SAMANTHA M. LESKA

10. REIMAGINING CURRICULUM

Engaging Students in Critical Literacy

INTRODUCTION

When I think about critical literacy, I always think back to a definition of critical literacy that Linda Christensen gave in her article, *Critical literacy: Teaching reading, writing, and outrage* (1999). In the article, she writes, "Critical literacy does explore the social and historical framework. It moves beyond a description of society and into an interrogation of it," (p. 56). For me, critical literacy is always about interrogating, deconstructing, and examining texts, so that we can uncover the power within the texts. In order to do critical literacy well, we must always question the status quo, and not accept anything at face value. It is only once we've gained an awareness of this power that we can begin to make changes. Hilary Janks speaks about the importance of change and social action when she defines critical literacy. Janks writes, "Critical literacy education focuses specifically on the role of language as a social practice and examines the role played by text and discourse in maintaining or transforming these orders. The understanding and awareness that practices can be transformed opens up possibilities, however small, for social action" (Janks, 2014, p. 349). Without the knowledge or awareness of the power that texts have over our discourses, we have no ability or opportunity to change or transform our society.

For me, the goal of education is to enable students to take action by teaching them how to be critical of the world around them. Unfortunately, it does not seem like many educational systems share this same goal. In an age of standardization, the institution of education is more focused on testing student "skills" than on encouraging students to think about and transform their worlds. Cooper and White write about this shift in educational focus that comes with standardization. They write, "We have moved from the dream of developing creative and enthusiastic problem-solvers to creating an army of compliant and obedient workers. Schools, thus, have begun to (re)focus on basic skills and knowledge and on accountability through standardized tests" (White & Cooper, 2015, p. 38). This standardization comes at a time when we need students to question more than ever. With the

K. Cooper & S. M. Anwaruddin (Eds.), Student Voice, 133–151.

globalization of our world, and the advancement in technologies, students are being inundated with texts that they must sift through to determine whether those texts can be trusted. If we do not teach students to pick apart texts and decide what they are being told and sold, then we should expect to be living in the same world generations from now. It is up to today's students and their teachers to take action and change the power dynamics in society so that our world can hopefully grow more equitable one day at a time.

Now that I have established what I see as the importance of critical literacy, I would like to turn and look at some newly designed curriculum that recently came out of the New Haven Public School District, where I used to teach in New Haven, Connecticut. After years of poorly designed curriculum, the NHPS district decided to fund the rewriting and redesign of their high school English curriculum. While I see major improvements in the curriculum, and even opportunities for students to do some critical literacy, I think the curriculum still struggles to require students to challenge the power relations within society, and fails to ask students to take any action based on their critical exploration of texts.

In the next portion of this paper, I wish to look at and critique one unit and performance task in this new curriculum, and suggest ways that it can be altered using critical literacy. I will build on some of the foundational ideas and questions in the curriculum and create two lessons and a performance task that engages students in a process of critical literacy. Through this process, I hope that I can inspire other teachers to re-imagine how they could tweak their own curriculum documents so they will be able to engage their students in critical literacy, and hopefully inspire students to create social change and transform their worlds.

CURRICULUM CRITIQUE: EXPLORING THE "AMERICAN EXPERIENCE"

Paulo Freire says, "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world,"(Freire, 1987, p. 8). In this now infamous line, Freire captures the essence of critical literacy. In order to read the word on the page you have to read the world—meaning you have to understand the context of the world in order to understand the dynamics and power of the words on the page. In turn, when you read the word you gain a greater awareness of how the world is being represented and, therefore, you are also reading or discovering something about the world you did not know before.

In order to engage students in critical literacy, we have to have them read the world and the word. This means we must immerse students in a process of deconstructing power relations in the texts they examine in and outside of class. By doing this, students will be able to develop a stronger sense of consciousness, and with this consciousness they will no longer be able to take the world at face value. Students will be able to challenge, and not just accept, the status quo.

Subject / Grade	ELA 11-12
Unit Title	The American Experience
Suggested Pacing	8 Weeks

Unit Questions

Essential Questions	Possible Supporting Questions
• What is America? • What is the American Dream? • What do Americans value?	• Is there a shared American experience? • Who defines the American Dream? • Can the American Dream be redefined? • Who defines what Americans value? • What binds us together as Americans?

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- That American identity is dynamic
- That America is in an ongoing conversation with the past
- That young Americans have a place, and can have a voice, in that conversation
- That there is a tension between group and individual needs pattern of American culture has focused alternately on the primacy of the group and the primacy of the individual needs

Background for the Teacher

Rationale

Whereas the units in the 9-10 ELA curriculum band focus on the self and his/her perception of the world, the 11-12 units invite students to explore the nature of their relationship to the world as members of society whose choices and behavior have a real impact on their world. Thus, the curriculum encourages students to move from considering who they are to considering who they are as individuals with responsibilities as well as rights. What does it mean to be an individual in society? What are the individual's responsibilities to the world as well as his/her rights? How does one engage the world critically? What happens when one does? Further, how does being a critical thinker help the individual as a citizen with rights and responsibilities to become an engaged member of a dynamic society, one that is in an ongoing conversation with the past and continuously reflecting on and debating its values? How does the individual come to see him or herself as a stakeholder in the shaping of this world?

This unit will ask students to consider foundational American documents and speeches alongside foundational works of literature by authors from a range of ethnic backgrounds as they explore what it means to be American. Both the historical documents and the literary works are essential components of this unit.

Figure 10.1. American experience unit

Above is an excerpt of the American Experience Unit from the new NHPS curriculum (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). This unit is to be used in 11th and 12th grade English classrooms across the New Haven Public School district. At the beginning of this unit, the designers engage teachers in a series of questions that they can use in their classrooms to help students explore the American experience. While some of these questions lend themselves well to deconstructing power relations, I find that, overall, the background information and questions that are provided to teachers fall short of requiring students to deconstruct power relations.

For example, one of the essential questions is: "What is the American Dream?" (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). This question alone assumes that all the people living in America have the same dream. It asks students to discover and explore what everyone is striving for. It does not take into consideration that America is a country of people from places all over the world that hold many different values. It assumes that all Americans have similar values, dreams, and identities. Once a student has

defined the "American Dream" according to recommended texts, their questioning stops.

In the "Possible Supporting Questions" section, the question, "Who defines the American Dream?" (New Haven Public Schools, 2014) is a question that begins to invite students to examine a text for the underlying power relations. For example, if students read Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" and discover that this one white man is defining what it means to be an American for the rest of its citizens, then they can begin to pick apart the power in that. For example, while Thomas Jefferson was a founding father and is regarded as a great man, he was also a slave owner. He relied on the free work of slaves to keep up his famous Monticello plantation. In one correspondence with a friend who was suffering financially, he even advised that he "should have invested in negroes" (Wiencek, 2012, p. 3). When students begin to discover this darker side of Jefferson, they can begin to read more meaning into the "Declaration of Independence." Students may begin to understand that this declaration of independence meant independence and freedom for white, land-owning men. As they develop greater knowledge of the people (such as Jefferson) who helped shape the culture of the United States, they can start to understand how and why that group of people (white, land-owning men) is still most privileged today.

While some of these questions begin to invite students to engage in conversations that reveal the power dynamics of these "foundational" American texts, the curriculum guide does not specify that students look at the context of the documents or explore the power in who wrote the documents, why they were writing them, or who they were representing or excluding in their work. For example, in the background, the curriculum says, "Thus, the curriculum encourages students to move from considering who they are to considering who they are as individuals with responsibilities as well as rights" (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). This statement suggests that students consider themselves, and their roles and responsibilities. However, they are never in any of the essential questions or other background information asked to examine how these "foundational" texts position them as individuals and determine what their rights and responsibilities look like. After all, literacy is contextual, and you can only understand the importance and meaning of a text if you understand its context. As Lankshear and Knobel (2003) say, "Literacies are bound up with social, institutional and cultural relationships, and can only be understood when they are situated within their social, cultural, and historical contexts" (p. 8), situating a text is of crucial importance in critical literacy. If students do not know who is writing the text, where the ideas are coming from, who the text is directed at, or who it does and does not represent, then students will never understand their position in relation to the text and society. They will never understand how the word also constructs their worlds. If we, as teachers, do not invite students in understanding the context, or the "world" of these texts, how can we expect them to critically deconstruct the "word" on the page and not take what is being said at face value? (Freire, 1987). How can students become "engaged

member(s) of a dynamic society" if they have not explored how society constructs them as individuals?

When talking about critical literacy, Linda Christensen says, "…students must use the tools of critical literacy to dismantle the half-truths, inaccuracies and lies that strangle their conceptions about themselves and others. They must use the tools of critical literacy to expose, to talk back to, to remedy any act of injustice or intolerance that they witness" (Christensen, 1999, p. 55). In this unit, while students are asked to explore the American Dream and American values, and become critical thinkers by exploring what these dreams and values are, the curriculum falls short of asking them to "dismantle the half-truths." Students are not being directly asked to challenge or talk back to these foundational texts. The curriculum asks students to critically analyze the meaning of these texts without asking them to expose the injustice or intolerance that is inherent within the texts. If students begin to understand that these foundational texts privilege one type of person and one point of view, they could start to understand the current inequities in their lives, and where the mindsets that produce these inequities come from. Students would have the opportunity to challenge because they have an awareness of the power these texts carry. They would be reading the world and the word and back again.

CURRICULUM CRITIQUE: ARGUING WITH A LENS

In many classrooms, my former classroom included, countless numbers of the assessments that we give as teachers are inauthentic. As an English teacher, I had students write papers or have discussions about a theme, a question, a piece of literature, or a combination of all three. While these assessments may have assessed the students' abilities to organize their writing, or clearly argue a perspective, the assessment was never engaging or transformative. In education, students always need to be assessed and their skills need to be assigned a number and a ranking and, as a result, many teachers (including myself) design activities and papers and tests that we believe will best assess these skills. However, many teachers also realize that these assessments leave something to be desired. Most of the time, these assessments do not engage students because they have nothing to do with students' lives, their identities, or what they care about. The students who always excel on these normative assessments continue to excel, and the ones who are always disconnected from this work continue to be disconnected and they perform poorly as a result.

Gerald Campano perfectly describes this tension that teachers face when he discusses the first and second classroom in his book *Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Remembering* (2007). In it he writes:

> I realized that I had been teaching in two classrooms: a *first* mandated classroom and a *second* classroom that occurs during the margins and in between periods of the school day. In the first classroom are the time and energy spent on mandated tasks of which teachers are becoming all too

> familiar – basil instruction, testing, test preparation, and codified teaching strategies that focus on the transmission of discrete skills. The second classroom runs parallel to, and is sometimes in the shadow of, the official, first classroom. It is an alternative pedagogical space. It develops organically by following the students' leads, interests, desires, forms of cultural expression, and especially stories. (pp. 39–40)

The first mandated classroom that Campano discusses is the one that most teachers experience. It is the pressure of the mandated classroom and curriculum documents that lead teachers to create assessments that are disconnected from students' lives. While teaching students discrete skills is an important part of teaching, it is not the only part of teaching. There is also a second space or a second classroom where teachers engage students in the learning process by allowing them to freely explore information, their passions, and themselves so as to become engaged in a process of learning. In his book, Campano discusses that students inevitably learn the most in this second classroom because the second classroom is the most relevant to their lives.

In critical literacy, it is important to have students participate in work that has some relevance to their lives but, as Janks suggests, it is also important for students to make change with the new information they've unpacked. Janks says, "It [critical literacy] takes us beyond deconstructing or problematizing the world by inviting students to intervene in ways that makes a positive difference. Education has a responsibility to develop students' sense of agency" (Janks, 2014, p. 254). As educators, we need to imagine ways to teach students skills, but we also need to teach them how to deconstruct power in texts, and develop a sense of agency so they can take action once they have been confronted with these inequities and power imbalances.

When I went back and looked at the "performance task" option for this 11th and 12th grade English unit, I looked to see if it would be relevant to students' lives, and I looked to see if it called upon the students to take action or to transform their worlds. Below is an excerpt of this performance task from the NHPS curriculum and, while it may ask students to engage in deconstructing some texts, it fails to connect this information back to students' lives and it fails to call students to action (New Haven Public Schools, 2014).

First, it asks students to argue with a lens, which is described as a nonfiction text that will help them better "engage with the question and the literary text in a sophisticated and meaningful way" (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). In the example that is provided in the task description, using a lens seems to ask students to deconstruct the literary text using a text that will better inform the reader of the story's context. As an example, the curriculum says you could look at historical documents or texts that would reveal the stereotypes given to African Americans so students could determine whether *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a racist text or a text that attempted to speak back to those racial stereotypes of the time. In this way, the nonfiction text that is being used as a lens gives students another way

Grade	11-12		
Type of Task	☒ Argument ☐ Explanatory/informational ☐ Narrative	☐ Literary analysis ☐ Rhetorical analysis ☒ Comparative analysis ☐ Research	☐ Speaking & listening ☒ Processed writing ☐ Timed writing
Performance Task Title	Arguing With a Lens (Argumentative Writing)		
Suggested Timing	1 week		

Task Overview

Task Description

In this task, students will draw on a nonfiction text to articulate competing interpretations of a literary work before writing an argumentative essay supporting of one of these interpretations over the other. Students will have studied both the nonfiction text and the literary work together in class, and they will have multiple class periods to plan, draft, and revise their work.

This essay should be focused on an interpretive question that lies at the heart of the literature studied in the unit, and the nonfiction text(s) should help students engage with the question and the literary text in a sophisticated and meaningful way. For example, there is ongoing debate as to whether The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a racist book that should be banned from schools. In order to more meaningfully engage with this question, students might read about common historical stereotypes of African Americans. Doing so could help them identify a range of possible interpretations. Reading through this lens, they might argue that the novel is racist because it conforms to the historical racial stereotypes they studied. Reading against this interpretation, they might argue that the novel is not racist because Jim exists as a fully developed character that transcends historical racial stereotypes. After having identified each of these competing interpretations, students would choose to support one or the other in their essay.

Demonstrated Learning

In this task, students will demonstrate their ability to trace the development of ideas and terms in a nonfiction text. This might mean tracing the development of an argument, if the nonfiction text is making one, or it might mean tracing the development of ideas and terms, such as the stereotypes mentioned earlier. They will also demonstrate their ability to synthesize and apply their knowledge by using their research to argue about a work of literature.

Students will also demonstrate their ability to organize and frame a sophisticated argument of their own. This task assesses their ability to make use of common structures that often shape arguments about literature. By pushing them to incorporate a nonfiction text, this task also assesses students' ability to make knowledgeable and sophisticated arguments of their own and support their claims with valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Figure 10.2. Performance task

to look at the character Jim, and the way he is portrayed as an African American in the novel. Students are asked to consider how Twain uses language to depict Jim, and why it is that Jim is depicted in this manner.

While this task, and the example they give in the task begins to engage students in the work of critical literacy by asking them to use context to better understand the depiction of a marginalized character, the task stops there. The curriculum asks students to engage in critical literacy because it helps assess "comparative analysis, argument writing, and processed writing" (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). In the section about demonstrated learning, it only references skill-based learning such as "tracing the development of an argument, framing an argument of their own, and make knowledgeable and sophisticated claims arguments of their own and support their claims with valid reasoning and relevant and sophisticated evidence" (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). While skills such as making an argument of their own using valid reasoning are important skills when doing critical literacy, learning and

doing critical literacy is about so much more than making an argument. Even though there are discussions of stereotypes, which can be highly relatable to a high school audience, present in the task, the curriculum does not ask students to engage with stereotypes on a personal level. They are certainly not going to take action to push back against stereotypes if the only way they engage in a discussion of power and stereotypes is in a book that was set in the late 1800s.

In order for this curriculum to improve, it has to better represent the students it seeks to engage. It has to get them thinking about themselves. When professor Valerie Kinloch talks about critical literacy, she brings up the importance of talking about representation in stories or texts. She says, "I think about issues of representation: How do people get represented in these stories? How do people make sense of who they are in relation to other people? Whose voices are heard and whose voices are not heard?" (Cooper & White, 2014, VT 2:50). For Kinloch, when people or students engage in critical literacy they do not stop after they analyze how people get represented in stories. This performance task asks students to stop once they see how Jim is represented in the text (New Haven Public Schools, 2014). They can write all day about how Jim is appears to be stereotyped and how the book is therefore racist, or they could write all day about how Jim appears to be stereotyped, but is actually a strong character and therefore the text is not racist; but at the end of it all, students will still walk away asking: so what? What does that help students understand about how they are represented in texts or by other people? How does that help them challenge the stereotypes such as the notion their voices do not matter because they are young? In order for this curriculum to be strengthened, it needs to take these ideas that are present in the texts students read, connect them to students' lives, and teach students how to speak up against the negative ways people are being portrayed in the world.

REIMAGINING THE CURRICULUM: LESSONS AND ASSESSMENT

In this next section, I will reimagine or redesign some of the curriculum I have introduced earlier in this paper. By doing this, I am participating in what Hilary Janks refers to as the "redesign cycle," which is pictured below. Janks writes, "In this cycle, deconstruction (that is, critique) sits between design and redesign" (Janks, 2012, p. 153). Now that I have deconstructed and critiqued this newly designed curriculum, I wish to redesign or reimagine what this curriculum could look like if it challenged students to more directly question and deconstruct the power dynamics within texts, connected the content and ideas back to students' lives and, finally, required students to take action based on their new knowledge.

In order to do this, I will design two lessons and a final assessment that will engage students in the themes and ideas of the curriculum, but will take a critical literacy approach to what already exits. It is my hope in doing this that other teachers can look at existing curriculum they've been given that does not call for critical literacy, but tweak the ideas in the curriculum so that students can spend more time engaging with material in a critical way that also connects learning to their lives.

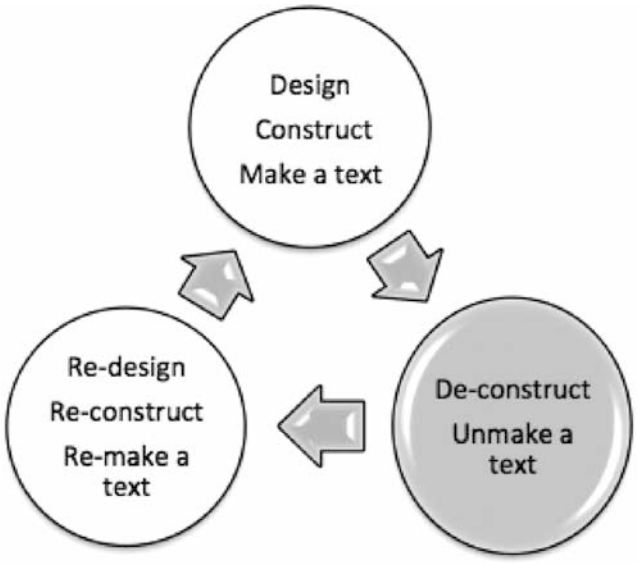

Figure 10.3. The redesign cycle

REIMAGINED UNIT: THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

I will use the book, *Warriors Don't Cry*, by Melba Pattillo Beals (2007) as the main literary text that students will engage with in these lessons and final assessment. In addition to this book, I will use Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" as the framing text for the unit.

Essential Questions

- Who defines what it means to be an American?
- Do all people experience being American in the same way? Do we have the same dreams, values, and experiences?

Enduring Understandings

- Although we may consider people living in America to be equal, some people enjoy more rights and privileges than others as a result of our laws and the country's history of oppression.
- Not all Americans share the same lived experience, and we must acknowledge the differences in order to create a more equitable society.
- Literature helps us better understand ourselves, our societies, and other people by immersing us in narratives about others' lived experiences.

Analysis

In the original unit, I found both the questions and understandings to be very open-ended and vague. I think in order to engage both teachers and students in critical literacy, there needs to be more direct references to power and experience in the questions and understandings that frame a unit. In order to frame the unit, I tweaked a question that I thought was already strong, "Who defines what it means to be American?" This directly asks students to examine who has the power to define a cultural experience. When they read the novel and the framing text, they can begin to see who has historically had the advantage of defining, and how these definitions benefitted some Americans over others.

In my second question, instead of asking students what values or dreams all Americans have, I ask students if all Americans have the same experiences. I question whether these values and dreams are the same. I believe this question asks students to examine power relations in American society. It does not assume that all people are the same, but rather it asks students to pick apart individual experiences of people and characters. It gives students an opportunity to see how different people experience being an American, and therefore requires them to examine how or why these experiences are different or the same. While some of the other, more vague questions ("What is the American Dream? What do Americans value?") could get students thinking in this way, it does not require it. My hope is that, by more explicitly calling on students to look at the differences in the American experience, they will begin to better understand the power that shapes these experiences.

I took a very similar approach to the understandings as well. While I could have engaged students in the understanding that "America is in an ongoing conversation with the past," I thought that was a vague understanding. I think the past is important because it helps us better understand the inequities that still exist in our society. So, I thought I would create an understanding that helped students see this connection more directly. That led me to create this understanding, "Although we may consider people living in America to be equal, some people enjoy more rights and privileges than others as a result of our laws and the country's history of oppression." When I was creating the other two understandings, I tried to do the same thing. I wanted students to better understand that not all experiences are the same, and that the experiences of others can help teach them more about themselves and their world. In critical literacy, it is important that students see the connection to their own lives. Therefore, it is important that there are understandings that make the content relevant to their lives.

Lesson 1: Who are you?

Standard: RI.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Understanding

- People do not always see us as we see ourselves, and others are constantly positioning us, especially those who hold more power than we do.
- In order to have a strong analysis, it is important to cite textual evidence that supports your analysis and inferences.

Homework: Read Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" for today's class.

Activity 1

- Create an identity chart. Students will be given a piece of paper with two different coloured pens/markers. In the middle of the chart, they will write their name. With one color they will write down all the words or descriptors they would use to describe themselves. With the other color they will write down all the words or descriptors that other people have used to describe them, or that they feel people think about them. Students can write down memories or incidents that led them to write down words they think others would use to describe them.
- Debrief in small groups by discussing the following questions: Did the words you used match the words others used? Why or why not? How did the words others used make you feel? Are they accurate in your opinion? *Be careful when selecting groups for this debrief. Letting students choose their own groups may be best since they are being asked to share sensitive and personal information. Do not force a student to share if it makes them too uncomfortable.

Activity 2

- Introduce the idea that texts communicate ideas directly and indirectly about our world. In order to make a strong claim about a text or in order to critique a text, we must look at what is being said, who is saying it, and why they are saying it.
- First, have students skim through "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" that they read the previous night for homework. Students should look for words and phrases that best represent how King views himself and other African Americans and highlight those with the same color they used to represent themselves on their identity chart. Next, skim through the text and look for words and phrases that best represent how King believes other Americans see him and other African Americans with the same color they used to represent other people on their identity chart.
- In small groups, have students create an identity chart for Dr. King. Have students write down words that King believes best describes himself or other African Americans and have them use evidence from the text (a line, phrase or sentence)

that best supports their use of that word or descriptor. Then, using the other color, have students write down words or descriptors that best represent how King thinks other Americans view himself or other African Americans and have them use evidence from the text (a line, phrase or sentence) that best supports their use of that word or descriptor. Have each group cite at least two words or descriptors for each category. Have the small groups discuss the discrepancies between the descriptors and words they used. What does this tell you about the power dynamics of the time?

- Have each small group go around and share our 1–2 descriptors for each category as well as some of the discussion the small groups had.

Homework: (For tonight) On the class blog, write a post that responds to this question: Using evidence from the class activity in addition to any relevant evidence from your life or current news events: Do you think all Americans are treated equally in the United States? Who decides how we treat one another in the United States? Who benefits from this treatment?

Analysis

This lesson would ideally kick off the new unit. This lesson not only engages students in the skill work that is necessary for this unit, but it also begins to teach students about the concept of positioning in the world. It helps students better understand how power gets enacted by looking at their own lives, and the lives of Martin Luther King Jr. and other African Americans during the Civil Rights era. The first step in doing critical literacy is to begin to look at how power is constructed in our world. This lesson that starts the unit asks students to look at power, and would begin to engage students in a process of unpacking the power within texts ("Letter from a Birmingham Jail") and within their own lives.

The work of critical literacy is not only about deconstructing power, but it is about making students see the connection between the power that exists in texts and their lives. Janks notes that the first thing teachers must do when doing critical literacy is, "Make connections between something that is going on in the world and their students' lives," (Janks, 2014, p. 350). In this case, I would begin the unit asking students to see the connection between their life experiences and the experiences of King and other African Americans during the Civil Rights Era. From the start of the unit, students will see the relevance of what they are learning, and they will begin to develop a new mindset where they see texts not as neutral, but as embedded with power.

Lesson 2: The Experience of Integration

Standard: W.11-12. 4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Understanding

- Americans can experience the same event very differently based on how society positions them.
- In order to best represent an idea or opinion you have, you have to take into consideration to whom you are speaking, and what you wish to achieve when you are speaking with them.

Activity 2

- Select multiple passages from chapters 10–13 that express both how Melba and the other 8 of the Little Rock Nine experience the integration of Central High, and how the other white students/teachers/community members experience the integration of Central High.
- Have students work in small groups together to examine different excerpts, and have them think about the following questions: How do all these people act/react/fail to act to what is going on? How is the white community treated through all this? How is the African American community treated?
- After small groups mark up their texts and discuss these questions with one another, come together as a large group and share some of the small discussions.

Activity 2

- Give a mini-lesson on writing for a specific audience.
- Give students examples of writing that was written for different purposes: blogs, newspapers, journal entries, persuasive writing, news videos, etc.
- After examining the writing for different purposes, introduce the students' next task, which will be to inform their fellow students about their character's experience of integration using a recorded video.
- First, have students get together in their small groups for a few minutes and consider what they might need to take into consideration when they write out a short script to use for their video. Come together as a whole class, and create a list of things students should consider when writing and recording for their fellow classmates. Students should consider the length of their writing/recording, use of excerpts from the text, tone in the writing/recording, the knowledge their classmates have of the story already, etc.
- Then, give students time to write/draft the script for their video. For homework, students will take their script and use it to create a short video explaining their character's experience of integration. Each student can then upload their video to the class blog when they are finished. Students can also hand in the script they used in class the following day. Now all students in the class will have an archive of information about how their classmates see the experiences of different

characters. This can also serve as a great source of information for students' final papers and project.

Analysis

This next lesson would ideally take place toward the middle of the unit since this reading would also occur within the middle of the unit. I began this lesson thinking of ways to engage students in work that was similar to work they would do for their final performance task, so I asked them to examine the different experiences of characters in the book *Warriors Don't Cry* (2007). While each student is only focusing on the experience of one character or one section of the novel, their work together as a class will begin to reveal how differently people experience integration.

Once students finish their video recording, the entire class can watch the different presentations of each character and begin to compare experiences across the book. Once this comparison begins in class the next day, students will have the opportunity to explore the power behind these differences. For example, students might ask why the white students treated Melba and the other eight students so poorly. Or they might ask why some teachers ignored the harassment the Little Rock Nine students received. Or they might examine the reaction or seemingly little reaction the Little Rock Nine students had to the abuse they received in school. They would begin to explore why they had to react in this manner. Or they might explore why some white people stood up for the nine students, and what the implication of those actions might have been. In this lesson students will be able to compare the experiences of different characters to begin to see how different people are advantaged and disadvantaged throughout the process of integration. Students can begin to question why people are treated so differently within this educational system.

Also, do not be afraid to allow students to make connections to their own lives. If you have already been asking students to relate the novel to their own lives, they may organically begin to discuss the inequalities they experience in classrooms today. Make sure to allow students space to discuss these connections if they come up in discussion. By engaging in these questions and comparisons, students will be examining the power relations within this time period (and hopefully their lives too) and, therefore, they will be engaging in critical literacy. This lesson will also set students up well for examining the power relations that unfold within their own lives that they will begin to examine in their final task.

Performance Task: Arguing with a Lens Reimagined

Standards

RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

W.11-12.1 Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

L.11-12.3 Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Understandings

- Although we may consider people living in America to be equal, some people enjoy more rights and privileges than others as a result of our laws and the country's history of oppression.
- Not all Americans share the same lived experience, and we must acknowledge the differences in order to create a more equitable society.
- Literature helps us better understand ourselves, our societies, and other people by immersing us in narratives about others' lived experiences.

The Task

Write a persuasive essay exploring the question: Do all people experience being American in the same way? Do we share the same dreams, values and experiences? Using Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" as a framing text, and *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Pattillo Beals (2007) as the literary text.

Once these arguments have been written, the class should use their essays to collectively inform their experiences of being American. Together, the class will use their arguments and their own personal experiences of living in America to create a video exploring what it really looks like/feels like to be an American/living in America. Each student will be required to write his/her own short narrative that reflects their own experience living in America, as well as connections they can or cannot draw to Melba's or King's experiences that they have read about. Students will be responsible for recording their individual segments and, then, students will work together as a class to organize each video segment to create one larger piece. This one longer piece can then be displayed to the entire school, on youtube.com, or any other platform that students see fit. This will give students an opportunity to share their work with a real audience so that their analysis and experiences can hopefully help inform others about a more authentic American experience.

Analysis

This performance task section of the unit was by far the most difficult one to alter. As I mentioned earlier, Janks says the first step a teacher needs to take when engaging students in critical literacy is to make what students are learning relevant to their lives. However, this final task requires students to use a framing text to write about a literary work. The framing text must also be a "foundational American text" according to the curriculum. This leaves very little room for students to connect material to their own lives. Instead of having students stop at making an argument, I decided I would have them take the argument they make and relate it to their lives by creating a multimedia project that the entire class could participate in.

In this way, I am asking students to engage in critical literacy in two steps. First, I ask them to engage in deconstructing power relations by looking at King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry* to answer, "Do all people experience being American in the same way? Do we share the same dreams, values and experiences?" which requires students to address the power dynamics that unfold during the Civil Rights Movement and school integration, as represented in these two texts. Once students have analyzed the power dynamics and experiences within those texts, they will have the chance to relate those experiences to their own lives. This means they can begin to talk about their American experience, and how they relate their experience of living in this country to that of the characters within the novel.

Students could choose to discuss how their experience today is still very similar to some of the Little Rock Nine students. Or other students might discuss how they relate to the experiences of the privileged white people in the story, and could choose to discuss how they have or have not seen this dynamic change. Other students may discuss the sometimes oppressive experience of being a young adult in a school system that treats them like children. Or a female student can connect her own experience of being a young woman to the experience of the young women in the novel. The more time teachers spend allowing students to make connections between their lives and the book, throughout the unit, the stronger the connections that students make will be. It is important throughout the unit that students are given the opportunity to see connections to their own lives that even the teacher may not think of or understand at first. The second part of this task is quite open-ended and it leaves students with a lot of room to talk about power and their own lives in ways they think best represent their experience, while still engaging in a comparative analysis, as the curriculum task requires.

There is nothing in the curriculum mandating teachers to stop the task once students have completed an essay. Students will understand the comparative process in a deeper way once they have compared their own experiences to those of characters in the novel. As Pahl and Rowsell write, "Identity is potentially one of the most important ingredients of teaching and learning" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012, p. 114). If identity is the most important ingredient in learning, then it is extremely important

that we provide students with opportunities to connect what they are learning to their own lives. Learning will inevitably sink in more deeply and stick with students for longer if they have related to it personally on some level. We cannot expect students to be motivated to change their worlds based on what we help teach them if they do not first understand how this information is relevant and meaningful in their lives. Hopefully, when students become more connected to their own identities (through their own narrative experiences), they will be more open and understanding of the nuances and fragility of others' identities (through the whole class narratives) and, therefore, begin to change how they interact with people who may seem so different from them.

While I may have added on to the task, there is a greater chance students will remember the arguments they made in this essay because they were also able to connect their argument to their own lived experiences and use their narratives to hopefully create a more inclusive idea of being an American.

CONCLUSION

After examining the New Haven Public Schools high school English curriculum, it seems to me that there are no explicit opportunities for teachers to engage students in the practice of critical literacy. While there are definitely questions and text suggestions within the curriculum that give teachers the space to engage students in critical literacy, that does not mean students will ever be exposed to critical literacy. I have demonstrated through this chapter how teachers could reimagine a given curriculum document so that it directly immerses students in critical literacy, but not all teachers are familiar with critical literacy. Even if teachers are familiar with critical literacy, it does not mean they will take the time to redesign a curriculum so that it reflects those principles, because redesigning the curriculum while still making sure it aligns with the original curriculum takes a great deal of time – time which many teachers do not have. If we do not make an effort to teach teachers about critical literacy and the importance of critical literacy, then there is no way for it to come alive in classrooms.

Unfortunately, I believe that the failure to teach students according to the principles of critical literacy will result in future generations of students who remain unquestioning of our larger society. The current injustices and inequities that exist will continue to exist because we have not taught people how to be critical of their world. In regards to equity and equality, Cooper and White write, "It has been contended that, if we were to act equitably by giving to those what they need in order to thrive, eventually all people would become equal" (White & Cooper, 2013, p. 43). Conclusions, like those of Cooper and White will never be understood if we do not provide people with a critical education. Many people do not understand that being equitable leads to equality. People think equality is all we need. It is not until we begin to teach students to unpack the power within texts that they will begin to

see that equality is not all it is cracked up to be. Critical literacy is a tool we can use to engage people in a process of questioning and deconstructing society.

It is my hope that, in writing this paper, I have shown other teachers that it is possible to teach students critical literacy even when it is not called for in the curriculum. There are ways of pushing back against the larger educational structures that fail to make changes to the curriculum that could propel students to become critical about their world. As a teacher, I know how inventive and imaginative my fellow teachers can be, and I have confidence that there will always be teachers and educators who are looking to redesign curriculum, their teaching, and their classrooms to better their students. Professor Jim Cummins writes, "Imagination is probably the greatest threat to established social orders, which is perhaps one of the major reasons why its use is rarely encouraged on the part of either teachers or students" (Cummins, 2005, p. 142). In order to change education, you must have an imagination that threatens the status quo. Even though this imagination may be discouraged, I see its presence all the time. There will always be educators who will imagine the scope of education differently, and it is this imagination that I believe will be the impetus for change within our classrooms, our students and hopefully, within our world as well.

REFERENCES

Campano, G. (2007). *Immigrant students and literacy: Reading, writing, and remembering*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Christensen, L. M. (1999). Critical literacy: Teaching reading, writing, and outrage. In C. Edelsky (Ed.), *Making justice our project: Teachers working towards critical whole language practice* (pp. 53–67). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Cooper, K. (Producer and Director). (2014). *Valerie Kinloch: Autobiographical context*. Retrieved from The Interpretive Imagination Forum.

Cummins, J. (2005). Afterword. In K. Pahl & J. Rowsell (Eds.), *Literacy and education: Understanding new literacy studies in the classroom.* London, England: Sage.

Freire, P. (1987). The importance of the act of reading. In P. Freire & D. Macedo (Eds.), *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.

Janks, H. (2012). The importance of critical literacy. *English Teaching, 11*(1), 150–163. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/1023746325?accountid=14771

Janks, H. (2014). Critical literacy's ongoing importance for education. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 57*(5), 349–356.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). From 'reading' to the 'new literacy studies.' In *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning* (pp. 3–22). Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

New Haven Public Schools. (2014). *NHPS ELA curriculum grades 9–12 unit*. Unpublished curriculum copyright New Haven Public Schools. Retrieved from leszek.ward@gmail.com

New Haven Public Schools. (2014). *NHPS ELA curriculum performance task.* Unpublished curriculum copyright New Haven Public Schools. Retrieved from leszek.ward@gmail.com

Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2012). *Literacy and education* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage Publications.

White, R. E., & Cooper, K. (2015). *Democracy and its discontents: Critical literacy across global contexts*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands/Taipei, Taiwan: Sense Publishers.

Wiencek, H. (2012). The dark side of Thomas Jefferson. *Smithsonian Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-dark-side-of-thomas-jefferson-35976004/?no-ist=&p=&preview=&page=1&webSyncID=8b4b5db9-709d-e5ae-45e8-39ede722687c