifting discourse about learners, problematizing the structures of schooling, and creating new conditions for teaching” (p. 104). The university partnership and study created structures the teachers used to push back against the high-stakes testing culture of the school by carving out space for literacy practices that can only become critical within transformative environments (Willis, 2007).

One of Campano et al.’s (2013) findings was the organic critical literacy work that surfaced without any explicit attention by the researchers or teachers to a critical literacy pedagogy. Another finding was “the school culture teachers helped to create and sustain” (p. 107), a culture that created pride and space for cultural history and legacy which led to the “students’ critique of dehumanization” (p. 118), and a “projected future in which their humanity would be more fully realized” (p. 118). The study by Campano et al. (2013) highlights the importance of the local context (school and community) and the necessary school and classroom environments needed for meaningful critical literacy work.

In *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, Christensen (2009) sets the stage for the reader in her introduction, providing a context from which critical literacy can take place:

I begin my teaching with the understanding that anyone who has lived has stories to tell, but in order for these stories to emerge, I must construct a classroom where students feel safe enough to be wild and risky in their work (p. 1).

Even though Christensen’s (2009) book is based on her work with secondary school students, there is much to glean from her critical literacy work that applies to my study. Her work is based on her mantra that teaching for joy and justice is what students and teachers need. Christensen “uses students’ lives as critical texts they mine for stories, celebrate with poetry, and analyze through essays that affirm their right to a place in our society” (p. 1). Christensen’s curriculum addresses “key moral and ethical issues of our time because she has discovered that students care more about learning when the content matters” (p. 1). With students’ lives at the center,
Christensen selects texts “about people who disrupt the script society set for them. I want students to see that history is not inevitable, that there are spaces where it can bend, change, become more just” (p. 6).

In Janks’ (2014) commentary of the continued importance of critical literacy to education, she discusses what critical literacy looks like in classroom practice. Janks frames the discussion with the link between what she calls “small-p politics and big-P politics” (p. 350), where she describes connections between the local and the global, between now and the future, and between us and our constructed Others” (p. 350). Janks offers five practices for teachers to be able to do:

1. Make connections between something that is going on in the world and their students’ lives, where the world can be as small as the classroom or as large as the international stage.
2. Consider what students will need to know and where they can find the information.
3. Explore how the problematic is instantiated in texts and practices by a careful examination of design choices and people’s behavior.
4. Examine who benefits and who is disadvantaged by imagining the social effects of what is going on and its representation/s.
5. Imagine possibilities for making a positive difference. (p. 350)

Janks provides five examples of critical literacy using a current airing of radio advertisements from South Africa, asserting that the critical reading of texts is one way to understand power—“to see how they have been constructed, whose interests are served, and how they work to produce our identities” (p. 355).

As an early childhood educator, Vasquez (2004) describes how she enacted critical literacy through whole language, “Whole language gave me a way of envisioning and supporting learning as a social experience, of creating spaces in classrooms for placing children at the center of pedagogy…” (p. xiii). From a critical perspective, Vasquez describes how she constructed “spaces where social justice issues can be raised and a critical curriculum can be negotiated with children” (p. 1). Through the use of “everyday issues and everyday texts,” Vasquez and her three to five-year old students “negotiated a critical literacy curriculum” above and beyond the mandated curriculum (p. 27). Vasquez found through a recursive process of
conceptualization and negotiating spaces, that as her understanding of critical literacy grew, so did the number of ways she was able to create space in the curriculum for critical literacy (p. 31).

In the thinking about creating space for critical literacy, it is important to remember that every selection made by schools—language, curriculum, texts, resources—are political choices and are never neutral. Because selections are not neutral, critical literacy is less about making different selections and more about critiquing the selections made. Vasquez and Felderman (2013) assert:

Text design and production can provide opportunities for critique and transformation. Before we are able to redesign a text, we must first figure out what about the text is so problematic that we need for it to be reconstructed. This process of figuring out what is problematic then creates a space for critique and transformation. (p. 5)

I argue that in order for the work of critical literacy to take place in schools, students, teachers, and principals must learn, teach, and lead in empowering environments so they have the freedom to create the emotional, physical, and technical space for critical literacy work. District leaders foster the empowerment of principals, principals foster the empowerment of teachers, and teachers foster the empowerment of students. Inquiry communities can be a space where autonomy can be identified and leveraged. I discuss the importance of inquiry communities for the enactment of critical literacy in the next section.

Critical Literacy and Inquiry Communities

In many accounts of critical literacy work in schools, the teachers and researchers engaged in the work belonged to inquiry communities where the enactment of critical literacy occurred concurrently as teachers and researchers met to learn about, examine, and reflect upon their experiences and insights (Campano et al., 2013; Jones, 2014; Luna et al., 2004; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006). Luna et al. (2004) describe the importance of their inquiry community this way: “Our work together is helping me understand my place in the world, how that place is historically, socially, and discursively shaped, and how my place in the world shapes my teaching and learning” (p. 77). In the Red Clay Writing Project, Jones (2014) asserts that the teacher inquiry community provided support for the teacher-authors to find new meaning and pedagogical
possibilities. Campano et al., (2013) used an inquiry community to guide the analysis of research data, inductively searching for themes, connecting the inquiry work to classrooms and educators' insights, which led to new cycles of action (pp. 106-107). Vasquez (2004) belonged to a teacher-research group during which she conducted two inquiries into critical literacy in action (p. 2). Van Sluys et al. (2006) used an inquiry community to examine critical literacy teaching and research practices. Christensen (2009) participates in several critical teaching groups. She describes the importance of her participation:

> to help me think more carefully about social justice issues inside as well as outside of the classroom, from literacy practices to top-down curricular policies...I carry these voices...like a Greek chorus in my mind. They remind me to question and sometimes defy those in authority when I'm told to participate in practices that harm children. (p. 10)

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) use the terms practitioner inquiry and practitioner research interchangeably, but emphasize the intentional selection of the word research rather than inquiry for the title of the text. This political and strategic decision was made to suggest that in addition to professional development, practitioner research is "a valuable mode of critique of the inequities in schools and society and of knowledge hierarchies...within as well as beyond the local context" (p. ix). Cochran-Smith and Lytle also use a term they "coined" in earlier work, "inquiry as stance" to "signify the idea of inquiry as perspectival and conceptual...a worldview and habit of the mind—a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice...intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo" (p. viii).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) make clear that their use of and thinking about practitioner inquiry "stands in sharp contrast" (p. viii) to other ideas of inquiry intended solely for teacher development and/or student achievement, such as professional learning communities (PLCs). They claim that the "larger purpose...of inquiry as stance [emphasis added] is education for social change and justice" (p. 150). This contrast deserves an explanation for its relevance to this study. From the start the teachers and I decided to call our critical literacy inquiry community a Professional Learning Community (PLC) because teachers in our school community already participate in PLCs. A few years ago and as part of a self-assessment for school accreditation, teachers identified PLCs as a missing component in our school. They elected to start PLC work
the following 2013-2014 school year. The teachers and I chose the PLC model of DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many (2006). While our PLC groups are for the purpose of differentiated professional development linked to student learning, the work is not limited to student achievement as measured by tests.

While PLCs and practitioner inquiry share some common features such as inquiry, data, communities of practice, and school culture and equity, there are a number of important differences (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 53). Both PLCs and practitioner inquiry recognize the agency role teachers assume in transforming schools, and as such both are part of school reform movements (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 53). However, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) contend that the origins of practitioner inquiry and PLCs differ in important and distinct ways. Practitioner inquiry originated from teacher research movements, participatory action, critical action research, and social responsibility. In contrast, PLCs originated in the sociology of the workplace, school effects research, and organizational theory to name a few (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 54). According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle, a central goal of PLCs is to raise student achievement (p. 55), with “an almost exclusive emphasis on assessment data, particularly tests” in some PLCs (p. 56). Practitioner inquiry views data much more broadly, and the goals are both the means and the ends rather than an instrument for achieving the ends (pp. 54-55). There is a critical component to teacher inquiry that may not be present in PLCs.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle assert that “in inquiry communities teachers jointly build knowledge by examining artifacts of practice...interrogate their own assumptions, construct new curricula, and engage with others in a search for meaning in their work lives” (pp. 54-55).

Perhaps the greatest difference between PLCs and practitioner inquiry is the emphasis on both learning and life chances with practitioner inquiry. If not deliberately examining existing structures of power and privilege that advantage some while marginalizing others, participants may be complicit in perpetuating the structures that narrow the life chances of some students. Our critical literacy and inquiry community, the four teachers and I, were in search of something more as educators—more than test scores, teacher scores, school and district performance
profiles...more than delivering content area instruction...more than loving kids. We are in search of environments, content, and pedagogy that will transform the lives of our students...that will transform our own lives...that will result in actions that may transform our local community and/or the world. So in retrospect and based on Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) framing of practitioner inquiry, we misnamed our group a PLC; it was a critical literacy inquiry community and will be referred to in that way for the remainder of this paper.

I now shift from a focus on the label of our group to the necessity of the group for critical literacy work. Inquiry communities create a safe space for practitioners to learn about, discuss, enact, examine, and reflect upon critical literacy work. For Luna et al. (2004), it was the safe place of their inquiry group that fostered the critical examination of their role in action-research generally, and more specifically, the way they as practitioners are marginalized by both education policy and academia. Luna et al. (2004) assert that “this discussion illuminated for [them] some of the ways that [they], as teachers, are oppressed by the dominant discourses of teaching and of teacher education” (p. 68). This insight facilitated their reflection “on how [their] own pedagogies may have positioned [their] elementary, high school, and teacher education students in similarly disempowering ways” (p. 69). They also reflected upon their responsibility in their own marginalization: “We were able to uncover and acknowledge the ways that we have participated and continue to participate in the power relationships that characterize dominant discourses of teaching and knowledge production in our society” (p. 69). The reflection upon their work and the naming of their growth occurred in their inquiry community.

An inquiry community must be comprised of members of equal standing within the group in order to foster critical discussion and reflection. In describing oral inquiry processes, Jones (2014) describes the process she most values as “clear demarcations of turn-taking so that no one voice dominates; mutually understood and accepted guidelines for proceeding; a focus on reflection, description and connection; and means for valuing and recording all that gets shared within the group” (p. 132). An inquiry community with a power differential is incompatible with inquiry, particularly inquiry of critical literacy work. I have contended from the start of this study
that a safe environment for teachers is a prerequisite for critical literacy work, just as a safe environment is critical if students are to engage in critical literacy. That environment must include space for the actual work with students and space for the learning about, planning, examination, and reflection of critical literacy work. Luna et al. (2004) explain that by the second semester of their work, the focus of their inquiry community shifted from their enactment of critical literacy with students to their own classroom practices and lives. They explain:

> By positioning ourselves as both critical literacy practitioners and researchers in our classrooms, we were treating our teaching practices as texts that could be collaboratively analyzed through a critical lens…we had come to realize that the most important lessons we were learning about critical literacy came from our practice of sharing and making connections between texts we were reading and our personal and professional lives. (p. 72)

In *Writing and Teaching to Change the World*, Jones (2014) labels her teacher inquiry group a “teacher inquiry community (TIC)” (p. 1). The teachers of this TIC participated in a yearlong project as part of the Red Clay Writing Project. Their work was “systemic research in their classrooms focused on one disenfranchised student and their critical attempts to reengage those students in meaningful ways” (p. 2). The initial goal of the TIC “was aimed at critical pedagogy and the ways in which teachers enacted critical pedagogies to engage students they perceived as vulnerable” (p. 2). What Jones (2014) found was that the complexities of the work of critical pedagogy cannot be defined or contained in one “approach—or even one way of thinking or seeing” (p. 2).

Luna et al. (2004) conclude their article by circling back to the title “the power of making the road by walking and talking together” and a tenet of critical literacy which is “uncertainty” (p. 80). Jones (2006) uses the phrase “coming together” to describe critical literacy work, embedded in empowering relationships. The conceptual framework of this study developed as the importance of relationships came to the fore.
Conceptual Framework

The graphic of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1) depicts the coming together of a principal, four participating teachers, and their students for the purpose of enacting critical literacy. The conceptual framework evolved as the study was planned. I first chose a concentric circles model to depict the conceptual framework for my study. The concentric circles represented the overlapping relationships among students, their schooling, and their communities. The concentric circles also demonstrated what I asserted as the necessary contexts for the work of transformative critical pedagogy. However, after further research, thinking and planning, the simplicity of Jones' (2014) description of critical literacy resonated with me—the “collaborative coming together” (p. 6) of teaching and learning and of teachers and students that creates the relationships and the environment in which the critical analysis of text, pedagogy, curriculum, schools, communities, and the world can take place. I began to visualize what this coming together might look like and how it related to my study.

![Conceptual Framework Diagram](image)

*Figure 1. The coming together of students, teachers, and leader for critical literacy work*
This coming together is represented in the Figure 1 with a Venn diagram and the space for critical literacy created in the intersection of students, teachers and researcher/principal. It is really quite simple, yet very powerful. When Jones (2014, p. 6) speaks of the “collaborative coming together,” she is referring to pedagogy and relationships, claiming that the work must always be collaborative. Other researchers also write about the importance of relationships, specifically the investment in students’ lives (Brown, 2004; Christensen, 2009; Sahni, 2001; Willis, 2007). They talk about the importance of creating safe spaces (Campano et al., 2013; Christensen, 2009), and empowerment (Sahni, 2001; Willis, 2007) for critical pedagogy work. Jones (2006) asserts that critical literacy starts with lives (p. 63). I love Sahni’s (2001) description of the transformative classroom created in his study as “circles of mutuality” where “there were spaces of inclusion, participation, addressal, and response” (p. 22).

I am simply extending the conditions that researchers talk about for the work of critical literacy, relationships, and empowerment to teachers who then pay this forward to students. Particular district, school, and classroom cultures create or limit the emotional, physical, and technical space needed to engage in the work of critical pedagogy. The emotional space is the culture: the culture of the district and school in which the principal and teachers work and learn, and the culture in the classrooms where students work and learn. The school leader, the principal, is traditionally responsible for the school culture; the teachers are traditionally responsible for classroom culture. In our school, teachers and I are collaboratively responsible for the school and classroom culture. As principal, I seek to flatten the hierarchy as much as possible so that teachers have agency and autonomy in their work. Teachers and students need to collaboratively exist in empowering cultures in order for critical pedagogy to take place.

The physical space would be the arrangement of furniture in the classroom and its use. Some classroom arrangements foster empowerment and critical literacy work. For example, desks arranged individually in rows facing the teacher in the front of the room do not send a message that the environment is collaborative and empowering. Rather, desks arranged in pods or a circle or square, with areas in the classroom for students and teachers to gather and face
each other for discussions indicate collaboration and empowerment. The teacher cannot have an emotional or physical placement of front and center, an arrangement that is physically and emotionally disempowering to students. The teacher needs to flatten the traditional teacher-student hierarchy as much as possible, both physically and emotionally in order for the work of critical literacy to take place. Similarly, when teachers meet with me in my office, I intentionally move from behind my desk to a round table where the physical arrangement is of reciprocity and mutuality, rather than power.

The technical space includes the curriculum, pedagogy, and schedules—the technicalities of education and structures in schools where teachers have varying degrees of control, depending on the culture in their districts and schools. Critical pedagogy requires time to read and critically examine text, discuss the text, redesign the text, and time for social action. In order to enact critical pedagogy, teachers need to know they have some degree of autonomy over their schedules, curriculum, and pedagogy. In summary, the conceptual framework depicts the coming together, the mutuality of principal, teachers, and students to make space for critical literacy. This space is only possible if students, teachers, and the principal work and learn in empowering classroom, school, and district cultures.
A fundamental idea behind practitioner research is the democratization of knowledge: the argument that those who participate in a context are in a unique position to systematically examine it. Practitioner research is not the sole purview of teachers; many have a practice to investigate, including teachers, administrators, and university researchers alike. Communities of inquiry are strengthened by the diversity of their members and multi-perspectival forms of inquiry and interpretation. (Campano et al., 2013, p. 103)

I am an educational leader in a public elementary school. As a principal, I assume many roles and responsibilities in my kindergarten through fourth grade school. Other than the personnel role I have hiring and supervising staff, the role I consider paramount is that of instructional leader. I have been this school’s principal since July of 2002. I have provided the leadership for many changes related to the work of teachers in my school, (e.g., the curriculum, pedagogy, school and classroom environments, instructional delivery, and professional development). As the years have ticked by, the decisions about the work of teachers has undergone increasing democratization. Professional learning communities for inquiry that increase the quality of students’ educational experiences and outcomes are one example.

This study evolved from the confluence of two related interests—the aspiration of four teachers to transform the lives of their students and my interest in critical literacy as a pedagogical approach. The purpose of this study was to examine the enactment of critical literacy in a homogeneously White rural elementary school by two third and two fourth grade teachers, and a principal. After two of the four teachers, Lori and Tommie, shared with me their interest to have a broader influence in the lives of their students, I proposed the idea of critical literacy. Lori and Tommie indicated interest so I ordered two books for them about teachers enacting critical literacy: Teaching for Joy and Justice (Christensen, 2009) and Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children (Vasquez, 2004). We met to discuss the books for the first time in the spring of 2014. During that meeting, we discussed other teachers who may have an interest in critical literacy. Two more teachers, third grade teachers Sammy and Susan, joined our group. I then invited all the teachers of my school because none of the participants wanted our critical literacy group to be perceived as exclusive, a concept incompatible with critical literacy. Just one other
teacher indicated interest, but was concerned about the high level of commitment. So the group has remained the four teachers and me.

**Transformative Paradigm**

This study is rooted in a transformative worldview, a paradigm that emphasizes the role of agency for the research participants (Mertens, 2009, p. 2). Working collaboratively protects transformative research participants from further marginalization as a result of the research (Creswell, 2014, p. 10). Transformative research often begins with a social issue (Creswell 2014, p.10) related to power. Power, at multiple levels—students, teachers, and principal, is one of the issues at the forefront of this transformative study for several reasons. First, our school improvement team just developed a new district vision statement that Lewis Woods School District empowers students to attain their personal best. Our district is not the first to use the word empower in their vision or mission statement. That said, questions emerge with its use: Do people empower others? What does empowerment look like in schools? How do empowered students, teachers, and leaders learn, teach, and lead differently? Jones (2012) argues that students must be empowered in order to engage in the work of critical literacy. I argue that students, teachers, and leaders must be empowered to engage in critical literacy work because critical literacy work requires some level of autonomy and agency. Without autonomy and agency, how do students, teachers, and leaders have the space to critically question the multiple literacies of their immediate contexts and broader environments for issues of power and justice?

It was my insistence on open and honest dialogue and transparency during an inquiry discussion that created the space for two of the participants to discuss the tension they had been feeling between critical literacy work and preparation of students for the state assessment. They explained to the group how they had been struggling with “making space” for critical literacy while receiving a combined score based on our school’s Pennsylvania School Performance Profile, a Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment Score, and an Observational Practice Score (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014a). While they wanted to do what they knew to be right and best for their students, they also knew that their scores would reflect on their
performance as public school teachers. One of them, a teacher who may want to seek work at another district during her career, is concerned about another potential employer's interpretation of her score, and therefore her work. This tension is discussed in detail in Chapter Five; however, it is an important example of my argument that empowerment is both a focal point of this study and a necessary condition at multiple levels for this work.

While the students and staff at Lewis Woods Elementary School are predominantly White and working or middle class, we have a population of students and staff belonging to groups who have historically been marginalized because of gender, physical and intellectual abilities, social class, or religious beliefs. Moreover, we are all citizens of various communities and systems that discriminate against individuals and groups of individuals because of inherent characteristics such as race, gender, social economic status, intellect, age, and more. It behooves educators to engage in transformative research that addresses the inequities caused by issues of “power, discrimination, and oppression” (Mertens, 2009, p. 3) and “empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression and alienation” (Creswell, 2014, pp. 9-10) in order to empower students to transform their own lives. Mertens (2009) asserts “there is not a single context of social inquiry in which the transformative paradigm would not have the potential to raise issues of social justice and human rights” (p. 4).

Mertens (2009) argues that one of the fundamental underlying principles of transformative research is the strength-based orientation brought to the research participants and their communities, a drastic alternative to the deficit-based orientation that has historically been brought to research communities and participants by social science researchers (p. 18). Mertens suggests that “a deliberate and conscious design can reveal the positive aspects, resilience, and acts of resistance needed to promote social change” (p. 18). As an example, Campano, Ghiso, and Sanchez (2013) designed a four-year school-based study where critical literacy was layered with theories of realist and organic intellectual (pp. 101-103) that sought to create space for teachers and students to engage organically in acts of social justice. Through literacy, students exposed “dominant ideologies that positioned them negatively” (p. 120). Campano et al. (2013)
suggest a reorienting of our image of students as evolving intellectuals with agency and potential (p. 121). Again, I would apply Campano et al.'s arguments to include not just students, but teachers and leaders as well.

Creswell (2014) asserts that transformative research "contains an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher’s life" (p. 9). A supposition that the teachers and I bring to this study is that educators involved in transformative research broadly and critical literacy more specifically will be changed. It is the agentic capacity of critical literacy work to transform lives that motivates me and appeals to the teachers. A form of transformative research is participatory action research, a genre of research I discuss next.

**Qualitative Design: Practitioner Action Research**

A salient theme of practitioner research is the role "of the practitioner as knower and agent for educational and social change" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37). Different from more traditional forms of research that assume the university-based researcher is the knower, practitioner action research engages the practitioner as knower in their local community and practice. Capable of knowledge generation, the practitioner becomes inquirer of a local critical issue for the purpose of change. While there are different versions of practitioner research, there are eight features all versions share. These features also serve to distinguish practitioner research from other forms of educational research. These features include practitioner as researcher, collaboration, practitioner knowledge, professional context and practice, blending of inquiry and practice, nontraditional validity procedures, systematicity, and the publicizing of knowledge for critique and generativity (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

All eight of these features are present in this practitioner study. The teachers and principal are the practitioners collaboratively examining the enactment of critical literacy as an alternative pedagogy for teaching and learning. Connected to the teachers' knowledge of and experience facilitating the development of students as thinkers, readers and writers, critical literacy is being enacted by way of a collaborative inquiry cycle of knowing, learning, planning,
acting, and critically reflecting. This organic cycle, consistent with the construct of *inquiry as stance* “repositions practitioners at the center of educational transformation by capitalizing on their collective intellectual capacity when working in collaboration with many other stakeholders in the educational process” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 153).

Beginning in July, 2014, the four teachers and I met once or twice a month as an inquiry community to critically reflect on the enactment of critical literacy that occurred since the last time we met. As intellectual practitioners, the teachers chose a reading as a source of new learning from recommendations I made to the critical literacy inquiry community. Prepared to discuss the reading and its connections to the teachers’ experiences enacting critical literacy since the last time we met, the teachers and I critically reflected on practice and problems of practice. We then planned the next cycle of enactment. Part of the planning included a sharing of knowledge of resources, including authentic texts the teachers chose because of the texts’ themes and their relationship to issues of social justice. In his 2006 study of culturally responsive teaching with immigrant students, Campano (2007) called his process of inquiry *systematic improvisation*, organically formed as he made “moves intended to generate knowledge-of-practice” and “recognized that [his] ability to effectively teach the children [was] predicated on [his] ability to learn from them” (p. 112). Similarly, the inquiry cycle of this study emerged organically as participants of our inquiry community met for the purpose of critical reflection, learning, and planning.

*Inquiry as stance* is meant to portray a “habit of mind” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009) defined as “a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice…intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo” (p. viii). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) challenge the traditional view of knowers and knowledge being university-based, generated by those working outside of schools. Instead, they advocate for a paradigm “where practitioners are simultaneously researchers engaged continuously in inquiry for the purpose of enriching students’ learning and life chances” (pp. viii-ix). The teachers and I were engaged simultaneously as practitioners and researchers in this study, not only for the purpose of
enriching students’ learning and life chances, but the enrichment of the professional practice of educators as well.

_Inquiry as stance_ is much more than a theory of action. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest it is a framework grounded in the problems and contexts of practice in the first place and in the ways practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students and their communities. Cochran-Smith and Lytle refer to this as the “dialect of knowing and acting”, “an organic and democratic one [theory of action] that positions practitioners’ knowledge, practitioners, and their interactions with students and other stakeholders at the center of educational transformation” (pp. 123-124). Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s description of inquiry of stance is a portrayal of the work of our critical literacy inquiry community. We, as practitioners, generated knowledge from practice by theorizing our experiences, considering our experiences in light of the research literature and the experiences of other critical literacy practitioners we have become familiar with, reflecting on our experiences and problems of practice, and planning the next cycle of inquiry. Our work placed our students, ourselves, and the knowledge we were co-constructing at the center of our work, thereby increasing the learning and life chances of our students.

The critical literacy inquiry community the teachers and I formed for this action research enabled “deep intellectual discourse” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37) in a safe physical, emotional, and professional space. The physical safety was insured through a collaborative selection of place and time where all participants were comfortable with the level of privacy and confidentiality. The emotional safety was insured with the mutual admiration, respect, and trust the participants shared prior to the research. The group also established norms such as confidentiality, honesty, transparency, vulnerability, and critique. Professional safety was insured through an agreement that the teachers’ participation would in no way negatively affect their evaluations. Furthermore, each of the teachers were free to end their participation in the work, the group, and the research at any time.
In the January critical literacy inquiry community meeting, one of the participants, after reviewing a draft of my research proposal, felt strongly that I needed to articulate the safe space I insured the participants would have to do this work, including curricular, scheduling, and inquiry space (in addition to the safe spaces already discussed). In an era of top-down accountability, she thought the assurance of this space in our school was unique, warranting a detailed discussion. This request was a bit surprising to me. I too often lose sight of the uniqueness of our small, rural elementary school. As the leader immersed in the daily work, knowing the progress made and work still to be done, I do not lead from a stance of school comparisons. I lead from a stance of inquiry—what are the practices that will most likely lead to environments where students’ and educators’ learning and life chances are individualized and realized?

To me, the request requires not just an articulation of the autonomy of the educators at Lewis Woods Elementary School, but an articulation of the culture of our school. Lewis Woods Elementary School is a place of inquiry and learning for the students, pre-service teachers, teachers, instructional aids, principal, and university partners. Inquiry takes place at multiple levels and intersects with learning, teaching, and leading. The teachers are a critical intellectual resource of our school, and therefore must have the autonomy and agency to generate knowledge from inquiry and practice. Other than parents, teachers know their students, and consequently must also have autonomy and agency to meet the individual needs of each of their students. Working inquisitively and collaboratively with other people of expertise in the school, such as the school psychologist, instructional coach, or curriculum specialist, teachers have the greatest impact on student learning. With that said, teachers at Lewis Woods Elementary School have varying levels of autonomy in curriculum, pedagogy, and scheduling broadly, and anything that impacts the school and their classroom environments more specifically. For school-wide work, teachers have collective voice in what and how. One example is our school-wide positive behavior program. For classroom specific work, teachers have the autonomy to actualize the proficient and distinguished levels of the Danielson rubric. Part of that expectation is meaningful participation in inquiry to inform practice. Our school has become a space of mutuality where
Describing the climate for practitioner research in the midst of a top-down era of educational accountability, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest that some of the practitioner inquiry may be an "intentional pushing back against top-down mandates" (pp. 33-34). At the start of this project, empowerment of teachers and students was the social issue I was interested in addressing. However, and in retrospect, I am tempted to ascribe some underlying motive for my and the teachers' interest in critical literacy to 'make space for something meaningful and empowering' when so much of our work has been prescribed by lawmakers through the leveraging of high-stakes assessments. Christensen (2009) speaks about the importance of an inquiry community's work in pushing back, "to question and sometimes defy those in authority when I'm told to participate in practices that harm children" (p. 10). The teachers and I are focused on meaningful educational experiences for students. I am also focused on meaningful experiences and work for teachers. None of us believe that this high-stakes system of accountability is fair, meaningful, or captures the breadth and depth of student learning or the work of educators.

The Participants

In this section, I provide background information about myself, a participant and researcher, describe the participant selection process, and provide background information about each of the four teacher participants. I chose to include participant information that could be relevant to critical literacy and inquiry work, as well as information that may have played a role in our own identity development, how we see ourselves as women and educators. It is quite probable, and thus assumed that important background information that has influenced each of us in ways we may not even be aware, or are aware but uncomfortable sharing, was not included. The included information is a compilation of my knowledge of the participants and information
they shared and knew would be included. Each participant has reviewed and approved the information provided about her, including the use of her real first name.

I am the researcher and school principal in my fourteenth year. I am a White, middle-aged, middle-class, Christian female. While I was born in Germany to American military parents, I grew up in the same community the school is located and actually attended this elementary school. My parents divorced when I was fifteen months old. As a single parent, my mother brought me, my older brother, and younger sister back to the community she was from so she would have the support of her family. My mother worked at a factory until she was laid off. Then, she began a clerical program while working two jobs. Upon completion of her schooling, she was hired as a caseworker for the welfare office. I clearly remember her announcement of her new job. I was a teenager then and thought we had hit the jackpot. I nostalgically remember it as the greatest thing that ever happened to my family during my childhood.

I am certain that my interest in critical literacy and social justice stems from my identity as a child—divorced parents, absent father, and poor. I can identify with so many of the students at my elementary school. I allowed my identity to be formed by the things I hated most about my childhood; the things I had no control over changing. That was unfortunate because I had so much love in my life because of my mother and siblings. Education was critical for my family’s mobility from poor to working class. My mother was hired by the state (welfare office) with greater benefits after she obtained further education and skills. My path to the middle class is a result of education. I believe that many children are disadvantaged because of their parents’ marital status, income, and many other things over which children have no control. My identity, personally and professionally, has been shaped by my childhood, and I am sure I have projected my identity onto the children I serve and the educators I lead.

I graduated in 1980 from the school district in which I work. I taught in the elementary school I lead for nine years as a regular education teacher in grades first through fourth. I have been an instructional leader as principal. The school’s culture and instructional programs in regular and special education have changed under my leadership. I have a reputation for high
expectations coupled with high support among the educators who work in and the parents whose children attend Lewis Woods Elementary School. I have had significant influence over those educators hired to work in my school: 18 of the 24 regular education teachers, two of the three special area teachers, and one of the five special education teachers. I hired and supervise all four of the teachers participating in this study. They have one to nine years of experience. While I consider all four participants my friends, one of the participants is a personal friend of mine (we see each other outside of school in a more personal way). All four teachers volunteered to participate in the study; two of them were the impetus for the study. Next, I will discuss the selection of the participants and describe each of them.

Participant Selection

All four teacher participants volunteered to participate in the study. Two of them, Lori and Tommie, were the impetus for the study. Lori, Tommie and I first met in the spring of 2014 to discuss critical literacy. I bought the teachers two texts, *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-imagining the Language Arts Classroom* (Christensen, 2009) and *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children* (Vasquez, 2004). We read the books then met to discuss critical literacy more generally and this study, specifically their role in the study. Lori thought Sammy, a teacher she had mentored as a pre-service intern in our school, would be interested in the work and study. After we invited Sammy and described critical literacy work and the study, she joined us in July, 2014 when we met to discuss critical literacy and the study. Sammy thought her induction mentor and third-grade colleague Susan would be interested in critical literacy work and the study. Susan joined the critical literacy inquiry community in the fall of 2014. I purchased texts for Sammy and Susan. The four teachers knew their participation was voluntary and was in no way a condition of their employment or evaluation.

Participants for this study had to teach in the Lewis Woods Elementary School, have an interest in enacting critical literacy, and be willing to get together and discuss their enactment of critical literacy. The two fourth grade teacher participants were the impetus for the study. The two third grade participants were invited to participate.
Teacher Participants

Lori is a White, fourth grade teacher who is in the midst of her tenth year at Lewis Woods Elementary School. Lori has taught kindergarten, second, third, and fourth grade students. Lori has tenure in the state of Pennsylvania and Instructional II certification. Teaching is Lori’s second career; her first career was nursing. She left the field of nursing for education because she wanted more professional autonomy. Lori has been married for 32 years and has three children and two grandchildren. She lives in a neighboring school district where her three children went to school. She grew up in a working class family. Her father was enlisted in the military. She went to eleven different schools between kindergarten and ninth grade. She describes her family’s social class when she was a child as working poor. Lori was one of the teachers that planted the seed for this study.

Tommie is also a White, fourth grade teacher who is in the midst of her ninth year at Lewis Woods Elementary School. Tommie has taught kindergarten, second, and fourth grades. Tommie has tenure in the state of Pennsylvania and Instructional II certification. Tommie is single and lives in a neighboring school district. Tommie’s parents were divorced when she was two years old, then her mother and step-father divorced when she was nine years old. Tommie lived with her mother, and saw her father infrequently. Tommie describes her social class as a child as poor. She grew up in an urban community in Pennsylvania. Tommie is a member of the school’s student assistance team. She is currently enrolled in an educational administration certification program, interning with me throughout the current school year.

Sammy is a White, third grade teacher in her third year at Lewis Woods Elementary School. She completed her student teaching as a year-long intern at Lewis Woods with Lori as her mentor. Sammy has Pennsylvania Instructional I certification. She does not yet have tenure. Sammy is engaged and lives in a community in the school district. Originally from western rural Pennsylvania, Sammy grew up with her married parents and describes her social class as a child as middle class. Because Sammy spent a year as an intern with Lori and both were involved in action-inquiry on Accountable Talk (University of Pittsburgh, 2013), Lori and I suspected she
might be interested in this study. I asked her to meet with me to discuss the study and her interest. While meeting, she volunteered to participate in the study.

Susan is a White, third grade teacher who is in the midst of her tenth year at Lewis Woods Elementary School. Susan has tenure in the state of Pennsylvania and Instructional II certification. Susan lives with her husband of 22 years in a township in the school district. She and her husband, also an educator, have two children. Her daughter is studying education at an urban university in Pennsylvania. Susan grew up in rural Pennsylvania with her mother and father. She describes her social class as a child as lower middle class. Sammy talked to Susan about the study after Lori, Tommie, Sammy, and I met in July. Susan expressed interest in participating. Susan, like Tommie, is a member of our school’s student assistance team.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

In this section I describe the methods used for the collection and analysis of data. Each of the research questions were aligned with data collection and analysis methods (see Appendix A). Mertens (2009) outlines eight steps for selecting data collection methods for transformative studies:

1. decide on methods with participants,
2. test the methods and get approval from reviewing body,
3. think about the number of interactions with the participants,
4. plan communication to participants for initial meeting and initial data collection,
5. choose a method for recording the data,
6. consider aspects that may emerge during the study,
7. insure quality of data, and
8. plan how to analyze data. (p. 240)

I used this framework as a general guide for the development of the data collection and analysis methods.

An important decision in the research design surrounded the pre-planning of instrumentation. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) talk of instrumentation design as a continuum from little to a lot of pre-planned instrumentation. My goal was to find a balance between the pre-planning of data collection and analysis methods for the purpose of the research proposal and successful defense, and the contribution of the participants in the data collection
and analysis methods. Frankly, the five of us were engaged in critical literacy work for the first time in our professional lives. We were learning about it while enacting it. In a transformative study, it is important that participants have a voice about research methods, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation methods (Merten, 2009).

From the time the teachers and I started meeting to discuss critical literacy, I was conscientious of the importance of the democratization of this study. The teachers helped select the structure, the critical literacy inquiry community, for learning about and enacting critical literacy. They helped decide how often to meet and the time. They chose the texts to use in their classrooms for critical literacy work with students. Early on, they pre-planned the social justice issues for each text. However, they quickly discovered that they could not make students engage with issues they did not find relevant; I discuss this realization more in Chapter Five. I also felt challenged throughout the study to balance the teachers’ involvement in every element of this study with the amount of time that level of involvement and commitment would require of them.

What follows is a description of the data collection and analysis methods used.

**Data Collection**

From the start, the teacher participants had opportunities to provide feedback on the data collection methods. Mertens (2009) makes the point that “data-collection techniques in the transformative paradigm often have labels similar to those used in general methodology textbooks. The difference…is the choice, development, and implementation of the data-collection strategies so they are grounded in the community” (p. 234). In this section I describe the data collection methods that were used in this study and the rationale for the selection of these specific methods.

Data primarily from the critical literacy inquiry community were collected over an eleventh-month period of time during thirteen meetings throughout the 2014-2015 school year. The collection methods included: (a) critical friend field notes of the critical literacy inquiry community discussions, (b) audio recordings and transcripts of the critical literacy inquiry community discussions, (c) researcher jottings of the critical literacy inquiry community
discussions, (d) participant reflections, and (e) research memos I wrote throughout the research data collection and analysis process. Appendix B contains a complete list of all collected data.

Critical literacy inquiry community discussions addressed all the research questions. The community provided a safe place where the participants discussed experiences, challenges, and insights enacting critical literacy, the planning of the next cycle of critical literacy work, understandings and questions from the readings, tensions and possibilities that emerged as a result of developing critical literacy and inquiry stances, and any concerns related to the study generally or critical literacy more specifically. Data collected during critical literacy inquiry community discussions included field notes, audio recordings, transcripts, and jottings.

Field notes were collected during critical literacy inquiry community meetings by a nonparticipant, Nicole, who volunteered to be my critical friend for this study. Nicole also is an employee of the school district, serving as the district-wide school psychologist. As part of her role as psychologist, she has observational, data collection, and analytical skills, as well as skill and experience in providing critical feedback. Because of her unique role as the only psychologist in the district, she is neither a teacher nor an administrator. As a critical friend, she attended seven meetings, starting in January, 2015, as an observer taking field notes. Her observations focused on the interactions between the teachers and me, and she provided feedback to me regarding any evidence of the presence of a power differential because of my roles as principal and researcher. Nicole also observed the interactions among the participants, both verbal and nonverbal communication. Apart from attending and taking field notes during meetings, Nicole also reviewed the dissertation proposal, research memos including data analysis memos, and the data analysis, arguments, and implications—Chapters Four, Five and Six, of the dissertation. Nicole assisted in the round of in vivo coding and reviewed interpretations of data. This data collection method addressed all research questions and triangulated the data.

Audio recordings of each of the critical literacy inquiry community discussions were quite useful. The recordings were taken with an iPhone app called REV. They preserved the audio content of the discussions from thirteen meetings. The recordings enabled me to confirm who
was speaking as sometimes the transcripts were unreliable as to whom was speaking. While confirmation was important to the reliability of the data, the audio files were most useful in transporting me back to those moments, noticing the presence of emotion, the tone of the participants as they made comments or responded to the comments of others—the sighs, pauses, and laughter. All of these characteristics of conversations can be important details regarding the nature of the conversation and how people felt during the conversation. The recordings, in light of my familiarity with the teachers, were important for the study. I used them to discern how participants, including me, were affected during the discussions. Following our meetings, I would often listen to the audio recordings as I completed my research memos.

Immediately following each critical literacy inquiry community meeting, the audio recordings were sent electronically to REV’s transcription service. In just a few days, the transcripts were emailed to me in Word. I saved each transcript to my laptop and backed up each of them to an external hard drive that I kept in my home and protected with log-in credentials. My initial reading of each transcript was done to check for accuracy of the speakers and to cross-check with my field notes.

The advantages of field notes, audio-recordings, and transcripts of practitioner inquiry community discussions included my first-hand experience with the group of participants, and my and Nicole’s ability to attend to any unusual aspects during the discussions (Creswell, 2014, p. 191). The disadvantage of this method was the potential that my presence might be intrusive, potentially limiting some of the discussion. There was also potential that the presence of multiple teachers from two different grade-level teams might limit some of the discussion. I have a healthy relationship with each of the research participants, knowing each of them for multiple years and working closely with each of them collectively and individually (Mertens, 2009, p. 234). I selected each of them to be hired as teachers at Lewis Woods Elementary School. I am proud of each of them personally and professionally. They also admire one another and work collectively on inquiry apart from this study. Three of the four, Lori, Susan and Tommie, were all hired within a couple years. While Sammy was hired quite a few years later, Lori was her mentor. Tommie knew
her well because she is also a member of the fourth grade team and mentored an intern that same year. And, following Sammy’s hire, Susan served as her mentor. Third and fourth grades are located on the second floor of our building. Therefore, the participants’ classrooms are closely located, and they share a faculty room and restroom facilities. They also have adjacent lunch periods so they frequently spend time with each other. As a result of my relationship with each teacher prior to the study, their relationships with each other, and the norms established and work done in our critical literacy inquiry community, we developed a rapport specific to this study—a trust that developed to insure I obtained valid data (Mertens, 2009). I feel confident regarding the validity of the data collected during critical literacy inquiry community meetings. I also add, as it potentially verifies the relationship and rapport I speak of, that the four teachers and I are now participating in a regional critical literacy collective with a university professor. A collective that came about as a result of the study.

Participant reflections were another method of data collection. They addressed all the research questions. A reflection would “enable the researcher to obtain the language and words of the participants” (Creswell, 2011, p. 191). Because reflections were generated individually instead of within the group as the other data sources, they were unique to each participant and the experiences of that participant. Many of the reflections were open-ended while others were guided by specific questions. The open reflections generated a more unique, and therefore, richer source of data than those with specific questions. With both open-ended reflections and those with specific questions, some of the experiences that participants wrote about did not emerge in the critical literacy inquiry community discussions.

In total, four reflections were written between March and May of 2015. The first reflection was done for the March meeting and included questions guided by some of the questions and feedback from committee members at the proposal defense. The questions included: What are we doing in this inquiry community? What is critical literacy? I had a third question: What is my role in this group? For the second reflection in April, 2015, the participants chose to write an “I Am From” poem (Jones, 2006). They had students write these as an identity activity to start the year
and thought this would be a good prompt for a reflection for the group. The third reflection, later in April, was open to anything on our minds related to the work of critical literacy. In the fourth and final reflection in May, participants responded to the following questions: How does a principal/teacher (depending on role) adopt a critical literacy inquiry stance? How do educators make space for critical literacy in a rural elementary school? How does critical literacy shape how we see ourselves professionally? The questions were directly the result of the research questions and given to insure that the participants’ words were present in the data specific to the research questions.

Interestingly, we discussed this final reflection at our final meeting relative to other, more open-ended reflections. A few of the teacher participants said that unlike the last two reflections, this final reflection felt evaluative because of the specificity of the questions relative to the research questions. I noticed this throughout the first hour of our May meeting. As a result, I asked, “I noticed our conversation did not come as naturally around the reflections this evening. Did anyone else notice that too? It seemed less organic” (T. Harpster, personal communication, May 14, 2015). In response, Tommie stated, “I was just trying to answer questions versus reflect. I don’t think I reflected very well today” (personal communication, May 14, 2015). Susan responded, “I felt like this was similar to in previous years when we had written our observations to the lessons, our pre-observations and post-observation discussion questions. I felt like I was having to prove my knowledge or prove myself in this” (personal communication, May 14, 2015).

When the reflections started, the group had actually discussed whether to have specific criteria for reflections or to leave them open-ended. At the time, the group decided to do both: respond to specific questions and open-ended reflections. Of the four reflections, two had specific questions, one was open-ended, and the other was an “I Am From” poem. However, there is no doubt that the two reflections that were not in response to specific questions, the completely open-ended reflection and poem, generated more personal and authentic accounts of the participants’ experiences. I was thoughtful about reflections prior to asking the participants to write them. Like structured and unstructured interviews (Mertens, 2009), structured and unstructured reflections
had several advantages, but also the potential for an important disadvantage. The advantages included linking the questions to the research questions, which I did, insuring data for each question. However, the development of specific questions also limited the content of the reflections to what was asked, resulting in the loss of other data the participants may have discussed, and potentially the same results as a leading question which often produces less than authentic responses.

Jottings (Miles et al., 2014), my field notes during the meetings, were a data collection method I employed during critical literacy inquiry community meetings so that I could remain present in the conversations. In the form of "key words and phrases" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, What are Jottings?, para. 1), I used jottings to jog my memory following the meeting as I wrote research memos with more details. Miles et al. (2014) claim that "a jotting holds the researcher's fleeting and emergent reflections, and commentary on issues that emerge during fieldwork and particularly data analysis" (p. 94). The jottings are small, post-it like notes that may be made in the margins of the data. Emerson et al. (2011) suggest making mental notes, what they call "headnotes," then "at some later point [writing] full field notes about these scenes and events" (Participating in order to Write, para. 1). Following the meetings, I cross-checked my jottings and research memos with the field notes of the critical friend.

The research memos provided an ongoing account of the research—not just data collection and analysis, but the thinking, reflection, and emotional state (Mertens, 2009) of the researcher throughout the study. Mertens (2009) asserts that the "notes kept in journals can be used as data to elucidate critical hypotheses, assumptions, and points of insight that are relevant to the study" (p. 243). Research memos are not just descriptive accounts of data collection and analysis, but "a synthesis of higher-level analytic meanings" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 95). The focus of my research memos following the critical literacy inquiry community discussions included my first impressions, anything unexpected or surprising, teachers’ descriptions of their experiences, insights and reflections, and their interactions with each other and with me. Research memos provided a structure for capturing my thinking during data collection, and provided a context for
linking together themes across meetings and other methods of data collection. Miles et al. (2014) call research memos “one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand” (p. 96). I explain the use of research memos specific to data analysis later in this chapter.

**Data Analysis**

Creswell (2014) asserts that data analysis “involves segmenting and taking apart the data…as well as putting it back together” (pp. 194-195). Maxwell (2013) refers to this as categorizing and connecting strategies. Where categorizing fractures the data and looks for similarities and differences, connecting looks at the data holistically for “contiguity-based” relationships or connections between one thing and another (Strategies for Qualitative Data Analysis, para. 7). The contiguity-based analysis requires multiple readings of the narrative from transcripts. However, the categorizing work also required multiple readings due to the development and application of two different code frameworks. The data analysis process I used started with listening to the audio files and reviewing participant reflections following critical literacy inquiry community meetings. I conducted three rounds of coding—the first an in vivo coding round with available participants and critical friend that resulted in an eleven-code framework. The second round of coding was an application of the eleven-code framework back to all the data which led to a revised four-code framework, and finally the coding of all data with the revised code framework. The purpose of the first code framework was to segment and categorize the data, identifying themes linked to the research questions and conceptual framework. After all data was coded with the initial framework, an analysis was done. This initial analysis resulted in a more refined and reduced code framework, which was applied back to all data. Following another round of coding, an analysis of the codes was done again. This helped shape the arguments. Finally, I went back to a holistic review of the data to story the findings. What follows is a description of each phase of the data analysis process using Mertens’ (2009) data analysis framework.
Mertens (2009) describes four steps in the analysis of qualitative data: data preparation, data exploration, data reduction, and data interpretation. I found this framework a helpful tool in organizing the data analysis process, keeping me mindful of where I was in the process and where I was headed. I will use this framework to describe the data analysis methods and rationale for each.

*Data preparation* (Mertens, 2009) included the transcription of the audio recordings from the critical literacy inquiry community meetings and the organization of the data electronically filed on my computer and an external hard drive by data collection method and date. I used a transcription service to transcribe all the audio recordings from critical literacy inquiry community meetings. Once the transcriptions were emailed back to an email account on my personal computer in Word format, they were renamed by method and date, and filed and backed up electronically. For me, the key to data organization was consistent file names beginning with method, then date. For example, the transcriptions for all inquiry community meetings were CL IC YearMonthDay; research memos were filed as Research Memo YearMonth Day. This was very helpful in both easily locating data as well as uploading to Atlas.ti, a qualitative analytic software program used during data analysis process.

Field notes collected at critical literacy inquiry community meetings by Nicole, my critical friend, were emailed to me prior to Nicole leaving the conference room, the location of the critical literacy inquiry community meetings. Her field notes were then saved electronically to my personal computer and external hard drive.

Jottings were written into a research notebook during the critical literacy inquiry community meetings. Following the meetings, I would use them to write research memos in Word on my personal computer. The research memos were saved and backed up electronically on my personal computer and external hard drive. They were also named by data collection method and date.

Participant reflections were written electronically by each of the five participants. The teacher participants emailed them to me. I saved and filed them electronically by data collection
method and date. We also each brought copies for other participants to the critical literacy inquiry community meetings.

*Data exploration* (Mertens, 2009) started at the time of data collection. The purpose of data exploration was to begin to identify themes and note thoughts and insights that emerged during the data collection period. As an example, I wrote the following in a research memo following a critical literacy inquiry community meeting:

I feel as though the teachers have engaged enough in this now that issues, tensions, and dissonances are emerging both for them and for their students. Now the teachers are feeling challenged about what to do about it. They spoke of how they are unsure what to do and that makes them feel uncomfortable, like they are not sure where this is going, but they should because they are the teachers and that is what they are to do. (personal communication, January 10, 2015)

As it turned out, this memo captures some of my initial thoughts regarding a few of the tensions that emerged during the study. In this same memo, I try to make sense of another tension that was discussed at that evening’s critical literacy inquiry community meeting:

This session tonight was by far the most passionate session from start to finish. The “numbers” issue (teachers’ number) was brought up in October for the first time, but then it was more about the tension of making space for critical literacy and test prep. Tonight, for TM and LC, it was all about feeling guilty for not doing something political, taking a stand against all this testing of kids and the new teacher eval [sic] system. It’s like critical literacy has empowered or awakened them and they feel a social responsibility to do something about their own disempowerment by the state for themselves and their students. (personal communication, January 10, 2015)

Both of these tensions, the uncertainty of what to do and state testing are storied in Chapters Four and Five. But for the purposes of data exploration, the writing of memos to begin data exploration during data collection proved quite useful throughout the data analysis and storying the data processes.

At the time the study was being designed, as I researched and considered data collection and analysis methods aligned to the transformative paradigm and practitioner action research, I wanted to continue to involve the participants in data analysis to the level they wanted to be involved. I knew this would lengthen the process because of working around the schedules of multiple people, but I also felt it would validate the collection and analysis processes and would contribute to the insurance that the participants’ voices were honored (Miles et al., 2014). Mertens
(2009) confirms that the involvement of participants in the process increases the time it takes and is potentially messier. However, I anticipated richer results and increased validation if the participants were involved (Mertens, 2009). So throughout the data collection period, as we met in the critical literacy inquiry community, I invited the participants to assist with data coding and analysis.

After data collection was completed and the school year ended, some of the participants\(^1\), my critical friend, and I met at my house on three different occasions to code and interpret three of the critical literacy inquiry community meeting transcripts following the dissertation proposal hearing and IRB approval. After reviewing again the Miles et al. (2014) text on qualitative data analysis methods, I chose to use the in vivo coding method because it is recommended for new qualitative researchers and for studies that “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 74). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to as in vivo codes as “codes that derive from the terms and language used by social actors in the field…a bottom up approach” (p. 32). Table 1 summarizes the dates, participants, and data analyzed during the participant coding process.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Date</th>
<th>June 19, 2015</th>
<th>June 23, 2015</th>
<th>July 1, 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Sammie and Susan, third grade teacher participants, and Nicole, critical friend</td>
<td>Susan, third grade teacher, and Lori, fourth grade teacher</td>
<td>Sammie, third grade teacher participant, Lori, fourth grade teacher participant, and Nicole, critical friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Coded</td>
<td>March 12, 2015</td>
<td>April 1, 2015</td>
<td>April 21, 2015, critical literacy inquiry community transcript</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) All four teacher participants and the critical friend indicated an interest in participating in coding, depending on availability. Working around the summer schedules of six people was difficult and as a result led to only three coding sessions. Tommie was the only participant who did not attend any of the sessions, due to prior commitments.
In preparation for participant coding using the in vivo method, I developed a Data Exploration Group Protocol (see Appendix C) that included the research questions and conceptual framework graphic, a summary of the conceptual framework, and a data analysis protocol. The protocol included the following description of the in vivo method: “uses words or short phrases from the participants own language in the data record as codes. It is particularly useful for beginning qualitative researchers and studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). I took notes during the discussions, and these analytical memos were named as analytical memos with a date and became part of the data. While I included this work in the Data Exploration section, it was exploration, coding, and interpretation.

Mertens (2009) asserts that data exploration serves “to reduce the data from an overwhelming pile of transcripts and notes into a meaningful depiction of the phenomenon under study” (p. 293). The contribution of in vivo codes from the participants and critical friend provided the participants an opportunity to look back on the discussion during the critical literacy inquiry meetings and make meaning of the work they had been and continue to be part of.

Mertens (2009) describes a practitioner action research approach to data analysis as a process whereby the participants read and critically reflect on their own narratives. Audio files and participant reflections preserved the participants’ description and reflection about their enactment of critical literacy in their own words. Their involvement in an initial round of coding, using the in vivo method, provided participants an opportunity to consider their own descriptions of the enactment of critical literacy and label or code segments of text using their own language based on their own interpretations.

Following the participant rounds of coding, I completed the coding of the data, including the critical literacy inquiry community transcripts we did not get to during the participant rounds of coding, the participant reflections, the critical friend field notes, and my research memos. Then I went through a process of developing an initial code framework using Excel. I went through each transcript and placed codes with similar themes together, initially based on the language of the
participants. I named each chunk of codes and placed all incidences of that theme in the
transcript below the theme name.

Once all codes were organized in one Excel column from each transcript, I alphabetized
and arranged like themes by name across the four columns, one column per transcript. I then
began clustering similar themes, color coding names of themes, and rearranging on a
spreadsheet to visually see the occurrence across the four transcripts. I had some themes that
originally did not seem to fit, and therefore were left without color codes. Upon further analysis,
specifically looking at the descriptive words from each occurrence, these themes were grouped
with other themes.

From this, an eleven-code framework was developed, grouping redundant codes and
providing descriptions for all codes, for the purpose of applying the framework back to all data.
The eleven codes included tension, critical literacy inquiry group, critical literacy enactment,
empowerment, identity, norms, organic nature of critical literacy work, power and resistance,
social injustice issues, space, and transformation. This framework, including descriptions for each
code, can be found in Appendix D. I used a software program called Atlas.ti to apply the eleven-
code framework back to all data. This software provided tools for quick analysis of the use of the
code framework. I could get information regarding the frequency or co-occurrences of codes
across all data sources or specific to types of data sources, such as all transcripts from critical
literacy inquiry community meetings or all reflections. During the coding with the eleven-code
framework, I also began to identify segments of data to use as narrative in the findings,
arguments, and implications chapters as the arguments and stories began to emerge. This was
another useful tool in the software.

At the conclusion of this round of coding, I had gained new insights about the data and
the eleven-code framework, which were detailed and preserved in a Data Analysis Self-
Assessment (August 2015). Regarding the data, one of the original codes, critical literacy
enactment, proved not very useful. It occurred 228 times across all data, the most used code, and
seven of the ten codes other than critical literacy enactment had the highest co-occurrence with
critical literacy enactment. I decided at this time that the code *critical literacy enactment* did not provide any useful insights. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue “that codes are organizing principals…our own creations…tools to think with. They can be expanded, changed, or scrapped altogether as our ideas develop through repeated interactions with the data” (p. 32).

*Data reduction* (Mertens, 2009, p. 293), what Cresswell (2014) refers to as “winnowing” (p. 195), refers to a process where some data become the focus and other data are disregarded in order to reduce the data to five to seven themes. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) discuss the importance of using data to “identify relevant concepts” and “think with” the data (p. 27). This was an important exercise for me. I went back to my research questions as there was one point where I felt I was getting lost in the minutia of the data, losing sight of the big picture. Miles et al. (2014) remind researchers that “conceptual frameworks and research questions are the best defense against overload” (p. 73). At this point I thought: What do I really want to know? What am I studying?

I developed a graphic that conceptualized the critical literacy endeavor. I considered the preconditions for critical literacy, something the participants referred to often and commonly as space. I then reduced the enactment of critical literacy to the pedagogical work and the critical literacy inquiry community. Finally, I considered the result—the development of a critical literacy inquiry stance. I depict this conceptualization of the critical literacy endeavor in Figure 2. Arrows are used to show the recursive relationships between the four broad categories that depict our endeavor, space, critical literacy inquiry group, critical literacy pedagogy, and developing a critical stance.

Miles et al. (2014) refer to this process I used as networks where participant actions, processes, or interrelationships can be linked, a useful tool for further data collection and analysis (pp. 111-112). This network approach was helpful as I began to think about the data in a way that answered the research questions and told a story about the critical literacy endeavor, a journey in the development of critical literacy inquiry stances. The four concepts became the revised code framework. I returned to the initial eleven code framework and the excerpts those codes were
linked to. I then linked each of the eleven codes from the initial framework to the four concepts. I did this to insure the work of the participants in the in vivo round of coding was preserved in the analysis and interpretation of data. See Table 2 for the integration of the initial eleven-code framework and the revised four-code framework.

Figure 2. The critical literacy endeavor
Using the descriptions of the eleven codes and the segments of text, I began the development of definitions for each of the four “meta” codes which are much broader and collectively include the concepts, descriptions, and definitions of the previous eleven codes. See Table 3 to review the four codes and definitions.
### Table 3

*Revised Critical Literacy Endeavor Code Framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Description of space: Participant references to an environment conducive to critical literacy including trust; empowerment; freedom/autonomy with curriculum and schedules, and freedom/autonomy to think, feel and act; time to plan, reflect, collaborate; relationships; belongingness; and respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy inquiry group</td>
<td>Description of critical literacy inquiry group: Participant references to space as it relates to the inquiry community, group norms, constructing knowledge about critical literacy, reflection, analysis, problem-posing and problem-solving, and encouragement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy as a pedagogical approach</td>
<td>Description of critical literacy as a pedagogical approach: Participant references to the space as it relates to students, identity work with students, selecting and/or discussing instructional texts, planning and/or discussing instructional activities, the organic nature of critical literacy, student transformation, and student action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a critical stance</td>
<td>Description of developing a critical stance: Participant references to our own identity, questioning norms, expanding perspectives, empowering others, transformation, action, tension, discomfort, uncertainty and vulnerability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The concept of space was the most challenging of the four codes. Space was discussed by all the participants throughout the study, captured in the transcripts, field notes, and participant reflections. The word space was used both broadly and specifically by all participants in reference to the environment or culture described as relational, trusting, empowering, safe, collaborative, respectful, having autonomy, freedom, and belongingness, and in reference to the time and place to collaboratively and critically reflect and plan.
For our critical literacy inquiry community, space existed at multiple levels—district, school, and classroom—in our school district, and in multiple communities—our critical literacy inquiry community, and the teachers’ classroom communities. We spoke of all these references to space as a precondition for critical literacy work, at least as a precondition for students, teachers and leaders to engage collectively in critical literacy work. Figure 3 illustrates our concept of space, as the word is used in the research data. I conceptualize space as a culture within a community existing at multiple levels—district, school, classrooms, depicted as circles. The size of the circles is simply meant to convey the scale of the community (i.e., the district circle is much larger than the classroom circle). The communities influence one another in reciprocal ways, as depicted by the two-directional arrows between communities. The illustration is not meant to assume that everyone at a particular level, even with the presence of the space, is engaged in critical literacy work.

After the development of the revised four-code framework, it was applied back to all the data for a third round of coding. Using the same Atlas.ti tools, I queried the codes for occurrence and co-occurrence across all documents, sorted for document types, and sorted by participant specific data. Critical literacy as a pedagogical approach was the code occurring most often in the
data. The transcripts from critical literacy inquiry community meetings were the most voluminous data source. The most segments of text in the transcripts were coded *critical literacy as a pedagogical approach*. The second most frequent code was *developing a critical stance*. During this round of coding I really began reviewing the data discriminately, using the new code framework to select excerpts of data that might be useful in the dissertation narrative. This process enabled me to get the data reduced for another close reading for arguments and critical incidences.

*Data interpretation* (Mertens, 2009) “When a transformative lens is applied to data analysis and interpretation, different facets of the data and their meaning emerge” (p. 282). I began to use the revised code framework as a conceptual framework for thinking about how we began to develop critical stances: How did the critical literacy inquiry community meetings and the pedagogical and leadership enactment of critical literacy facilitate critical inquiry stances? Emerson et al. (2011) suggests that asking how “produces luminous descriptions (Katz, 2001c)” and “focuses the ethnographer’s attention on the social and interactional processes through which members construct, maintain, and alter their social worlds ” (Participating in order to Write, para. 13). By asking how, I began to identify the arguments and critical incidences, and the co-occurrence and interdependence between codes. For example, critical literacy as a pedagogical approach and developing critical stances emerged as interdependent. As teachers began to enact critical literacy, they felt a responsibility to be role models for students by taking up stances and being more explicit with students about those stances. This created a tension for them accompanied with regret. They realized that they had not done anything to resist a system they were part of, and as such, were complicit in their own and their students’ quantification.

A second example would be the argument that to engage in critical literacy is to be human with all our strengths and faults. This is part of developing a critical stance. I think part of the traditional identity of teachers and even educators more broadly, such as principals like me, is this concept of perfection. Educators carry this perceived (or real) burden to *always* be planned, to *always* interact appropriately with students and parents, and to *always* be an expert in content
and pedagogy. When in fact, *always*, at least in this context, is not even possible and often interferes with our ability to be authentic and transparent with others. Frankly, it interferes with being human. Tommie acknowledged and described her humanness this way:

That’s what I have to accept of myself as well. We hold ourselves to this standard of being utterly and forever patient, kind and loving, persistently empathetic people…the truth is I’m not constantly forever, endlessly patiently empathetic and compassionate. (personal communication, May 14, 2015)

Educators are human, and part of developing a critical stance is acknowledging and even embracing our humanness and imperfections.

While my conceptual framework evolved throughout the study, it consistently recognized and even emphasized the coming together of people—a principal, teachers, and students for the purpose of enacting critical literacy. The advancement of the framework occurred as I wrestled my way through data analysis and interpretation—specifically the critical incidences, the arguments, and how to story them in a way that honored and accurately portrayed the participants’ voice and experiences. This was a recursive process that frequently took me back to analytical memos, data, and the revised conceptual framework. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) “argue…that a conceptual framework offers a clear, consistent frame of reference for making methodological decisions, including choices about how you organize, interpret and ultimately analyze…and reanalyze data” (p. 81). As I identified the arguments, I aligned them with the research questions, then the critical incidences or stories. I then developed a framework with each argument aligned with each of the research questions. This was given to the participants and critical friend for review and critique. It was also given to a member of my doctoral program cohort who I also consider a critical friend. She is a teacher, and I value her critique and feedback. She gave me very specific feedback that pushed my thinking about the arguments. From this, I refined the arguments (see Appendix E), and then began to story the arguments around the critical incidences. This work eventually became Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation.

Chapter Five of this dissertation is titled Professional Identity: Who Am I? It is an account of what I think is the study’s most critical incident. The incident actually occurred over many
months from October through April, but it began unexpectedly during our October inquiry community meeting. It is organized sequentially and sub-titled by months. Data excerpts are used to demonstrate the evolution of our professional identities and the development of our stances of critical inquiry. That October meeting and our discussion flipped the lens of our study from the students to ourselves, from pedagogy to stances. It was during that fateful meeting that we began to question and examine our own identity as educators and our implicit role in our identities shaped by the state’s educator evaluation system.

The incident also changed the dynamics of our inquiry community. It led us to a place of vulnerability and mutuality with each other that had not been present before. As we became more vulnerable and mutual in our inquiry community, we became more vulnerable and mutual with others in our work outside the inquiry community, those in our school and classrooms. These changes are the topic of Chapter Four: With…not for.

As I fumbled my way through the data analysis and interpretation processes, at the time mechanical processes guided by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Creswell (2014), Maxwell (2013), Mertens (2009), Miles, et al. (2014), and Ravitch and Riggan (2012), I already knew that this story of vulnerability and professional identity was of upmost importance in the study. The breakthrough in the data analysis stage of the study came as my chair pushed me to start writing and tell the story. The story developed as I reviewed the data sequentially. It was then that I noticed the change in the professional identities of two of the participants in particular as they wrestled with their own professional identities and the state’s evaluation system. I knew then that I needed to tell this story. The incident is something that I cannot conceive of happening apart from the study. And, its impact extends well beyond the scope of the study. The incident was painful, yet brought healing and renewal. It happened in an exclusive space, yet will affect many students for many years to come. It was an incident that revealed the humanity and vulnerability of educators. My greatest challenge was how to story it in a way that was as raw and real as it was, and that honored the participants and their stories.
Validity

Creswell (2014) asserts that the purpose of validity in a qualitative study is to insure the accuracy of the findings from multiple perspectives—the researcher, study participants, and the readers (Creswell, 2014). Mertens (2009) suggests that discourse analysis, the reading of the data with an "open mind and asking questions," such as what the participants are actually saying, why they are choosing to say it this way, and who else has said this—at tempting to "read between the lines" (p. 296)—is one way to address validity and honor the participants in qualitative studies. Mertens (2009) further asserts that the "essence of credibility is the correspondence that can be demonstrated between the way community members actually perceive constructs and the way the researcher/evaluator portrays their viewpoints" (p. 236). This can be accomplished by insuring participants' perspectives are represented in the data, in the analysis and interpretation of the data, and in the findings. My challenge has been threefold: (a) to achieve open and critically honest dialogue by the participants during critical literacy inquiry community discussions, (b) to fully understand the experience of each participant and honor their voice during the data analysis and interpretation process, and finally (c) to portray and convey accurately the experiences and learning of the participants collectively and individually. In this section, I discuss the use of prolonged and substantial engagement (Mertens, 2009), critical literacy and inquiry community group norms and check-ins, peer debriefing (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2009), progressive subjectivity (Mertens, 2009)/researcher bias (Creswell, 2014), triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2009), member checks (Cresswell, 2014; Mertens, 2009), and catalytic validity (Lather, 1986)—the strategies I used to evaluate and insure the accuracy, or validity, of the findings.

_Prolonged and substantial engagement_ between the researcher and study participants increases the rigor of this study (Mertens, 2009). This is critical so that participants will "trust them [sic] enough to give accurate information" (p. 234). While I have known the participants over a sustained period of time, two of the participants for more than nine years, a third participant for more than eight years, and the fourth participant for more than three years, I have two roles that
needed continuous examination to insure the power differentials because of the roles, did not negate the accuracy of the data and overall validity of the study. First, I am the building, and therefore, supervising principal of the four teachers. I observe, supervise and evaluate their work. Second, I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. While this role gives me no formal power over the teachers, I am the official "researcher" of our critical literacy work, and directly involved with the University of Pennsylvania as a result of the educational leadership program. I will discuss both of these roles and the inherent issues as they relate to the validity of this study.

As principal, I have supervised and evaluated all four of the teacher participants throughout their careers at Lewis Woods Elementary School. As such, the teacher participants and I recognized and discussed this power differential from the start of the study (Mertens, 2009). The teachers were assured during informed consent (written into the research proposal) and during several inquiry meetings that they could choose to step out of the study at any time. The teachers were also assured that their participation and/or lack of participation in the study would in no way negatively affect their observations and evaluation ratings. This issue was addressed in the research proposal, which the teachers reviewed. Sammy, as an Instructional I teacher, was formally observed four times during the 2014-2015 school year and received two evaluations, one at the end of each semester in January and May of 2015. The other three teachers were part of the differentiated observation process and were evaluated once at the end of the 2014-2015 school year. Nothing I observed or heard during the critical literacy inquiry community meetings was used to make a negative judgment about their teaching practice. I did note in each of their assessment rubrics, as they did in their self-assessments, evidence of the healthy and productive relationships among all members of their classroom communities, the types of rigorous, productive, and critical discourse evident among their students, and each teacher’s participation in the critical literacy inquiry community.

My role as researcher places me in a position that carries a notion of power related to the work of teachers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) discuss the "ideas and assumptions about
teachers, teaching, and the knowledge teachers need to teach well” (p. 61) embedded in the federal legislation of No Child Left Behind. Related to research is the idea that teachers need to know content and pedagogy to teach well, and the knowledge of both content and pedagogy should be research-based (i.e., generated by academia at universities). This assumption serves to deepen an already entrenched societal belief that teaching is transmission, that what needs taught and how can be transmitted to teachers so they can then transmit knowledge to students. It diminishes the knowledge and experiences of both teachers and students.

The four participants and I met in a critical literacy inquiry community beginning July, 2014. We often met as often as bi-weekly and as infrequently as monthly, a collective decision. While trusting relationships were built with each of the teachers in my role as principal, it took time to build trust with the participants in my role as researcher to assure them that my role as principal would not get convoluted in the research. The critical literacy inquiry community was the catalyst for the development of researcher trust. And, as I mentioned previously and will describe in detail in Chapters Four and Five, the tension that materialized in the October, 2014 critical literacy inquiry discussion and my response validated the high level of mutual trust and openness among the research participants.

Two important structures built into the critical literacy inquiry community were group norms and member check-ins. Group norms were established to insure validity of critical literacy and inquiry community discussions. Early on we discussed the importance of openness, honesty and confidentiality. We also discussed and established other norms such as participant preparedness for critical literacy inquiry community meetings, the protocol for meetings which included check-ins, the sharing and discussion of reflections, the discussion of what was happening in classrooms with students and associated challenges, and the discussion and application of the text we chose to read.

Member check-ins became part of meeting protocols and developed rather organically as part of the meeting protocol. The purpose of the check-ins was to get a pulse on how participants were feeling about the critical literacy work broadly and the research specifically. In response to
the October, 2014, check-in, the two fourth grade teachers discussed a tension that had welled up in both of them as a result of the Pennsylvania Effective Educator System. This tension is discussed in great detail in Chapter Five. However, for purposes of addressing validity, I knew my response, in the midst of their discussion, would either validate our group norms or change them in ways that would be detrimental to the work and the research. I can confidently say the group norms were validated during that meeting.

Peer debriefing (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2009) is the use of a person to review the different parts of the study, ask questions about the study, help clarify the account of the study, check the accuracy of the interpretation of data, and to insure the study resonates with people other than the researcher (Creswell, 2014). I have referred to this person, Nicole (her real name), as a critical friend. Nicole works as the district school psychologist, in the midst of her thirteenth year. Her office is located in Lewis Woods Elementary School. Nicole has also developed mutually trusting relationships with the teachers at Lewis Woods Elementary School, with whom she works closely.

My relationship with Nicole’s is broad. Professionally, we are critical confidantes and intellectual resources for each other. We have worked collaboratively on many projects at Lewis Woods Elementary School. Nicole helps to insure my resonance as the principal—character above reproach, students first, collaborative, and high expectations coupled with high support for instructional staff. She is comfortable critiquing my leadership and work. Over the last 13 years, our relationship has grown into a friendship outside of school. Regardless of the nature of our discussions, professional or personal, we expect that the other will provide feedback and critique, and we know that any critique is given and received with mutual love and respect.

Prior to this research project, Nicole and Lori, one of the fourth grade teacher participants, helped me with another project related to my coursework at the University of Pennsylvania. This project was an examination of my own leadership—strengths and areas for growth. They were both able to give me critical feedback based on their own personal experiences and their observations of my leadership. As part of the project, I requested their
critical feedback, was open to it, and found it quite useful. I used feedback from both of them to improve areas of my leadership. The project validated Nicole as a critical friend and made her an obvious choice for a critical friend for this research.

As an added bonus, Nicole had demonstrated a high level of interest in this study. In January, 2015, Nicole, with the permission of all the participants, attended inquiry community meetings as an observer taking field notes, assisting in the data exploration and interpretation processes, reviewing research memos, field notes, and findings. Her most important role was to examine the interactions between participants for any evidence of influence I had with the participants as their principal or the researcher. Nicole collected notes during the critical literacy inquiry meetings and emailed those notes to me following each meeting.

Progressive subjectivity (Mertens, 2009) and researcher bias (Creswell, 2014) will be addressed through research memos. Mertens (2009) refers to this as researcher engagement in self-reflection (p. 195) for the purpose of noting hypothesis, assumptions, and feelings throughout the study. Creswell describes it as the bias brought to the study by the researcher, and “how [her] interpretation of the findings is shaped by [her] background” (p. 202). I wrote research memos throughout the study to capture my assumptions, hypothesis, feelings, and changes. Following inquiry community discussions, I would write research memos then compare my memos to the observations of Nicole, my critical friend. This was a useful exercise for checking myself against the insights of a more neutral and critical observer. The research memos were also a useful resource during the data analysis and interpretation process as I would refer back to them.

Triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2009) in qualitative research refers to the use of multiple data sources to justify the presence of themes across data. The data sources for this study included researcher jottings from critical literacy inquiry community discussions (I typically made a few notes during the meeting, but wrote more extensively following the meeting), audio recordings and transcripts of critical literacy inquiry community discussions, critical friend observation notes from critical literacy inquiry community discussions, participant reflections, and research memos. The data exploration and analysis process included listening to the audio
recording of the meetings, multiple readings of the critical literacy inquiry meeting transcripts, and an exploration of the transcript data from multiple perspectives—the participants’, critical friend’s, and mine. The four codes in the revised code framework, the data supporting the arguments, and the critical incidences were present across multiple data sources including transcripts, reflections, critical friend field notes, and research and analytic memos.

Member checks (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2009) were used to insure validity of the dissertation proposal, research memos, and interpretations of the data. Mertens (2009) describes member checks as checking the “believability of the results with the participants” (p. 195). Teacher participants reviewed the dissertation proposal, Chapters One, Two and Three, the transcript of the proposal hearing, and my analysis of the data, arguments, and implications in Chapters Four, Five, and Six of the dissertation. The participants provided feedback which was integrated or used to revise. For example, Tommie questioned my description of the selection of reading material for the critical literacy inquiry community. She felt my description made it sound as though the selection of literature was entirely collaborative. She thought it should be explained that I provided three to four texts with brief summaries, then the teacher participants chose. I made that change.

Another specific example followed my proposal defense. I provided a transcript of the defense hearing to each of the participants and critical friend at a critical literacy and inquiry community meeting so they could read and interpret the feedback from the committee. We spent a great deal of time reading and discussing the feedback and what it meant for the study. For example, we were all very interested in the feedback I received regarding my role in the study and with the participants. Prior to the defense hearing, I participated in critical literacy inquiry community meetings more as a researcher/observer instead of a participant. My initial understanding of critical literacy as a pedagogical approach placed the work with the teachers and their students. The committee helped me see critical literacy as a stance, and as a principal I could and should be engaged as an equal member and participant of the work. The teachers were excited about my changed role, as was I, because it seemed much more authentic. I
provided the participants and the critical friend a copy of the analytic memo I wrote as required by
the committee in response to their feedback during the proposal defense. The participants and
critical friend reviewed the memo and thought I had accurately interpreted and integrated the
feedback.

Three of the four participants and the critical friend participated with me in a round of in
vivo coding. We identified and named themes, using the language of the participants from the
critical literacy inquiry community transcripts. The themes identified by the participants and
feedback from member checks were integrated into the data analysis findings and implications
(Mertens, 2009). Participants and critical friend were provided a final member check—a review of
Chapters Four, Five, and Six, the data analysis chapters containing the stories behind the
arguments, critical incidences, and implications.

Catalytic validity refers “to the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses,
and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it.” Freire (1973) terms this
conscientization, premised in: (a) a recognition of the reality-altering impact of the research
process, and (b) the desire to consciously channel this impact so that respondents gain self-
understanding and ultimately self-determination through research participation (as cited in Lather,
1986, p. 272). Campano et al. (2013) assert that “catalytic validity ensures that the collective
pursuit of knowledge benefits the participants' teaching and learning” (p. 106). The critical literacy
inquiry community, along with the participant reflections, brought a useful and critical reflective
process to the critical literacy work. Participants were quite open about some of the tensions that
emerged as a result of critical literacy and our developing critical and inquiry stances. Tensions
emerged as we became more aware of normalized conditions present in our work in schools and
classrooms. The questioning of norms can lead to dissonance. These experiences were
embodied in each of us and as a result, those moments became critical. Acting on this
dissonance can be transformative. These tensions and embodied moments, as well as
transformation are discussed in detail in Chapters Four and Five.
CHAPTER 4: WITH...not for

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states...Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. (King, 1963)

In a critique of critical pedagogy discourse, Ellsworth (1989) argued: “While the literature states implicitly or explicitly that critical pedagogy is political, there have been no sustained research attempts to explore whether or how the practices it prescribes actually alter specific power relations outside or inside schools” (p. 301). In this study, critical literacy and the inquiry community were the agents of an altering of power relations that existed in our elementary school. A traditional hierarchy between myself and the teacher participants, and between the participants and their students existed in my elementary school embedded in our formal roles and relationships. The work of critical literacy within our inquiry community led to a disruption of the traditional, relational norms. The data from this study demonstrate how spaces of mutuality altered the power relations between myself and the teacher participants, and between the teachers and their students in real and useful ways.

In this chapter, I argue that the mechanism for the changes in traditional power relations is found in spaces of mutuality, re-imagined relationships between the principal and teacher participants, and between the teacher participants and their students that developed concurrently as the critical literacy endeavor unfolded. If we hope to disrupt the norms that have prevailed in our public schools that advantage some while disadvantaging others, we must first disrupt the existing power relations that exist in our schools between teachers and students and teachers and school leaders (Ellsworth, 1989). Prior to my argument for spaces of mutuality, I want to briefly discuss teacher autonomy at Lewis Woods Elementary School prior to the study. The participants’ appreciation of autonomy emerged frequently in the data, and that autonomy enabled critical literacy and inquiry community work to disrupt the power relations.
Autonomy for Teachers: A Look Back

The creation of the space that critical literacy work was cultivated in began years before critical literacy or this study was ever conceived. Initially, the space was conceived for students and their development as readers and writers. It was during the work done to re-imagine the teaching and learning of reading and writing instruction, that students became central to our mission. More than a decade ago, as we transitioned to balanced literacy, and a more student-focused and individualized approach to reading and writing instruction through the use of authentic literature and leveled texts, our school’s mission statement was developed—“Love and literacy: The two greatest gifts we can give a child.” Our belief that students and relationships with students matter, and are a pre-requisite to teaching and learning, is embedded in this mission statement. And then, if literacy matters more than any other learning at an elementary school, we need to create environments and foster relationships in which students develop as critical thinkers, readers, and writers.

Using a balanced literacy framework as a tool for the planning and delivery of reading and writing instruction required a high level of instructional freedom. A balanced literacy framework was the first of several frameworks that became the structures for a more student-focused culture. The frameworks were flexible and meant to guide the development of classroom environments and the planning and delivery of instruction, including instructional contexts, activities, and materials. Frameworks, rather than programs, provided increased instructional freedom, that is, increased levels of teacher autonomy. Forbes and Jermier (2015) define autonomy “as the condition or quality of being self-governing or free from excessive external control” (p. 718). They go on to conclude that workplace autonomy, individual and collective, is beneficial to the employees and the organization (p. 721).

Autonomy for teachers, particularly at the scale we have at Lewis Woods Elementary School, indicates the confidence I have in the intentionality and expertise of the teachers, and the value I place in them. As I wrote in a reflection at the end of the study, “even prior to this critical literacy work, teachers in my school have space within their day and within the curriculum to use
their expertise to enhance student learning and learning experiences” (T. Harpster, personal communication, May 14, 2015). I refer to autonomy in this quote as space in reference to both time in our school’s schedules and freedom within our school’s curriculum.

The teacher participants also described the level of freedom they feel they have in our school throughout the study—during critical literacy inquiry community discussions and the reflections they wrote. Notice the different words the four teachers use to describe that freedom. Sammy, in response to a reflection question asking how space is made for critical literacy, wrote about the freedom she has in our reading framework: “I am very thankful to teach in a school that already implements a balanced literacy framework. This enables me to already have a certain amount of freedom” (S. Lenhart, personal communication, May 14, 2015). In the April discussion, Lori stated, “I actually feel empowered in my own school…in this setting…but as a 4th grade teacher, having that other structure hanging over me, it was causing major anxiety” (L. Crownover, personal communication, May 14, 2015). Lori’s phrase “that other structure” refers to the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s enumeration of her effectiveness as a teacher. Notice Lori’s use of the word empowered, a word Tommie also used to describe situational autonomy:

In some areas, I feel very empowered, and in other areas, I don’t…. there are different sectors of my educational life in this school, that I feel empowered – like this setting – but other areas that I don’t. It may never be something that is clearly empowered or not. It will always be situational. It varies within settings depending on the people in power. (T. Murray, personal communication, April 21, 2015)

Tommie’s use of “this setting” refers to our critical literacy inquiry community, a “situation” in which she feels empowered. However, she indicated there are other situations in our school where she does not feel empowered. Susan also discussed her feelings of autonomy, but differently as she included the concept of support. She reported, “I feel our district is very welcoming of critical literacy….It definitely helps to have administrators that support us” She elaborated, saying: “Teachers need to feel that they have the freedom needed to enact critical literacy” (S. Bouslough, personal communication, March 12, 2015)
If professional learning communities were a prerequisite to our critical literacy inquiry community, then autonomy was a precondition to mutuality. Autonomy, in and of itself, is not enough for critical literacy work. The importance of autonomy emerged as a theme in our study, but also as a precondition for critical literacy work. Our thinking about autonomy was still embedded in power relationships. We thought of autonomy as something given by one who has the power to give it, such as a principal to teachers, or teachers to students. Thought of in this way, the power inherent in the hierarchical roles of school—principal, teachers, and students was left unexamined. It was not until after the study ended, when I was pushed to think about the difference in our critical literacy inquiry community before and after the critical literacy endeavor, that I began to recognize some of the characteristics of our inquiry community that differed from the characteristics of our school community overall and professional learning communities more specifically. It took me quite a while to put my finger on mutuality as the difference. Even after I described and argued that spaces of mutuality are necessary for critical literacy work, I did not immediately see the construct of mutuality, as I define it, as unique to our inquiry community and the participants’ classrooms.

In the next section I will use the phrase *spaces of mutuality* in reference to the relationships and environments that emerged during the critical literacy endeavor. I will use participant quotes from the data to describe the characteristics of *spaces of mutuality*, organized around two themes that emerged during the critical literacy endeavor—the criticality of relationships and the organic nature of the work.

**Spaces of Mutuality**

*Spaces of mutuality* refers to the way people or things relate in the intersections or overlap of people’s lives and roles, specifically the principal, teachers, and students involved in the critical literacy endeavor. Spaces of mutuality can emerge in the spaces or intersections where students, teachers, and leaders come together to learn, teach, lead, reflect, critique, and imagine. The possibilities for spaces of mutuality in schools are endless and can potentially emerge anywhere people or things come together. *Intersections* are a useful analogy for spaces
of mutuality because of the coming together of two or more things. Things can meet, cross, or even collide in intersections, just as they can in the intersecting spaces of school. The intersecting spaces are critical because of the amount of time people spend there, the purpose people have for being there, the accountability for the outcomes of the work done there, and the impact the relationships and work have on the lives, present and future, of those who are there.

Spaces of mutuality can exist anywhere in schools where two or more people share a space or purpose. Spaces of mutuality exist in the intersections of teachers, students, leaders, and across school roles, for example teachers and students, principals and teachers, and principals and students. Sometimes, power differences are inherent in the intersections due to the roles and/or work of the people sharing the space such as students/teachers, and teachers/principals. The spaces or intersecting lives and roles are a given. What is not a given is the level of mutuality among those sharing the spaces.

**Mutuality**

My use of the word *mutuality* is thoughtful as I hope to depict a particular and reciprocal type of relationship between those sharing the spaces. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) uses the word mutuality to characterize humans’ interconnectedness: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (para. 4). King’s use of the phrase “network of mutuality” focuses on the interdependence of people, as Merriam Webster’s online dictionary defines the term: “shared between two or more people or groups” (Interdependence, n.d.). While my use of mutuality recognizes the interdependence of people, I also use it to describe a reciprocating and empowering interdependence among people. I argue that through the flattening of the inherent hierarchy present in the relationships between students and teachers and teachers and principals, and the development of openness to and appreciation of the lived experiences of others, that relationships can become transformative and empowering. I use the word mutuality to name the reciprocity between and among members of the participants’ classroom communities, namely students’ relationships with one another and their teacher, as well as between and among
the members of our inquiry community (i.e., teacher participants’ relationships with one another and me, their principal).

The participants, in transcripts of inquiry community meetings and reflections, used the following words and phrases to describe the spaces of mutuality and the relationships within those spaces specific to this study: “trust,” “openness,” “honesty,” “vulnerability,” “empowerment,” “freedom,” “autonomy,” “time,” “collaboration,” “relationships,” “conversations,” “belongingness,” “feeling valued”, and “non-judgmental.” Most of these words are intra- and interpersonal characteristics, words ascribed to people and their relationships. The words express positive characteristics of relationships, meaningful relationships people are willing to invest in because of the high level of reciprocity. I ascribe the word mutual to the relationships that developed as part of this study. These relationships of mutuality created the space and cradled the organic work of critical literacy and inquiry.

**Relationships of Mutuality**

The critical literacy endeavor was cradled in relationships—my relationships with the teachers individually and collectively, the teachers’ relationships with one another, and the relationships between the teachers and their students. Let’s consider what the teacher participants had to say about the importance and characteristics of the relationships between themselves and their students and among students. Lori, in response to a text she read in preparation for a critical literacy inquiry community meeting, argued that the space for transformative work begins in relationships:

One who was powerless and yet through the interpersonal composing and then intrapersonal composing was able to imagine himself in a more just, fair, and kind world by writing it into his life. This is where it begins. The space to not only know where we are from but the ability to imagine what we want our reality to be. But it began with openness in relationships and shared power. It has at its base the understanding that we all bring something of value and each voice should speak and be heard. (personal communication, April 21, 2015)

Lori referred to a student in Sahni’s (2001) study who felt powerless in a traditional hierarchical school environment. As part of the study, when the classroom environment—the relationships between the teacher and students, and the curriculum—became more mutual, the student re-
imagined his own identity. Lori connected to this student’s experience, and from it characterizes the relationships she has with students as open and flat. She mentioned the importance of valuing the experiences and voice of others. Prior to the study, Lori developed positive effective relationships with her students, for whom she had high expectations. Her work was student-focused and individualized. However, the curriculum/content was at the center of her work. Lori’s transformation placed students at the center of her work, and her relationships with students became more mutual. She wrote this about her own transformation, “But I had many transformative moments that reminded me it was about individual student lives” (personal communication, May 14, 2015).

Susan, used the word “partnership” to describe the relationship she developed with her students for the critical literacy endeavor: “For me to enact critical literacy in my classroom, I had to enter a partnership with my students” (personal communication, May 14, 2015). Note Susan’s use of the phrase “I had to…” to depict the criticality of the relationship she needed to foster with her students in order to engage in critical literacy work. The word “partnership” indicates joint ownership in a relationship, where those in the relationship are invested and have power to make decisions. A “partnership” connotes a flattening of the teacher-student hierarchy.

Susan also discussed the difference between the development of relationships for the critical literacy endeavor and relationships with students in past years. She reported:

In order to enact critical literacy…I had to get to know my students. In order to do that, I had to share aspects of myself with them that I might not have with students in my earlier years teaching. By doing this, it created an environment of trust and respect in my classroom (personal communication, May 14, 2015)

Susan has always developed respectful classroom environments. But what she acknowledges here is the sharing of some of her own lived experiences with students, experiences she did not share in past years. This suggests a level of transparency in relationships of mutuality, something needed to develop trust among all members of a group. As critical literacy educators, we have a responsibility to let students know they are neither alone in their struggles nor as different as they think. Teachers’ lived experiences, when shared with their students in safe ways, may be a
window for students into a whole new world—“a world where people disrupt the script society set for them…a world where history is not inevitable” (Christensen, 2009, p. 6).

Sammy takes a similar approach, but described it differently in response to an “I Am From…” poem, a reflection prompt we all responded to in April. Sammy wrote, “I am from learning with them” (personal communication, April 1, 2015). In this quote, Sammy refers to herself as a learner alongside, “with,” her students. The word with suggests a partnership, where two or more people are invested collectively in some endeavor. The use of the word with characterizes an experience where the work and the consequences will be shared.

A sense of belongingness is an important attribute of relationships of mutuality. During a critical literacy inquiry meeting discussion, Susan told of the impact her classroom environment had on one of her students: “During a classroom meeting, the student said he was not being mean anymore. When he was asked why he said he felt like he belonged” (personal communication, April 21, 2015). Tommie also used the word belong to describe the importance of the relationship she has with students for her and her students, saying “In having a relationship with your students, school becomes a community you belong in, rather than just a building you report to and work that you do” (personal communication, April 21, 215). Tommie’s quote suggests that belongingness increases the meaningfulness of work for teachers and students. She juxtaposes community with building and in with to, a community you belong in rather than just a building you report to.

The participants’ descriptions of their classroom environments, specifically the relationships they developed with their students, were strikingly similar to their descriptions of the critical literacy inquiry community and the relationships among participants. The word safe was used often in the data to name an important characteristic of the classroom environments and the inquiry community. Lori wrote, “I know that for me to participate in a practitioner inquiry community I needed a group of people I could trust and feel safe to discuss my challenges” (personal communication, May 14, 2015). Lori indicates in her response the presence of challenges and the need to discuss those challenges within a community where she felt safe with
those whom she could trust. Susan also uses the word safe to name a characteristic needed in an inquiry community. Here, Susan likens the need to feel safe for the work of an inquiry community to the students' need to feel safe for the work of critical literacy in the classroom:

Teachers need to feel safe in a practitioner inquiry community just like students need to feel safe in our classrooms: safe to take chances and voice opinions or struggles without being judged. Teachers or anyone need to feel valued in a practitioner inquiry community. (personal communication, May 14, 2015)

Susan’s response implies that feeling safe means not feeling judged. In a February 2015 written reflection, I also used the word safe to characterize the inquiry community. I wrote: “The inquiry community will provide a safe space to name the tensions we feel, and what, if anything, we will do about them” (T. Harpster, personal communication, February 27, 2015). By this time in the study, tensions had already emerged and were named in the inquiry community. Just as the relationships among the members of the classroom community cradled the critical literacy work, the relationships among members of the critical literacy inquiry community cradled our critical literacy work.

Another theme that emerged and characterized relationships of mutuality was vulnerability. The teacher participants considered the importance of being vulnerable. Lori wrote in response to the norms of our inquiry community, “I had to be willing to be vulnerable and open” (personal communication, May 14, 2015). She suggests that being vulnerable and open was not typical. I wrote in my February reflection, “The teachers have already displayed vulnerability within the community. I am the only participant who has not. I have felt vulnerable, but I have not shared my feelings” (T. Harpster, personal communication, February 27, 2015). This reflection was prompted by the feedback I received during my proposal defense which clarified for me how I could and should co-participate in the work of critical literacy. At our post-proposal defense inquiry community meeting, when I discussed my new role in the study Lori said, “Does this mean we’re going to get to work right with you?! This is better… so much better” (personal communication, February 26, 2015). For Lori and, I suggest, the others, they much preferred that I be involved with them, instead of simply studying them as they enacted critical literacy. This role
change may have reduced their feelings of vulnerability, particularly after I exposed my own
tensions and uncertainties related to critical literacy. The change left me feeling exposed.

Being vulnerable with others, particularly for the teachers with me, their principal, and for
me to be vulnerable with teachers creates some anxiety about what others will think or how they
will react. Educators have been conditioned to think that there is a specific body of content and
pedagogical knowledge we should know and do. The educators I have spent my career with have
also been competitive. We want to be as good if not better than the teacher who teaches in the
classroom beside or across the hall from us. School principals want to be as good, or better, than
the other principals in the district. For teachers to expose themselves to me, the person who
evaluates them, and for me to expose myself to them, is counter to our preconceived notions of
what it means to lead, teach, and learn, and our relationships with other educators.

However, critical literacy and inquiry work involves critical and accurate reflection and
examination in understanding self, others, and the world more deeply. This kind of self-
examination and deep reflection leaves one feeling vulnerable, and when shared, exposed. One
cannot participate in this work authentically without becoming vulnerable with others. Susan
spoke of the importance of reflection within the inquiry community: “For me, reflection was a large
part of this inquiry community—reflection on readings, what was happening in my classroom, as
well as changes that were happening within me” (personal communication, May 14, 2015).

Susan’s quote highlights the importance of reflecting on the multiple dimensions of critical
literacy: readings, inquiry community and classroom work, and the tensions and uncertainty that
lead to personal transformation. Tommie also wrote about the multiple dimensions of the work as
she describes what she thinks is the role of the participant inquiry community:

We intend to inquire, to wonder, to be moved in our conversations by asking broader,
deeper, transformative questions. We expect it of ourselves and the others in our
group….I expected this group to be a place of wondering together, analyzing together,
and transformation – transforming our thinking and our practice. (personal
communication, March 12, 2015).

The work of the critical literacy inquiry community left all of us feeling vulnerable and uncertain,
feelings that were exacerbated by the organic nature of the work.
The Organic Nature of Critical Literacy

A characteristic of spaces of mutuality that surfaced quite a bit during our inquiry community discussions and participant reflections was the need for critical literacy work to be organic. This characteristic increased our feelings of vulnerability. When we think about the word organic and its relationship to spaces of mutuality, we should understand that any space of mutuality, by its very nature, must also be organic. If our connections, disconnections, and ideas are always planned by another person, then the relationship, or the space it exists in, is not mutual. However, spaces of vulnerability are uncertain, and for educators, create an uncomfortable tension.

Tommie used the metaphor of planting to describe the delicate balance between advanced planning and letting it happen organically: “It does need to be theirs. I think it needs to grow organically from it, but I still think we have to plant something” (personal communication, November 4, 2014). Tommie was using the metaphor to understand and communicate the tension between planning and feeling in control, and letting it happen organically, suggesting far less control. Susan indicated that the organic nature of critical literacy created a lot of stress for her, reporting: “It is very unnatural for me to say that critical literacy development was organic in my classroom. I usually like curriculum to be planned and orderly” (personal communication, May 14, 2015). Sammy, a consummate planner, often spoke of how uncomfortable the organic nature of critical literacy made her feel. Lori, an extensive planner herself, stated, “I guess this is all very experimental for me” (personal communication, February 26, 2015). Susan’s response to Lori also demonstrates the value she placed on planning and knowing, “that’s what [she feels] the most stressed about.” As she said, “There’s not like a map…I don’t feel confident sometimes with the decisions…where do we go from here? And that’s why I’m excited to plan and work with you” (personal communication, February 26, 2015).

While the teachers were uncomfortable, they quickly named and described how the lack of knowing in advance made them feel, and acknowledged the organic nature of critical literacy and why. By the end of the year, Sammy conceded:
I feel that the most effective way to enact critical literacy is to be open to what students connect to and to realize that you cannot always plan where critical literacy will go within your classroom. It must be organic. (personal communication, May 14, 2015).

Sammy’s comment, “to realize you cannot always plan” is in reference to early attempts where Sammy attempted to plan the issues that students would connect with, such as gender. Third grade students, at that time and with the text Sammy was using, did not connect to inequality based on gender. Sammy’s persistent efforts to create a connection to students’ lives did not change their responses. It was not until Sammy confronted this as her issue of control that she began to let go. Interestingly, as she left go students began connecting to poverty and gender issues in authentic ways.

Sammy, Lori, Susan, and Tommie, like me and many of the educators I have worked with, have been conditioned to think that effective teaching begins with prescribed curriculum and planned instruction. While I am not ready to concede that planning is not an important part of teaching, I argue that there is an important organic characteristic of critical literacy that cannot be overlooked, something the participants of this study realized in the midst of it. At the start of the study, the uncertainty the teachers felt was due to their developing understanding of critical literacy as a pedagogy. Further into the study, this uncertainty was intensified by our developing critical stance and understanding that critical literacy has an important organic characteristic.

I am suggesting that critical literacy happens in the intersections of roles and relationships, where leaders and teachers and students come together in spaces of mutuality. Just as professional development should not be thought of as something we do to or for teachers, we need to reconsider how teaching and learning have been traditionally thought of—ininstead of something we do to or for students, teaching and learning should be done with students. The word with is more organic and is suggestive of mutuality. With also demands, as it relates to education, that teachers’ and students’ lives are an integral part of the curriculum.

As the teachers began to embrace rather than resist the organic nature of the work within the mutual spaces they created in their classrooms with their students, notice how the discourse
changed to make space for what is important to students. Thinking about student learning in much the same way she thinks of her own learning, Lori questioned:

> Then their passions matter too and so I start to think to myself...how can they study something they’re passionate about? I'm doing that. I'm studying things I'm passionate about and I'm changing how I see things so why can't I empower them to do the same thing? (personal communication, February 26, 2015)

Many months into critical literacy work, and in a very organic way, critical literacy changed from a text-based fixed pedagogical approach to a people-based organic approach, where the lived experiences of students and teachers became valued. Simultaneously, the level of mutuality increased in the relationships between the teachers and me, and between the teachers and their students. The discourse changed in inquiry community discussions, becoming more student-driven, less about the planning, and more about the relationships. Tommie described a project her students initiated as she gave them more control of classroom activities:

> Tying blankets together for the cats and dogs from the humane society...that was student initiated. It wasn't because of a book that I read to them that then jump started...that was student initiated...You know I don't know that last year or in the years before students would've come to me and said, "This is something that I really appreciate and value in our community and can we do something about it?" (personal communication, February 26, 2015)

Tommie, as a result of the critical literacy endeavor, notices a difference between this group of students and students in past years. Relationships of mutuality leave space for participants to leverage autonomy in ways that are meaningful to them. This act of kindness for animals at the humane society was meaningful to the students. The space of mutuality that the classroom had become nurtured the students’ idea and created the space for the idea to be acted upon.

> Just as I began to value and leverage the organic nature of professional learning and realize the power of mutuality and learning with teachers, the study participants began to embrace the organic nature of critical literacy work, and more broadly, the power of mutuality in their relationships with students—teaching and learning with students. In May, near the end of the study and first year of the critical literacy endeavor, Lori’s reflection on critical literacy enactment captured the characteristics of spaces of mutuality—relationships of mutuality and the organic work of critical literacy:
Critical literacy enactment grows out of not only working to understand myself but simultaneously working to understand those around me. Understanding and getting to really know students enabled me to thoughtfully consider what ideas I could introduce to my students but I also allowed space for their conversations to guide and grow our critical literacy ideas (personal communication, May 14, 2015).

Lori uses the word “understand” to emphasize her deliberateness in “getting to really know students” then using her knowledge of students to plan. Lori’s use of the word “grow” is suggestive of the organic nature of critical literacy work. Her use of the phrase “grow our critical literacy ideas” is indicative of the value she places in students’ lived experiences and their collective generation of understanding.

Classroom Examples

The work of critical literacy in the inquiry community led to the transformation of teaching and learning in the classrooms of the four teachers. It started with the re-imagining of the traditional relationships and roles of teachers and students. It led to increased student ownership of teaching and learning, specifically in the intersections of teachers and students, and teaching and learning. As the participants began to unpack their own identities, they shared more aspects of their identities with students. In this way, they were more vulnerable with students than they had been in past years. As the participants acknowledged the organic nature of the work, they began to honor and leverage the knowledge and experiences that walk into schools and classrooms each day with their students. In this section, I will provide a few examples of how these re-imagined relationships and perspectives about teaching and learning played out.

Susan referred to her changed role with students as a “partnership” (personal communication, May 14, 2015). As Susan’s educational partners, her students initiated a service project in December of 2014. Students, after identifying poverty and homelessness as the themes in a text and discussing their growing understandings of homelessness and poverty, identified a local family going through a difficult time financially. The students engaged their own families to purchase food, clothing, and toys. The items were brought to school where students wrapped the gifts in preparation to give to the family. The family was so appreciative, but it was Susan’s students who felt the greatest joy in their service to others. In past years, Susan may have
initiated a service project for her students. This was the first time her students initiated a service project with Susan in response to their developing understanding of poverty and homelessness. In the process, Susan’s students felt empowered to do something, and their own perspectives about homelessness and poverty were transformed.

Sammy was watching a local news show out of Pittsburgh one evening when KDKA’s weatherman Jon Burnett was reporting on a pumpkin throwing/smashing science event. According to Sammy, Mr. Burnett stated multiple times that boys like throwing, smashing, and blowing things up more than girls. This was very upsetting to Sammy as a young female educator. She wrote an email to Mr. Burnett explaining that his remarks were gender stereotypes, and that they were harmful as they perpetuated generalizations of both girls and boys. His response was very defensive and belittling. Sammy shared the event, her reaction and email, and Mr. Burnett’s reply with her students. Her students chose to write persuasive letters to Mr. Burnett and invited other third and fourth grade students to do the same. An envelope full of letters from third and fourth grade students was mailed to Mr. Burnett. This example illustrates a transformation of this teacher, as a result of the critical literacy work of the inquiry community, who in past years would never have sent the original email. She would also not have shared the incident with her students. As a result of her willingness to be more open and vulnerable with her students, her female and male students made connections and disconnections to the incident. Some students were appalled that Mr. Burnett would make such a presumptuous statement about girls not being interested in throwing, smashing, and blowing up things. Other students were upset that Mr. Burnett would cast such a generalization about boys. It was the students’ idea to engage in a letter-writing campaign as an act of resistance. This idea occurred because their teacher, Sammy, modeled critical literacy in action. Not only did students have an opportunity to respond to a harmful incident of gender stereotyping, they also engaged in authentic letter-writing using persuasive, yet respectful discourse for an authentic purpose and real audience. While Mr. Burnett did not respond to their letters, we can hope that Sammy and
her students have caused Mr. Burnett to pause and reflect on his own assumptions about gender differences.

While the examples were of specific and unique classroom activities, the teaching and learning in all four classrooms transformed in some similar ways. All four teachers became much more critical of the texts they chose for use with students, particularly for interactive read alouds. The teachers spent a great deal of time searching for texts that included social justice themes related to gender, poverty, educational access, and age. Teachers became more deliberate about opening and expanding their own perspectives and those of their students. The intentional activities for “getting to know students” at the start of the year became much more focused on students’ and teachers’ identities. Students in all four classrooms also became more equal partners in the development of the classroom environment including relationship and community building, physical layout, daily work, and the ongoing identification and solving of problems. All four teachers began to use students’ lives as text. I think there is always a bit of uncertainty surrounding critical literacy work, and probably should be. However, as these four teachers continue their development of critical inquiry stances and continue to transform their relationships with students, and the roles of teachers and students, they are simultaneously growing their passion for critical literacy work and their confidence as facilitators of this work.

WITH…not for

Spaces of mutuality is the phrase we used to name the relationships and environments that supported the critical literacy endeavor. The concept of mutuality provided a lens to contrast the work of our critical literacy inquiry community with the work that takes place in our school’s professional learning communities. Mutuality defined the relationships between the participants in our critical literacy inquiry community and the relationships within the classroom communities of the four teacher participants. Mutuality creates a context for vulnerability, a trait important to critical understanding and transformation. And, mutuality creates the space for organic work, an important condition for critical literacy.
It was in spaces of mutuality that I re-imagined mine, the teachers’, and students’ roles in public education, and the importance of leading, teaching, and learning with, and not for. I initially thought of spaces of mutuality specifically related to critical literacy and inquiry community work. As I continue to reflect on and examine the critical literacy endeavor, I have come to believe that spaces of mutuality can and should be the experiences of all members of our school communities—students, teachers, support staff, and leaders. The existence of mutuality between school leaders and teachers makes mutuality between teachers and students more likely. Spaces of mutuality are a condition for re-imagining teaching, learning, and leading in ways that can transform our schools and enable public educators and local communities to take back their schools.
While the four teachers and I assumed, because of what we had read about other educators engaged in this work, we would be transformed by this work, none of us anticipated a transformation that would humanize our identity as educators during an unprecedented time in public education (T. Harpster, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

This chapter highlights the transformation of the professional identities of the participants of this study, including my own. I explicate the changes in the participants’ professional identities by contextualizing participants’ quotes, then unpacking and illuminating those that point to changed identities. Creswell (2014) asserts that data analysis “involves segmenting and taking apart the data…as well as putting it back to together” (pp. 194-195). In earlier phases of analysis, I segmented the data using filters such as document type, participant, and codes. Those processes provided multiple lenses for me to look closely at and make meaning from the data. However, the discoveries that emerged in this study are not hidden in document types or codes. The discoveries are in the moments when five female educators chose to be vulnerable in order to confront and make sense of what it means to be an educator in this present era of hyper-accountability through state testing. I will begin with an overview and analysis of the Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System because it plays an important role in the identity transformation of the participants of this study.

The Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System

The Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System is being implemented in phases that started in the 2013-2014 school year with two of the eventual four categories—Teacher Observation and Practice, and Building Score—more commonly known as School Performance Profile. The system will be completely phased in by the 2015-2016 school year and will include all four categories. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014b).
Table 4

Pennsylvania’s Teacher Effectiveness Score Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Effectiveness Score Categories</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Observation and Practice</td>
<td>Danielson Framework Domains: Planning &amp; Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, Professional Responsibilities</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Score/School Performance Profile</td>
<td>Academic achievement (PSSA proficiency), Closing achievement gap, PVAAS Growth, Attendance</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Specific Data</td>
<td>PVAAS Growth</td>
<td>15%/NAa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elective Data/Student Learning Objective</td>
<td>School/teacher developed student learning objectives</td>
<td>20%/35%a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*aTeachers in grades 4-8 and 11 in tested content areas. If PVAAS Growth is NA, Elective Data/Student Learning Objective is 35% of score.

As shown in Table 4, the Teacher Observation and Practice score category is the most comprehensive category of the entire system—comprehensive in its inclusion of the spectrum of educators’ practice. The evaluation is based on either formal observations or a differentiated model of supervision plus multiple walk-through observations. Teachers are integral to both the formal or differentiated processes. The observation and evaluation processes require teachers to add data, self-assess, identify strengths and areas for growth, and conference with their evaluator. While the final determination of domain ratings rests with the evaluator, if the process is done with fidelity, teachers engage with their evaluator in a participatory process.

At the backend of the process, the teacher identifies strengths and one to two areas for growth. The teachers I have worked with have critically self-reflected and self–assessed. They have also selected meaningful goals for growth, based on their own and my assessment, as well as our discussion. Because of the embedded timeline and follow-up with the goals, teachers are changing and improving practice. For example, I have had multiple teachers identify assessment as an area of growth and begin engaging students in the development of assessment criteria.
The Teacher Observation and Practice score category is based on The Framework for Teaching, “a research-based set of components of instruction aligned to the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium Standards and grounded in a constructivist view of learning and teaching” (The Danielson Group, 2013, para. 1). Working from a belief that teaching is a complex task, The Danielson Group asserts that the Framework has multiple uses, yet its “full value is realized as the foundation for professional conversations among practitioners as they seek to enhance their skill” (para. 3). They suggest that the domain rubrics “provide a roadmap for improvement of teaching” (para. 2).

Whereas I understand that the rubric was never intended to quantify the work of teachers, in fact that is how it is being used in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) (2014a) has translated the performance levels into a four point rubric ranging from 0-3. The language prescribed for the four performance-level rubric included distinguished, proficient, basic and unsatisfactory. PDE renamed the unsatisfactory label failing, quite indicative of the high-stakes era of school and educator accountability. It is also indicative of the intentional framing of the problem. Blaming teachers and school leaders for the state of public education is done to justify the accountability measures passed into law, and the fundamental ways in which philanthropists working with policy-makers want to change the landscape of public education (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Scott, 2009).

As shown in Table 4, the Building Score/School Performance Profile (SPP) makes up 15% of the score of all educators within a school, regardless of the grade or content area. The performance profile of elementary schools is comprised of Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) proficiency rates in tested content areas, the percentage the required achievement gap was closed, growth as measured by the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS), promotion and attendance rates, and PSSA advanced scores. Of the six parts that comprise this score, four are singularly based on students’ performance on the PSSA.
Teacher Specific Data is 15% of the educator effectiveness score. The data used for this category is limited to PVASS Growth for eligible teachers—those teachers who have fourth grade students attributed to them for reading, math, and science. Teachers in the school who are not PVAAS eligible have this 15% combined with the Elective Data-Student Learning Objective category to make that category worth 35% of their Educator Effectiveness Score. While I will not debate the validity or reliability of the formula, the test, or test data for the purposes of this study, I take issue with the assumption that students’ performance on one test is a valid and reliable indicator of the effectiveness of a teacher.

According to PDE (n.d.), benefits of the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) include academic growth for all students, using student achievement to assess the impact of practices, curricula, instruction, and professional development, where to focus resources, differentiation of instruction, and identify best practices (sec. 6). Noticeably absent from the page is any indication or discussion about the use of PVAAS data to evaluate the effectiveness of educators.

Based on Education Value Added Assessment (EVAAS) methodology, Value Added is a statistical analysis used to measure the academic growth for a district, school, or teacher’s groups of students from year to year. Simply put, the statistical analysis compares students’ scores on a current assessment (PSSA) with all the group’s prior scores on the PSSA. That analysis is then used to construct a score that would indicate a year’s worth of growth. Using standard errors to indicate confidence in the amount of growth or lack of growth, Value Added Growth Measures are reported in a color-coded system to assist with the interpretation of the data.

Elective Data-Student Learning Objective is the final category worth 20% for teachers PVAAS eligible, 35% for teachers not eligible for PVAAS growth. PDE (2014a) recommends this category to be the outcome of “a collaborative effort between the evaluator and classroom teacher” to “include measures of student achievement that are locally developed and selected by the school district from a list approved by PDE” (p. 25). According to PDE, approved measures
include district designed measures and examinations, nationally recognized standardized tests, and/or student projects and/or portfolios. This score broadens the types of data schools and teachers can use to demonstrate student achievement, and therefore, as assumed by the teacher effectiveness system developers, teacher effectiveness.

When I consider all the frameworks that make up the educational environment and learning experiences for each of my nearly 500 students, I am skeptical of how many of them can be measured by a one-time standards-based achievement test. I am also skeptical of the reliability of this one test to account for student learning, and therefore teacher and principal effectiveness. What part of the School Performance Profile and teacher-specific data directly reflects school-wide and classroom environments that emphasize love and literacy, positive school-wide behavior, BARK Against Bullying, student assistance program, school-wide Reading Challenge, the use of authentic texts for all content areas, student inquiry and STEM projects, a differentiated workshop approach to reading, writing, and mathematics instruction, or student ownership of school and classroom communities and learning? If one argues that all these things are measured by the state test, directly or indirectly, then one must also recognize the many other factors measured indirectly by the state test, such as parents’ educational levels, socioeconomic levels, mental health, location of students’ residence, and others.

The system is dehumanizing to students and educators alike as it attempts to enumerate, then label the complex work of teaching, learning and leading. It diminishes students and their learning to a label—advanced, proficient, basic, or below basic. It diminishes teachers and school leaders and their work to a number—0 and 3. Students’ proficiency rates are compared to teachers’ proficiency rates to insure school leaders are not inflating the proficiency levels of their teachers. The system negates the physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual health of its students, teachers and leaders, as if the academic and intellectual development of humans can be isolated and measured by a standardized assessment. The system does not account for the life experiences or developmental levels of eight-, nine-, and ten-year old students. The consequences layered into the system assume that public embarrassment through school
comparison, state take-over of continuously “failing” schools, and exclusion from additional education funds for schools of excellence somehow motivates school leaders, teachers, and students to produce increased levels of performance. Finally, this punitive system narrows and decreases the quality of educational experiences, collective human learning and growth, for already at-risk students.

In the next section, I dissect excerpts from several of the participants about the Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System, specifically the testing and enumerating part of the system. The discussion about the state test changed in important ways from October, when it was first discussed, through May. The data and discussion will reveal how the critical literacy endeavor created tensions that led to critical reflection and an emerging critical inquiry stance, as well as transformed our professional identities.

“Who am I?”

“There’s a Number Attached to Me”

October 2014. The critical literacy inquiry group began meeting at the end of July 2014. We met three times prior to the start of the 2014-2015 school year, then twice in September and once in October. It was near the start of the October meeting when I was discussing with the teachers how important it is that my position as their principal and evaluator be left at the door for this work. I had just finished saying, “I think one of the things that’s important is for us to set norms so you feel like you can be critical and be open and be honest in this PLC. This is the only way that this can work. It’s the only way the study is even worth doing.” Then, I asked: “How are you feeling about this right now?” (personal communication, October 20, 2014). While the question was still hanging in the air, Lori, one of the fourth grade teachers, suddenly revealed a tension she was feeling:

I’m going to be totally open and honest because I’m struggling with something. I want to do this. This is to me what teaching is all about, but I’m really struggling with the PSSA testing thing...I know that now there’s a number attached to me and I also know that I want to spend time having these conversations and doing this sort of thing. Then when do I teach the standards? I’m really struggling with going between do I do this or this, or how do I do both, and wrapping my brain around I have this pressure on me to have a certain number of kids... my value, how I’ve added to their education and how I’m going
to do that, how that looks and how I concentrate on this and how I concentrate on that…I just don’t like what— (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

There is so much tension and emotion evident in Lori’s comments. She first specifies that she is going to be open and honest. Perhaps her phrase “open and honest” could be exchanged with “vulnerable,” as she is sitting with her principal and unsure how she might react. When I designate something I am about to say with “I am going to be honest”, I am typically not sure how my audience will react. Is Lori uncertain how the group, or colleagues, or her principal will react? My guess is that this comment was for me. Moving on, Lori used the word “struggling,” indicating a strenuous effort. The perceived contradictory relationship of PSSA test preparation/teaching standards and critical literacy, referred to as “these conversations,” is evident. In her response, she indicates the pressure she is feeling from the evaluation system to have a “certain number of kids.” This is in reference to the system’s use of the percentage of students scoring proficient as a determinant of school, teacher, and leader effectiveness. She equates the percentage of her students who score proficient to her value as a teacher. Lori’s question, “When do I teach the standards?”, reveals her perception at this time that critical literacy and the state standards are mutually exclusive. She is concerned about the time it takes to engage in critical literacy activities, particularly conversations, when she states, “I want to spend time having these conversations and doing this sort of thing.” Lori provides evidence of her understanding of how the teacher effectiveness system impacts her when she says, “there is a number attached to me” and “my value...how I’ve added to their education.” She provides a bit of evidence of the mental toll on her when she says, “how do I concentrate on this and how I concentrate on that.” Finally, Lori provides a window into her philosophy for teaching and specifically her reasons for participating in the critical literacy endeavor when she states, “This is to me what teaching is all about.”

The topic of the Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System is initially framed as problematic because of a perceived dichotomous relationship between instruction aligned with the state standards and instruction aligned with critical literacy. Perhaps in past years, prior to the implementation of the evaluation system, Lori would not have been concerned about the time it takes for students to engage in rigorous discussions about identities, text, and life. But, because
she perceives the time allotted to critical literacy work as time not spent on standards-aligned instruction, she must decide between the two types of instruction. That choice leads to another perceived choice—does Lori provide students with the type of instruction that she got into teaching to deliver or the type of instruction that will produce a greater number of proficient students, and therefore a higher teacher effect score?

The moment Lori breeched this subject, the environment changed. Eyes widened, bodies tensed, and heads leaned in. As Lori was in mid-sentence, “I just don’t like what—”, Tommie, the other fourth grade teacher, interrupted her with a similar tension she was feeling:

I feel that same pressure. I’ll be honest, I feel that pressure especially when we look at third to fourth grade data and we’re seeing that there’s this drop off…I’m struggling. I have kids in my room who’ve lost parents and this is so what they need. I’m also struggling with, well before I didn’t have a number attached to me. If my students didn’t score a certain way, I didn’t have any pressure on me. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

It was like this tension had been boiling in both Lori and Tommie, and when I opened up the discussion about being critical and open and honest, the tension just boiled up and out of both of them. I really think it was the one word, “honest,” that opened the floodgates of a long-held tension. The critical literacy endeavor, specifically the pedagogy, created this tension of choice between time for state standards or time for critical literacy conversations. The critical inquiry group provided the safe space where the tension was revealed and named. I argue that the timing of this exchange so early in the endeavor indicates a level of trust and vulnerability shared among the members of the group that had been nurtured and growing over a number of years.

Tommie’s response makes reference to being human and the importance of critical literacy when she states, “I have kids in my room who’ve lost parents and this (critical literacy) is so what they need.” This statement reveals a bit of her philosophy for teaching and why she chose to participate in the critical literacy endeavor. Like Lori, Tommie states that she feels pressure from the effective educator evaluation system’s quantification of teachers when she states, “a number attached to me.”

Again like Lori, Tommie frames what she is about to say with, “I’ll be honest.” I have no doubt that the words, “I’ll be honest” were directed to me. Tommie referred to a meeting I had led
just weeks before this discussion with the third and fourth grade teaching teams to share third and fourth grade PSSA proficiency rates. I had the school, grade-level, and teacher-group proficiency rates disaggregated by economically disadvantaged and special education groups of students. This is a common practice among principals in the school district. My purpose in sharing the data with teaching teams was to make them aware of how their grade level and classroom groups of students scored. I also wanted to insure that the instructional strategies teachers felt resulted in increased scores were shared among and across teaching teams.

Tommie further described how this meeting made her feel:

This is how I honestly feel; I’m so hurt. I’m going to be open and honest. I do. I feel like when we talk about test scores and we look at particular teacher’s test scores compared to others then we are valuing them and we’re valuing them based on the teacher. I feel this judgment, and I’m like “I know this is the kind of teacher I want to be. This is the teacher that I hope to be. It’s a teacher that—”. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

Again, the comments are framed with the word honest, and more intense emotion, as Tommie is crying by this point. She is letting me know the effect the meeting I facilitated had on her, and in this way my contribution to this test-driven evaluation system. In the way that the students’ test scores were presented, then discussed, Tommie felt the presence of a value-judgment, possibly from me, but also her colleagues. And, like Lori, the tension she was feeling was caused by a perceived incompatibility between the teacher she wants to be, the teacher she believes she should be, and the teacher rewarded by the Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System.

The tension in the room continued to rise while Lori interrupted and finished Tommie’s thought, “This is the reason I went into teaching” (personal communication, October 20, 2014). Lori went on to explicitly describe the tension between her philosophy for teaching and the reality of her position as a public school teacher in Pennsylvania. This tension emerged as an identity crisis about who she was as a teacher, a tension she described as new:

You knew philosophically you did the right thing. I’m struggling with “am I that teacher that does tons and tons of worksheets and helps them prepare for the PSSA or am I that teacher that helps them do this identity work?”. I guess I’m really struggling because of the PSSA and I’m struggling with that. I’m struggling with who am I and I’ve never had
that problem before. I always knew who I was as a teacher. Now I’m like, “Okay. Who am I?” (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

The *real* tension is finally named—professional identity. “Who am I?”, Lori asks in this politicized educational context of accountability. Whom are educators going to be accountable to? For the many educators who care about students and want to contribute to the life opportunities students will have, are we accountable to the five- through ten-year-old students who walk into our schools and classrooms each day, or are we accountable to politicians, far removed from the teaching and learning taking place in our schools? Who am I? “Am I that teacher that does tons and tons of worksheets and helps them (students) prepare for the PSSA, or am I that teacher that helps them do this identity work?”, Lori asks. It’s a rhetorical question. She is not really asking us because she already knows the answer—at least the only answer she can live with. Her asking of the question signals not a struggle for the answer, but a struggle within a system that makes her feel like she has to choose between doing what’s best for students or her own effectiveness, as framed and measured by the system. What she and many educators really want is to do what is best for students, and be acknowledged for their work in a profession that is so important, but also complex, and raw, and real.

While Sammy, Susan, and I continued to listen, Tommie described her concern for the judgment she felt, specifically the effect it might have on her grade-level colleagues, saying: “My teammates will think that what I’m doing is not valuable and they won’t want to try it with their students. I feel like I’m going to be judged because I’m not going to get the scores” (personal communication, October 20, 2014). I think Tommie is saying that acknowledgement is reward and that what gets rewarded gets done. If her students do not produce high levels of proficiency, her colleagues will see critical literacy as a risk because it does not produce high levels of proficiency. Therefore, they will not even try critical literacy. Tommie continued to elaborate on her perceptions of her colleagues. She asserted that her colleagues might be thinking, “I don’t have to do what you’re doing. My kids are doing fine on their tests. In fact, they do it better than yours” (personal communication, October 20, 2014).
This is interesting because the underlying assumption here is that Tommie’s colleagues will only do what produces higher percentages of proficient students. I am contributing to this in fact, when I sit down with grade-level teams and acknowledge those teachers with the highest percentage of proficient students and ask them to identify and share the strategies they think result in higher proficiency rates. Is this the intent of those who developed the system? It feels very market-based. Pit teachers, schools, and communities against one another by making the results public along with the consequences for the results. Public education becomes a competition for the highest scores, particularly in environments where parents have school options for their children.

Tommie then explained more specifically the decision she is left with:

The test measures something else. I’m just struggling with what do I teach this year and how much of it is a balance of teaching what’s going to be measurable and what’s never going to be measurable, at least on this exam. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

Tommie suggests in this quote her belief that the state assessment measures a narrow curriculum. Does she narrow her work to the learning that is measured on the state assessment? She indicates a balance, rather than one or the other. Tommie’s and Lori’s concerns reveal an assumption they have made: Critical literacy work and standards-based instruction are mutually exclusive. While both indicate a belief that critical literacy work aligns with their teaching philosophies, they both assume they have to choose one or the other because both are time-consuming. They also assume that critical literacy work will negatively affect student proficiency rates.

Then Susan, a third grade teacher whose students also participate in the PSSA, and a former fourth grade teacher, joined the conversation. She pushed back. Below is the conversation between Susan and Tommie during that October meeting:

Susan: I know you have the measures from third grade to fourth grade to worry about and the growth. When I taught fourth for three years my whole thing was PSSA, PSSA. I was so strung out with PSSA and I when I went to first grade it was a breath of fresh air that I didn't have to worry about these test scores. Then I thought, “It's a number.” I know people will look at the number and judge you from that but you know yourself. Can they assign a number to this pencil or a pen? I'm sure they could. Does it make it better than anybody else? It's just, I don't know, maybe I'm—
Tommie: Can I ask you? Do you see yourself teaching in this district until you retire?

Susan: Yeah.

Tommie: You know you’re going to have favor in the district where you work because you’re a great teacher here. For me, I think part of the fear is I don’t see myself in (Lewis Woods Elementary) for 30 years. These scores are looming over my head; I’m like “Is anybody going to ever look at my resume if I come with these scores?”

Susan: You wouldn’t want to work in a district that only looked at the scores. You wouldn’t want to work in that kind of district. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

**Leveraging Christianity as a Local Cultural Resource**

In that moment, looking at an emotionally spent Lori and Tommie who sat across the table from me, I was overcome with empathy, not as a researcher nor their principal, but as a woman and member of this same oppressive system and their Christian friend. I wanted to hug them and tell them how much I loved them and what great teachers and people they are. I wanted to tell them not to worry about their teacher effectiveness scores. I wanted to remind them of this opportunity to be courageous teachers. However, in those same moments I was hyper-aware of my role as researcher and their principal. I knew that my response in this moment would determine the safety of this inquiry community, the work we would do, the conversations we would have, and the level of openness and honesty. With red flags waving and sirens screaming in my mind, I spoke these calculated, yet genuine words that reveal some of the vulnerabilities and uncertainties I was feeling as principal and researcher:

This is where it gets difficult because I want this to be flat, but yet there are times when I have things I want to say... Can I just talk to you as your friend for a minute and not your supervisor? Is that even possible? (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

After Lori and Tommie responded for me to continue, I, still questioning what I am about to say, asked again, “Will you believe that I’m talking to you as your Christian friend and not your supervisor?” (personal communication, October 20, 2014). Again, they both indicated that I could continue. After explaining to them how I believe I am situated in this accountability system in similar ways as teachers, my thoughts became less calculated—they became raw, and I felt vulnerable, still uncertain of my participation in this discussion in this way. I made several points. First, I spoke of the importance of my faith in God in making these decisions: “I have decided, I
don’t know how…many years ago now that God’s opinion of me makes man’s opinion of me irrelevant. I am not making decisions based on man’s opinion of me." While this is challenging to live out, at times, it is a belief that guides my life. The second point I made revealed my vision for school leadership:

I am doing what’s best for kids. While I will jump through the hoops and do the stuff that we have to do…In terms of my leadership in the school and the autonomy that teachers have in the school I think that speaks to what I call courageous leadership. It’s about having the courage to do what is right for kids regardless of what the state and everyone else who thinks they know all about education are telling us we have to do. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

I find my vision for school leadership fairly easy to follow. I sift my decisions through a “best for kids” filter. However, the autonomy I have and the confidence in me by the Board of School Directors and the Superintendent have empowered me to enact this each and every day.

As I continued, I was no longer aware of the red flags and sirens. In fact, I was on a roll—adrenaline or passion had taken over. My words became no longer guarded. I went on to connect these points to their work as Christian teachers:

You figure out how you do those things that you have to do, but you do the things that are right for kids. You figure out what that is. I think all of you have found a way to figure that out from what I have seen in your classrooms. When I say to you though, what has changed, the only thing that’s changed is you’re getting this number. Then I say to you again, what has changed? Your God is the same God. If we believe that He has a plan for our life, whether that test score may end up in some resume or in some place is irrelevant. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

My point here was that in terms of their work in our school, nothing had changed since last year before the state had enumerated their work. They still had the autonomy they had last year. They still worked with a principal that believed that the test scores need only to be good enough to maintain the level of autonomy that we have. I remind them of the irrelevance of this number for Christians. And then, transitioning from my role of Christian friend to my role as researcher, I remind them that at any time they could choose to no longer participate in the study:

I’m not saying this because again you can walk out of here today and not even be interested in this study, it’s fine. I’m saying this for you, because I remember that this study started because I got into a conversation that the two of you were having at the end of Main Street where both of you were talking about “I’m not in this work for the long haul if there’s not more to it than this”…This is the more to it. You’re going to have to decide … whether we’re doing the study or not you’re going to have to decide because wherever
you work in education, are you in education and do you think you can make a difference even within this accountability and framework and everything that’s going on, that’s imposed from the top down upon us, that you still can make a difference within that type of system? If the answer is yes, I think I can, then you’re in the right field and you should continue to do what you know is best for kids. If you think that no, then maybe this is the wrong time to be in education, I don’t even know what else to tell you. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

As I write about and unpack this, more than thirteen months from the date it occurred, it is still very raw and emotional. I am physiologically feeling as if I am back in my conference room in that emotionally charged moment with these teachers that I love and admire. I am also feeling exposed as a researcher that I may have crossed some line. Should I have left the conversation and their struggle to continue or at least play out among the four teachers without intervening or interfering? Did my response change the very critical and open and honest norms I was seeking? Did my response set some high bar for them as Christians, degrading their feelings and the struggles they felt? Did my Christian response further dehumanize them by critiquing their struggles? I may never know the answers to these questions. However, I do know that in that moment, as a Christian woman, critical friend, and educator, I wanted to inspire these passionate and exceptional Christian women educators to live the courageous lives they hoped to live when they chose to be teachers. Perhaps in this moment, a seed of resistance to this oppressive system was planted.

I do know that in this moment I came face-to-face with an internal tension I carry as a public school educator and university doctoral student—a tension that has been exacerbated with critical literacy work. Christianity is highly politicized and is associated with “the far right,” “the right wing establishment,” “conservative” political views, “neoliberalism,” and a systemic attack on public education (Christensen & Aldridge, 2013). I do not deny the conflict I have with some of the oppressive norms and relationships among people as depicted in the Bible. While Christianity is a norm within the community in which I live, specifically among the people with whom I associate with personally and even within the school I lead because the majority of employees identify themselves as Christians, it has not been the norm in my university experiences. I would characterize my university experiences as highly contentious as students and professors alike
have accepted and generalized a stereotype of Christians as narrow-minded, judgmental of others, and oppressive. While I would never argue that too many Christians presently and historically have fit, even caused this stereotype, it is in fact not true of all Christians. In all of my university experiences, I have found it difficult to find a safe space to engage in conversations about conflicting beliefs on social issues such as religion, abortion, and gay rights without feeling politically incorrect.

However, in the space of our inquiry community, sitting with four other Christian women, I gravitated to my Christian faith as a local, experiential, and cultural resource. In that emotionally charged moment, I used Christianity by leveraging our shared values and beliefs in a higher purpose for our lives, and our faith to trust in Him who is the author and creator of all our lives. Through Christianity, I attempted to transcend the effects of educational policy on our work, my leadership, and our relationships for the liberation and empowerment of these teachers.

“This is How I Honestly Feel, I'm So Hurt”

In light of the moments just described, I want to go back to Tommie’s quote, referenced earlier, of how the meeting I facilitated with third and fourth grade teachers for the purpose of sharing PSSA student proficiency rates made her feel. Tommie said:

This is how I honestly feel, I’m so hurt. I’m going to be open and honest, I do. I feel like when we talk about test scores and we look at particular teacher’s test scores compared to others then we are valuing them and we’re valuing them based on the teacher.

(personal communication, October 20, 2014)

As Tommie explained her feelings in response to a decision I had made as the school principal, a tension welled up in me. For more than a decade, my message to teachers and instructional aides about the importance of student performance on the PSSA was limited to “good enough scores so we continue to have the autonomy we have with our community-building and instructional programs.” I typically shared the school and grade-level data with all staff at the opening faculty and staff meeting, then shared the disaggregated school, grade-level, and classroom data with the third and fourth grade teams. The use of the data in this way enabled me to “check it off” my list of things expected of me. I facilitated the review and analysis of testing
data with the teaching teams, and as part of that process, asked teachers with the highest student scores and/or greatest PVAAS growth to share the instructional strategies they thought were most effective.

I am strategically careful about calling out certain teachers and the strategies they use because I want teachers to use classroom environment and instructional strategies that acknowledge that learning is a social process. I want teachers to help students develop certain dispositions: love coming to school and learning, take ownership of their own education, contribute to the classroom and school communities, respect others, and develop an awareness of their place in this world with others. I am fairly confident the students in my school could achieve the highest PSSA scores in the county, if that was our goal, by narrowing the education of our students to the eligible content. However, that is not and has never been our goal.

Lori and Tommie revealed a perspective I had not considered—that of the teachers as vulnerable and powerless victims in this educator effectiveness system. I am embarrassed as I write this that I used test scores in this way. I would have recommended to other leaders to not use data to make comparisons of teachers with teachers. Prior to this moment, I believed I did what I could to protect teachers from the system. I advocated for mine and their autonomy as educators. I advocated for the students and their right to an appropriate education—one that created opportunities for their futures, and developed in them a disposition of responsibility to the multiple communities in which they live. I began to process how my actions affected teachers for the first time. If not for the study and inquiry community, I may have never become aware of how my work made Tommie feel.

Following the meeting, with Lori’s and Tommie’s voices lingering in my thoughts, I prayed about and thoughtfully considered what I should do with the teachers’ PVAAS data that had just recently become available. The principals had been directed to meet with teachers and discuss their PVAAS scores. I printed reports in preparation. Those reports were in my to-do box on my desk as I listened to Lori and Tommie passionately discuss this tension. I wondered, “Do I follow-through with my plans, explaining how the data does not really matter, but it is something I should
do as a school principal? What is the right thing to do as a school principal, as a Christian school principal, as an educator who values integrity? How will my decision affect critical literacy work with these four teachers?”

In the end, I changed my plans to meet with the fourth grade teachers individually last fall to share and discuss their PVAAS data. I value integrity, particularly Christian integrity. I want to be that leader and woman who is characterized by my integrity. I do not believe that PSSA or PVAAS data capture the complex work of educators. Therefore, I do not place great importance on the results attributed to our school. For years, I made my belief known to the teachers in my school. After processing Tommie’s feedback with my beliefs, the decision was actually an easy one. I buried the folder in which I had placed the reports in that same to-do box where they stayed for the remainder of the year. In the summer, I finally filed the reports in each teacher's folder in a drawer in my desk. I am not even sure why I kept the reports, maybe I kept them as a symbol of my resistance to a system that I am part of, but do not believe in. Maybe I did it for the teachers. Maybe I did it for me.

“Is It Because There Are A Lot of Women in Education?”

January 2015. The state educator effectiveness and PSSA testing emerged again in January 2015 during a critical literacy inquiry discussion. As the teachers discussed some of the ways students were engaged in critical literacy activities in their classrooms, the lack of children's literature with strong female characters arose. Lori argued that her female students do not feel represented in literature, “They don’t...honestly they don’t see themselves represented in literature. I am just going to say they really don't...there is just not great representation of women in literature and what they could be” (personal communication, January 6, 2015). After a brief discussion about women, like “Sybil Ludington,” who “had a voice and was heard,” but “we silenced them” (personal communication, January 6, 2015), Lori connected the conversation to women in education when she asked, “What is the percentage of women in teaching as compared to men, does anybody know that number?” (personal communication, January 6, 2015).
For this meeting, the teachers and I read the Campano et al. (2013) article. In the article, Campano et al. describe how a group of elementary school students reading the text *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) took offense to a character nicknamed Zero, a name that suggested his worth. The boys claimed that “nobody knows the…value of a person” (Sachar, 1998, p. 99). Lori, connecting with the insight of the boys, began to suggest that the reason educators have allowed departments of education to quantify students and teachers is because most teachers are women:

> Just interested in that just because this article...they really do address the testing thing and then I started to think have we been just pushed around and told what to do because most of teaching is women and who has been doing this (pushing us around), men. I mean I am just throwing that out there. I started to think why...why...why have we stood by and let this happen to our children...because...it's a huge deal, and now just stand by and let all these other things happen and get a number attached to our name which really intensely bothers me...and we are just not going to do anything? Why? I guess I am wondering why. Is it because there are a lot of women in education? Is it because education is mostly women? I am talking K through twelve. And we just don't say anything? What's the reason? (personal communication, January 6, 2015)

Lori’s response is quite interesting given where she was in October regarding this same topic. She is questioning whether the system for evaluating educators and state testing has been a result of mostly women in K-12 education and mostly men making education policy. Her concern for the quantification of children emerges in this discussion. In October, she was trying to process the effects of this system on her and the pedagogy she would use. Now her concern has broadened to include the effects of the system on children, her students. Finally, she questions why there has been no resistance.

Tommie then shared her connection as she thought about the girls in her classroom and their thinking about the greater number of male lead characters in children’s literature. Tommie wondered if women generally in the United States feel powerless, and as a result think they cannot do anything:

> When you say that, it makes me wonder too like there are so many students, the girls of my classroom are also saying that boys are more interesting and that boys live more complex lives. Is this that we have grown up and not addressed that with the women in our country and so when they are pushed around they think what can I do or, a letter to a company wouldn't do anything? (personal communication, January 6, 2015)
Tommie's question reminds me of Ira Shor's (1999) introduction to critical literacy: “Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us. That world addresses us to produce the different identities we carry forward in life.” Shor goes on to give us hope: “Yet, though language is fateful in teaching us what kind of people to become and what kind of society to make, discourse is not destiny” (p. 1). Tommie is wondering about the social reproduction of marginalized people groups. Just as Lori questions why women in particular have not resisted the state’s educator evaluation system and state testing, Tommie wonders if her female students think boys are more interesting and live more complex lives because they have no context nor role models for women resisting.

Lori continued to discuss her long-held concern with the testing of children, something she argues is developmentally inappropriate. She continues to wonder about the lack of resistance to this system of testing by educators, specifically female educators:

I am reading this article and it is bothering me what I am seeing going on in education and for the longest time it bothered me for the children and what have we done about it. That intensely bothers me. I can't even tell you... It's just so unfair that a doctor takes an MCAT and takes five and half hours to take it and my fourth grader takes 13 hours. I don't care if we break it up every hour and a half, two hours a day. That is not right. It is not developmentally appropriate and where are the women who are mainly the educators saying this is not fair to our children. Where’s our voice? ... And now we got a number attached to our name. It is not just the students. (personal communication, January 6, 2015)

Lori compares the length of an MCAT that a doctor takes to the length of time children spend each year taking the PSSA. She questions why educators, particularly female educators, have not taken a stand. She then suggests that because educators have not taken a stand for students, a number is now attached to educators. Tommie agreed and said one of the things that stood out to her was “it is natural not just for adults, but for children to even say, ‘Hey you can't make me a number. You can't devalue me within a numerical system.’” Tommie reflected further on the ways she may contribute to the enumeration of students:

Sometimes I fall into the track of letting that happen to me and letting it happen to my students and doing it to my students. When I think about, how they are doing on a particular test, that is the number. Am I reinforcing this process...every time I hand them back a paper with a score on it? (personal communication, January 6, 2015)
Lori agreed that educators are partly responsible, saying “I think we let kids be reduced to that and I think now we are letting a lot of teachers be reduced to that...I don't think we have stated a voice in it” (personal communication, January 6, 2015). Tommie, further reflecting on her math students, described the effect the state labels of below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced have on her students:

When I think about the students in my math class and over and over and over again what are they told about themselves...and that's not true but they believe it because score after score after score shows them that they...it validates that word over them and even with these tests, they may not know their score, but they know if they get proficient, advanced or below basic. I mean telling somebody, labeling somebody below anything... (personal communication, January 6, 2015)
Each time I read this set of quotes by Lori and Tommie, I am reminded of two things. The first is the student in the Campano et al. study (2013) who pushed back against the text *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) in response to the quantification of the character nicknamed Zero. I am also reminded of a poem written by Lutheran minister Martin Niemöller in Germany in 1946, after he had been confined to prison from 1937 to 1945 for opposing Hitler (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016). Niemöller wrote:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

While I hesitate to compare state testing or Pennsylvania’s system for educator effectiveness to the atrocities by the regime of Adolph Hitler in the mid-twentieth century, I think the moral of Niemöller’s poem applies. Just as Niemöller was reflecting on his own responsibility, his lack of resistance to the oppression of so many people, Lori and Tommie were reflecting on theirs and other teachers’ lack of resistance to an oppressive system. Am I exaggerating in referring to the Pennsylvania Effective Educator Evaluation System as oppressive? Perhaps. But, first consider a detailed literary sketch of PSSA test administration:
As public school teachers in the state of Pennsylvania, fourth grade teachers Lori and Tommie administer the state assessment to their students. As I reread their quotes, I hear their voices and sense the tension they feel as they distribute materials, read directions, then watch students read, think about, and select answers to each question. Lori and Tommie see nine and ten-year-old fourth grade students seated, separated from peers, and quiet for a long period of time. The evidence of their thinking is mostly reduced to a bubble. They have been directed to fill each selected bubble in completely and to not make any stray marks on their answer sheet, scripted directions teachers are required to read. Students can use scrap paper, but that paper must be collected with the test booklets and answer sheets, and unlike the test booklets and answer sheets, be destroyed locally as if the scrap paper contained spy codes that threaten world peace. Except each student and their teacher, no one will ever see the evidence of their thinking on that scrap paper. Students will not get credit for their thinking unless it is represented by a correctly selected and completely filled bubble on their answer sheet.

Those same test booklets and answer sheets are then boxed and sent to DRC. Some of the test booklets are stained with the tears of children. Some of the answer sheets have eraser smudges, others holes caused by multiple erasures, evidence of the uncertainty of some students, frustrated because they cannot read the passages or figure out how to solve some of the math problems. In the end, each student will be enumerated and their development for the year reduced to three labels, one each for reading, math, and science. Each child will either be advanced, proficient, basic, or below basic in three content areas. Their teachers’, principals’, and schools’ effectiveness will be enumerated in those same tension-filled hours over a period of three weeks. And, while we document in those same answer booklets children’s race, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and giftedness, and children who are English language learners, economically disadvantaged, and who qualify for Title 1 services, with the exception of accommodations such as small group or individualized testing, a transcriber, or questions read aloud, most of the children will take the same reading, math, and science assessments, and be held to the same outcomes as all other fourth grade students, as measured by this once-yearly state assessment.

In this educational world of hyper-accountability, there are no passes…for difference…a bad day…death of a family member or friend…an estranged parent…homelessness…hunger…first generation immigrant parents…a morning incident on the school bus…a jammed locker… Do we think teachers, school leaders, and parents are struggling because of their own perceived contribution to this oppressive system? Do we think children understand their role in this system? We are all complicit in this system of high-stakes accountability. Some of the time we are complicit for what we intentionally do. But more often, we are complicit for what we do not do. As a leader, I facilitate the administration of state assessments. I eagerly await the preliminary scores each June, then report those scores to my third and fourth grade teachers. I have also, as Tommie explained, used the scores in ways that placed teachers in comparative and
uncomfortable positions with their peers. These are things I do that implicate me. There are also things I have not done such as engage in public acts of resistance. However, I also do intentional things to negate to some extent the importance of the assessment results for the students and staff of my school. We do not spend much time on what some call “test prep.” We do not use workbooks or purchase materials made specifically for test practice. We do not eliminate non-tested subjects or experiences to make more time for content coverage. We do not have scripted programs. We no longer use curriculum maps that dictate pacing. In these ways, I work and help staff work against the purpose of the state assessment which is control and accountability of our public schools.

“I am Worthy, I Belong, and I am Loved”

February 2015. By February of 2015, Lori and Tommie repositioned themselves. They both described a changed professional identity that no longer allowed them to stand by as if they were powerless. During the February meeting, following a reading of some of the dissertation proposal defense transcript, the participants were reflecting on and sharing what we thought we were doing in our critical inquiry community and how we were thinking presently about critical literacy. As Lori responded to the questions, she described an emerging critical inquiry stance:

I was absolutely thinking about how does this look in my own life...There’s all kinds of social injustices and I think there’s a huge injustice going on right now and I’m not even speaking about teachers. I’m speaking about children and the whole testing thing and what have I done about that...I don’t think it’s something I can let go of and do nothing about...because I almost feel this sense of empowerment. (personal communication, February 26, 2015)

Lori is taking personal responsibility, at least in part, for PDE’s accountability system. She also reveals a sense of empowerment that has come as a result of the struggle with her role in this system. Lori paused, then continued to explain how her professional identity has evolved since the start of the critical literacy endeavor:

I really started the year out so upset about the PSSAs, and I’ve come to this realization that none of that matters. None of it matters. It's really okay and what we’re doing matters, and me being there matters, and I matter, and so what am I doing about that? I feel so much calmer in the classroom and so much more like, I am looking at you as an individual and not a test score. I don’t care what the state says. I can't do that and I'm not
looking at you like that and we’re not worrying about that anymore because I’m not that anymore.

And I think that every morning we are saying I’m worthy, I belong and I’m loved. I’m worthy no matter what that score says and you’re worthy no matter what that score says… because I had no control over that. I would just do the best job I can, you know? And so I’m going to love you no matter what and I’m going to be patient and kind no matter what because I do think you can start to feel a certain amount of pressure… I don’t want to be that teacher that just sits and talks about that in the lunchroom all the time. (personal communication, February 26, 2015)

Notice the language Lori uses throughout this passage, language that re-humanizes herself and her students—“what we’re doing matters, me being there matters, I matter, I’m not that anymore, I’m worthy, I belong, I’m loved, you’re (students) worthy, best job I can, I’m going to love you… be patient and kind… I don’t want to be that teacher.” Each morning, Lori and her students start the day by saying, “I am worthy. I belong. I am loved.” Her use of the words “no matter what” juxtaposes the dehumanizing enumeration of her and her students with a humanizing resistance of discourse and transformative pedagogy.

Tommie then shared with the group her new role as a contributing writer for Shared Justice, an online journal whose mission is to engage “young Christians in a conversation around what it means to do politics justly” (Center for Public Justice, 2015, Who We Are, para. 1). Tommie explained that when she entered education, she knew she wanted to be involved at a level that would make a difference beyond her classroom:

It’s been a year where I knew this was something that I wanted to do and when we were having conversations last year we were saying why can’t we just do this thing that was the reason that we got into education in the first place? … You have to come back to yourself. What am I doing to make a difference… how am I making a difference in my life and in my students’ lives in my profession? (personal communication, February 26, 2015)

I suggest that the development of the professional identities of Lori and Tommie from October to February highlights the potential of collective critical literacy work within inquiry communities. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) propose a challenge to the current arrangements and outcomes of schools and other educational contexts and to call for practitioner researchers in local settings… to ally their work with
others as part of larger social and intellectual movements for social change and social justice. (p. viii)

The critical literacy endeavor broadly, and the critical inquiry community more specifically, created a space for Lori and Tommie to re-imagine themselves as educators in an era of top-down accountability. In October, Lori and Tommie were distressed over their own decisions to spend instructional time on critical literacy work with their students or activities they perceived as more aligned to the state assessment. The tension they felt emerged as uncertainty and vulnerability within their own grade-level teaching teams. The tension called into question their effectiveness as educators and how their effectiveness is measured. Lori questioned whether she would remain in education in a system that places such a limit on her autonomy:

I got out of medicine. Part of the reason was because I didn’t find it incredibly satisfying that there is absolute power structure in medicine. You just do what the doctor tells you to do… All of a sudden I’m starting to feel that way again at the beginning of this year I think because of this thing. I’m thinking, do I want to stay in education? This is the reason why I didn’t want to stay in medicine. (personal communication, April 21, 2015)

March 2015. Within five months, both Lori and Tommie were in very different places as professionals. Instead of struggling with uncertainty about making time for critical literacy, they were confronting their role in the system and what they would do as an act of resistance. By February, Tommie revealed that she and Lori were planning some resistance to the 2016 PSSA:

And so I think one of the choices that we talked about openly and strategically next year, starting this year, planning for how were going to stand and do this against this testing with parents… I think that our students’ education is worth the risk of whatever score or whatever they want to put on me. It’s worth it. And you know what? We know we’re not the only teachers who think that? And so sometimes there just has to be a first person. A first group. (personal communication, February 26, 2015)

By March, Tommie stated in an inquiry group discussion that she and Lori already made the decision, and now they were planning what that resistance would be. Tommie indicated that it will involve others. Tommie also acknowledged that the resistance is a potential risk:

I can tell you that Lori and I, it’s not a decision about it, we know we plan on it. We’re planning on taking a stand next year because we know that we need time to develop and to get people on board who might also have that same stance. At some point we have to be able to risk something which goes into the conversations I have with my students. At some point, if it’s worth standing up for then it has to be worth the risk. (personal communication, March 12, 2015)
Tommie and Lori were not the only participants professionally transformed. During the March 2015 discussion, in response to Lori who asked if I was experiencing any tensions with critical literacy work, I revealed the tension that had welled up in me after Lori and Tommie had described the tension they were facing about critical literacy and standards-aligned instruction. I told the teachers that the district’s building principals, following the state’s release of PVAAS data in October of 2014, were directed to meet with teachers to discuss their PVAAS scores. In preparation, I had printed reports and placed them in file folders for each teacher. I was about to schedule individual meetings with teachers in October when Lori and Tommie exposed the effect that PDE’s system broadly and my use of the data specifically had on them. I just could not bring myself to move forward with the scheduling of those meetings. I told the study participants:

I felt like it was hypocritical of the message that I had communicated to you. That it would be hypocritical then for me to sit down with teachers and talk about these PVAAS scores. Either they matter or they don’t matter. Literally I have been sitting on them and haven’t done anything and honestly don’t plan to. That creates this tension because I tend to be a compliant person. I do what people tell me to do and take pride that I do the responsibilities of my job. (personal communication, March 12, 2015)

April 2015. In April of 2015, the state accountability system surfaced again. We were discussing empowerment in response to a text we had read. More specifically, we were discussing how vulnerable children are in the development of their identity because they are less aware of the influence others have over them. Lori connected this to how disempowered she felt at the start of the school year because of the power of others to assign a number to her without knowing her practice:

I think that’s what I’ve really felt especially at the beginning of the year is that just this sick feeling that somebody has that much power over me to assign a number to me when they don’t know what I’m doing in my classroom. (personal communication, April 21, 2015)

In the Foreword to *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (Freire, 1998), Donald Macedo and Ana Maria Araújo Freire use Paulo Freire’s invitation for adult literacy learners—“to come out of the apathy and the conformism…in which they find themselves” (p. xi)—to make the following argument:

When men and women realize that they themselves are the makers of culture, they have accomplished or nearly accomplished, the first step toward feeling the importance, the
necessity, and the possibility of owning reading and writing. They become literate, politically speaking. (Freire, 1998, p. xi)

In the four teachers’ and my struggle to confront the tensions we felt as members and potential contributors to an educator effectiveness system we found oppressive, we began to become politically literate, initially in small acts of resistance, such as burying teachers’ PVAAS reports and Lori telling me how my use of data made her feel. However, Lori and Tommie began to consider acts of resistance that carry greater risks. In 2003, the Pennsylvania Department of Education began testing fifth, eighth and eleventh grade students. Lori and Tommie were just considering a career in education at that time. Now, nine and eight years into their respective careers, Lori and Tommie are confronting difficult tensions. I feel certain they have felt these tensions before. However, I argue that it was critical literacy, the critical literacy inquiry community, and their developing critical inquiry stances that created a space for this tension and the resulting confrontation to emerge.

**Discussion**

The discussion about the state test changed in important ways from October, when it was first discussed, through May. In October, Lori and Tommie were emotional, sounding somewhat hopeless while discussing the tension they were feeling between doing what they knew to be best for students and preparing students for the state assessment. The tension developed in response to the number “attached” to them, constructed partly from their students’ performance on the PSSA. Their concern in October was personally focused. They attributed the responsibility for the way they were feeling to others—PDE, the principal, and their colleagues. By January, their comments were more student-focused as Lori and Tommie discussed their concerns for their students spending too many hours taking the test and being enumerated.

Lori and Tommie also began to share responsibility for the system that attempts to define student achievement and teacher effectiveness with a number that is constructed with such narrow inputs. They began to question why teachers have done nothing to resist the system for their students and themselves. While still emotional, Lori and Tommie’s outlooks changed from
feelings of powerlessness to feelings of empowerment, so much so that they began to plan how they would oppose the 2016 PSSA. In October, I sensed hopelessness and defeat caused by the disequilibrium they were feeling between the kind of teacher they wanted to be and the kind of teacher the system would reward. By January, an awareness was apparent of the responsibility they, as educators, had for their students’ and their own positioning within a system characterized as top-down hyper-accountability.

The space that was needed to participate collectively in critical literacy and inquiry work was vital in confronting the tensions that emerged for Lori, Tommie, and me related to Pennsylvania’s Effective Educator Evaluation System, and more specifically the system’s emphasis on students’ performance on a standards-based assessment. Our developing understanding of critical literacy and our developing critical inquiry stances brought an awareness of our own and our students’ positionality within the state’s student and educator evaluation system. The inquiry community provided a safe space to be vulnerable as we acknowledged and processed the tensions.

The initial focus of the tension was our own identities as educators. Lori asked multiple times, “Who am I?” as she struggled at the start of the year to be the teacher she envisioned when she chose to become a teacher or the teacher whom the educator evaluation system rewards. Tommie struggled with a decision to spend time on critical literacy work in her classroom, something she felt her students needed as six of the students were processing the deaths of one of their parents, or spend time on what will be measured on the state assessment. I struggled to make a decision, a decision I prayed about, of whether to meet with teachers to share and discuss with them their PVAAS score, an action expected of public school principals, or protect the space/culture in place for this work, and in the process, my own integrity. In the end, we all made the choice that brought us to education, the choice to do what we each viewed as best for students and teachers. We chose to do what we knew to be right, and what we knew was the only choice any of us could live with.
Our collective critical inquiry community provided us a space where we could confront and process the decisions we each faced. The work of confronting and processing led to a clearer professional identity, an identity that we found freeing and empowering. In a relatively short period of time, Lori and Tommie progressed from questioning whether their quantification by the system was a risk worth taking, to planning opposition towards the testing part of the system. I changed plans from complying with expectations of meeting with teachers to share PVAAS scores to burying the reports in an in-basket on my desk and later my desk drawer. This action was symbolic of my opposition to the reduction of the complexity of teaching to a number. If Lori and Tommie had not revealed to our group their struggle with the Pennsylvania Educator Effectiveness Evaluation System in October, I would most likely have met with teachers and discussed their PVAAS scores.

How did the participants in this study confront tensions that emerged from the work of critical literacy? The confrontation with tensions happened within the safe space of the collective—our critical inquiry community where we heard about, read about, and learned how to examine the perspectives and positioning of others. Our critical inquiry community provided a safe space to confront and re-imagine our work and our own professional identities. It was a space to become “critically literate”, where “we examined our ongoing development to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it” (Shor, 1999, p. 2). Through this work and in our inquiry community we began to examine and more clearly understand our own evolving identities, and the influence we each have in the development of our own, each other’s, and our students’ identities. For this reason alone, the space we occupy and share with each other and students must be characterized by mutuality.
CHAPTER SIX: NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR TEACHING, LEADING, AND LEARNING

Students take risks when they see teachers take risks. Teachers take risks when they see school leaders take risks (Currie, 2015).

At the onset of this study, four teachers and I sought to answer the following broad research questions: How do teachers and a school principal adopt critical inquiry stances? How do educators make space for critical literacy? How does a critical inquiry stance shape how educators (four teachers and a principal) see themselves professionally? We set out to answer these questions by engaging in critical literacy work in the classrooms of four teachers of third and fourth grade students, and the participants’ critical literacy inquiry community.

Assumptions Carried Into and Challenged During the Study

We started the critical literacy endeavor with baggage—assumptions that shaped the early work in both classrooms and the inquiry community. We perceived critical literacy as a pedagogy, a set of instructional practices and strategies used with texts. In the first few months we did what teachers do. We began to think about the intentional work and activities related to the development of a classroom environment that would support the work of critical literacy. We knew relationships among students and between the students and teacher would be important. We spent a great deal of time discussing and planning activities related to identity work and critical literacy. We discussed the texts that would be most conducive to critical literacy work.

I set off in the critical literacy endeavor as researcher. I was going to observe, gather data, and support the work of teachers. I would provide resources and encouragement. I would insure teachers had the space (curriculum and schedule) to engage in this work. My early work in this study was a result of the faulty misconception of critical literacy and a misconception of research. Critical literacy was initially viewed as a pedagogy, something teachers would engage in, not the principal—or so I thought. I also started the work thinking I could not study myself, that I needed to be a neutral observer. Backlit by critical literacy, this assumption is laughable; thinking of any role, but particularly researcher/principal, as neutral.
The baggage became heavy a few months into the study and the assumptions were gradually exposed. We began to realize that critical literacy is not some fixed set of instructional practices. We were not learning how to teach differently for students, we were learning how to be differently with students and with each other. The title of Chapter One of this dissertation, There’s Got to be More…More to Teaching than This, symbolizes the rationale for critical literacy work. As this study was conceptualized, we were searching for something to increase the meaningfulness of our work and thought critical literacy was that something. Chapter Five’s title, With…not for, captures an important finding. Critical literacy work needs to be cradled in relationships with others, suggesting an examining and flattening of inherent and perceived hierarchies, and not for others, a phrase which is highly suggestive of a power differential. Shor (1999) argues that critical teaching “is driven and justified by mutuality…the teacher herself develops as a critical-democratic educator who becomes more informed of the needs, conditions, speech habits, and perceptions of the students” (sec. 5, para. 5). Many years ago, Freire (1998) stated, “But by listening to and so learning to talk with [emphasis added] learners, democratic teachers teach the learners to listen to them as well” (p. 65).

In some ways, we were on the right track. We knew the meaningfulness of our work was connected to the lives of our students. However, we never imagined that the key to unlocking the meaningfulness of our work was locked away within us and our own professional identities. We never realized how each of us had contributed to the system of accountability we had grown to loathe. The critical literacy endeavor brought about the transformation of each of our professional identities. It was an awakening that evolved like stages of grief. At first there was denial, then anger, followed by acceptance, a feeling of empowerment, and new possibilities. It was after we became vulnerable with each other and critically open to our own responsibility in the educators we had become, that we could begin the work to re-imagine the educators we wanted to and could be.
**Vulnerability: The Key to Mutuality**

After the close of the school year, after all the data had been collected, I began to realize that the depth of the work was cradled and made possible because of the relationships of mutuality that had developed within the inquiry community and the teachers’ classrooms. These relationships of reciprocity were different than those among other teachers, in their classrooms with students and among colleagues within professional learning communities. It took me awhile, but I finally realized the difference was the level of vulnerability that was present in the four teachers' classrooms and in our inquiry community. Vulnerability leaves us feeling exposed to judgment, and as a result, humans tend to remain guarded or closed. We want others to see us as our ideal selves. But when we do this, we tend to de-humanize ourselves and others as we neglect the fragility and frailty that makes us human. This is particularly true of educators because of the degree of criticism that surrounds us. However, critical literacy work is dependent on critical self-reflection and collaboration that is cradled in relationships of mutuality and humility, where vulnerability is only possible when genuine trust, what several of the teachers referred to as “lack of judgment,” is the norm. Next, I will discuss the significance of the study.

**The Significance of the Study**

Five educators now teach, lead, and learn with critical dispositions. Students from the classrooms of the four teachers, approximately 200 of them now two years later, had critical literacy learning and life experiences. The experiences of those students have already included work that, even for a brief moment, has made the world more just for others. Some of those students developed critical dispositions. I believe this difficult work begins one person at a time, one relationship at a time, one life at a time.

The study quickly disrupted my understandings of critical literacy and transformative learning, of leading, teaching, and learning. Quite frankly, following the proposal hearing when it was suggested that I participate in critical literacy and become vulnerable with the teachers, I did not have a clue about how to engage in critical literacy as a school leader. So, for the first time in the study, post-proposal hearing, I experienced what the teachers had been experiencing since
we first met—vulnerability—as a result of not knowing how to do critical literacy work as a leader. What do I do first? Is it how I think, or what I do, or both? I had many questions without answers. It’s not like putting on a new pair of shoes one day and suddenly you are leading and living with a critical stance. Is it questioning everything or some things? If it is some things, how do I know what to question? If it is everything, how do I question everything, and what do I do with that? Talk about feeling vulnerable. Every part of my being felt vulnerable.

My dissertation committee members said, “Critical literacy was a way of being in the world.” While I understood their words and what they meant literally, practically I did not really understand what “being in the world critically” looked or felt like. I am sure my committee members sensed my misconception of critical literacy—early on, I thought critical literacy was a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, something teachers did for kids, such as a best practice or instructional activity. I had read multiple accounts of the transformative outcomes of critical literacy. It seemed to be a missing feature of our language arts program specifically and our school culture more broadly.

For me, it was an important “something” to do and study because it seemed real, and humanizing, and transformative for students, teachers, and leaders in unprecedented times—information economy, global connectedness, political correctness, the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor, the -isms of race, sexual orientation, class, and gender, and the hyper-accountability of fixed outcomes for unfixed people. It was a way to increase the relevance and meaningfulness of the work of educators.

How was I to know that engaging in critical literacy was a bit like opening Pandora’s Box? At one point in the study, one of the teachers said, “There is no turning back.” Once you begin to develop a critical inquiry stance, you question many, many things. Beliefs are questioned, understandings are disrupted, and the things we have normalized are suddenly critiqued. The phrase “ignorance is bliss” suggests that it is better not to know because knowledge, in the context of the phrase, requires action or apathy. While I do not really believe that ignorance is bliss, I acknowledge that critical inquiry stances can be quite disruptive to our understandings of
people, institutions, structures, processes, relationships, and roles. Even more uncomfortable is the disruption of our beliefs about the agendas of people and institutions such as education. It is much more comfortable to think that education exists as a public institution to provide all people access to better futures, and as a result, a better world. It is far less comfortable to think that public education exists to reproduce social structures and inequities. Critiquing requires courage. Being vulnerable to the critique of others requires courage. Vulnerability and humility become constant and necessary companions.

But so does hope. While critical literacy causes us to courageously question and think deeply about the experiences, positions, and perspectives of others, critical literacy also provides hope for better futures, better selves. Rogers, Mosley, Kramer, and the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group (2009) developed a framework of critical literacy that "leans on twin pillars of critique and hope" (p. 195). Critique enables us to examine "what is" and hope enables us to imagine "what might be" (p. 195). Rogers et al. assert that it is the space or "hyphen" between critique and hope where learning occurs. They assert that "learning becomes situated as the product and process of working the hyphen, the in-between space between what is (reality) and what might be (possibility)" (p. 195). They refer to what others call a stance or way of being as a "habit of critique and hope" (p. 195), where the possibilities that come from the deliberate and critical work of inquiry communities disrupt the unjust realities of school. While critique alone leaves us in the same place we started with a dash of pessimism, hope enables us "to try on different practices and identities" (p. 195).

For many years I have believed that education is the most influential profession on earth. I believe this for several reasons. Other than parents or guardians, educators spend more time with children than people of any other profession. Children are required to attend school, and most attend public schools. Therefore, every child in the United States will spend a significant portion of their life between the ages of five and eighteen in schools with educators. Children go through remarkable developmental, physical, emotional and intellectual stages during this period of their lives. They develop powerful identities that will influence the many choices they will make.
as young adults—relationships, profession, spirituality, agency, gender identity, sexual orientation, among others.

Quite possibly the most important understanding that has developed in me through my doctoral studies, research, and writing of this dissertation is that everything about schooling is political—social constructs created, mandated, and governed by humans with specific agendas. When I began this study, I felt a responsibility to broaden the scope of my school’s English language arts program by adding a critical dimension to our framework. The goal was developing in students a critical disposition as they consume and create texts. I realize that it is so much more than a critical disposition for reading and writing. It is a critical disposition for citizenship in this world, to make the world more fair and just. My responsibility as a principal is much more than expanding curriculum frameworks to include critique. I must embody and model a habit of critique and hope; to create a school culture where critique and hope is the norm for every educator and every student. Now, a year later, I want to shout it out to all leaders—leaders must be vulnerable with those we lead in order to lead with and not for. This is the first step in developing stances of inquiry and critique.

The changes in how five educators teach, lead, and learn as a result of this study are of enough importance. Our development of the habits of critique and hope is significant. However, there is so much more. This study took place in small town rural America. I have lived in the small town in which I work since I was fifteen months old. The family homestead, now owned by my sister, is third generation. It is a great place to raise a family. Crime is much less of a concern than it is in larger towns and cities. Most of my mother’s side of the family lived in or near this same town. People know one another; often families go back many generations. Many family members, neighbors, and friends attend and even plan social functions together. People support one another during life’s greatest celebrations, such as marriages, new homes, and new babies. People also support one another during the most difficult times in life, including sickness and death. Many people share common values and beliefs.
However, the strengths of small-town America present some challenges, and I think the most urgent challenge related to the significance of this study is homogeneity. At the risk of stereotyping small towns, I am going to discuss some of the challenges based on my own experiences. There is a lack of diversity in my small town—race and ethnicity, religion, education, work, and social activities. This becomes a problem because we naively normalize the attributes that are shared such as race and religion. We lack experience with otherness. We form generalizations about “others” without personal experience. Our sameness becomes so normalized, we would never consider the need to question it. The stories of our citizens are told in barber shops and beauty salons, in lines at the grocery store or the post office. School personnel know the many family ties of our children. Gossip has a life of its own. Some of us grow up and leave wanting something far different. However, many of us stay, and the normalized attributes are passed on to the next generation unquestioned.

This is the significance of this study—critical literacy in small-town America. Our challenge now is expanding our group to others and moving the epicenter of the work from classrooms to our school and community. The questions are many. The conversations are potentially risky. Where do we even begin? These are the questions our critical literacy collective are now exploring. Possibly, the most urgent question for our critical literacy collective is, “What do we do about our own Whiteness?”

**The Absence of Race**

When I first thought about a critical literacy study in my elementary school, I considered what it would be like given the predominantly White students in our school. In the many critical literacy studies I had become familiar with, race seemed a common social justice issue, but it was often raised by students who were other than White. I wondered what issues would emerge in our school given our lack of racial diversity. As it turned out, race was not a theme that emerged. Students connected with poverty and gender, but not race.

My Whiteness never occurred to me until I started the doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania. We engaged in some small group identity work our first week of classes. I was part
of a small group of five; two of my group members were Black males, one was a White male, and one a bi-racial female. One of the questions I left the activity with was why the race of the two Black males was such an integral part of their identity, and it was not for the White male or me. In my life, I cannot even remember a time when I thought about being White. I often thought about my gender and the many things that seemed unavailable to me because I was female. I often thought about my identity as a child of divorced parents, about being poor and the things I did not have access to because we were poor. Yet, my own Whiteness never occurred to me.

DiAngelo, in her book *What It Means to Be White* (2012), describes her race, White, as “unremarkable” (p. 134) because “in virtually every situation or context deemed normal or valuable in society, I belong racially” (p. 135). DiAngelo goes on to argue that the sense of belonging as a White person in the United States is so common it is “taken for granted that [she does] not have to think about it or notice it” (p. 135). As a White living in the predominantly White area I grew up, I relate to DiAngelo’s experience. Thinking back to my childhood, I can only recall two Black people living in my community. Both were male: one was a student, the other a high school English teacher. While I do not ever recall thinking less of them because they were Black, I do remember noticing that they were Black, and remember probably referring to them as Black because Black was uncommon in my lived experience.

DiAngelo helps me understand why I do not even think about being White. I just am. As such, I had also never thought about being advantaged because of my White identity, or about being complicit in racism. My life is a great example of the importance of talking about race, specifically Whiteness, in Lewis Woods Elementary School. If left unexamined, we socialize our students to our norms. Underneath our norms are implicit and powerful messages about what it means to be.

**Regrets**

Two regrets stand out to me as I look back at the study. The first is the missed opportunity to pursue the gender issues. They surfaced with students in some of the classrooms, and students and teachers pursued the issues there. However, they also surfaced in our inquiry
community as Lori questioned whether the fact that the majority of teachers are women has had an impact on the state’s educator effectiveness law and even the level of accountability directed at teachers. Lori wondered if the rhetoric and law would be the same if most educators were male. She also questioned whether a male-dominated profession would have done things to resist the enumeration of students, then teachers. In hindsight, I regret that our inquiry community did not pursue Lori’s questions.

Related to gender issues, but also our group’s shared Christian beliefs is a second regret. Our group did not unpack our own religious identities and how those shape how we teach, lead, and learn. I recently read the book *Jesus Feminist* (Bessey, 2013). The author discusses her own faith, the patriarchal society that existed before the birth and after the death of Jesus Christ, and the Biblical evidence she points to that God never intended men to be considered superior to women. She asserts that because sin entered the world, humans have created gender and racial hierarchy and roles that were never part of God’s plan. Bessey (2013) suggests that many in the Church have used scripture out of context to position men and women into specific roles defined by gender. Bessey uses multiple examples of Biblical women placed in leadership positions by God.

This reading has led me to questions about my own identity as a Christian woman, and how my identity was shaped by the Church through scripture and by my own Christian mother. There is so much to unpack related both to my Christian identity, but also my gender identity. While our inquiry community unpacked our “professional” identities, we did not spend a great deal of time unpacking our “personal” identities. We never considered the tangled web of our identities that greatly influence who we are and how we act as women, teachers, leaders, wives, mothers, sisters, Christians, and more. So while race was notably absent from the study, I would suggest that religion was as well, and gender was a missed opportunity.
New Possibilities for Learning, Teaching, and Leading

New Possibilities for Learning

The National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project seeks to “drive personal, organizational, and societal change toward greater equity and diversity” (National SEED Project, 2013-2016). SEED co-founders Emily Styles and Peggy McIntosh believe in the importance of incorporating students’ lived experiences, “the realities of their own lives, making their own reflections part of the curriculum,” an approach coined “serial testimony” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Christensen (2009) also incorporates students’ lived experiences into her high school English curriculum. She works from “the understanding that anyone who has lived has stories to tell” (p. 1). Christensen uses an approach where “students’ lives are mined for stories, celebrated with poetry, and analyzed through essays that affirm their right to a place in our society” (p.1). Campano (2007) has coined his acknowledgement that “the students possess valuable and relevant knowledge to bring to bear on their educational development” an “improvisational” approach (p. 112). Students’ lives matter and should be incorporated in meaningful ways into their educational experiences.

A student-focused curriculum needs to be embraced in relationships of mutuality. Sahni (2001) argues that it is relationships that empower students, enabling them to re-imagine their own lives, imagine new possibilities, and thereby transform their own lives into “an imaginative narrative and poetic invention of possible worlds and possible selves (Sahni, 2001, p. 33).

Transformative education requires educators to take a much more organic approach to teaching and learning, one that genuinely enables students to own their school experiences, learning, and possible futures.

Student-focused curriculum and learning requires teachers to know students in more intimate ways. It requires a focus on students rather than standards or the curriculum. While I am not suggesting that we eliminate standards, I am asserting that rather than the standards, students and their individual lives be central to the process. The current educational climate places fixed standards and outcomes at the center. This type of approach requires students to be
nimble and flexible, adjusting to an inflexible curriculum. I am arguing for the transformation Lori made, where the student is central and the curriculum is developed from their lived experiences, interests, and skills. The curriculum should be nimble and flexible in order to meet the individual needs of students. It should be a guide or framework that allows space for students’ lived experiences, curiosities and passions, rather than a map with pacing guides, something the teacher uses to inform decisions about teaching and learning. I think of it as project-based learning with a critical, social justice lens. New possibilities for learning requires courageous teaching.

**New Possibilities for Teaching**

Garcia and O’Donnell (2015) have this to say about supposed best practices, “best practices rely on the myth that some teaching techniques are so foolproof they will work with all students in all contexts for all time” (p. 5). This is a courageous assertion given the current rhetoric and manipulation of departments of education to get schools and teachers to adopt “best practices” and “research-based” programs. Using a yoga metaphor of pose, wobble, and flow, Garcia and O’Donnell offer a model in which teachers can adopt frames for instructional practices. The word pose conveys intentionality, deliberation, and mindfulness—the why of teaching. As poses are to yoga, stances are to teaching. Teachers take them on for thoughtful reasons. Garcia and O’Donnell assert that “the poses teachers take up have profound implications for the kind of teacher they intend to be and the impact they and their students will have on the world” (p. 5). This speaks to my belief of the profound influence teachers have in the lives of students. To whom much influence is given, much responsibility for students’ lives is expected.

A wobble is defined as a “naturally occurring circumstance that occurs routinely in classrooms when something unexpected emerges” (pp. 5-6). Teachers often feel unprepared for wobbles. The authors suggest that “a wobble is discomfort because of going to the edge…it marks a liminal state, a state of transition…where…change is occurring” (p. 6). A wobble signals the gap between the current reality and imagined possibilities. Garcia and O’Donnell explain it
“signals that you are pursuing worthwhile poses that require learning, reflection, and professional growth” (p. 6). Garcia and O’Donnell also argue that:

like painters, the goals for…teachers are sufficiently vague as to make it difficult to know whether or not we are succeeding on a moment-by-moment basis. That is why poses are so important…they function as touchstones to guide our teaching. (pp. 7-8)

Flow is the state we might choose to always be in. It is “a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and becomes a landmark in memory” (p. 7). It is a state that occurs for people involved in meaningful work for which they feel competent. Teachers grow professionally as a result of the flow experience (p. 7). Flow can refer to small moments or long projects.

Garcia and O’Donnell (2015) describe a variety of poses or stances “intended to speak back to the inequities reproduced in schools and societies” (p. 132). Inherently political, “the poses include shifting the purposes of instruction from the classroom to civic outcomes” (p. 132). In order to re-imagine new possibilities for teaching, we first must acknowledge that our work is political and that societal inequities are commonly reproduced in schools, often unbeknownst to educators.

Re-imagining the work of teachers also requires what Lytle & Cochran-Smith (1992) refer to as an “inside/outside” notion of knowledge for teaching, “calling attention to teachers as knowers” and “legitimizing the knowledge that comes from practitioner research” (p. 469). Teacher/practitioner research “redefines the notion of knowledge for teaching, alters the locus of control for the knowledge base, and realigns the practitioner’s stance in relationship to knowledge generation in the field” (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, p. 469). We need to move away from fixed notions of curriculum and best practices, and instead create spaces of mutuality where teachers are valued, supported, and rewarded for taking up stances or poses of inquiry and critical dispositions. This requires courageous leadership.

New Possibilities for Leading

It takes incredible courage to make our schools spaces of mutuality for the work of teaching and learning. In the midst of this era of hyper-accountability, scrutiny of our schools and
the outcomes, as measured narrowly by standardized tests, places school leaders in precarious positions. A few years ago, much of the pressure to increase students’ performance on the state standardized tests came from the top down. With a student-focused board of school directors and superintendent, I found it easy to insulate teachers, and thereby students from a hyper-focus on test performance. I never felt pressured to narrow our curriculum or students’ school experiences to proficiency on the state test. However, that became a bit more complicated when the state tied students’ performance on the state tests to teachers’ evaluations. Suddenly, I felt pressure from teachers who were concerned about their effectiveness scores. Teachers were feeling more vulnerable. Insulating them suddenly felt risky.

To acknowledge the risks, remain student-focused, and engage in critical literacy work requires courage and commitment as a leader. There are risks related to the state’s accountability system. There are risks inherent in critical literacy. Those engaged in this work have as a goal the development of critical dispositions in themselves, teachers, and students. While critical educators may see critical dispositions as a good thing, school employees and boards, parents and/or community members may disagree. They may find the critical dispositions of students, teachers, and leaders unsettling or even threatening. Critical dispositions cause us to question and de-normalize those things that have become normal and unquestioned. People tend to like normal, particularly if they benefit from it.

In the county of Lewis Woods Elementary School, there are no other leaders or teachers engaged in critical literacy work. It is one thing to jump on the bandwagon and start doing noncontroversial things that others are doing. It is quite another to be the trailblazer of controversial approaches. The four teachers and I are absolutely in the vulnerable position of trailblazers for this potentially threatening work. And while we have agreed to assume the risks, there has not been push-back—yet. Our resolve for this work has not yet been tested.

**Implications for the Field of Critical Literacy**

It is imperative that the field of critical literacy gets a seat at the table of school leadership programs in order to facilitate the development of critical dispositions in future school leaders.
Principals matter, and if the field wants to see critical literacy and inquiry get to scale in public schools, then the development of critical dispositions in future school leaders needs to be a priority. Brown (2004) has developed a “process-oriented model that is responsive to the challenges of preparing educational leaders committed to social justice and equity” (p. 77). Using a weaving metaphor, “preparation programs are viewed as the contextual loom, the theoretical underpinnings of a transformative framework as the warp, and the pedagogical strategies as the woof. All three components are necessary in preparing leaders with the knowledge, skill, and desire to examine why and how school policies and practices” (Brown, p. 79) advantage some and disadvantage others.

Rogers et al. (2009) developed a framework of critical literacy that “leans on twin pillars of critique and hope” (p. 195). They acknowledge the lifetime process of becoming critically literate. They assert that:

more so than life-long learning, a lifespan perspective of critical literacy education considers what is and what might be in our lives, our classrooms, and the groups in which we participate. It requires that we use our social imagination to imagine new possibilities and courses of actions. (pp. 194-195)

While they encourage a critical literacy education lifespan perspective, they acknowledge the “irreconcilable tension of disrupting notions of what is” (p. 195). Rogers et al. “conceptualizes the space between what is and what might be as the place where learning occurs” (p. 195). If we want teachers to invite students into and share these spaces with students, then school leaders must invite teachers into and share these spaces with teachers.

Furthermore, the most important thing I can do for all students is to promote and advocate for undergraduate and graduate educational programs that “lean on the twin pillars of critique and hope” (Rogers et al., p. 195). Educators have a profound and lasting influence in the lives of students, and therefore in the character of our nation and the world. Every problem facing mankind can be traced back to our interdependence on each other and the world. With that in mind, the development of the habit of critique and hope in educators and students should be one of the most important missions of schools.
Finally, the field of critical literacy education needs public school leaders to engage in critical literacy work, develop critical inquiry dispositions, and make public their work. While there is a plethora of research and literature describing the critical literacy work of teachers, often in community with university critical literacy educators, there is a notable absence of research and literature from school leaders. The partnerships of critical literacy educators and school leaders might facilitate the development of critical literacy education in school leaders. It is much easier to take risks and take up new stances when in partnership with others. In south central Pennsylvania few educators are engaged in critical literacy work, and to my knowledge, I am the only school leader.

What Now? The Critical Literacy Endeavor Continues

While the study came to a close, the critical literacy endeavor continues. The critical and inquiry stance that emerged in all of us continues to be cultivated in the work we are doing alongside each other, our students, and our newest member, a literacy and language education professor working at a nearby university. We continue to read about critical literacy work and meet to discuss our own work and the work of those we read about. The four teachers and I are involved in some exciting things as we continue the critical literacy endeavor, and even though our work is sometimes done alone in classrooms and offices, it is always shared and owned by the collective.

*Lori Crownover* continues to teach fourth grade at Lewis Woods Elementary School. She says she is “prepared to fight against the system regardless of the consequences.” She has made a point to insure girls have a voice in her classroom as she believes we live in a society where men and their voices are valued more than women. Lori is questioning why women behave the way they do, referring to how the mostly female public school teachers have contributed to a system that oppresses students and teachers. Lori is also interested in what advertisements, toys, and other influencers of children say about gender roles. For the third consecutive year, Lori’s students along with the other fourth grade students, will provide the leadership for what has become a community-wide service project, Water for South Sudan. As part of the project,
students design the campaign to raise money by writing and sharing texts with the other students in our school, creating advertisements, writing letters to local businesses, and this year, organizing a walk-a-thon. The goal by the end of this year will be to have raised enough money over three years to completely fund the building of a well in a village in South Sudan. Speaking about her role in education, Lori says, “It looks different for me now” (because of the critical literacy endeavor). My happy moment will be when it looks different for them” (referring to the students).

Tommie Murray started writing for Shared Justice, an online Christian community geared towards engaging young Christians in conversations about how to do politics justly (Center for Public Justice, 2015). In August, Tommie wrote an article entitled Change Agent: Redefining the Buzzword (Murray, 2015). While she continues to teach fourth grade at Lewis Woods Elementary School, she is participating in an educational leadership program with Regent University, where she will earn an M. ED. in educational leadership and principal certification. I am Tommie’s mentor for her principal’s internship, which has been a useful role following the study. Together, we question the things that have become normalized in my work. With a new class of fourth grade students, Tommie is helping them confront their own understandings of what it means to be different. Over the past two years, Tommie’s students have initiated and engaged in several service projects including making blankets and donating supplies to the Humane Society, donating used pencils and markers to children in developing countries through the Right to Write (2013) organization, and for the third year, co-leading with other fourth grade classrooms the community-wide Water for South Sudan project. Because of the critical literacy endeavor, Tommie has changed her selection of read alouds to include Wonder (Palacio, 2012), Esperanza Rising (Ryan, 2002), and Long Walk to Water (Park, 2010). Tommie now takes a critical literacy approach to the Pennsylvania history unit. She and her students have created a critical literacy wall in their classroom.

Sammy Lenhart continues to teach third grade at Lewis Woods Elementary School. Recently, she wrote an email to the host of a science news event challenging his statements that
mostly boys like to watch things explode. This is the first time in Sammy’s life she has spoken out. She showed me the email she wrote to the show’s host, his response to her email, and what she intended to do next. She and her colleague Susan have engaged the other third grade teachers and students in a letter-writing campaign to challenge the statements the host made during his news event and his email response to Sammy where he defended his report. Sammy invited other teachers in our school district to join the letter-writing campaign. As she exited my office door, Sammy turned and said to me, “I would have never done this before critical literacy.”

Susan Bouslough continues to teach third grade at Lewis Woods Elementary School. Within the last year, she spoke up at the local teachers’ association meeting, something she said she “would never have done before critical literacy.” For Susan, this work has become even more meaningful as her daughter, an education major, is walking the critical literacy road with her. Susan and her students are currently engaged with Sammy Lenhart’s students in a letter-writing campaign to a radio host in Pittsburgh who made some gender-based claims about children during a science news event. Susan has become much more intentional about choosing books that lend themselves to issues of social justice for read alouds and shared reading. One of Susan’s favorites is I Am Malala (Yousafzai, 2013) where Susan’s students are drawn to and unpack the injustice surrounding the lack of girls’ access to education in other countries. While the text initiates conversations about gender roles in other countries, it leads to an examination of students own gendered identities. Susan has noticed critical stances emerging in her students as a result of her classroom community becoming a space of mutuality. Students are more aware of injustice. They feel “emboldened” (Susan’s word) to critically examine and respond to injustice. For example, when her class was reading about and increasing their understanding of poverty in Fly Away Home (Bunting, 1991), the students chose to adopt a family at Christmas. Students brought in and wrapped toys, clothing, and food items for their adopted family. Susan proudly remembers students’ refusal to take home a baseball flyer last year because it excluded girls.

One of my goals to continue this work was to start a regional critical literacy group. In partnership with the four teachers in this study and an education professor, Dr. S. Tanner, at a
near-by university, we have been meeting monthly since November 2015. Dr. Tanner is also involved in the school-university professional development school. He recently moved from the Midwest to take a university position as Assistant Professor of Literacy Education. The type of research and topic of his dissertation? Youth participatory action research and critical literacy. Our goal is to develop and grow a critical literacy collective in rural Pennsylvania, engaging in inquiry, writing, and publishing. With the start-up of the regional critical literacy collective, the teachers and I quickly realized that critical literacy is not even on the radar of most educators in this region of the state. We feel a responsibility to change that.
## APPENDIX A: MATRIX OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS METHODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do teachers and a school principal adopt critical inquiry stances? How do they</td>
<td>From critical literacy inquiry community:</td>
<td>During data collection</td>
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<td>enact critical literacy? How do they participate in a practitioner inquiry community?</td>
<td>- Critical Friend Field Notes</td>
<td>- Listened to audio files</td>
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<td>How do they confront tensions that emerge as a result of a critical inquiry stance?</td>
<td>- Audio Files</td>
<td>- Reviewed critical friend field notes and participant reflections</td>
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<td>How do educators make space for critical literacy? What constitutes that space?</td>
<td>- Transcripts of Audio Files</td>
<td>Following data collection</td>
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<td>What do people behave in that space? What are the relational norms and how were they</td>
<td>- Jottings</td>
<td>- Participant round of coding using in vivo method with the transcripts of the</td>
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<td>created?</td>
<td>Participant Reflections</td>
<td>discussions following the proposal hearing</td>
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<td>How does a critical inquiry stance shape how we see ourselves professionally?</td>
<td>Research Memos</td>
<td>- Development of first code framework</td>
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<td>- Second round of coding of all data using eleven-code framework</td>
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<td>- Third round of coding of all data using four-code framework</td>
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<td>- Analysis of codes</td>
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<td>- Analysis themes applied back to data holistically for arguments and stories</td>
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### APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTED

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Data</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Audio File</td>
<td>Critical Literacy Inquiry Community</td>
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<td>Transcripts</td>
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<td>Critical Friend Field</td>
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<td>Notes</td>
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<td>Jottings (Harpster)</td>
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<td>Research Memos</td>
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<td>Participant Reflections</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is critical literacy? What are we doing in this inquiry community?</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am From... poems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open-ended (no questions)</td>
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<td>How do I adopt a critical inquiry stance? How do educators make space for critical literacy? How does a critical literacy stance shape how we see ourselves professionally?</td>
<td>05.14.2015</td>
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</tbody>
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APPENDIX C: DATA EXPLORATION GROUP PROTOCOL, 6.19.2015

Research Questions

5. How does a principal adopt a critical inquiry stance?
   a. How does a school principal enact critical literacy?
   b. How does a school principal participate in a practitioner inquiry community?
   c. How does a principal confront tensions that emerge as a result of a critical inquiry stance?

6. How do teachers adopt a critical inquiry stance?
   a. How do teachers enact critical literacy?
   b. How do teachers participate in a practitioner inquiry community?
   c. How do teachers confront tensions that emerge as a result of a critical inquiry stance?

7. How do educators make space for critical literacy in a rural elementary school?
   a. What constitutes that space?
   b. How are people behaving in that space?
   c. How is language being used in that space?
   d. What are the relational norms in that space? How are the norms created?

8. How does a critical inquiry stance shape how we (four teachers and a principal) see ourselves professionally?

Conceptual Framework

![Diagram: The coming together of students, teachers, and leader for critical literacy work](image)

*Figure C1. The coming together of students, teachers, and leader for critical literacy work*
This coming together is represented in the graphic with a Venn diagram and the space for critical literacy created in the intersection of students, teachers and researcher/principal (Figure C1). It is really quite simple, yet very powerful. When Jones (2014) speaks of the collaborative coming together, she is referring to pedagogy and claiming that it must always be collaborative (p. 6). Other researchers write about the importance of relationships, specifically the investment in students’ lives (e.g., Brown, 2004; Christensen, 2009; Sahni, 2001; Willis, 2007). They talk about the importance of creating safe spaces (e.g., Campano et al., 2013; Christensen, 2009), and empowerment (e.g., Sahni, 2001; Willis, 2007) for critical pedagogy work. Jones (2006) asserts that critical literacy starts with lives (p. 63). I love Sahni’s (2001) description of the transformative classroom created in his study as “circles of mutuality” where “there were spaces of inclusion, participation, addressal, and response” (p. 22).

I am simply extending these conditions that researchers talk about for the work of critical literacy—relationships and empowerment to teachers who then pay this forward to students. Particular district, school, and classroom cultures create or limit the emotional, physical and technical space needed to engage in the work of critical pedagogy.

In summary, the conceptual framework depicts the coming together, the mutuality of principal, teachers, and students to make space for critical literacy. This space is only possible if students, teachers, and the principal work and learn in empowering classroom, school, and district cultures.

Protocol for data exploration/first cycle coding

1. Data exploration
   a. Copy the following transcripts for each participant:
      i. 20150312
      ii. 20150401
      iii. 20150421
      iv. 20150514
   b. In Vivo Coding: Uses words or short phrases from the participants own language in the data record as codes. It is particularly useful for beginning qualitative researchers and studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice (Miles, Huberman, Saldaña, 2014, p. 74)
i. This is data exploration, not interpretation, called *first cycle coding*. Our goal is to use participant language to label segments of text that are related in some way to the research questions.

ii. Take time to individually read the first transcript (20150312). You are looking for segments of text that may be related in some way to the research questions and/or conceptual framework.

iii. For each segment of text, highlight it, then note a word or short phrase the participant used that you think best captures the meaning of the segment of text. Write the word or short phrase in the right margin by the text the quote is from. Place the word or phrase in quotation marks, which indicates the participant said it.

iv. You may use the word or phrase multiple times, as long as it is a quote from the segment of text.

c. When we all finish the first transcript, we will share and discuss codes.

d. As a group, consider the following:
   i. What are the common codes/themes for this transcript?
   ii. What inconsistencies or discrepancies are evident?
   iii. What is not represented in the data?
   iv. What questions do the data raise?

2. Data interpretation
   a. What patterns or themes do we see in our codes and observations?
   b. What assumptions might be underneath what we are noticing in the data?
   c. What areas in the data stand out as needing further explanation?
   d. Which of these observations are most relevant and important to our inquiry?
   e. Based on our analysis, what do we know now?
## APPENDIX D: ELEVEN-CODE FRAMEWORK AND DESCRIPTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tension</td>
<td>Participant discussions of or reference to any of the following: tension, conflict, dissonance, struggle, act/stance, uncomfortableness, vulnerability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy inquiry group</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to the work of the critical literacy inquiry group: the usefulness of collaboration among group members, discussion related to participant reflections, encouragement of one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy enactment</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to the enactment of critical literacy: a developing critical inquiry stance, connections, the principal’s changed role, literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to empowerment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to identity, perspective, identity work with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic nature of critical literacy work</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to the organic nature of critical literacy work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and resistance</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to power and resistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social injustice issues</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to social injustice issues: poverty, social class distinctions, values, definition of success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to the spaces within our school for critical literacy work: roles, environment, relationships, autonomy, time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Participant discussions or references related to transformation: student transformation, teacher transformation, learning, awareness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. How do school principals and teachers adopt a critical inquiry stance?

1A. How do school principals and teachers enact critical literacy?

1A.1 School principals/teachers make *space* for critical literacy.

1A.2 School principals/teachers leverage power and autonomy in that *space*.

1A.3 School principals/teachers need to be role models for teachers/students in that *space*. Texts can also be chosen to provide students with peer role models.

1A.4 School principals/teachers develop relationships with others in that *space*.

1A.5 Identity work is a prerequisite to critical literacy work.

1A.6 The organic nature of critical literacy work creates uncomfortableness for teachers conditioned to planning and preparation.

1B. How do school principals and teachers participate in a practitioner inquiry community?

1B.1 School principals/teachers participate as authentic co-researchers.

1B.2 School principals/teachers share, question, wonder, analyze, reflect, problem-posit and problem-solve, learn, co-construct knowledge of theory and practice, name tensions, encourage, and transform our thinking, practice, and selves in practitioner critical inquiry communities.

1B.3 School principals/teachers journey (as in a passage) collaboratively towards a new way of being personally and professionally in the world. The destination is far less important than the journey; the value of the inquiry group cannot be overstated.

1B.4 School principals/teachers participate as real and less-than-perfect humans (vulnerable) by making visible our thinking, feelings, and actions—putting it out there for reflection, interrogation, encouragement, and alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

1C. How do school principals and teachers confront tensions that emerge as a result of a critical inquiry stance?

1C.1 There is uncertainty and uncomfortableness in the development of a critical inquiry stance.

1C.2 School principals/teachers name tensions and what, if anything, we will do about them.

1C.3 For those authentically participating and confronting tensions, transformation, professionally and personally, is inevitable.
2. How do educators make space for critical literacy in a rural elementary school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2A</th>
<th>What constitutes that space?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2A.1</td>
<td>That space is created at multiple levels including district, school, classroom, and inquiry community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A.2</td>
<td>That space is made up of multiple dimensions including environmental, relational, and emotional; schedule (time), curriculum, and programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A.3</td>
<td>That space is characterized as safe, autonomous, and empowering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A.4</td>
<td>That space compels thinking, feeling, and acting, in potentially transformative ways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2B</th>
<th>How are people behaving in that space?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2B.1</td>
<td>Participants are trying to understand each other, new ideas, and alternative ways of being in the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B.2</td>
<td>Participants are co-constructing their knowledge of others and their way of being in the world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2C</th>
<th>What are the relational norms in that space? How are the norms created?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2C.1</td>
<td>Participants in that space demonstrate mutual respect and acceptance, challenge one another without judgment, encourage one another, and interrogate power and norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2C.2</td>
<td>The norms in that space are communally established, most often organically.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. How does a critical inquiry stance shape how we (four teachers and a principal) see ourselves professionally?

The four teachers and principal feel empowered by critical inquiry/literacy work, even in this educational era of accountability. The four teachers and principal have developed a hyper-awareness of the influence our work and positionality have on the lives of others—we acknowledge our responsibility to establish empowering environments for others by identifying, leveraging, and sharing the power we have and knowledge we have co-constructed. We acknowledge our responsibility to critically consider how school practices and policies, specifically and broadly, can be advantageous and disadvantageous. We acknowledge our responsibility to model for others how to resist practices and policies that advantage some while disadvantaging others.


