Critical Literacy
Whose Way of Thinking is it?

by

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Is bias detection an effective way to improve the critical thinking skills of students “at-risk?” The research involved nine Grade Five students “at-risk” from a school in Ontario. These students were selected in order to provide the opportunity for them to participate in advanced skills instruction, rather than the more common basic skills practice. The students looked for bias in the pictures of three picture books, during twelve 40-minute sessions, over six weeks. Beyond the description of my work as a teacher-researcher, the students’ oral participation was the only data gathered. In conclusion, bias detection provided the context for critical thinking (observation and questioning) however, the improvement of these skills was attributed more so to their practice over time, as well as to the teaching approach. Determining a direct connection between teaching bias detection and the improvement of critical thinking skills would require more research.
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Another chapter has ended and the next one has begun. I can’t wait!
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Sinbad: Why does every book have a bias?
Bond: Because it’s a person’s way of thinking.
Researcher: Right, and did we all grow up in the same place, with the same parents, in the same country?
All: No/Yes.
Researcher: So we all have different ways of thinking about stuff.
Chapter 1: Research Project Overview

-or-

What is this all about anyway?
How do I tell you
what this is about
ahead of time
before you feel it?

What do I need to say
so that you know
what is in my heart,
so that you can see,
and hear,
and listen,
from that place in yours
that understands?

I need to tell you what is.
Background Information

This thesis is an integration of three main ideas: critical thinking skills as they relate to literacy (critical literacy); the role of bias detection in becoming critically literate; and the opportunity for students considered to be “at-risk” of school failure to participate in work involving advanced skills. The final ingredient, involving students “at-risk,” has made the student selection process for the research more purposeful. This was a deliberate attempt on my part to challenge the educational experiences (or lack thereof) of students considered to be “at-risk.” However, critical thinking/critical literacy and bias detection have lead to the formulation of my research question: Is bias detection an effective way to improve critical thinking? The focus on the “at-risk” student population was meant as a challenge to the often limited opportunities for these children to practice advanced skills. Because of the population chosen, and in an attempt to question how teachers can possibly be serving our students “at-risk” by denying them these types of “advanced skills” opportunities, my research question became: Is bias detection an effective way to improve the critical thinking skills of students considered to be “at-risk?” I thought that if I showed that students “at-risk” could read critically, grade level achievement could not be used as a determinant of participation in a project such as this (a project that used advanced skills). I hoped that in this way the curriculum that I

1 Quotations around words in this document indicate a troubling of the term within them. In this case, they indicate my discomfort with the term at-risk and how it is used to label children who are caught in a situation that is at risk, because of a lack of fit between what they come to school knowing and what is expected of them and accepted as knowledge. The school system’s rigidity makes the situation at risk, but places the responsibility on the child.
designed and the ideas that I used could be seen as appropriate for all students, regardless of their level of achievement.

Thinking about the impact of bias detection on improving critical thinking skills is where I began. What I have learned over the course of the research project has lead me to challenge the question because I began to challenge my view of success as improvement. I became focused on the process rather than simply the end result. I wanted to focus on the students using their skills, perhaps in a new way, rather than being concerned with how much they improved. This work has caused me to reflect a great deal on my own biases and assumptions, as well as on my pedagogy. I have included reflections on my own journey throughout these pages. Some of this journey made it necessary to make changes to my plans, as is detailed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

Before entering into the heart of my research, it is necessary for me to introduce myself to you. Who I am has obviously impacted my ideas, my choices, and the methods I used in conducting this research. My identity as a teacher has determined my choice of location for this research. My belief in equity has lead me to incorporate students considered to be “at-risk”. My focus on issues of social justice required that I incorporate something that could effect change for the students with whom I worked. This project was not going to just be about my desire to get a Masters Degree. Bias detection provided the balance between equity, social justice, and change. The project also attempted to make a political statement regarding many teachers’ assumptions and the consequent educational experiences of “at-risk” students. These are issues upon which I will elaborate in Chapter 2.
The Heart of the Matter

The basis for my research, on which I will elaborate in Chapter 3 are: critical thinking and critical literacy; bias and bias detection; the “at-risk” population and their experiences in the education system, as well as the assumptions made about the abilities of students “at-risk” by some educators; and the role of the teacher in upholding or challenging the status quo (consciously or unconsciously).

Researching whether bias detection is an effective way to improve critical thinking skills involved two elements: bias detection (instruction and skills) and critical thinking (specifically observing and questioning). Underlying these ideas was my agenda: that showing students how to uncover the hidden messages in the books they read might help those students whose lives are not reflected in the pages to maintain a healthy sense of self. Learning about bias and being able to detect it could make the difference between a book as a story, and a book as an affirmation of what was right, real, or acceptable. If the reality in a book, presented as Truth,\(^2\) is not your reality, what happens to what you know as truth? What does this do to your perception of who you are and your ways of knowing and being? Entering into the research with this liberatory agenda in mind often clouded my ability to remain focused on where the students were at and follow their path. Questioning and observation are the critical thinking skills on which I focused. Using these critical thinking skills when reading suggests reading critically and therefore critical literacy.

Critical literacy involves applying critical thinking skills when reading. My view on critical literacy is that it includes observing and questioning the messages within the

\(^2\) Truth is capitalized to indicate the dominant culture’s presentation of their truth/version as the one truth or version.
pages, how the content of a text speaks to each of us differently, sharing these meanings, and creating the possibility for action. Truly, no two people are moved in the same way by any one book, due to the diverse nature of our experiences (Paterson, 1992). Critical literacy includes the skills necessary for the mandated curriculum, as it requires reading and comprehension. Moving beyond these skills, I believe that teachers can make literacy critical when they validate and acknowledge the perspectives, experiences, and the life of each child who is reading; when they encourage the readers to make meaning from the text as it relates to their lives and to share this with their classmates; and when teachers encourage their students to incorporate the often different or new meanings into a view of the world that is more just. Critical literacy gives ownership to the students as they see their lives as meaningful sources for learning (Bigelow 1990). When students are encouraged to bring their knowledge to what they read, their lives provide a contextual relevance for the text, thus establishing a basis for questioning. In so doing, everyone in the classroom (students and teachers alike) has the opportunity to see the text in different ways and with different meanings, so that they become critical readers. This is the basis for the six-week project that I designed for this research, which I have outlined in detail in Chapter 4.

Although I believe in the necessity of critical literacy for every child in every classroom, my research looks at students “at-risk” in particular. The “average” and “high level” students in classrooms (those working at or above grade level expectations as set out by the Ontario Curriculum (1997)) receive some emphasis on critical thinking by virtue of their quick grasp of the material, leaving time for discussion. The “at-risk” students (those working below grade level expectations set out by the Ontario Curriculum
(1997)), however, may rarely be challenged to think critically, as they are busy trying to catch up to the skill level of their peers (Palinscar & Klenk 1991; Palinscar & David 1991). In addition, students “at-risk” are often part of the non-dominant group in society (i.e. from single parent, non-English speaking or ESL -English as a Second Language, non-White, and low-income families. Students “at-risk” are also part of the non-dominant group within their school culture (below grade level). By involving students “at-risk” in this research, I hoped to show that they can be critical readers: students thinking critically about what they are reading, using their lives and experiences as guides for their questions and analysis.

In addition, working with students “at-risk” was also a challenge to the frequently low expectations that many teachers have of students considered “at-risk” of school failure. This was an important focus for me, as the “at-risk” population is often placed on the margins within the school system. Creating a project that supported this marginalization of “at-risk” students by focusing on the “average” student, or even a mixed group where those “at-risk” could once again be or feel excluded, seemed counterproductive. It was important to me that the students involved be those considered “at-risk” within the system, in order that they might have the opportunity, often denied, of participating in a project about so-called “advanced” skills.

Bias detection was a specific area I wanted to explore within the context of critical literacy. Bias in books presents itself as the overt or covert messages within the text and pages reflecting a particular point of view. Bias detection involves looking for the messages included in the authors’ choice of text and pictures in their books. My focus was on bias as it related to the “isms” (racism, sexism, etc.). This was particularly
important for me since students “at-risk” are frequently from the non-dominant groups in society. Bias is present in all material, as it reflects the ideas and point of view of the author (McFarlane 1986). When we don’t educate our students about bias, I feel we place them in an unfair position of possibly accepting what they read without question. If students know that bias exists and read critically (applying their critical thinking skills, especially questioning and observation), then they may realize that books have limitations and reflect a particular point of view (McFarlane 1986). I feel that knowing about bias and becoming skilled in reading critically with bias in mind is just as important while reading a picture book in elementary school as it is reading a history textbook in high school. If what students are reading does not reflect their lives or ways of knowing and being, the result of approaching reading without a critical eye could be detrimental to their sense of self. Thus, bias detection (and more particularly critical literacy) are important for all children to develop. However for students considered “at-risk,” who are frequently members of the non-dominant groups of society, I believe that using critical thinking skills while reading (critical literacy) is crucial.

Because of my sense of social justice as well as the life realities within the “at-risk” population, I chose to use bias detection as a vehicle for critical literacy with a focus on equity. Understanding and detection of bias becomes even more important when bias affects who you are and how you are in the world, to the great extent that it does for those who are not within the dominant group. Bias detection can provide an understanding of the lens through which non-dominant cultures are seen and presented by the dominant culture. Awareness of this lens provides a place to begin questioning the truth that is presented as Truth, and for valuing and acknowledging the truths that are not presented
(or are misrepresented). While awareness of different realities and truths is valuable for all students, I believe it is most crucial for students who are not of the dominant culture. These students often do not see their truths reflected in the books they read, or are read to them. Within the daily classroom routines, expectations of teachers, and lessons taught, the life experiences of students “at-risk” are often devalued, ignored, or only highlighted as “different” or “interesting” on special occasions or months of the year.

What it Looks Like

I wanted the project to be a collaborative effort involving the students and their parents. I did not want this project to be about what I thought was best for these students, and not about what they or their parents were interested in, or thought was important within the context of bias detection. In the final analysis, this desire was easier said than done, which I will elaborate on in Chapters 4, 5 & 6.

The participants were students who were referred by their teacher and who, after student and parent/guardian information sessions were interested and given permission by their parents or guardians to take part in the project. The final research group consisted of nine Grade Five students (eight boys and one girl) of an original sixteen referrals. I encouraged parent/guardian input in three ways: initially in the introduction session; by setting aside three sessions where parents or guardians could join us; and in weekly letters sent home about what we were doing. There was no response to any of these initiatives. In terms of student input, one student suggested that they could do drama, which occurred in the last 3 sessions. In retrospect I realize that there were many verbal and non-verbal cues and clues that could have signalled to me where the students were at,
and which direction to take, had I been paying closer attention. Clearly in this case, actions spoke louder than words.

The data that I gathered focused on observation and questioning as critical thinking skills. Initially I planned to have a pre- and post-interview/questionnaire from which to determine growth and change in these two areas with regard to reading. This measure was never used. In order to collect data about the students' critical thinking skills of observation and questioning when reading I planned to use a three separate sources; audio-tapes of the twelve sessions, a response journal for independent reflection, and a checklist to track the amount and type of student participation during the sessions. Many changes occurred in my data sources and also in my perception of what was important. The response journals and checklists proved to be ineffective and were discontinued. The oral participation of the students provided more than adequate data with which to answer my research question.

The students and I met together during two 50-minute periods per week (the last period of the day) over six weeks. During these sessions I taught the students about bias and bias detection and we read three picture books together. I encouraged them to use the critical thinking skills of observation and questioning to examine the pictures for bias. During the last three sessions the students created short drama presentations based on challenging a bias presented in one of the books we read. My decision to focus on the pictures in the story books rather than the text, was due to the short time that we spent together and the fact that pictures carry many messages and are just as important as the text in terms of carrying bias (McFarlane 1986). “Pictures do not serve a purely decorative purpose, they communicate some of the hidden messages of a book…. By
learning to question the visual image, children can begin to uncover bias in pictures" (McFarlane 1986, p. 14). Most children love to look at the pictures in stories. For students “at-risk” who may have difficulty reading, this seemed like a good place to start. I hoped that examining the pictures for hidden messages would be the beginning of a new way of reading for these students: that they would begin moving beyond what the story says to what other messages are conveyed through pictures, and how these messages impact our lives. In this way, I hoped that the students would begin their development as critical readers.

My Framework for Analysis

Crucial to the analysis of the data gathered from these twelve sessions is the framework that I used. The link between bias detection and critical thinking skills that I made was the connection between experience and choice. The focus on bias as a person’s way of thinking (a definition developed by Bond³) allowed us to explore the way experience shapes our ideas, beliefs, and opinions. Through questions, I challenged the students to examine the connection between their life experiences and the choices they might make if they were illustrating a story. We then examined and discussed the choices the authors/illustrators had made in the books we read together. Through our observations and questions about the pictures, I hoped to highlight the authors'/illustrators choices as reflective of their way of thinking (bias), based on their experiences. I hoped that this connection would make it possible for the students to realize that pictures show one out of many realities, rather than the only reality. Linking

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³ Bond is the pseudonym chosen by one of the boys in the group.
experience and choice made the students’ discussion and sharing of stories and ideas a crucial aspect of this research, as I have outlined in Chapter 4 and 5.

*What the data showed*

The analysis of the data (Chapter 5) required that I change my perception of success from a model of more or better, to an examination of *how* the students were using the skills of observation and questioning when reading. For the data analysis, I focused on the concept of experience leading to a way of thinking, which impacts on choice. This is what I used as a framework as I analysed the various ways that the students were observing and questioning the pictures, and sharing their ideas, opinions, and experiences.

I was no longer focused on improvement as more or better, but instead interested in analyzing the *process* of critical literacy. I was particularly aware of the students’ observations and the ways in which these incorporated the ideas of experience, way of thinking, and choice. The three books we read together over twelve sessions provided opportunities for the students to share not only their observations, but the questions, comments, and opinions that went along with these. In Chapter 5 I have highlighted many discussions that showed the students engaged in critical literacy – using the critical thinking skills of questioning and observation while reading *and* sharing these questions and observations with the rest of the group in oral form. This oral emphasis was a crucial part of this project, one that taught me a great deal about my assumptions and biases. These personal realizations were an important part of the project, given the
topic and my intentions. My personal journey is evident throughout the thesis, but particularly in Chapters 4, 5 & 6.

**What it all Means**

The shift from my initial approach of assessing the improvement of the students’ critical thinking skills, to an emphasis on the *use* of these skills made my research question difficult to answer. Whether the students’ critical thinking skills improved seemed unimportant at the end of the project compared to *how they were using* these skills. It was evident to me that the students were using critical thinking skills, even though the concepts of bias and bias detection seemed to elude them.

Bias detection seemed to provide the context for observing and questioning the pictures in the books we read. This context provided a space in which to question and be observant of the pictures in the books we read. This combined with an effort on my part to value the students’ knowledge and ways of being set the stage for their use of critical thinking skills when reading. Given the way in which I designed and implemented my research, I cannot make a direct link between learning bias detection and the improvement of critical thinking skills. However, the context which bias detection provides for questioning and observing supports the reality that anything practiced over time has the potential to improve. I feel that the teachers’ desire and attempts to acknowledge the students’ different ways of knowing and being is crucial in critical literacy work. Therefore determining whether bias detection is enough to cause improvement in critical thinking, in this context, would require further research.
In Brief

The various journeys encompassed in this research have been examined in detail in the following chapters. I have introduced and positioned myself as the researcher in Chapter 2. The background to illustrate how I formulated my question is in the literature review in Chapter 3. The research design and the curriculum project are detailed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 the data was analyzed using the framework of experience leading to choice, and my growing awareness that success was not about improvement so much as the process of reading critically. My conclusion in Chapter 6 attempts to pull all these journeys together to address the question of whether bias detection is an effective way to improve critical thinking skills.

Parallel to my journey through my research is my personal journey in response to what I was learning. I have used my poetry at the beginning of each chapter (as well as some sub-sections within chapters) to document this personal journey. My poems speak of my thoughts, struggles, joys, and hopes throughout this work. Their presence has let my voice come through more clearly in the pages of academic writing, as I navigated through unknown territory.
Chapter 2: Positioning Myself Within My Research

- or -

Who am I to be doing this?
A few questions before we start...

Who are you? You may ask me, as I speak to you about your child, and the ideas I have about the project we will do. Together.

And you have every right to do so and to know. And so I ask myself...

Who am I? To be doing this work? To speak to you about your child, and put the ideas I have into practice with you.

I am many things and nothing all at once. I am teacher, investigator, participant, black, white, female, student, and minority - visibly and invisibly.

I am a believer in many truths, not just one. And in many voices, not just one.

All of these things bring me to this place, with you, and your child. Hoping that together we can show our truths, lift our voices, and be heard.

What right do I have? The right you give me, that we create together. And in some measure, because I share, in part, in some of your struggles and in other parts, participate in their necessity. The latter makes me humble, the former gives me strength. Ultimately, you give me permission and we create the results.
The role I chose for myself within my research is one of teacher-investigator. This role of teacher-investigator allowed me room to move. I was not a researcher outside what I was studying. I was a part of the school community in many ways, and also removed from the school community in other ways. I was learning from, and contributing to the school community through this process. As a teacher in the school in which I conducted my research, many students knew me, knew my name, and had me as their teacher at one time or another. Our relationship went beyond the subject-investigator relationship, and I honoured that. This was my fourth year on staff at the school. I was part of the community – the teachers, the students, and many parents, knew me.

The title; teacher, carries with it many responsibilities and biases of its own in reference to the work we did together and my role in it and its creation. As a teacher, I am an accomplice in the promotion of the dominant culture through the way I teach, my expectations of my students and by the biases I carry. As a teacher who has begun to think outside of the box, I have striven to infuse some sense of purpose, to trouble what is believed to be “the way,” and to bring some hope into my practice within the confines of a mandated curriculum. Even so, I have struggled with the realization that my desire for social justice is often circumvented by my own bias, specifically in assumptions I have made, as a teacher, of the students in my classrooms, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter. This is disheartening, and yet this realization of my own bias has given me the possibility to trouble my assumptions, confront my biases, and grow as a teacher, a researcher, and a human being. My role as a teacher has afforded me the opportunity to work with many different students including those considered “at-risk” (by myself and
others). I have seen and been part of how we as teachers, and the education system, circumvent the growth and progress of these students we consider to be “at-risk” by lowering our expectations of them, providing them with less challenges, and separating these students from their peers. And so, I have been two people within my role as a teacher; an accomplice through my silence, lack of knowledge, and auto-pilot responses and ways of doing things; and a critic, willing to challenge the status-quo through questions and material I have brought into my classroom.

Apart from my profession, I am a woman of some colour. I use “some” purposefully, because my complexion is light due to my mixed heritage. I affectionately call myself brown. Sometimes people don’t know where to “put” me in their racial frame of reference and quite honestly, sometimes I enjoy not being put anywhere. If you look at the colour of my skin, you would assume one thing, but my way of speaking, and many of the experiences I have had, might challenge those assumptions for some. Considered able to “pass” for White by some members of the Black community, my lighter complexion has afforded me some privilege, as has my socio-economic status, the fact that English is my first (of three) languages, and that I come from a nuclear family. Having said all of this, I grew up being told that I would have to work harder than everyone else because of the colour of my skin. I have had the good fortune of being successful in academics and the occasional (non-stereotypical) sport, specifically swimming. When growing up I was always a tall person for my age, however, luckily (or unluckily) for me I couldn’t play basketball (stereotypically the sport tall people should play) to save my life. Perhaps not excelling at basketball did save my life in a sense. Perhaps this enabled my teachers to see my academic ability because my athletic ability

\[4\] The dominant culture’s way is often presented as the way it is, rather than one way it is.
was not drawing any attention away from my success as a student. These identities: brown, multi-lingual, middle income, from a nuclear family are my history and my present, and have shaped who I am today.

As an adult, I am a lesbian, who at the time of writing this thesis, is not out to most people at work, but mostly everywhere else. This invisible identity highlights (for me) the automatic (mis)perceptions and assumptions of others and the sense that many of the people around me daily do not really know who I am. Unfortunately, I have chosen not to disclose my sexuality in my place of work, a decision based on the community in which I teach and the unpredictable reactions and ramifications of self-identifying within the education system, and my insecurities due to both of these factors. My many realities (language, class, race, sexuality, family) are only partly represented in the books I read, or that I find in the library at school. Despite my class, family background, and academic success, I am outside of the dominant culture visibly as a person of mixed heritage, and also as a lesbian. This can create a gap between myself and those around me. Therefore, while I do not share many of the life situations of the children in my project, I share some. With those similarities, I share an understanding about invisibility, assumptions, and bias.

Meanwhile, I have also shared in the lowering of expectations for the students “at-risk” in my classroom by planning certain lessons (“advanced” skills lessons) at times when these “at-risk” students would be out of the room receiving remedial help. As a Grade Five classroom teacher, I have taught many thought-provoking lessons with the whole class present, and I have challenged my whole class to think about issues that affect us all (such as stereotypes and assumptions about others). However, I wonder at
the other opportunities I missed; those opportunities I denied the students who were out of the room receiving In-School Support\(^5\) and also the opportunities lost for those who remained, because of the absence of the so-called "at-risk" students. The reality exists that students receiving additional support are often removed from the classroom. Perhaps it is not just the skills they are being taught that we need to question, but the benefit and cost of removing these students from the regular classroom.

This project was important to me because of the shared understanding I have with many of my students through membership in non-dominant groups, and because of my commitment to social justice that I attribute to my life experiences and my mother's influence. A helpful analogy for my beliefs about "at-risk" students is to illustrate the student as a knapsack, and the skills and ways of knowing and being (the collection of resources for success) that they come to school with as to items in the knapsack. The school assumes (and requires) that each child comes to school with certain skills and resources in their knapsack. Students are considered "at-risk" when they seem to come to school with different resources and skills. The result is that the students perform the required tasks to the best of their ability, using the skills, resources that they have. These different skills and ways of being are often mistaken for inferior, or ignored, because they do not match those the system has deemed as "correct."\(^6\) The students' answers may then be wrong (assessed using the way deemed correct by the education system) and the assumption is then often made by teachers that the students cannot do the task. Often teachers then focus on correcting and teaching these students (deemed as being "at-risk")

\(^5\) In-School Support programs consist of small group instruction for students experiencing academic difficulty.

\(^6\) Correct is a narrow view of what is acceptable in school, which I have difficulty with.
how to use the "correct" item or tool without acknowledging the wealth of knowledge they have already displayed, and have yet to share.

It is my hope that the exercise of bias detection will create a space for voices, bodies, alternatives, and sharing that we often do not find. Encouraging the students to think critically I hope, will make the difference between their blindly accepting the Truth, and seeing it as one of many truths with the ensuing right to value and speak our own truth, and listen to the truth of others. My privilege of class, family structure and to some extent, complexion as well as my resulting biases and assumptions about the students in my classrooms have made me an accomplice in the silencing of students' voices. My sexuality and mixed heritage have often resulted in the biases and assumptions of others silencing my voice. I came to this research with both my silence and my silencing identities in mind with a sense of purpose and hope that the students and I could accomplish something important together.

Interwoven in my writing are my poems. As an academic I often push aside my creative expression, but being creative is a big part of who I am. In an effort to honour that voice, as I attempt to honour the many voices, and expressions of those voices, in my students, this is an important part of my writing. My poems accompany each chapter. They tell of my struggles, hopes, desires, and fears as I travelled on this journey.
Chapter 3: Literature Review
-or-
What's everybody talking about?
Surveying the land....

This is the place
I have come to
having read your words
been inspired by your passion,
your thoughts,
your ideas.

This is what
I have made it mean.
Where my journey begins.

As I take your ideas
and make them mine -
almost,
but not quite.

Start again.
I take your ideas
into my soul
and create
something new.
Mine.
Introduction

The focus of this Master’s thesis is whether bias detection in children’s books can impact the critical thinking (and therefore critical literacy) in students considered “at-risk” of school failure. Critical literacy contains two objectives: literacy (implying reading), and the fact that it must be critical (implying thoughtful analysis and critique of what has been read). Critical literacy includes thinking about and understanding what has been read, and making the text meaningful by relating it to one’s experiences (Hiebert 1991). We do this naturally by relating what we read to the experiences that we have had in order to make sense of the material (contextual relevance), or recognizing where relating the text to our lives is not possible. The critical part of critical literacy implies the incorporation of experiences, thought, and feelings. Taking a text and looking at it critically can require not only reading it for the information it gives overtly and covertly through the use of language, stereotypes, bias, and isms (i.e., racism, classism, etc.) embedded in the text, but also the messages conveyed by omissions.

While I believe that critical literacy is an important skill for all students to learn, the focus of this thesis is on Grade Five students in Ontario considered to be “at-risk.” There are many reasons for focusing on this segment of the student population: the mismatch between what they come to school knowing and what they are expected to know; the tendency to focus on remediation and basic skills instruction for these children (Means, Chelemer & Knapp 1991); and the fact that a disproportionate number of students “at-risk” are from low-income, single-parent, non-English speaking, non-White families - all non-dominant groups within society (Means et. al.1991; Hopfenberg et al
1993; Thomson 2000). Students considered “at-risk” are thus labelled because they are seen as lacking skills by a system with narrow parameters for contribution and success (Delpit 1995; Hopfenberg et al. 1993; Thomson 2000). These narrow parameters for defining success keep out a large section of the population, creating a mismatch of school-imposed academic expectations and the child’s reality.

Students considered to be “at-risk” are 

...those students who are unlikely to succeed in schools as schools are currently constituted because they bring a different set of skills, resources, and experiences than those on which school success is traditionally based... An at-risk student, then, is one caught in a mismatch between the experiences that he or she has in the home, family, and community, on the one hand, and what schools expect for success, on the other (Hopfenberg et al. 1993, p. 9).

This mismatch does not suggest that the students are not capable. However, this gap is often manifested in low achievement, which teachers often equate with low ability. The education system’s reaction to low ability is to provide remediation. If educators saw these students as coming to school with a rich repertoire of skills and knowledge (recognized by the school system), how would that change how these “at-risk” students are taught? How would it change what is taught? Would it affect the individual student’s academic performance? Would it impact on the students’ self esteem, their ability to contribute, and their motivation to do so?

Focusing on students considered to be “at-risk” serves two purposes: it has the potential to increase their reading and critical thinking/critical literacy skills, and in so doing, to change our teaching strategies towards our “at-risk” students. The mismatch between the skills that “at-risk” students bring to school and the expectations that the education system has for them has been responded to through remediation. This
compensatory model (Means et al. 1991) does not leave much room for the wide range of skills and experiences that these children do bring to school. The more advanced skills that their peers are introduced to through the grades often do not become a part of the curriculum for the "at-risk" student, because of the assumption by many educators that the basics must come first (Hopfenberg et al. 1993; Means et al. 1991). Often "at-risk" students do not have the same opportunities to explore these more advanced skills, since they are busy doing remedial work to "catch up" to the skill level of their peers (Palinscar & David 1991).

Schools and the Status Quo

The study of bias detection as it relates to critical thinking is crucial in understanding the relevance of perspective. Schools are institutions set up by those of the dominant culture. Because of this, it stands to reason that their purpose is to transmit the knowledge, values and ideas of this dominant group (Shannon 1992; Giroux 1992). The result, often, is a system that not only values one reality over others, but often fails to acknowledge that there are other realities. This disparity between academic context and student experience is manifested in what we teach, how we teach it, and what we leave out. For the child whose way of being in the world is supported through the curriculum and classroom experiences, this disparity does not exist. What about the student whose life is not reflected in the curriculum? If the child recognizes the disparity between their life and what is presented in the curriculum, what tools do they have to deal with it? If they do not recognize the disparity, how do they affirm their own identity? The daily

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1 Curriculum refers to all aspects of a child's experience in school, including the classroom and the school environment.
school experience for some students can be summarized, to some extent, in McFarlane’s comment about images in books: “If they are the only images which we see, we can easily internalize them and imagine that this is how things should be” (McFarlane 1986, p.22). “Should” leaves little, if any, room for any other (acceptable) ways of being.

There are two vastly different consequences of presenting reality as a singular experience. For the child within the dominant group, it validates their way of knowing and being in the world, and can provide privilege and power. For the child whose way of being and knowing is either not valued, or not acknowledged, it may accomplish just the opposite: it may invalidate their realities.

.. it is also crucial for teachers to understand how schools, as part of the wider dominant culture, often function to marginalize, disconfirm, and delegitimize the experiences, histories, and categories that students use in mediating their lives. This means understanding how tests, classroom relations, teacher talk, and other aspects of the formal and hidden curricula of schooling often function to actively silence students (Giroux 1992, p.17).

The students who are often silenced are those who may also be considered “at-risk” of school failure (Hopfenberg et al. 1993; Means et al. 1991; Thomson 2000). These actions and the resulting silence mean that all of the students miss out on an opportunity to see the world as made up of many different realities.

Teaching About Bias

Teaching students about bias in literature (what it is, how it works, why it is there, and how to find it), and encouraging them to be bias-detectives as part of their reading, is a form of critical thinking within literature, and therefore critical literacy. Shannon (1992) and Giroux (1992) focus on critical literacy in terms of the teacher’s role in
bringing rich, meaningful curriculum to the classroom. However, as students develop the skill of bias detection, they can begin to use their lives as rich sources of learning (Bigelow 1990; McFarlane 1986). Ladson-Billings (1994), in her work with Black students in the United States, explains that she has “…to work to make sure they understand that it’s okay for them to challenge what’s in the book. It should be simple for them, but like kids everywhere they want to accept the book as gospel. Now they know that that will never do” (Ladson-Billings 1994, p. 93-94). Using this knowledge, students can become critical thinkers and critically literate in any context.

With this in mind, let us examine the concept of bias in literature. It should come as no surprise that all material contains bias (McFarlane 1986; Klein 1985). In fact, “every communication expresses the views of the individual or group of individuals making them” (Klein 1985, p.1). Since every book has at least one author, one can therefore assume that the authors’ biases will naturally (and often unconsciously) make their way into the text and the pictures if there are any (McFarlane 1986). Although we often see bias as being negative, the fact that bias exists in a book is not necessarily a criticism of the material (McFarlane 1986). Bias present in books becomes an issue when it becomes pervasive, and in so doing sends a message of what is acceptable and what is not.

Bias that has become pervasive results in the messages in society that have taken hold and become Truth, leaving no room for alternatives without these being considered wrong or abnormal. The messages of the dominant culture filter into our books. “We value books highly, but we also need to acknowledge that books are not neutral conveyors of information. They tend to reflect assumptions of society which are held by
the powerful within that society who consciously or subconsciously reproduce their view within written and visual material" (McFarlane 1986, p.2). Once again, we are confronted with the rules, values and beliefs of the dominant group. These dominant-group values and beliefs need not be as big an issue if we are aware that they represent one viewpoint. Unfortunately, this awareness is not always present.

Since everything we read contains a bias, “...objectivity is not only unobtainable; it is not necessarily even desirable. What needs to be identified when we look at the bias of the author is: whose bias is being reflected?” (Klein 1985, p.3). This is important for educators to acknowledge as we choose the material we use in our classrooms, or how to approach the material we are given (McFarlane 1986; Toronto Board of Education 1989; Klein 1985). Realistically, we cannot protect our children from all biases. Nor, as mentioned in the Toronto Board of Education's Bias, Controversy and Censorship in Language Arts/English: A Teacher’s Guide, can we replace our entire textbook and library collections. It is suggested in the Toronto Board of Education’s document that educators balance the material with other points of view, giving the students a fuller picture of reality. Once again, however, this puts the onus on the teachers, and assumes that they will be willing to challenge the status quo and be consciously political, as Shannon (1992) suggests. Teachers who incorporate various worldviews into their teaching or curriculum provide rich opportunities for their students not only to feel that their different ways of being are valued, but also to recognize and explore other knowledge and realities. To a student who is a member of the non-dominant group such a classroom would value who they are. For students who do not have this experience in school, and learn in an environment built solely on the foundation of the dominant
group’s reality, knowledge of bias (and skills in detecting it) may provide a window through which they can see their own reality. If we “…give children skills in recognizing firstly, that books are written from a viewpoint and secondly, what that viewpoint is” (McFarlane 1986, p. 14), we encourage them to be critically literate. When children know that the authors’ bias (viewpoint) will come through in their books then they can approach the text in a different way. Thus, bias detection and critical thinking/critical literacy are linked. Critical literacy encourages students to look at the material through their own eyes and experiences, taking what has value to them and leaving the rest. I believe that this is important for all students. However, for the students considered “at-risk” whose life experiences may not be reflected in the books in the classroom, being critically literate provides the space for their experience to co-exist with the reality which is shown on the pages in the story book.

**Bias Detection as a Skill to be Taught**

Delpit (1995) asserts the importance of teaching skills to bridge the gap between what students are expected to know and what they come to school knowing in a concrete and tangible way. Skills in detecting bias are also valuable and important. “Because books can easily over-represent some groups and under-represent others, it is important that we enable children to question what they find in the books they read. This means introducing the basic concept of bias and helping children to recognise for themselves the bias of the books they read” (McFarlane 1986, p.2). McFarlane (1986) and Klein (1985) suggest, in contrast to the Toronto Board of Education document (1989), that the skill of bias detection be passed on from the teacher to the student. The ability to understand and
detect bias can provide students with the skills to read critically, regardless of the inclinations of the teacher. Putting the emphasis on the teacher’s role as the provider of alternatives can create the opportunities to share experiences triggered by the material used. I wonder, however, if the teacher as provider of information may also limit the sharing and discussion among the students because the Other\textsuperscript{8} ways of being are presented by the teacher rather than coming from the student’s own experiences.

Giving students the chance to engage critically with the text, questioning what they are reading, and listening to each other, is highlighted in McFarlane’s (1986) work. However, Klein (1985) does mention Maria, a seven year old Black girl, who was able to pick out elements of racism and sexism (presumably from her own life experiences) in a storybook. Klein wonders if her son, who is White, would also be able to recognize the racism and sexism in the story. Klein concludes that since her son’s reality is reflected in the story, there would be no reason for him to question what is presented and nothing would seem “wrong” about the story to him. Maria, on the other hand, was confronted with a very different picture from what her experience told her was true. Had the two of them been given the opportunity in a classroom such as Allen’s (1997) to discuss the story and look for/discuss things that seem unfair, they could both have learned a great deal about each other and about who was telling the story. Through his encouragement and teaching, Allen’s Grade Twos were able to look for and talk about pictures in the books they were reading that they considered unfair and find and discuss patterns in the pictures. From these classroom activities the students then decided to search through the books in the library for books containing characters that portrayed more positive roles,

\textsuperscript{8} Other is capitalized referring to members of the non-dominant groups in society. These groups are often seen as others in reference to the dominant.
and some students even wrote to the publishers expressing their concern. Sharing is a crucial element in learning the detection of bias. By sharing reactions to text (comments, questions, stories, experiences), students may be able to see glimpses of life that are different from their own. The idea is not that they will remember all the differences, but that they will recognize and remember that difference exists, and that "the way it is" is only that way for some. Being able to recognize bias in text changes "the way it is" to "a way it is," and could leave students who are traditionally on the margins with a place on which to stand. The recognition of different ways of being may make it possible, or easier, to stand firmly in who you are while learning within a system that is structured on different knowings.

This thesis attempts to respond to the question of whether student performance can be improved or impacted through introducing the concept of bias and teaching bias detection. Bias detection is a skill that involves critical thinking. It requires reading skills, but encourages the use of basic skills (reading) within the context of advanced skills (critical literacy). Students for whom the reality outside the classroom is different, foreign, or in opposition to what they are expected to know and believe in school (Delpit 1995; Hopfenberg et al. 1993; Means et al. 1991), still bring knowledge with them. Critical literacy demands that "at-risk" students' life experiences inform their examination of the text they are reading (or, in the case of the method used for the body of this research, the pictures in the text). Can bias detection, therefore, help students to become critical thinkers and therefore critically literate? A further question to consider, keeping in mind the benefit of providing a context for practicing basic skills, is whether
bias detection can provide a meaningful context for "at-risk" students to become better readers.
Chapter 4: Research Design

-or-

The plan, in four parts.
If you could see
inside my head
to where my thoughts
are forming

you would find
a map,
of sorts,
linking my hopes,
ideas,
dreams,
and the way it 
could be
into one bright picture.

Instead,
I have blank pages
and black ink
to inspire you…
Overview

My research question was whether teaching Grade Five students “at-risk” about bias detection is an effective way to improve critical thinking skills. The research I designed in order to answer this question involved a curriculum unit. I implemented this bias detection curriculum unit at a school in the Greater Toronto Area. Nine Grade Five students worked with me during the school day over twelve sessions in a six-week time frame during April and May 2001. The selection of participants and data gathering and analysis are both significant in the research design. The decisions that I made with respect to how the students were selected, what the data was and how I was going to collect and analyze the data, were impacted by my attempt to challenge the way the education system understands and treats students “at-risk.” The actual six-week project challenged me to reflect on my own biases and assumptions about the students I was working with and my role as a teacher. The four components of this chapter are; the selection of participants, data gathering, project design and my analytical framework.

Together, these four components make up the research I designed to address the question of whether bias detection is an effective way to improve critical thinking skills.

The project itself can be broken down into three sections of lessons. The first four lessons focused on teaching the students about bias. Sessions five to nine consisted of reading three picture books together and making observations/asking questions about the pictures in each book as we read them out loud, as well as two of the students sharing their own bias detection work on a picture book with the group. During the last three sessions the students used the concept of bias in short dramatic presentations. The twelve-session project was designed to address the research question about the link
between bias detection and critical thinking skills, and will be discussed in detail in the project design section of this chapter.

During the project, however, it became clear to me that my own pedagogy was also part of this research. My pedagogy was important because of the “at-risk” student group I had purposefully selected. I specifically chose this student population in an effort to highlight some of the misperceptions that many teachers have about the abilities of students considered to be “at-risk”, as well as the often limited opportunities that “at-risk” students have with advanced skills instruction. I realized that I shared some of the assumptions about the abilities of students “at-risk” that I was challenging. These assumptions impacted how I structured the project and that (and what) I thought I had to teach the students. These realizations about my assumptions required that I step back and also examine closely what my agenda was, and how my perceptions and biases were impacting my design of the project. I will discuss my own agenda further in this section. I examined the choices I made while designing (and modifying) the twelve sessions, and noticed the challenges that I was faced with in how I was perceiving the students, their skills and abilities, as well as their reaction to our work together. I recorded my journey in a journal.

I struggled with balancing the desire for the project to work and what that would look like, with wanting the students to feel like they had a part in the design and direction of the project. I had hoped that the latter of the two would be the guiding force behind my lesson plans, however, my reflections during the process and my realization after reading the transcripts of the sessions with the students, lead me to believe that I was largely driven by my own agenda of what I hoped would happen and what a successful
project should look like to me. I have incorporated personal reflections within this chapter as well as chapters 5 and 6 within the descriptions of the design and analysis to show this personal journey and reflective process.

During the project and the subsequent writing up of the research, it became clear to me that the process of designing and delivering the curriculum of bias detection was just as important as whether the ability to detect bias can improve critical thinking. The way the project was delivered and what was included, valued, and acknowledged was in some ways more important than the focus on critical thinking skills and their possible link to bias detection. Reflecting on my pedagogy highlights the important role that teachers can play in limiting (or expanding) opportunities for all students, but particularly in this case, for students considered “at-risk.” Shannon (1992) says it best when he asserts that teaching is political, and that as teachers we make political statements every day by what we do, and what we do not do. Both our actions and our inactions are important to the educational experiences of our students, and both have ripple effects for the students beyond the lesson we are teaching.

In this chapter I will outline the details of the research design: how I structured the project, what I was looking for, who became involved, and what actually occurred. In order to do this, it is necessary for me to reveal my agenda. This is important because the frame from which I was operating not only influenced my planning, but also affected my flexibility and, of course, also affected what the students and I did together as a group.

It would be irresponsible to do a thesis around bias detection without revealing and examining my own biases. I began this research project with a desire to educate students about the power of words and pictures, and the necessity to be critical in their
reading. I felt (and still feel) it is important for students to learn that what is presented in a book (be it a story or a text book) is just one way of looking at something and not necessarily the only or correct way. I feel that this is particularly crucial for children who are not members of the dominant culture because it is often these groups' knowledge and ways of being that are put aside, left out, made insignificant, or vilified by the dominant culture. The results of these omissions and misrepresentations surface in books, among other places, as bias. Therefore, I felt that teaching students what bias is and that it exists in books would show them that the absence or misrepresentation of their life realities within the pages does not mean they are not important, real, or true. Knowing that bias exists, makes room for the existence of other ways of being. What may formerly have been known and accepted as the Truth, becomes one way of looking at something. I hoped that if “at-risk” students had this knowledge, it would take the sting out of books that often misrepresent, or do not reflect, the realities of the non-dominant groups in society. Therefore, my agenda had a strong basis in liberatory pedagogy.

The liberatory nature of my agenda had two aspects: the necessity of bias detection in exposing the dominant way of seeing and representing reality as one way, not the way; and the specific value in this for students considered “at-risk” because they are predominantly members of non-dominant groups and they may otherwise not be included in the advanced skills of critical literacy (in this case specifically questioning and observing). I wanted to show students “at-risk” in a different light: one where they were successful at “advanced” skills such as bias detection and critical thinking. At the same time, I felt bias detection and reading critically would give them an edge that would help keep their sense of who they are (their identity) intact, regardless of the messages in
the books. This desire to help the students keep a healthy sense of self comes from my belief that the messages they are getting (or missing) from books are affecting them negatively: consciously or unconsciously. With this in mind, I began the six week project intent on teaching nine students considered to be "at-risk" about bias and stereotypes, reading storybooks with them, practicing finding the hidden messages in the pictures, and encouraging them to practice this bias-detection on their own as well.

I entered the research with an idea of what to do (critical thinking/critical literacy) and how to do it (bias detection: looking at the pictures in picture books for hidden messages). I wanted student feedback and input but was, as it turned out, not quite prepared to relinquish control. This was the greatest learning curve for me. I am happy to say that despite my desire to control the direction of the sessions, I heard (and later read in reviewing the transcripts) some truly amazing things from these children that showed questioning, resistance, and open-mindedness and highlighted the ideas and issues that concerned them. In my mind, sexism and racism in particular were the most relevant issues, due to the age of the students and the fact that we are all non-White. The focus of many of our discussions, however, was mostly on sexism, and the obvious and in some cases unquestionable rules that come along with issues of gender. In general, the students' participation included an array of questions about the pictures in the books that we were reading together, targeting any and everything that did not make sense. While most of the points the students made were not about bias and definitely not big issues like sexism, they were still observing and questioning what they were seeing. Questioning, observation and discussion while reading was the point of our time together. However, somewhere between bias, stereotypes, "isms", social justice and a thesis, I lost my
awareness of the students' knowings and how they showed these, and became focused instead on what I felt they had to learn. I have been able to extricate myself from this narrow view during my data analysis.

There are four portions to this chapter: the selection of participants, the data gathering, the project design, and the analytical concepts that I used to analyze the data. Each of these will be outlined briefly in the following paragraphs, and expanded upon in the rest of this chapter.

In the Selection of Participants section I have outlined the steps that I took to find participants, and the results of this effort. Because I wanted this to be a collaborative project, including student and parent input, there were two options: teacher referral and parent-initiated. Once referred, students and parents were given project introductions after which they were free to decide if they were willing to participate. I will introduce the final group of students who participated in the research, and will include their own personal introductions.

Following the Selection of Participants section is the Data Gathering section. In this portion of Chapter 4 I will outline the data that I initially wanted to focus on. During the course of the project, I needed to change my focus in keeping with my desire to be student-centred, and troubling the notion of success. This change in focus meant that I did not gather as much data as I had initially planned. My initial intention was to use a variety of data gathering methods; checklists to track participation, students' independent written or oral work (response journals) to track ideas and questioning, and student participation in discussions during sessions. The checklist and response journal as well as the focus on progress (my version of it) became incongruent with my desire to
challenge the notion of success, and to acknowledge the knowings of these children. Therefore, I stopped using the checklist and no longer required the students to complete a response journal. Instead, I focused solely on the oral participation of the students during our time together.

The **Project Design** section introduces the curriculum of the project and the ideas behind my choices of activities. It outlines the structure and goals of the twelve periods that the students and I spent together. I have broken down the twelve sessions that the students and I spent together over six weeks into groundwork, practice, and application stages. Change occurred in the curriculum of these sessions as I listened to the tapes and made changes to accommodate the understanding, interests, and needs of the students in the group. In addition to these changes, I was very aware of my own liberatory agenda and my need to let go and see where the process took us. It was often difficult for me to let go of control. This created a delicate balance between wanting to affect some kind of change in the way these students read, while simultaneously acknowledging their interests and needs.

Finally, the **Analytical Concepts** section deals with the framework that I used in analyzing the data. The basic concept is that one's choices are a result of one's experiences. The choices made by an author/illustrator in the pictures of their books reflect the experiences they have had. I feel that if students understand the contextual relevance of an author's perspective, as well as have the opportunity to hear and share about different experiences with other different perspectives, then bias becomes a way of thinking and a book can be read with a certain amount of detachment. This detachment derives from observing and questioning the choices made in the pictures (and also the
text), realizing that they reflect one person’s (the author’s/illustrator’s) experience that may not be shared by the reader. The value of the link between experience and choice, to me, is largely the realization that the way things are portrayed in pictures are one way and not the only way that they could be. The data analysis, therefore, centres on this link between experience and choice, and the students’ understanding of it. Detailed analysis of the data will come in Chapter 5.

The overall theme in the first three sections of this chapter is adaptability and change. These three sections outline the plans and the process for my research. The final portion of the project design section, is a reflection of what actually occurred, and an examination of my methods, ideas, and my various ways of thinking in light of what my goals were. The final section of this chapter, the analytical concepts portion, introduces the framework which I used to measure and analyze the data, which is found in Chapter 5.
Selection of Participants

Who are you?

How do I choose who can be, should be, could be, a part of this?

Who decides who will get to decide to be included?

So much a part of the system. Already. Is there any way to do this that doesn’t make it unfair? Another box?

I want you to decide that you want to participate. But the you is already a small group within the larger population. And so I have already defined you, trying not to.

If it was an “all-call” would you come? Or would you already have decided that you couldn’t?

And that, ultimately, is the problem, and where this begins.
The students that were involved in this project were eight boys and one girl in Grade Five at an elementary school outside of the Greater Toronto Area. The school and surrounding community are made up largely of new immigrants to Canada. The school has over 700 students and over 30 staff members, which is quite large for a Kindergarten through Grade 5 school. The majority of the students in the school are non-White, and the staff reflect the diversity of the students (races, colours, and first languages) more so than any school I have taught in. I chose this site because I have been on staff there for the past three and a half years, and felt my familiarity would be an asset. I chose Grade Five students because it is the age group that I felt most comfortable teaching. The nine students who agreed and were given permission by their parents (or aunt and uncle in one case) to be a part of this project are all non-White; three boys and one girl are Black, four boys are South Asian (India and Pakistan) and one is Sri Lankan. I asked them to introduce themselves and choose their own pseudonyms. Their stories are included later in this chapter.

Considering ESL (English as a Second Language) as a possible consideration for being “at-risk”, the school itself could be considered “at-risk”, as the student population is largely ESL. For many students, English is not spoken at home, and many parents do not speak English at all. Interestingly, the school is allotted funding and literacy support under the same formula as any other school in the district, without extra consideration (and money) for the crucial reality that the ESL population is so high. In light of my challenges with regard to how students “at-risk” are regarded by teachers, and how the school system is structured to address the education of “at-risk” students, this funding
formula (i.e. equality versus equity in the allotment of money) brings up the question of whom the education system is designed to serve.

The school community recognizes the diversity in its student and staff populations in various ways. The largest population in the school is South Asian, however, various festivals are recognized and celebrated as part of classroom learning as well as in assemblies, and many students (and staff) are away from school on holy days such as Eid (Islam), for example. During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan many of the older students are fasting between sunrise and sunset, and accommodations are made for them to stay in for recess or spend the lunch hour in a classroom with a teacher who is fasting as well. The library has some bilingual books (i.e. English & Urdu, English & Punjabi), and you can hear students speaking to each other in their first languages. Teachers are available to help translate for teachers during parent-teacher interviews, but often older siblings come along to facilitate communication between their parents and the teachers. The environment in the school is one that attempts to value and acknowledge the diversity of the staff and students.

Many students in the school come from single-parent families, or live in extended families. Often parents work shifts and there is no one home at lunchtime, so many students stay for lunch. Many students live in the apartment buildings that are walking distance from the school, as well as in basement apartments of houses. We have overflowing lost and found boxes, and yet I have seen boys and girls outside at recess without hats or mittens in the winter. Examining these descriptors in light of the high ESL population and the funding allotted to the school, our school fits the description of being “at-risk.”
The fact that the school could be considered "at-risk" is a necessary detail to note because the small group of students who worked with me are representative of the student body as a whole. The importance of this representation is this: in another community, without such a high ratio of immigrants who don't speak English as their first language, the "at-risk" students (usually of the non-dominant group) may be easily identified in relation to the majority of students (usually of the dominant group) in the school. The school in which I did my research project, the majority of students are of the non-dominant group in society. Thus, the students who worked with me look like, and have family lives at home and circumstances that are similar to many (if not most) of the other students. This means that the "at-risk" student population does not stand out as (visibly) as it would in a different school. If this were another school in a different community, this might not necessarily be the case. The demographics of the student population most often deemed to be "at-risk" by the education system includes being a visible minority, non-English speaking, low income and often having a single-parent family. Many of these characteristics are noticeable. In another school, where the majority of the student population might be of the dominant group in society (White, middle class, English speaking, nuclear family), the "at-risk" students might be easily identifiable and may form a visible sub-group of the school population. The nine students in the research group had life circumstances as well as cultural and ethnic identities consistent with the majority of the school population as a whole. This similarity created the advantage of a student group (and parent group) that were less likely to feel singled out or apart from the rest of the school community.
The project required that the students meet with me as a group, two periods per week over six weeks (April 2, 2001 – May 11, 2001). During this time we would read stories together and talk about bias and how to find it in the pictures in the books. The students would be involved in discussion/drama/art/written work about the stories and their ideas about the books we read. The students would be required to complete a written response journal or tape-record their thoughts, questions, and responses regarding the material that we read and discussed together.

There were two possible ways that students could become a part of the project; parent-initiated or teacher-referral. A letter of information was placed in the monthly school newsletter (March 2001) in English (Appendix J). This letter outlined the purpose of the project that was to improve critical thinking through finding hidden messages/bias in books, for students having academic difficulty. The letter also outlined the intent of involving parents; the time frame (6 weeks, two periods a week); and invited parents to contact me at the school if they were interested in having their child participate. I felt that an introduction in the school newsletter would provide the opportunity for interested parents to respond, rather than the recommendation coming from the teacher. I thought that if involvement in the project were parent-initiated, there would be more input by them in the project. I was wrong. Unfortunately, no responses were received. I then met with the Grade Five Teachers as well as the Special Education Teacher to discuss the project (see Appendix A & B3). I asked each classroom teacher to recommend four students from their class that they felt were “at-risk” and who would probably be willing, and able, to participate. Students who were designated “Exceptional” were not

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9 “Exceptional” is a term used in Special Education to designate students who have been tested and have special learning needs and who therefore receive special programming. This is not to replace or ignore the
considered. Students with Exceptional designation are those who have had psychological and educational assessments that indicate the reasons for their learning difficulties (i.e. difficulty processing information etc.). These students receive up to half a day of special education support, versus remedial support for students who are not identified as “Exceptional” which could be less than one period per day. Thus, Exceptional students were not considered, as I did not feel I could address their specific learning issues within the context of the project over the six-week period of time designated to the project. My choice of asking for four student referrals from each teacher was meant to allow for reduced numbers due to lack of interest (by the student or their parents/guardians) and lack of parental/guardian permission, while hopefully resulting in a small group of approximately 10 students. In the final analysis, the group consisted of nine students. Nine was a comfortable number for group-work based on reading and discussion, although an even smaller group may have allowed more time for each student to share.

The sixteen students who were initially referred by their teachers met with me for one period (40 minutes) during which time I explained the idea of the project, my job as a student and a researcher, and their part, should they choose to participate (Appendix D). I answered the students’ questions. I asked the students if their parents/guardians spoke and understood English (to determine if the forms needed to be translated). All 16 students were given forms in English briefly explaining the project (Appendix C) and inviting the parents/guardians to come to an information meeting at the school the following week. Of these sixteen students, one was removed by the teacher because of an error in “at-risk” designation, and four students did not return their forms.
The parents and guardians of the remaining eleven students expressed interest, and five (two mothers and three fathers) were able to make the information meeting. Four of the five parents brought their children with them. The other five parents and aunt & uncle were contacted by telephone. The parent/student information meeting took place on a Wednesday evening at 7 p.m. in the school library. The parents were given a detailed information letter (Appendix E) while waiting for others to arrive. The presentation was brief, with the most time used to answer the questions of one parent in particular, who was concerned about skills instruction (reading and writing) for his child.

The presentation included an introduction of who I am and why I wanted to work with their children and my belief that all students come to school with varied and valuable experiences but that we tend to focus on certain skills and ways of doing things, often ignoring alternatives. Everyone was asked to draw a picture of the outside of their home (not house). I used a knapsack with various items that could be used as a basis for measurement to illustrate the different skills (the items) that students (the knapsack) bring to school. I read from a picture book to the group and we talked about the messages in the pictures. There was a question and answer period when the knapsack presentation and book reading were finished (see Appendix F for a detailed agenda).

Having the children (or their parents) draw their home, was done as an exercise in the many different types of homes, and how the consistent use of one type of home (a flashcard from a French unit showing a house with a garden was used as an example) in books or by the teacher may result in an invalidation of the different life circumstances and experiences of students in the classroom. The knapsack was used to illustrate that there are many different ways of doing things, but that often in school, we focus on one
way as the only way or the correct way and discount all others. The picture book and its messages (bias) exercise, was to give the parents an example of what their children would be doing with me during the project.

The meeting lasted for approximately one hour and ten minutes. During the discussion I asked the parents and students about having the sessions after school or during lunch time instead of during class time. I was conscious of the stigma associated with being removed from class, and knew that a few students were already being removed for remedial assistance or ESL. Even though I felt that this project may not have this same negative stigma because I was asking for their help with my research, I wanted to offer the students and parents the option of schedules. Although the parents who were present seemed to like the idea of their children not missing class time, two students took the school bus, and another was not able to stay for lunch. The sessions were therefore held during class time, scheduled in consultation with the four classroom teachers.

My hope for a dialogue in the meeting with parents and students, about issues that they felt were important for us to focus on, did not materialize. One parent was very focused on reading and writing instruction for his daughter. I addressed this issue by pointing out to him that the programs offered at school largely deal with skills instruction and that my focus was on practicing reading and writing within the context of bias detection, but that basic skills would not be the focus. With this exception there was virtually no parent feedback or questions during the meeting. A telephone conversation with one mother who could not attend the meeting, was much more engaging. She intended to send in a letter with ideas, but I never received one. This parent, however,
pointed out that perhaps it was too early for parents to feel comfortable giving any input and to “give it time,” meaning that perhaps the parents would feel more comfortable sharing their ideas as the project progressed. There was no parent input during the course of the project, and despite weekly update letters (see examples in Appendix I) and three sessions that were set aside for parents to join, us if they were available, I did not hear from any of the parents. This was disappointing, but not entirely surprising to me.

The lack of parent involvement was disappointing because I wanted very for this to be a collaborative project, and for the parents to feel that their ideas and input were valued. I realize that simply asking for their participation may have accomplished this, however my assumption was that they would welcome the opportunity to have a say in what their children would be learning about. My own agenda about bias and its effects on the non-dominant groups in society led me to assume that the parents would have much to say on what issues and messages they wanted their children to question and discuss. While it may be true that the parents/guardians had concerns and issues that they wanted their children to focus on, these issues and concerns were not communicated to me. The fact that I was not surprised by their lack of input comes from the knowledge that many of the parents are single parents, and are very busy. It also speaks to me of the possibility that they feel alienated by the system, and that the short time period of the project could not change this feeling. My approach following the meeting was to send a letter home every week. In retrospect, I question whether phone calls may have been more effective in eliciting responses. As a result of the lack of parental/guardian input I questioned whether my assumptions were due to an unrealistic view or understanding of
parents’ interest in their children’s schooling or my biases as to how this interest should occur.

I handed out consent forms (see Appendix B1 & B2) following the meeting, and sent them home with students the next day for parents who were introduced to the project over the telephone. Ten students (8 boys and 2 girls) were given permission and agreed to participate in the project, which started the following week (April 2, 2001) and ran for six weeks. One girl changed her mind following the first session, leaving eight boys and one girl. Being the only girl became a challenging situation for Veronica towards the end of the six weeks. As we were already over half way done, I did not feel comfortable finding another girl to join us at that late stage. We talked about this and she decided to stay and thus remained the only girl for the duration of the six weeks.

The Students

The nine students who ultimately took part in the project were eight boys and one girl, all in Grade 5. Three of the boys and the girl are Black, all of Caribbean descent. Four boys are of South Asian descent. One boy is Sri Lankan. Six of the students (all boys) speak languages other than English at home. Four of the students (all boys) were born outside of Canada, and none of the students’ parents were born in Canada. All but three of the students (boys) live with both parents.

The students all chose their own pseudonyms and were asked to describe themselves, including anything they felt was important about themselves that they wanted to be a part of this thesis. I have included what they have said verbatim below, with any
comments or prompting by me in italics. They are a wonderful group of bright, energetic, enthusiastic, thoughtful children, and I enjoyed working with them.

Name: Veronica
Age: 10
Place of birth: Canada
Parent's place of birth: St. Kitts & Nevis
Lives with: parents, cousins, sister

I'm a girl that has long hair, that's a Christian who believes in the Lord. I'm a girl who loves to read and loves to write, and learn about Math and French and art and music. I know that it's important that I want to graduate, I want to learn lots of education so when I grow up I can become a [sic] evangelist and teach the people about God and how to become and evangelist just like me.

Name: DJK
Age: 11
Place of birth: Sri Lanka
Length of time in Canada: 6 years
Parent's place of birth: Sri Lanka
Lives with: Aunt and Uncle
Language(s) spoken at home: English and Tamil

I like soccer. First I was at (name of school) then I came here. My favourite subject is math. I like Nike shoes. I like Alan Iverson. He's (speaking about himself) friends with Brian. He's in Mrs. (name omitted)'s class. He is athletic.

Name: James
Age: 10
Place of birth: Richmond B.C.
Parent's place of birth: India
Lives with: both parents, brother and sister
Language(s) spoken at home: English & Punjabi

I like to play hockey, basketball and soccer. I like to watch TV and play with my friends. I like doing math. That's all.
Name: Bond
Age: 11
Place of birth: Canada
Parent’s place of birth: India
Lives with: both parents
Language(s) spoken at home: English and Punjabi

I like to play hockey. I collect hockey cards. My favourite basketball [sic] is Michael Jordan and Vince Carter. My favourite team in basketball is L.A. Lakers, and in hockey my favourite team is Toronto Maple Leafs, like I’m wearing my shirt right now. I’m friendly, I like to play, I like to share. I have lots of friends. Some people try to bully me around, but I don’t let them. I’m very good at hockey and I joined for soccer. I got one goal this year and five assists and that’s it.

Name: Sinbad
Age: 10
Place of birth: Montreal, QC
Parent’s place of birth: Trinidad and Ghana
Lives with: both parents
Language(s) spoken at home: English and Twi (an African language)

(Sinbad wanted to respond to questions)

*What kind of person are you?*
I’m mild.

*What does that mean?*
Sometimes I get angry, and sometimes I’m nice.

*What things make you angry?*
When people make fun of me or say nasty things about me.

*What kind of things do you do when you are being nice?*
I help people and….that’s it.

*What’s your favourite thing to do in the whole world?*
My most favourite thing is to play football, and soccer and basketball. I like playing with my friends, and more stuff.

*Like what?*
Like playing around.

*Anything else you want to tell me?*
My favourite subject is math. Because I’m good at it.
Name: Naz
Age: 10
Place of birth: Jamaica
Length of time in Canada: 6 years
Parent’s place of birth: Jamaica
Lives with: Mom
Language(s) spoken at home: English

I like to sing, I like to make jokes and I have lots of friends. And I have a scratch on my nose.

Anything else important that you want people to know about you?

Anything else important?...that...I don’t know. Oh, yeah, I have something for them to know... If you remember that Naz, this little man, that he wants to be a singer, okay?

Name: Wolverine
Age: 11
Place of birth: Canada
Parent’s place of birth: Jamaica
Lives with: Grandma, Mom, 4 brothers and Uncle
Language(s) spoken at home: English

I like to play basketball, soccer and soccer baseball, and I like to run. I like to make jokes and I like to draw. And sometimes I like to fool around.

Anything else important that you want people to know about you?

I like to walk around, to get exercise, sometimes I ride bikes, everywhere, sometimes I go to my cousin’s house. I like to wear shorts, I like cars, I like boats. My favourite colour is blue.

Name: Wes
Age: 11
Place of birth: India
Length of time in Canada: 7 years
Parent’s place of birth: India
Lives with: both parents and little brother
Language(s) spoken at home: English and Punjabi

I like playing soccer, basketball and hockey. But my most favourite I like to play soccer because it’s fun and you get to run a lot. And the thing that I really hate is when my brother bugs me a lot. I like to watch Pokemon and Digemon, and I like going to school and I like playing with my friends, soccer and other stuff. And playing video games. That’s it.
Name: Michael  
Age: 11  
Place of birth: Pakistan  
Length of time in Canada: 9 years  
Parent’s place of birth: Pakistan  
Lives with: Mom Dad and Brothers  
Language(s) spoken at home: Urdu and English

I live on (name of street) and when people are going home they can see me, so I would call myself, like, famous, ‘cause a lot of people know me. I’m the guy that lives next to the catwalk. I draw very good, I’m a very good artist, and I um, I like, um, playing baseball, so people can see me around playing, and um, my favourite thing is eating chocolate.
Gathering Data

Collecting what is

What am I looking for?
A space for your voice,
a way of listening
without borders.

Room to let you
tell me what is important,
in what you say,
what you don’t say,
and what you do.

Some way to see
what our work together
has meant to you.
Really

And in that
what it has meant
to me.
It was important to me that this critical literacy project be as student-centred\textsuperscript{10} as possible in design and approach. I wanted some way to track the progress of the students that would allow them the freedom to express their thoughts and ideas, rather than a rigid assessment tool that might possibly not reflect the students' ability. Taking into consideration the students' freedom of expression was particularly important to me, given that the usual experiences of assessment and evaluation in the classroom for students "at-risk" are probably not positive. The whole point that students "at-risk" are members of a non-dominant group within a dominant structure, and the gap in experience between these two groups, made the data gathering process delicate and crucial for me as a teacher and as a researcher. I did not want this to be another exercise that highlighted what these students weren't doing "right" or "like everyone else". I will briefly outline here the initial data gathering methods that I planned to use, and will elaborate upon them and the changes that I made in the rest of this section.

My original data sources were to include: pre- and post-interviews/questionnaires, oral participation, written or oral response journals, and checklists. The pre- and post-interview/questionnaires consisted of a choice of oral or written questions and answers (for the students, their parents/guardians and their teacher), about student participation and interest in reading, and questioning what they read. I felt that this pre- and post-questionnaire/interview would give me a sense of what, if anything, had changed in their reading or approach to reading over the course of the six weeks. Our twelve sessions together were to focus on learning about bias and its detection as well as reading stories out loud together (each group member taking a turn to read). The discussions and

\textsuperscript{10} By student-centred I mean incorporating student ideas and input into what we would be doing together, and being aware of where the students "are at" during the course of the project.
activities that came out of these stories were to be the source of the data I collected, and the sessions were be audio-taped as data. The written or oral response journals for the students were meant to be a place for the students to record their thoughts, feelings, ideas and questions about the stories we would read together and the discussions that ensued. I hoped to record any changes in the amount or type of questions they asked about the stories we read together. Finally, the checklist was meant to track the students' participation during the sessions, to see if and when they asked questions, or contributed to the discussions, in the hopes that their participation and questioning/observation skills would increase. During the twelve sessions, and in the students' response journal entries, I wanted to focus on the types of questions they were asking or observations they were making about the pictures in the stories (if any). Were they being critical thinkers in this process? Were they thinking about what messages the pictures are sending? Were they questioning the choices the author/illustrator made or his/her way of thinking? I began the project hoping to see a progression from the beginning to the end of the six weeks in terms of each student's participation, as well as the types of questions/issues that the students brought up orally as well as on their own in their response journals. Originally, I planned on using a checklist as part of the data gathered. This was intended to track the students' ability to detect bias in the pictures of the books I selected on their own, as well as their participation in the discussions. I was also interested in noting whether they came up with the questions and observations independently. I realized that the checklist was the rigid assessment tool I was worried about using. The data collected on the checklist in the form of check marks for every contribution to the discussion (or lack thereof), did not contribute to my analysis of the way the students were using their critical thinking
skills. This became a problem when my focus shifted from the improvement of their critical thinking skills to examining how the students were using questioning and observation while they read. This change in my outlook, which will be discussed further in this section, made the checklists irrelevant. How many times a student asked a question or shared an idea or comment told me little about how they were using their skills and what contributions they were making. In the final analysis, the data gathered consisted solely of the students’ oral participation. The students seemed to enjoy our discussions, in direct contrast to their response journal work (which was not done or not returned to school). Using their oral participation as the only data source felt like the best and most authentic way to capture the ways in which the students were using their critical thinking skills. The tape recordings of the sessions and the transcripts were instrumental in the gathering and analysis of this data.

The following pages outline the sources of my data in greater detail, as well as the changes that I made, in keeping with my desire to honour the needs and ways of being of the students in the group (specifically their preference for oral over written communication). The changes that were made in the sources of data reflect a change in my perception of the work the students and I were doing together. During the six weeks, I struggled with the gap between what I thought should happen regarding the students’ improvement in critical thinking (by learning to detect bias in books) and what was actually occurring in the group. I was beginning to realize that our work was not so much about improving their skills as much as it was about how they were using their critical thinking skills within the context of bias detection and critical literacy. My realization that the context provided a new and different opportunity for the students to use their
critical thinking skills solidified when I was analyzing the data. I will expand on this in Chapter 5, however my altered perspective with regard to the students' response styles did affect my decisions not to use pre- and post- questionnaires/interviews, response journal entries and checklists as originally planned. Although my data sources changed over the course of the project, there were consistently two main elements that I was interested in within critical thinking: observation and independent questioning. These areas provided the focus for the data gathering despite the changed data sources, which I will discuss in the following pages.

Initially, the research design included pre- and post- interviews/questionnaires for the students, parents, and teachers. However, before beginning, I turned my attention towards the importance of the students' written/drawn work and oral participation. I decided to change the focus of the data to be collected because I was more concerned that the participating students experience success in the process of the project than I was about how the educational system may view their abilities. The important gauge for success, for me, was the children's experience. Focusing on the students' experience made my decision to remove the questionnaires as a data source and focus on the students' written work and oral participation over the six-week period quite easy. This change occurred before the project began, and the questionnaires/interviews were never part of the actual project.

Valuing their participation in this project made it important that I not copy the school model that put them at risk in the first place. The idea of a questionnaire or interview which would validate the opinions of their parents (who obviously want them to succeed within the system) and teachers (part of the system which has these students
deemed "at-risk") as benchmarks for their success seemed to undermine my position on challenging the system's view of what these students are capable of. I wanted to value their contributions in whatever form I received them, and let these speak for themselves.

In addition to troubling the notion of success and having the students' work and contributions speak for themselves, it is necessary to examine the interview or questionnaire as a method of gathering information. Meaning is subjective and affected by time, context, and the individual, among other things (Scheurich 1995). Although Scheurich (1995) is speaking about interviews, I believe that a questionnaire requires the same considerations. The meanings I placed on the questions could have been completely different from those placed upon them by the parents, teachers, and the students themselves. The answers given by the students, but especially by the parents and possibly the teachers, would have been based on the meanings they attributed to the questions, as well as possibly a desire to give the "right" answer (the one that would be in keeping with the status quo). In addition, my intended meaning in the questions, as a researcher and a teacher would have impacted my reading of these answers. I realized that what started as a simple tool designed to help me gather information and determine any changes in the students' approach to reading, could have added another layer to the onion I was attempting to peel. In other words, the interview/questionnaires could have been be counterproductive. In light of my awareness that academic success is often seen through only one lens and that the results that might be successful for students "at-risk" often fall outside the expectations of the school system, I did not feel that using the interview/questionnaires would serve the project.
Our group sessions consisted of twelve 50-minute sessions during the last period of the school day (2:40-3:30), twice a week over a period of six weeks. The actual time spent together during these sessions, however, was never the full 50 minutes. By the time the students came in from recess and the ones who had forgotten were called down over the intercom to join us, most often we had approximately 30 to 40 minutes together. These sessions were tape-recorded. The tape recorder was in full view, much to the students' delight, as they tried various sounds and watched the needle jump on several occasions. The final two sessions were spent in small groups creating a drama skit about challenging a bias that we found in one of the books we read together (Tough Jim, by Miriam Cohen). These drama presentations were video-taped. The tape recorder allowed me to participate in the discussion without worrying about writing down what was being said. I reviewed the audio-tape of our discussions following each session. Listening to the tapes helped me to design future sessions based on the questions, comments, and topics of interest to the students that arose out of our taped discussions.

In addition to the tape, I began the project using a checklist to track student participation (and off-task behaviour) using checkmarks (see Appendix G) for each time they contributed. This too was made known to the students, some of whom reminded me about the check marks on a few occasions. During our twelve sessions I wanted to focus on three things regarding the students' critical literacy. First of all, I was interested in whether or not they were asking questions and engaging with the pictures in the story, as well as making connections between what they read and their own lives and experiences. The checklist was intended to serve as the measure for the number of times each student participated (see Appendix G) and consisted of five columns: Sharing Ideas; Sharing
Stories; Asking Questions; Responding to Questions and Not Participating/Paying Attention. Each time a student contributed to the discussion, I indicated their input in the appropriate column with a check mark. I soon found that the categories were limiting in terms of categorizing the responses, which took more of my attention away from the actual discussion as I tried to find the appropriate column in which to place the checkmark. As I listened to the students' discussions I became more interested in what they were talking about, and participating in the discussion with them in a meaningful way, and less interested in how often they contributed. Thus, I often forgot to make checks and eventually stopped using the checklist all together. It seemed far too simple a tool for the important and meaningful ideas that the students were sharing. Discussion around the topics, which arose as a result of the pictures in the story, often prompted the students to share stories of their own. I felt that these stories were very powerful and significant contributions to the group and the project.

Each student was given a response journal. They had a choice of a note book (with or without lines) or an audio-tape. I realized that writing is not always a favourite mode of expression for students, especially those considered "at-risk," therefore the students were given a choice of a lined or blank paged notebook, or an audio-tape. My intent was that the choice of notebooks or audio-tape allowed for expression through art or oral communication in addition to the written word. I encouraged the students to complete a response journal entry following each session and return it to me so that I could read/look at/listen to it before the next session if possible. The purpose of the response journal was two-fold: the entries would give me something I could read or look at, reflect on, and draw from for the following sessions, as well as comment on, if
appropriate. In addition, the entries would serve as a record of student growth (again, the focus on progress as defined by a measurable outcome improving over time) in terms of questioning and observing what they were reading. I planned to photocopy the entries so that the journal would remain with the student. Of the nine students in the group, two (one boy and one girl) chose to use a tape and one (a boy) chose the blank-paged notebook. All the others used lined notebooks.

The data I hoped to gather by means of the response journal work was similar to that gathered during the oral discussions – the students’ questions, ideas, and thoughts about what we had read or talked about during our time together that day. I wanted to focus on two areas within critical thinking: Were they asking questions about the stories or our discussions? Were they making connections to their own lives and experiences? Over the six weeks, I hoped to see student comments and reflections about the author’s way of thinking (bias) presented in the pictures, and how this connected to their lives. Much like the oral data gathered, I felt that using the students’ reflections as a data source allowed the students space to express themselves; therefore I did not want to make too many rules about how or what they should do. I asked the students about giving them specific questions for their response journal work, but neither the students nor I particularly liked the idea. Therefore, most often I simply asked the students to comment on what we had discussed that day. In this way, I hoped the students’ own ideas of what was important would come through in their response journal entries. After the first few sessions, however, the students stopped responding in (and returning) their journals, despite reminders. Due to this lack of interest, and my desire to respect and acknowledge
the contributions the students were making, I no longer required that they complete their journals, and focused instead on the work we were doing together during the sessions.

As part of our bias-detection exercise, I handed out sticky notes to the students to take home and use when they were reading. I hoped that this would allow them to practice the type of questioning we were doing together on their own, and share their findings with the group. Having students stick Post-It™ Notes on the pages they thought contained bias was, in effect, a form of assessment of the skills they were using when reading, because the results of their inquiry were shared and recorded. Only two students (two boys) participated in this activity; both were very excited about sharing their books and questions/bias detection with the group. Again, as this was a homework assignment, I did not insist that the other seven students find and share a book. The results of the two books shared by the two students (Naz and Sinbad) became part of the data gathered, indicating their independent questioning of the pictures in a text (see Appendix J).

Two important shifts in my outlook occurred that affected my choice of data sources and data gathering. The first shift concerns my appreciation for the students’ success in terms of how they were using the critical thinking skills of observation and questioning, rather than assessing how many questions they asked and how detailed their observations were. Part of this change in outlook, was my view of the students and their abilities and ways of being. I began to see the purpose of the project as providing a context for the students to use the critical thinking skills of observing and questioning, rather than the opportunity to learn and improve upon these skills. Finally, I became aware how important oral communication was within the scope of literacy, and how important it was to these children that I recognize their command of and comfort with
oral language. This required that I recognize that reading and writing are not the only forms of literacy, although as a result of the educational systems’ structure and expectations, we teachers we seem to emphasize these over the spoken word within the context of literacy. In fact, although their writing may have been limited (which may have contributed to their resistance to making the journal entries) many of the students’ were quite comfortable expressing themselves in words and their oral literacy was powerful.

Over time my idea of what success looked like changed from being a quantitative assessment to a qualitative assessment as to the way in which the students were observing and engaging with the stories we were reading together. This shift from quantitative to qualitative was slow in coming. During the six weeks I struggled with letting go of my own ideas, my own agenda, and the need for specific outcomes (such as the students being able to find and name bias in pictures that involved racism and sexism) for this project to “work”. During the analysis of the data, however, it became clear to me that my liberatory preconceptions (wanting to help, to empower students, to create social change, etc.) were undermining my belief in the abilities and ways of knowing of the students. I was focused on teaching them about bias and what I felt was important, rather than engaging them in the process of uncovering what bias is for them, and approaching bias and not taking books at face value from their perspective and experiences. I had entered into the project to teach the students critical thinking skills and to see if their questioning and observation skills would improve. This did not allow me to enter into a dialogue with them about their experiences when reading, nor to acknowledge their critical thinking skills. I missed the crucial fact that these nine students probably already
knew how to observe, question, compare, and discuss issues, and that what I was providing was a (new?) context in which these skills could be used (as advocated by Means et al. 1993) when reading. My outlook was not allowing me to see their abilities. My lack of acknowledgement of their experiences and skills and my desire to “teach” them falls right into the very aspect of the education system I was hoping to challenge by including students “at-risk” in the first place: the assumption by many teachers that these students do not have the necessary skills. In addition to this, my version of success required improvement of the skills as I was teaching and seeing them (i.e. more questions, more detailed observation etc.). The classic quantity versus quality trap. Instead, I tried to let go of the direction I thought the sessions should take (for greatest results) and to see where the students’ conversations took us. Letting go was difficult and I did not always succeed during our six weeks together. It was a process that continued, however, as I examined the data. My data analysis was profoundly affected, and is discussed in Chapter 5.

Another important shift occurred in how I perceived the students’ literacy. It was evident that writing was not as comfortable for these students as talking was. I struggled with the question of whether it would appear that I was lowering my expectations of these students by “letting them get away with” not writing. Part way through the six weeks, however, I realized that it was not so much about lowering my standards, as it was about valuing who they are. Their oral work contained valid, brilliant and important examples of the students’ ability to think critically. I was forced to see the importance of their oral literacy, because the students were not completing their response journal entries. Many of them, however, were eager to share and discuss during our time
together. Their comfort with oral communication compared to written communication was obvious, but the validity of oralacy as part of being literate came slowly and only truly solidified as I reread the transcripts of our sessions together. As long as I was focused on literacy as being reading and writing exclusively, the students’ oral participation did not seem as valid as the traditional benchmarks. Once I began to realize that their oral communication was a form of literacy and provided the same type of data I was looking for in a different form, our discussions took on a new meaning, and our conversations then became the only data source.

I believe that the changes that I made to the sources of the data gathered were important and consistent with my desire for a student-centred project. My focus on the critical thinking skills of questioning and observation remained consistent despite the removal of the checklists, questionnaires/interviews and the response journal. Instead, focusing on the students oral participation valued the way in which they were comfortable expressing themselves and their literacy. The students’ comfort is important not only as an issue of respect for their way of being, and their existing skills base, but also because it impacts the quality of their responses and participation. This is evident in the stark difference between their oral participation and their response journal work (or lack thereof). My bias towards written responses initially overshadowed the wonderful work the students were doing orally. The data gathered was all student oral responses within the context of group discussions. Their responses, comments, and questions over the course of the six weeks tell the story.
Project Design

Plans...altered...space

Balance – but then even here, why?
What am I trying to weigh?
The should with the possibility?
The fear with the safety?
The right with the wrong?
The known and the Other?

Is this not the journey that I am on?
Troubling,
seeing,
shaking up,
asking questions,
how can I create a new box
when I am casting off the old?
Am I?

What do I need to do
for freedom to enter the spaces
blow through the pages
sing in the laughter and chatter
and create Voices

Letting go
balance is the universe
we create the weight
that brings one side lower
one side higher
one side heavier
one side weightless
more and less

If we let it be,
wouldn’t it just BE?
Balanced.
Real.
The project design includes the following elements: instruction in what bias is and practice in detecting it, oral participation and written reflection, yet the written component was dropped. Oral participation was important for sharing experiences and hearing different experiences of similar issues. Bias, presented as a way of thinking, is not necessarily a negative thing (McFarlane 1986). It is one viewpoint on an issue. When put in the context of the “isms” (i.e. sexism) and stereotyping it becomes negative. This focus on the negative was a point, unfortunately, that I became stuck on, in my desire for highlighting social justice and change to the students. Sharing experiences and opinions was an important part in seeing different ways of being and recognizing them as different realities for different people. The voicing and recognition of different realities helps to dispel the myth that the dominant way is the only or correct way. Written reflection initially seemed like a good way to elicit thoughts and questions from the students; however, this became an issue of respect and validation as I realized that they were much more comfortable using oral communication. This realization affected the project design, as I discontinued the response journal component. The practice in bias detection was the basis for our discussions and the oral participation of the students. Bias detection was the backbone of the project. Unfortunately, I became caught up in the initial instruction about bias rather than hearing what it meant to them and finding out about their views during our work together. My focus on teaching about bias took away four sessions of time when we could have been reading and talking about books and their pictures. Bias detection supported by instruction was the pivotal aspect that provided the context for the students’ oral participation and exploration of critical thinking while reading.
The curriculum design was simple. I introduced the concepts of bias and encouraged the students to identify and understand bias through exercises, discussion, and practice using picture books. Everyone in the group (myself and the students) took a turn reading a page in the books. As the facilitator of the group, I then guided the students to look for the ways of thinking presented through the authors’/illustrators’ choice of illustration. I encouraged the students to see if they could find examples of the authors’/illustrators’ bias on their own and share with the group. Finally, the students worked on a dramatic presentation which challenged bias, based on an idea from one of the books.

The first five sessions were designed to provide the students with information about bias and stereotypes, and about how such stereotypes can be manifested in the text and pictures of storybooks (although we focused solely on the pictures). In the first two sessions, I introduced four points for detection of bias: invisibility (who is left out), stereotypes (appearance, conditions, circumstances, characteristics of characters and surroundings), imbalance/selectivity (whose side of the story is being told and whose is missing?) and unreality (life experiences not portrayed realistically) (McCune & Matthews 1978). The purpose of these lessons was that understanding of bias and stereotypes would provide a framework for finding examples in the stories. These concepts (invisibility, imbalance/selectivity, unreality and stereotypes), however, proved to be very difficult for the students to grasp. I consequently replaced the word bias with a brilliant definition by one of the students (Bond): a person’s way of thinking.

The third, fourth and fifth sessions focused on stereotypes. I introduced students to a definition of a stereotype (one way of looking at a group, making them all the same)
and the students and I talked together about some examples of stereotypes that they could think of. Interestingly, most of the stereotypes brought up by the students centred around sexism. James was the first student to respond with the example of girls being afraid of balls. Racism was also brought up in the way children were treated (e.g. not being welcome to play) by Veronica and Naz. Personal stories about experiences of stereotyping and exclusion were shared by two participants (Naz and Wolverine).

Unfortunately, the focus on stereotypes made bias a negative thing, which although often the case, became problematic in our work together. Bias being seen as a negative thing by myself and the students fell in line with my agenda of social justice regarding exposing the “isms” with the intention of equity. I wanted the students to see how bias in books can be damaging if the bias became a pervasive representation (i.e. if Black characters are always depicted as the ‘bad guys’, how does this affect Black children’s sense of self?). I felt that this would encourage them not to take books at face value, but to become critical readers. However, this was not where the students were at and this view of bias as purely negative confused the concept of looking at bias as a way of thinking based on experience. To attempt to get the students to view bias more as a way of thinking, in the fifth session the students participated in small group work in which different coloured apples were used to represent different experiences and to demonstrate the limits of the belief that there is just one experience of the same thing.

I set up the apple activity to illustrate how a person’s experience affects their way of thinking. I wanted the students to see and feel “bias” (or a way of thinking) in a concrete representation, so that they would be able to find it more easily, and we would have a common reference point. Each group (of 1 to 3 students – their choice) was given
a different coloured apple. None of the groups knew what item the other groups were
given, and were expected to keep their item a secret (this did not occur). Each group was
asked to describe their item (apple), draw a picture that included it and made sense, and
to think of something that could be made with it. These pictures and ideas were then
shared with the group before the apples were shown. We talked about how having only
one colour of apple as our experience of an apple would translate to our drawing/use of
an apple in a story. We then talked about what it would feel like to have the experience
of, for example, a green apple and to come across only a red apple in a story. This
activity was designed to assist the students to see the link between life experience and the
choices available in pictures. I wanted to show how different choices occur as a result of
different experiences and that all experiences are valid, thereby making all choices valid
as one of many possible choices.

Spending time with the students analyzing pictures and their meanings in
storybooks was intended to help make the skill of bias detection more concrete. The
concepts introduced initially (invisibility, imbalance/selectivity, stereotypes and
unreality, see page 73) were never used. Instead, I asked the students questions in order
to encourage them to examine the pictures closely. I hoped that the questions would
generate discussion regarding the authors'/illustrators' biases and how these biases affect
his/her choices as a writer/illustrator, as well as how those choices may affect different
readers. What happened was that my questions generated some discussion about "the
way things are" in the students' lives, particularly around gender roles. Our discussions
impacted the types of things the students picked up as readers when they observed the
pictures in a text (i.e. the colour of the characters' clothing). Instruction in what bias can
look like in a picture, along with concrete examples, was designed to provide a base from which to begin our inquiry into the choices an author/illustrator makes in illustrating (and in writing) a book. Once the students understood the pictures to be a choice, I felt we could talk about the messages the pictures were sending as a result of the choices made.

As mentioned above, the working definition for bias which I began using with the group came from Bond: a person’s way of thinking. This definition helped in the rest of the sessions, as we read the stories and questioned the pictures, examined the students’ drama skits during the last two sessions, and talked about experiences that were related to the themes and messages we were uncovering in the books. We read the stories together and I encouraged the students to examine the pictures using this guiding question: *What does this show about the illustrator/author’s way of thinking about ____?* Many of the issues the students brought up dealt with sexism, especially the clothing of boys and girls. This focus was a direct result of earlier discussion on stereotypes, where the issues brought up were mostly in this area.

As we read the stories together, I modelled using Post-It™ notes to write the observations of the pictures directly on the page of the story. Each student was given Post-It™ notes to use at home. This was to encourage them to practice what we were doing and to return with the books they had read and share them with the other students. It was also my hope that in this way, the students’ parents could become involved if they so chose. Two students did in fact work with the Post-It™ notes and brought in the books to share, and were quite excited about sharing their findings with the group.

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11 This idea was taken from an activity entitled “Check A Book For Bias” in *We’re Erasing Prejudice For Good* (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario 1999).
I consistently asked for student input. During the course of the sessions, Bond suggested that we do drama for a change. Everyone agreed and so the last three sessions focused on dramatic presentations of the students’ choice, with each presentation centring on a theme in *Tough Jim* by Miriam Cohen, one of the books we read together. The students worked in groups of three. Their objective was to create a skit on their own that challenged a bias in the story. These skits were then performed for the whole group. I asked questions about the ways of thinking being shown in the choices they had used in creating their characters, and the skit was then re-done with different ways of thinking. This strategy of re-working how the characters were portrayed, was designed to highlight the biases that we all have, and how these messages are communicated.

Reading together during the sessions allowed the students to practice their reading. Together we practiced observing the pictures, and I modelled the types of questions that could be asked. Encouraging the students to do the same on their own provided the opportunity for home involvement, as well as for student initiative to use the skills outside of the group setting and to share them with others. The drama activity was an opportunity to do something fun and student-initiated, an important aspect of working with any students, but particularly with this group who obviously felt more comfortable expressing themselves orally than in written form.

The dramatic presentations at the end allowed the students to express an issue that was important to them (they all chose bullying) and challenge a bias that was part of the original story (*Tough Jim* by Miriam Cohen), as well as modify their characters after our discussions about the ways of thinking shown by the characters’ actions. Having these at
the end pulled all of our work together nicely, by showing how our own biases creep in, and how easy it is to send a message through the choices for the characters.

Summary & Reflection

All three areas (selection of participants, data gathering, and project design) presented a challenge and required a balance between my ideas of what I wanted to see and what was happening. During the project I wondered if I was focused on an outcome or the process. This was very confronting and I realized even more so after reading the transcripts how difficult it was to let go of my own agenda and see what came up. The students took the discussions to where they needed to go. While I often did not recognize this at the time, it is important to note that their disruption not only created conversations about issues that were important to them, but also changed how I looked at the work that we did together. My outlook about what the students’ success would look like changed. My definition of their success initially focused on their progress, in terms of more questions or better observations. In the end, I saw the students’ success to be about them using the critical thinking skills of observation and questioning, as well as the way in which they used them when reading.

The collaboration with the parents did not occur. However, I feel that having extended the invitation to them, and keeping parents informed in weekly letters (see Appendix J) was a positive aspect of my work. Similarly, student input was barely existent in an overt sense, with the exception of Bond, who suggested that the students do drama. In retrospect, I recognized, while reading the transcripts, that student input was everywhere; in their silence (Veronica and James), letting a conversation drop (issues of
family and race), and in their steering of the conversations. At the time this form of input by the students was hard to see. It was also difficult to let go and let the students’ silences and their steering away of conversations from topics I brought, determine the direction of our time together despite my best intentions to have them be part of the process.

It is both interesting and heartbreaking for me to examine our work together and the difficulty I had in letting go of my own agenda. The challenges that I faced in terms of seeing the directions the conversations were taking and really exploring these areas fly in the face of my intentions and beliefs about students “at-risk.” I believe that they come to school filled with knowledge and skills. I wanted to provide the opportunity for them to show that they could handle advanced skills, not just how much they could learn. My difficulty letting go of what I wanted to happen, what I wanted them to learn, and what I felt was important put me right in the very seat that I was trying to show was ineffective: the teacher that feels she needs to teach “at-risk” students the skills, rather than providing them with an opportunity to use the skills they have. While I was feeling very good about working with students “at-risk,” I perpetuated the structure of dominance I wanted to challenge by thinking that I was teaching these students the skills of observation, comparison, questioning, and focusing on their improvement. The students already knew how to observe, question, and compare. This was evident in their discussions (that I often cut short in an attempt to move on, to do more). What the project provided, and what I focused on in my analysis, is a context in which using these skills (specifically questioning and observation) is important.
In addition to the students’ success, I have also focused on my own personal growth. In presenting my agenda, I have made important realizations about my assumptions and their possible effects on our twelve sessions together. Learning is not transmitted; it results from our interactions. My focus on teaching bias rather than exploring it with the students did not allow for an optimal pedagogical process to occur. Knowledge grows within the context of the people involved, the sharing of their knowledge and what is happening within that space. I felt that I had the knowledge and I wanted to make sure they got it. In so doing, I did not consider what the students would know about bias (through their experiences) and the fact that they may simply not know the word. This approach could have provided a powerful illustration of respect for the knowledge and experiences of students, particularly those considered “at-risk.”

The fact that I had difficulty letting go of my ideas and having the students’ knowledge really impact what was happening was frightening for me. It flies in the face of my belief in the abilities of these students and that their “at-riskness” is a product of a school system (Hopfenberg et al. 1991) that does not value their knowledge or ways of being. This situation illustrates Lather’s query about how “our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance” (Lather 1990, p. 86), as well as Ellsworth’s comment that “critical pedagogues are always implicated in the very structure they are trying to change” (Ellsworth 1989, p. 310). Quite simply, my desire to challenge the way the “at-risk” students are seen, and the opportunities they are given to do advanced skills resulted in my focusing on skills and their development as if they did not know how to question, observe or compare before we began. Once again, the focus was on learning the skills before applying them to advanced work in context. In so doing, I forged ahead
in the stories, often missing opportunities for discussion that the students began. This illustrates for me how ingrained the structures of our education system are, that even with the best intentions, it is still possible to support the status quo. I think that I have redeemed myself somewhat in my approach to the data analysis of how the students observed and questioned, rather than if or to what extent they did so.

The overall theme of these three sections, and of my work in general, is one of letting go. The students involved were enthusiastic and had amazing things to say. The discussions were interesting and provided rich data, which I will highlight and expand upon in Chapter 5, keeping in mind my new understanding of how my agenda implicates me in the research process. The design and the fact that it changed somewhat is a message in accommodation, as well as the pervasiveness of the dominant ideology in terms of success, progress and control. This was definitely a learning experience in awareness and appreciation for what is.
Analytical Concepts

How do I make sense of this?

So here I am.
With pages full
of your talk
and my talk
and your questions
and silence

And under this umbrella
called analysis
I must determine
what it means...

Beyond the time we spent
sharing,
laughing,
talking,
reading,
creating a space
for questions
and observations.

Must there be more
to it than that....?
My rationale for linking bias detection with critical thinking were the concepts of experience and choice. During the twelve sessions, the question that the students and I began using was “what is the author’s/illustrator’s way of thinking?” This definition came from one of the students (Bond) and made it possible for me to make a bridge between life experience and choices: experience can influence a way of thinking about an issue which in turn can inform a choice. In the case of our work together, the choice became the way in which the author/illustrator chose to represent the characters and draw the pictures for his or her story. I was curious how the students used their critical thinking skills to make this connection between experience, ways of thinking and choice. Not only was this connection important to make in their own lives but I as also curious about their application of this idea to the author/illustrator. This was the analytical framework through which I examined the data.

An important factor in the link between experience and choice was the sharing of various experiences by the students during our sessions. Discussions around issues such as whether to draw a house or an apartment, or what colours are suitable for boys to wear, allowed the students to express their opinions and to hear the opinions of the others in the group about the same issue. Often these discussions prompted stories; some about television shows or books and others of a more personal nature. This sharing of stories, experiences, and opinions was important in order to see the ideas behind the choice for a picture: just as there are many opinions and experiences around an issue, these same diverse opinions and experiences influence the many alternatives choices for the picture in a story.
An important aspect in seeing that diverse experience and choice can create diversity in the way a picture is drawn, is understanding that the choice of illustration reflects the authors’ or illustrator’s way of thinking (or bias). Because of the authors’/illustrators’ bias, their pictures represent a way, and not the only way something is or could be. I highlighted this point with the students in an exercise involving different coloured apples. (This activity was outlined earlier in the project design section, pages 66 & 67). I felt that this distinction between a way of thinking versus the way of thinking (a truth versus the Truth) would enable the students to recognize that their own experiences are not necessarily shared by others, and that many realities can coexist. Similarly, I felt that this distinction may also, in the long run, help them to maintain the integrity and validity of their experiences even if they were not portrayed in the pictures of the books they read.

Another important factor in the link between life experience and choice are the critical thinking skills of questioning and observing. I felt that these two critical thinking skills were necessary to make the connection between the pictures in the books (the authors’/illustrators’ choices) and the authors’/illustrators’ experiences and consequent ways of thinking that may have inspired those choices. Observing the pictures together, with an appreciation of the link between experience and choice, and then asking the students questions about the authors’/illustrators’ way of thinking were intended to help highlight the authors’/illustrators’ choices (for instance, if all of the females in the books were wearing dresses or skirts, this may indicate that the author’s/illustrator’s bias about acceptable clothing for girls and women). Presenting our own experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the pictures we are observing makes the alternatives to the picture in
question apparent. Our own experiences, thoughts and feelings form the basis for our questions about the pictures. It is the feelings associated with the pictures that speak loudest for me. If something is triggered in a student, then chances are there is an experience that is different from the one portrayed. I saw these differences as starting points for discussion. With this in mind I purposefully chose books with all White characters and traditional families hoping that these would be obvious as one way of thinking.

I felt that once the authors'/illustrators' way of thinking is uncovered, it leaves room for discussion about alternative ways of thinking, and consequently, alternative choices for the same picture. Observing and questioning were important because they brought out the students' different ideas and thoughts. My focus, however, was on the way in which the students were observing the pictures and asking questions about them. Their observations and questions about the pictures were used by me to determine their understanding of how experience and choice are crucial elements in the illustration of picture books. This will be elaborated on in the data analysis in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

My research was structured around the design and implementation of a twelve-session project over six weeks with nine Grade Five students considered to be “at-risk” of school failure. The design and implementation included such crucial factors as selecting the students to be involved and how to do this, determining what data to use and the source of this data, and the design of the curriculum unit. Lessons in bias and bias
detection were designed and delivered by me in an attempt to determine if bias detection could improve critical thinking skills.

The selection of participants was a crucial aspect, because I did not want students considered to be “at-risk” to once again be left out had I chosen to conduct my research using students who were working at grade level (according to the Ontario Curriculum guidelines). Involving students considered to be “at-risk” was important because I felt it would give them a chance to show what they can do. I also hoped that their participation and success may challenge some of the common assumptions held within the education system about the abilities of these students “at-risk” and how best to help them “catch up” to their peers (Palinscar & David 1991). I wanted to challenge the assumption that students “at-risk” were not able to (or ready to) handle advanced skills.

The data gathering process underwent many changes. I was pleased with my realizations about the importance of the students’ oral participation relative to their written responses. I am happy that I was open to focusing solely on the discussions. I realize that there was more I could have done, both in design and in flexibility during the project itself, that would have further validated the students’ ways of being.

The project design was designed to teach about bias and bias detection in twelve sessions. It was also meant to provide the students with practice in detecting bias in story books that we read together using their critical thinking skills of observation and questioning. This project was an attempt to teach the students the importance of not taking a book at face value, and the need to read critically. I began this process by choosing to examine the pictures of the storybooks we read together for the hidden messages conveyed through the choices of the author/illustrator.
I found was that bias detection provided the context within which the students' critical thinking skills could be used. In the process, however, I found it necessary to question my own assumptions and pedagogy, and their roles in my planning and my teaching of the curriculum unit as well as my attitude and outlook towards the students involved in the project.
Chapter 5: Data Analysis

-or-

So what happened?
And so...

We have worked together
laughed, read,
and talked together

I have asked you questions
and marvelled at
the ways the world
has already told you how to be
in 10 or 11 years of life.

I have listened to your stories
of life,
of TV shows
and answered questions.

And here I sit
trying to piece together
12 puzzles of time
to create a shape,
to show the world
who you are
what you can do
and what we did together.

I just want to make sure
that it is your voice
they hear
and marvel at.
Overview

The data and the accompanying analysis presented in this chapter all centred around the students' awareness of how experience impacts choice, as discussed in Chapter 4. I felt that this link between experience and choice connected bias, bias detection, and critical thinking: bias arising from one's life experiences and the critical thinking skills of observation and questioning being used to uncover the bias or way of thinking in the picture. This link also provided an entry point for social justice awareness, which indulged my liberatory agenda. As explained previously, my focus changed over the course of the project. Initially I was concerned with the students' improvement in their critical thinking skills in terms of the number and types of questions and observations they were making. By the end of the project (and subsequently in analyzing the data), I was interested in examining how the students used questions and observation about the illustrations during our twelve sessions together, and what this suggested about their critical thinking while reading (and therefore their critical literacy). In the end, it seemed to me that bias detection in books provided the context for making these observations and asking questions, rather than being the focus of the questions and observations. This change to bias being the context of critical thinking skills was an interesting twist, and challenged my agenda of highlighting the "isms," (i.e. sexism) while providing rich opportunities for critical literacy.

In examining the data, I looked at how the students were observing the pictures and the ways in which they were making these observations. Were they seeing the picture and thinking about what was beyond what they were seeing (their ideas, thoughts, and questions about the illustrations)? The students were learning about thinking
critically when reading and perhaps why to do so, as well as different ways and reasons to observe and question. I wanted the students to recognize that experiences inform our choices. I hoped that through our discussion they would share and hear about different experiences around the same issues. I hoped that they would then come to understand that the different experiences of authors/illustrators would also result in different choices for the pictures in their books. The pictures, then, could become one way of thinking and presenting something among many choices, not the only way. It is my opinion that observation begins with seeing the picture, yet also incorporates our feelings, ideas, and experiences as we react to a picture and what is missing from it. Being conscious of this process, I feel, is a form of critical thinking. When students are able to include and apply his kind of critical thinking to their observation of pictures when reading, I see critical literacy.

The data gathered was the students' audio-taped oral participation during our twelve sessions. In analysing the data, I used seven major areas of focus regarding the use of observations and questions and their facilitation of the experience to choice connection; The students' observations as seeing what is there; Talking about experience and ways of thinking; The fact that pictures only show one way of thinking; Bias as a way of thinking; Ways of thinking and resulting choices; Sharing experiences through discussion; and finally applying the idea that experience leads to choice with regards to the author's/illustrator's life and the pictures they use in their books. In addition, I have examined the data for my journey as a teacher in the last section entitled My Agenda Unravelled. The following pages attempt to illustrate the observations and connections of the students during our twelve sessions together. I have referred to the students' by the
pseudonyms that they chose for themselves. The analysis also illustrates my own growth and change as bias detection moved from being the focus to become the context for our work.

Observation – Seeing What is There

During the first two sessions (April 5 & 6/01), I read the beginning of the book *Dog Breath, The Horrible Trouble with Hally Tosis*, by Dav Pilkey to the group. I used this book because I saw Naz and Wolverine reading it and giggling in the library after our student information meeting. I asked the boys if they thought it would be a good book for us to read in the group and they agreed enthusiastically. The story was about a dog that had such bad breath that everyone and everything in her path was affected by it. In the end she became a hero because two burglars were overcome by her breath and were therefore caught. In my attempt to include student input, I felt that using this book would be a good start. The students enjoyed reading it and Sinbad even used it for his own bias detection work towards the end of the six weeks.

In the first session (April 5/01) I asked the students to respond (in writing, drama or drawing pictures) to *Dog Breath* (plot, favourite part, what they learned). I had hoped that beginning with getting them to respond to the story itself in any way they wanted, before introducing bias, would provide a point of reference from which to determine if their observations of the story changed after we began talking about bias. In the second session (April 6/01) I asked them questions about what they saw in the pictures. The responses of four boys (Wolverine, Bond, Wes, and James), included below, indicate their face value observations of the pictures.
Researcher: What do the people look like?
Wolverine: They look funny.
Researcher: They look funny.
(student): They look so ugly.
Researcher: They look ugly, why do they look ugly and funny?
(student): They have a big nose.
Bond: Because Miss Shrouder...
Researcher: Yeah, and they are smiling at the same time. Bond?
Bond: It looks like they are picking their nose.
Researcher: It looks like it, but they are not, they are holding it probably. What else?
James: They are wearing good dresses.
Researcher: They are dressed up, right; the mom has a necklace on...
Wes: And the dog is like...sticking out his tongue.
Researcher: He's sticking out his tongue, yeah, dogs do that a lot. Yeah, now...what else?
Bond: I know, I know.
(student) The house is pretty small for them.

This conversation clearly illustrates the observation skills of Wes, Bond, James, and Wolverine when looking at an illustration in a picture book. Their responses were simply about what was shown in the picture, and nothing beyond what was presented. These responses seemed appropriate to the question that I asked of the group about what they saw in the pictures. It was my hope that learning about bias and bias detection would change the way they observed illustrations, encouraging them to look closely at what meanings the pictures held.

Talking about Experience and Ways of Thinking

In the last comment in the brief dialogue above about the students' observations of the pictures in Dog Breath, one student (see footnote) mentioned that the house in the story Dog Breath was very small for the entire family. I took this opportunity to suggest

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12 The student's name is omitted because I was unable to determine, from the audio-tape, which student was speaking.
to the students that where they lived might influence their choice of illustrations if this were their book. I asked for a show of hands about who lived in a house and who lived in an apartment, and the answers were mixed. My intention was to point out that the authors'/illustrators' choices for the pictures that represent their story, are often a reflection of the authors'/illustrators' experience. I hoped to highlight this connection by having the students think of their choice of a house or an apartment, and the reasoning behind it.

(student): The house is pretty small for them.
Researcher: The house is small, okay, now how many people here live in a house, how many people live in an apartment (show of hands, some of both). Okay so if this was a story, you might want to make it into an apartment, you might want to make them living in an apartment.
Naz: Mmm mmm (no)
Bond: A house, even if I lived in an apartment
Researcher: Even if you lived in an apartment, you’d want to make it into a house?
Why?
Bond: Because an apartment is boring
Researcher: An apartment is boring?
Bond: Not that much room, like this whole, up to here is our apartment (arms sweeping the room to show the size).
Researcher: Why do you think the author chose to make it a house?
Wes: Sometimes apartments are hard to draw.
Researcher: Maybe, could be hard to draw. Yes. James?
James: You can’t show when they are going outside, because there’s elevators.
Researcher: So maybe when they have a house they have a yard, and elevators take a long time...
Naz: And we don’t have balconies, we don’t have a big garden to play in...

My question of what the students would choose to draw (a house or an apartment) if it were their book was meant to draw the connection between their experiences and the choices they would make for pictures in a book. However, our conversation did not include the choice of drawing an apartment. What showed up in this dialogue was Bond’s insistence that he would not draw an apartment, even though he lived in one, because he
felt that apartments were boring. Following this, Wes, Naz, and James joined in with some practical reasons for using a house in the picture: it is easier to draw; it is easier to show the people going outside; and the fact that an apartment does not have a garden to play in. I expected the students to choose to draw an apartment if they lived in one, and was therefore initially surprised and disappointed by the conversation.

Of the four students who responded, there did not seem to be consistent connection between their realities and the choices they would make (for instance Bond lived in an apartment and would not have chosen to draw one). However, the four students' responses did show critical thinking because they were reflecting on possible reasons for the choice of house over apartment. The four boys' comments could have, and quite possibly did, spoken volumes about the realities they lived with daily (or had lived with at one time in their lives), or that they associated with apartments if they didn't live in one: not having a backyard to play in; not having a lot of room; having to wait for the elevator to go outside to play; feeling bored. If these things made apartment living undesirable for these four students, then in fact their reality, and experiences were affecting their choice, and they were able to clearly express that choice. Their choice was to draw a house, regardless of whether they lived in one or not.

Although the conversation about apartments was short, I felt it was important because the four boys were sharing their opinions and ideas. In this case, the students involved in the discussion seemed to be in agreement. I wondered what would happen when their experiences were different. I hoped that these discussions would highlight the crucial role that experience plays in the students' way of thinking. I also hoped that they would make the connection to the authors'/illustrators' way of thinking and their
subsequent choices for the pictures. Therefore I often asked the question in terms of what a picture would look like given a certain point of view: "What would you put in your pictures if this was your book?"

In Session #3 (April 9/01), I introduced bias to the students as one way of looking at something. I used an example of having a bad experience with a dog and then not liking any other dogs. I pointed out that this experience would create a bias against dogs, and tried to connect this to a choice for a book illustration. Bond and Naz participated in this discussion with me, during which time Bond developed our working definition of bias as a person's way of thinking.

Researcher: So if I was going to write a story what kind of dog would I have in my story, would it be a good dog or a bad dog?
Bond: Bad.
Researcher: Probably a bad dog, because that's my bias, I think that all dogs are bad.
Naz: No, not all of them are.
Researcher: They're not, you're right, but in my head if I had a bias against dogs, in my head all dogs would be bad, and so probably if I wrote a story, my dogs would be mean.
Bond: Miss Shrouder, it's you're thinking.
Researcher: Right. And so, every book has a bias in it, because they are written by a person and people have ideas. Sometimes biases are damaging because they don't show things as they really are, or they make certain groups of people feel bad, and that's when we have a problem. We're going to look at the same book that we read last week and see if we can find any bias in it. There are four things: Invisibility, who is missing, sometimes it is biased, because it leaves out people.

Bond was able to make the connection between my experience and my choice of dog in the story. Naz pointed out that my portrayal of dogs as mean was not necessarily accurate for all dogs. This was thrilling for me because I felt like Naz and Bond were beginning to make the connection between a person's experience and a person's way of thinking, as well as the limiting nature of one person's point of view. I hoped that this connection between experience and a way of thinking about something would lead to the realization that the way we think of something impacts our actions. In this case, the
action would be the choice of pictures that were to be included by an author/illustrator in a story.

Pictures Show One Way of Thinking

The students’ responses to the pictures began to change in Session #3 (April 9/01) during our discussion about stereotypes considering everyone or everything in a group to be the same. I asked the students what they saw in the pictures that showed a stereotype or a bias. Again, my agenda was filtering through: I was hoping that the students would see how stereotypes are a result of one way of thinking, and that this one way of thinking could result in a narrow representation in a picture. We were still examining the pictures in Dog Breath. In this next dialogue I had just asked the students what they saw in the pictures. DJK’s response suggests that he understood the limiting nature of pictures (see * below).

Sinbad: Happy clothes.
Researcher: Happy clothes, what are happy clothes?
Sinbad: Like Miss (teacher’s name omitted) her clothes, clothes and stuff that make people laugh.
Researcher: Clothes that make people laugh? So these wouldn’t be clothes that you would wear, right Sinbad, is that what you are saying? So if you wrote the story Sinbad, then probably you’d illustrate your characters with different clothes. Look at what the girl is wearing, look at what the mom is wearing, and the sister is wearing.
* DJK: The girl is wearing a dress, but not all girls wear dresses, some girls wear pants.
Researcher: Let’s look and see if she’s wearing a dress the whole time. Turning the pages, students responding to what the females are wearing. Ah, different colours now, at least we know they change their clothes....
So, would that be a stereotype?
All: Yes
Researcher: So what’s the bias it is showing in the story, by what the girls are wearing?
DJK: That this girl only wears dresses and not pants.
Researcher: Okay. Now, if you were a girl, and Veronica, you could probably answer this a little bit easier, if you were a girl, and every story you read only had girls wearing dresses, and you wore pants, would that make you feel kind of like hmm...how would you feel about that? Would you wonder?
Veronica: I'd feel angry
Researcher: Why would you feel angry?
** Veronica: Because boys just think girls only like to wear dresses, and we show off and say hi and this princess, but some girls can be different, some girls can wear shorts and pants, don't have to wear no skirts [sic].
Researcher: So the problem happens when books don't show you lots of ideas, and that doesn't make this a bad book, but if all the books you read have girls wearing dresses, and you're wearing pants, you'd be like, hey, what's going on? That's not what my life looks like, I wear pants!

DJK was able to make the connection that what was shown in the picture was only one reality (see *). I attempted to link the idea of a picture only being one way of presenting something with the concept that this one idea could be hurtful to some people. This is especially true if this one way of thinking (bias) appears repeatedly in books. Veronica and DJK's responses suggested that they understood this connection (see * and **). Bond jumped from this discussion into a completely different observation about necklaces not looking real. His response suggested to me that he was either not paying attention or did not understand what we were talking about. The rest of the group was silent, with the exception of Naz, who later on observed that all the girls were wearing earrings - a continuation of the theme about stereotypes. Therefore, it was inconclusive if any other students, besides DJK and Veronica, realized that a stereotype was one way (and a narrow way) of thinking.

The concept of stereotypes fit with my liberatory agenda for the project, and my desire to expose the "isms" (in this case, sexism). However, introducing the concept of stereotypes confused the students, and myself, and it was not part of our discussions after Session #4. What did begin in session #3, however, was the idea of a picture presenting one way of thinking. This continued during the rest of our picture observations, and I
often even used this as a question to encourage observation: “What does the picture tell us about the person’s way of thinking?”.

**Bias as a Way of Thinking**

In Session #3 (April 9/01) Naz shared a personal story about his bias against pickles, which was an amazing example of how choices come out of the connection between experience and a resulting way of thinking. It is important to note that Naz clearly articulated his choice not to eat pickles, following his first experience with pickles. He told us the whole story, making the connection between the initial event (the pickle flying out of his burger), the way of thinking (having a bias against pickles), and his choice (removing pickles from burgers).

Naz: I have a bias against pickles.
Researcher: What’s your bias against pickles?
Naz: Last time my mom said she was going to buy me a McDonalds burger when I just came from Jamaica, and I never knew nothing, and she said she was going to buy me a burger and she said the stuff she was going to put on it, and they put a pickle in there, and when I squeezed the burger the pickle just went flying out like it was something, so I always throw out my pickle, even now.

Clearly the fact that Naz’s first experience with pickles was negative influenced his way of thinking about them, and consequently his dislike for pickles. His response indicated that he understood this connection. The bridge that Naz was making between his experience, his way of thinking, and his choices was exciting for me to see because it suggested that he was picking up on the concepts I was trying to present to the group. In retrospect, this would have provided an excellent beginning for a group discussion about pickles, (or other foods), sharing our experiences, our resulting ways of thinking (opinions) and the choices about the food that these experiences had caused. This could
have been a more meaningful way to begin the process of examining bias as one way of thinking and then moving on to the results of bias in pictures.

Allowing the students to talk about biases as they related to their individual experiences made sense, however I did not to give the conversation enough time to develop. Focused as I was, initially, on the students’ progress and being able to measure this progress, I wanted to teach the students about stereotypes because I felt they were important in highlighting the negative aspects of bias (Sessions 3 & 4). This meant I hurried on in order to make use of the time we had in order to teach about stereotypes. Bias as a negative concept fit into my agenda concerning the “isms” and their impact on the non-dominant groups in society. Thus, the experience to choice connection was put on hold until Session #5, as I introduced stereotypes in Session # 3 and Session #4. I realized, upon reading the transcripts, how my desire for a specific outcome resulted in missed opportunities for following interesting student-initiated discussions.

I also realized that my own agenda around bias as negative and my need to expose stereotypes and the “isms” was compromising the project by taking time away from reading books together. I decided to drop my focus on stereotypes and bias as negative and return to bias as a way of thinking. In Session #5 (April 18/01) the students worked on the apple activity (discussed in Chapter 4, pages 73 & 74) to show the connection between experience, ways of thinking, and choice. The result of my diversion from bias simply as a way of thinking, however, confused the students (and myself) about what bias was and what we were looking for. This confusion about bias and our work together was clearly evident in Session #6 (April 19/01) when Bond asked me what I meant by bias. By Session #6, however, we had begun to read the books and examine the pictures. This
proved to be a very powerful session because of the students' comments, their observations and the opportunity their observations and comments presented for future dialogue, specifically around issues of gender roles.

**Ways of Thinking and Resulting Choices**

During our last three sessions together (May 3, 9 & 8/01) the students made up, practiced and presented drama skits in small groups. The students chose the topics based on *Tough Jim*; all the presentations were about bullies. In *Tough Jim* the bully was an older boy and he was physically aggressive. The students' task was to challenge a bias in the story and once we saw the skit, to change the way of thinking that they had presented through their characters. I have presented a brief synopsis of the first group's presentation, as well as the remake of the drama once we had discussed what their ways of thinking were in terms of the choices they made for their characters personality and actions.

**Group 1: DJK, Veronica, Naz and Wolverine**

Two bullies (DJK & Wolverine) want money from a boy, who is really a girl, (Naz)) and take his (her) doll. The girl fights back and goes to the principal (Veronica), who is very calm and speaks softly. One of the bullies talks back to the principal. They continue their bullying at which point the victim removes the mask and shows that she is really a girl. The point is that girls can beat up boys as well.

Once we saw the skit, and talked about the ways of thinking in terms of the bullies and the teacher, the group’s second presentation followed with modifications. One of the bullies (Wolverine) was no longer physically aggressive, but simply intimidating. The victim (Naz) developed an attitude and fought back/was more assertive. The principal (Veronica) was louder and more forceful/assertive in her choice of words and deeds. The
highlight of this drama activity, in all cases, but especially this group's, was the students' ability to pick up on the ways of thinking that had informed their choice of characters:

Are all principals quiet? Do some of them yell? Are all bullies physically aggressive? Does the girl have to take being beaten up? How could she be different? The drama presentations were a fun way to end the sessions. The students enjoyed them and enjoyed watching themselves afterwards (videotaped). It gave them the opportunity to see how their own biases came through in what they put together and how changing their way of thinking created changes in their characters.

What Doesn't Make Sense... and Sharing Experiences Through Discussion

I had started making the link from experience to choice in Session #2 with the question about choosing to draw a house or an apartment. In Session #5, the apple activity (discussed in Chapter 4, pages 74 & 75) was meant to link experience and choice in a concrete way. The groups drew pictures with only their colour of apple in them, despite the three other possible colours present. In Session #6 (April 19/01) I changed my approach somewhat, asking the students to look for things in the pictures that did not make sense to them. This was an effort on my part to solidify the idea that experience can lead to a way of thinking, which can lead to choices for the pictures in a book. Looking for things that did not make sense proved to be an effective way to begin conversations about different experiences. One student's comments about something not making sense often prompted another student to respond about their experiences (similar or different). This is what I had hoped for; bringing the different experiences in the
group to light, and recognizing that these differences influence alternative choices, which in the end are all valid.

The first example of this type of dialogue, which had students sharing realities, occurred in Session #6 as we read *The Perfect Father's Day* by Eve Bunting. This story was about a little girl who took her father out to various places to celebrate Father's Day. The story ends with the two of them returning home where the mother had made a special Father's Day cake. The interesting thing about the following dialogue compared to the one about apartments in Session #2 was that the bias or way of thinking was a students’ observation, not mine. In the beginning of *The Perfect Father's Day* the father was reading in a large easy chair. To Bond, this was strange:

Researcher:...Bond, you said you saw another bias.
Bond: Um, humungo chair.
Researcher: What’s the bias about the chair?
Bond: It’s so big; I never saw a chair that big!
DJK: I have a chair in my room like that.
Researcher: Okay, listen, DJK has a chair at home that big, but you don’t so maybe if you were writing the story your chair would be smaller. So, and you know what, can everybody afford to get a big chair like this?
All: No.
Sinbad: My dad got a big chair, a couch and it's not for apartments – because it's too big.
A: There's not as much room in an apartment right? Okay we're going to look inside the book. Yes?

Two things happened in this dialogue. Bond noticed a discrepancy between what he knew and what he saw, and he questioned the picture for accuracy. This was an exciting development for me as I felt it suggested that he was not only observing the pictures but also thinking about whether they made sense to him. The picture of the large easy chair did not make sense to him because he had never seen a chair of this type. What happened next was equally exciting. Two other students with different experiences with such a
chair became involved in the dialogue. DJK informed us that he had a large chair at
home, and Sinbad mentioned that his father had large furniture, but went on to tell us that
such furniture was "not for apartments". Thus, the three students in this piece were
sharing their experiences and were being exposed to different possibilities. Bond's initial
comment prompted an interaction that created the space for three different realities to
exist. In this and the following excerpts in this section, none of the students involved in
the discussions sought to persuade the others that their experiences were correct. The
students were merely sharing information and opinions.

Continuing to be aware of the power of sharing different opinions, when we came
to the point in the story *The Perfect Father's Day* where the girl and her father were in
the park, I seized the opportunity to ask about the students' experiences with parks.
Knowing what the parks in the area looked like, I hoped that this would spark another
dialogue about different ways of thinking.

Researcher: Now look at the picture of the park, is there a park around here that looks
like that where you could take somebody out?
All: No!
Researcher: So that's kind of a bias right?
Wolverine: And the pigeons have different colours on them.
Sinbad: No parks doesn't [sic] have a pond.
Wes: Only good parks do.
Veronica: All the girls are wearing dresses.
Researcher: Sinbad had a good comment, he said all the parks have swings, and what
else.
Sinbad: That um...
Wes: That they don't have...
Sinbad: They even, they have a little pool.
Researcher: A wading pool. Sinbad's experience of a park is that they have swings and a
wading pool, does that mean that this is not a park?
All: No.
Researcher: It's a different type of park, right? In Sinbad's experience, that's the kind of
park that he knows, so if Sinbad was writing a book, he'd probably draw a picture of a
park with swings and a wading pool, would that be wrong?
In contrast to the earlier excerpt where information about the boys’ experiences with chairs was shared, in this dialogue both Sinbad and Wes shared their opinions. Wes asserted that only good parks have ponds, while Sinbad was firm in his convictions that parks don’t have ponds, but do have wading pools. What ensued was a discussion about a park in the area that looked like the park in the story. In another excerpt from Session #6, Sinbad again makes a strong statement about what does not make sense in the picture, and his way of thinking:

Sinbad: I have a bias – dads don’t wear running shoes.
Researcher: Does your dad wear running shoes?
Sinbad: Never.
Researcher: Okay, so here, let me stick something on there (using a Post-It™ Note), Sinbad said that his dad never wears running shoes, so for him, the fact that this guy is wearing running shoes… your dad wears slippers (response to another student’s comment).
Sinbad: People don’t wear shoes in the house.
Researcher: Oh, okay, so we have two (Post-It™ Notes)— dad is wearing running shoes and wearing shoes in the house.

Sinbad was very vocal during this session in sharing the things that he felt did not make sense to him. Not only was the father in the story wearing running shoes, but he was wearing them in the house. Sinbad’s comments and Bond’s earlier comments about the chair are important for two reasons; both boys brought the issues up themselves, and they chose items that were in contrast to their experiences and shared why they thought the picture did not make sense. I was also thrilled that the students were sharing their opinions.

I was pleased by what I perceived as a change in how the students’ were using their critical thinking skills. We were entering into discussion about bias as one way of thinking from where the students were at, rather than bias as a decontextualized
definition, or through examples that I felt were important. Rather than me pointing things out that I saw as glaring examples of bias, I encouraged the students to look for things in the pictures that did not make sense to them. I felt that approaching the illustrations from the perspective of looking for things that did not make sense to the students would highlight the students’ ways of thinking about something, or their reality about an issue. I felt that there were bound to be some differences in their ways of thinking, and that these differences would show how one issue could be seen in many different ways. Thus, discussion about the pictures (what made sense and what did not) was a crucial turning point in this project. The discussions created the opportunity for the students to hear each others’ ways of thinking, and therefore highlighted the idea of there being many different ways of thinking about an issue. These opportunities were important as I felt it would be easier for the students to make the link between their own differences evident in discussions and the different ways of thinking of authors/illustrators.

Further along in the story *The Perfect Father’s Day* when the father and daughter were in the park, Veronica responded to Sinbad pointing out that parents don’t play in parks.

Sinbad: I have a bias. Dad’s doesn’t play with monkey bars.
Researcher: Okay, adults aren’t supposed to play on the monkey bars.
Veronica: Probably the parents want to experience life when they were young, and they just want to go on the monkey bars, ‘cause sometimes parents get kind of upset, because they grow into grownups and when they see their kids they miss what they used to be a young kid who played in the park and had fun.
Researcher: I’ll bet you’re right, and if I was reading a book like that I’d be like, hey I do that, cool!
Veronica: Do you play in the park?
Researcher: I love playing in the park, I love swings.
At this point, Wes and James were fooling around and not paying attention. Veronica, however, who had been silent for most of the session began showing that she was looking beyond what the picture was showing. She was thinking about the reasons why this picture might be included, and why the father would be playing on the monkey bars. I made the connection as a reader to seeing something I like to do in a picture. I was trying again to illustrate how a picture and story can validate a way of thinking, feeling, or being.

I thought that Veronica’s opinion and ability to see the parents’ point of view was very insightful. On the rare occasions that she participated in the discussions, she always pointed out an alternative view or possibility. Statements such as Veronica’s have helped me to redefine what I was using as indicators for the early stages of critical thinking. These observations suggested that the students were beginning to notice the pictures, and the differences between their experiences and knowledge and what was presented in the illustrations. To me, these types of observations and comments were the beginnings of the concept of not accepting a book at face value. Noticing discrepancies and asking questions are examples of critical thinking and therefore are important in reading critically.

*The Perfect Father’s Day* prompted a long discussion about gender and the rules society holds for males and females. Three things were interesting to me in the following discussion: Veronica had no input; James, who was also usually very quiet was the one who started the conversation; and Wolverine made two insightful comments. The first thing that was brought up by James (a rare occurrence) was the fact that the father was
wearing a flowered shirt. James did not participate very much during most of the sessions, yet he had a lot to say during this conversation.

Researcher: Take a look at the cover of this book - see anything here that you wouldn’t experience in your life or see in your life or doesn’t make sense? James?
James: The man is wearing a flower shirt.
Researcher: He’s wearing a flower shirt.
Wes: …and…
Researcher: One thing at a time. So what about that?
James: I’ve never seen no one wear a flower shirt.
Bond: You never saw…
James: A man.
Researcher: Could that be a bias?
Bond: Yeah.
Researcher: What would be the bias?
Wes: That he’s dancing.
Sinbad: Only girls wear flowers.
Researcher: Ah, so he’s not supposed to be wearing a flower because he’s not a girl…okay So really, this book is sort of challenging a bias, because usually, guys don’t wear flowered shirts, but this book is like, let’s put a flowered shirt on this guy
DJK: There’s nothing wrong with wearing a flowered shirt.
Researcher: So, and you know what is there anything wrong with wearing a flowered shirt?
Naz: Yes!
Researcher: What’s wrong with wearing a flowered shirt if you’re a guy?
Naz: It has on flowers
Wes: And only girls wear flowers!
Researcher: Why?
(Student): They love flowers
Sinbad: Look at her, she’s wearing flowers. (referring to Veronica)
Wes: And she’s a girls [sic].
Researcher: Yes, she’s a girl.
Sinbad: I know, so boys should not wear, um, flowers.
Researcher: Why not?
Sinbad: ‘Cause they look like girls.
Bond: I found a bias!
* Wolverine: You don’t know anything, but your mom might chose something, your mom might buy you something.

During this exchange, DJK, Naz, Sinbad, and Wes were all able to express their opinions about flowered shirts being worn by males. Veronica had nothing to say during this exchange, which surprised me since she had no difficulty expressing her opinions in
previous sessions, and seemed quite firm in her convictions around girls' choices. I wondered if she was feeling uncomfortable, which she was. I will discuss this further on the following page. Besides the fact that students involved in this exchange were sharing their opinions, what was exciting here was that Wolverine (for the second time) spoke up with a comment about what he thought could be happening beyond what we saw. To me, this illustrated that he was beginning to see the bigger picture: that there is more to a situation or picture than meets the eye, and that there are reasons behind what we are shown. This observation, to me, suggested the possibility that Wolverine was beginning to make the connection between the experiences and the choices that authors/illustrators make for the pictures in their books.

Following this, I tried to bring the boys involved in the discussion back to the idea of rules (having talked about stereotypes). I was interested in their adamant opinions that boys were not to wear flowered shirts, and was curious if they would make the connection between a societal the way it is and their way of thinking. I was saddened that the societal rules about gender-specific behaviour had already been internalized so fiercely. Their responses to society's way it is surprised me.

Researcher: Let's talk about this for a second, 'cause this is interesting, who makes the rules that says if you are a boy you can't wear flowered shirts?
Naz: Boys!
Researcher: Boys do?
DJK: The boys -- who was that?
Researcher: What would happen if you were a boy and you today wanted to wear a flowered shirt, just because you wanted to wear a flowered shirt? How would you feel if somebody said to you, you can't wear a flowered shirt?
Naz: I'd feel normal, take it off and put on a new one.
Researcher: Yeah?
Naz: Yeah.
Researcher: What if it really meant something to you to wear the flowered shirt?
James: I'd feel sad.
Researcher: You'd feel sad?
Naz: I’d just get mad.
Researcher: You might get mad.
James: If somebody said that you can’t wear a flowered shirt, I might hide in the flowers.
Researcher: You might hide in the flowers so nobody could see you? Would you feel like...
Bond: Camouflage

Again, I was trying to point out the fact that pictures can be limiting or liberating by what they portray. I was intrigued that the four boys realized that the boys made the rules (enter the power dynamics of society) and was surprised that Veronica again had nothing to say about this. Was it acceptance? Resignation? I didn’t interpret her silence as indicating a lack of interest nor a lack of opinion, based on her comments in previous sessions, but I was aware of her silence. As it turned out, she was beginning to feel alone as the only girl in a group of boys. We discussed this but as we were already more than half way through the six weeks, I did not feel comfortable inviting a new student into the group. I realize now that this was partly due to my belief that what I had taught the students in the beginning was an important part of the process, without which they would not know what to do. This only reinforces my understanding of how I too hold the assumptions about the knowledge students bring to school not being ‘enough’, in comparison to what we teach them. Including another girl may have had a huge difference in Veronica’s participation.

Despite their strong agreement with the rules, Naz, DJK, and James’ answers to my question about not being allowed to wear a flowered shirt if they wanted to surprised me: feeling “normal” but removing the shirt; sad; mad; and perhaps afraid (camouflage) but unwilling to remove it. I noticed that none of the boys balked at the idea that they would wear a flowered shirt, despite their assertions to the contrary in the earlier excerpt.
With the exception of James, none of the boys considered rebelling and wearing the flowered shirt anyway. James did not plan to remove his, but did not want anyone to see him ("I would hide in the flowers").

None of the students demonstrated an awareness that having more pictures of boys and men in flowered shirts would make a difference in their choice to wear such a shirt or their feelings about this opportunity. I continued to press the issue of males wearing flowered shirts, connecting it to reading. I was attempting to link this seemingly provocative issue to the pictures in the book. Again, I was trying to get the students to think about the results of various experiences, as opposed to one pervasive view, being represented in books.

Researcher: That's a good thing though because sometimes when there's a bias like guys shouldn't wear flowered shirts, then if you happen to be feeling like you wanted to wear flowered shirts, you wouldn't necessarily want anyone to know right? If you felt like that, what would happen if one day you saw a book with a guy with a flowered shirt in it? Wes: I would laugh.
DJK: I'd laugh my head off.
Researcher: Listen to the question - if you were the guy who wanted to wear a flowered shirt and everyone was making fun of you and one day you came across this book that had this guy with a flowered shirt, how would you feel?
Wes: Happy.
Researcher: Happy, why?
Bond: Because you'd know that, what you call it, that I'm not the only one whose wearing that shirt.

Bond made the discovery that books can validate ways of being! His comment (seeing a boy wearing a flowered shirt in a picture book making him feel like he was not the only one who would wear this type of shirt) indicated was what I was hoping to lead the discussion towards. I wanted the students to see the importance of many different representations in everyone feeling included, and conversely the downside of feeling excluded if your realities are not presented in pictures. I was thrilled that Bond seemed to
understand the impact that a picture could have on how he might feel about himself or his choices. This and the earlier comments by DJK and Veronica (pages 97 & 98) about girls wearing pants as well as dresses, were the only times I felt that the students may be beginning to grasp the concept of the negative effects of pervasive and limited representation in pictures.

**Making the Experience to Choice Connection About the Author/Illustrator!**

I was determined to apply the experience-choice link to the author/illustrator. It was interesting to me that James, a student who was not very vocal during most of the sessions was the first to make the jump from our discussions about experiences and choice to considering how the pictures could implicate the authors'/illustrators' experiences. His comments suggested that he was considering what could have influenced the pictures. This occurred in Session #6 (April 19/01) while we were reading *The Perfect Father's Day*. I initiated the question in this case. However, unlike Sinbad's and Bond's initial observations (dads wearing shoes, page 105; the size of the chair, page 103), James took my question and made the connection independently.

**Researcher:** Why do you think this author chose to make a family with a mom and dad living together?
**James:** Maybe he has a…
**Wes:** He has a child.
**James:** Maybe…is it a boy or a girl…
**Researcher:** It's a woman illustrator.
**James:** Maybe she has a husband and a girl.
**Researcher:** Yeah, that's here experience, so that's going to be her bias about families, does that…what about the fact that almost all the people in the book are white?
**DJK:** Maybe she's white.
James was beginning to think about the connection between experience and choice in terms of the illustrator ("Maybe she has a husband and a girl" page 112). He wondered if the illustrator was male or female and suggested that she had a nuclear family. He had made the leap from our discussions about our experiences and choices to the author’s experience and thus her choice. This was exciting for me at this stage in the project! DJK followed suit with the hypothesis that the author was perhaps also White. These comments suggested to me that the students had begun to transfer the general idea of experience leading to ways of thinking and choice to the ways in which the authors’/illustrators’ experiences and ways of thinking influence their choices for their pictures.

In Session #7 (April 23/01) we began reading a new book entitled *Tough Jim*, by Miriam Cohen. This book was about a party in a Grade One classroom. The students all came in costume. Jim came dressed as a strong man and was picked on by a bully. Jim managed to embarrass the bully, who left, and the party was a success. While examining the pictures in *Tough Jim* the students were focusing on the colour of the children’s hair in the story. I tried to turn the students’ attention to who the teacher was in the story:

Researcher: What about the teacher – she’s a woman, are all teacher’s women?
Naz: No, some are men. All my teachers that I had were women, every single year.
Bond: The person who wrote it might be a woman.
Researcher: Yes, and in fact it is. Good for you!
Bond: See?
Researcher: Now do you think Miriam Cohen (*the author*) had a first grade teacher who was a woman maybe?
All: Yes.
Wes: Because she’s a girl.

Again, although I initiated the question, Bond’s answer about the author being a woman suggested that he was thinking about the reasons that the teacher in the story was female.
I continued his thought and linked the choice directly to the author’s experience. Bond, DJK, and James’ responses could indicate that they were considering what was in the pictures and why these choices had been made by the author/illustrator. This was the point of the project – to read critically. My liberatory agenda meant that I would have liked to see more connection to “isms” by the students, both in the pictures themselves and as possible reasons behind the pictures. However, the fact that these Grade Five students were engaging in the process of considering the way of thinking behind the pictures was exciting.

My Agenda, Unravelled

While the students were beginning to show critical thought as part of their observations, I decided to ask some questions to get them thinking about social justice issues. We had spent a lot of time talking about gender issues. I wondered about issues of race and family. As mentioned previously, I was prepared to have issues of race surface, and in fact picked books with all White characters purposely so we could have the opportunity to talk about race and racism. I found it somewhat frustrating (and interesting at the same time), that the students were picking up on things like the colour of the characters’ hair, whether or not the characters were wearing shoes, and what colour their clothing was. They did not, however, bring up things that in my opinion were glaringly obvious (the portrayal of the nuclear family and all White characters).

Researcher: I have two questions for you: 1. Some people don’t have moms and dads at home right, some people just live with mom, some people just live with dad, or some people live with mom and mom’s husband or mom’s boyfriend and some people live with dad and dad’s wife or dad’s girlfriend. Some people just live with one parent. So is there a bias in this book about families?
Sinbad: Yes.
Researcher: What's the bias about families?
DJK: That all mommies and dad...
Sinbad: That we can't see his wife.
Researcher: No, we see the mom; she's at the beginning.
Sinbad: Once.
Researcher: But what's the bias about families? Bond?
Bond: You know how it's talking about the perfect father's day and the mother's in there.
Researcher: Yeah, there's a mother so the bias in the book is that a family has a mom and a dad. Does every family have a mom and a dad that live in the same house?
(Student): No.
Researcher: No, so that's a big bias in this book. And just because your mom and dad don't live together does that mean you don't have a family?
Sinbad: Yes.
DJK: No.
Wes: Miss Shrouder, probably they divorced.
Sinbad: Yeah because the dad...
Wes: They're divorced.
DJK: I have a friend...
Researcher: Maybe not, but you still have a mom and dad right?
Wes: Probably the family got divorced.
Researcher: Maybe they got divorced. So somebody that was reading this book that only lived with their mom or only lived with their dad, might feel a little left out.

I had to point out the bias of a family having a mom and a dad living together. This reflected what I felt the students should find important and obviously did not reflect their issues. Perhaps the students' silence on the topics of family and race indicated that this was an issue they did not want to discuss. Perhaps the way it is, as dictated by dominant society was already too powerful and so the nuclear family was seen as being the way it should be, even though Naz and Wolveringe lived only with their mother and DJK lived with his aunt and uncle. Perhaps, those students did not want to talk about the fact that they did not live with both parents. I wondered what this said about these boys' experiences with bias around families in books so far. Sinbad was quite certain in his response that only living with one parent meant you didn't have a family. This feeling could also have affected the students' sharing of this particular reality within the group. I also brought up the issue of race. This issue similarly resulted in very limited discussion:
Researcher: One other big question to ask you. How many people of colour are there in this book. Very few right? Most of the people in this book are...
James: The same.
Researcher: …are white. Is that a bias?
Naz: Yes.
Researcher: Because it’s only showing one type of person mostly…
Naz: Some of them are green.
Researcher: So it’s showing one type of family, and it’s showing one type of skin colour, that’s a bias, so most of the character, almost all of the characters are white.
Wes: And green.

Although Naz agreed that all-White characters could be a bias, none of the students cared to elaborate or share their opinions as they had previously, on the subjects of furniture, or the colour of boys’ clothing. A similar reaction occurred when Naz shared the book *Things We Like* that he had read and done some bias detection on using the Post-It™ Notes. *Things We Like* was a story showing a boy and girl enjoying different activities, such as going to the beach. Again, all of the children in the story were White. However, this was not brought up as a bias by Naz nor any of the other students in the group. It came as a surprise to me that in a group made up exclusively of non-White participants, (myself included), within a culturally diverse school, none of the students saw this as an issue. I wondered about this – is it a simple matter of Whiteness being part of the dominant culture in our society and therefore not noticed by students of this age anymore? Were the students already accustomed to the dominant portrayal of White characters in books? I brought up the issue of the characters’ skin colour when reading *The Perfect Father’s Day* and *Things We Like*. While the students all agreed that this was a bias when I asked, there was limited discussion about it, although we had had quite a lengthy discussion about racism and examples of excluding people of colour in the third session.
The lack of discussion concerning racism shook up my agenda and my perception of what might be important to these children. It required that I re-examine where I was attempting to lead the project, rather than follow the course the students were taking. This is an example of how silence becomes loud if one is listening closely. I thought I was receiving limited (or no) input from the students as to what issues were important for them. However, their relative silence in the area of racism and also about families, as well as their interest in issues of gender, were clear messages of what they felt was important. I wish I had listened more carefully.

It became clear to me that despite my intentions of teaching the students about bias and how to detect it, they were not connecting what we were doing (bias detection) with the idea about the limiting nature of bias. What the students were doing was using the critical thinking skills of observation and questioning. The students were applying these skills to the pictures in the books we were reading together and beginning to examine ways of thinking. During Session #8 (April 24/01), Sinbad and Naz shared their bias detection work in their own books (done using Post-it™ notes). This gave me an opportunity to see what they had learned and absorbed from our discussions and time together and how they would apply it on their own. Naz' bias detection focused on gender and pointed out what was wrong:

Naz: *Things We Like.* I have a bad bias on this; all the boys have to agree. Boys are not supposed to wear tights!
Researcher: That's not tights, it's a bathing suit.
Naz: No, it's tights!
Bond: That's underwear.
Naz: Look how tight it is!
Researcher: It's a type of bathing suit.
Wolverine: It's not underwear!
Naz: Another bias... girls are always wearing a dress.
Veronica: Hold on, before Naz starts, what would a guy want to wear underwear...
Researcher: You know what it's a type of bathing suit, and usually people wear shorts to go swimming now, but before or if you race, you wear that type of bathing suit.

DJK: In my old building I used to go swimming with shorts you're allowed to wear those little things, you're not allowed to wear normal underwear, one day this guy he just came from India or something, or work and he knew you're not supposed to wear underwear, and when the lady was not looking, the lifeguard, he changed himself [sic] into underwear and nobody saw him and then he was wearing underwears [sic].

Naz: The girl's wearing skirt again.

Researcher: That's actually a bathing suit, but it has a skirt on it.

Naz: Tights!

Sinbad: Tights too tight!

Wolverine: The train has different colours on it

Researcher: That's not a bias.

DJK: Yeah it is, the train can't have...

Naz: Boys is [sic] not supposed to wear purple.

Researcher: Oh my goodness! See how strongly we feel about that stuff, because that's our experience? It's not supposed to be that way.

Naz’s observations focused on the clothing of the characters. He used the word bias and showed the things that he had difficulty with: the boy in the Speedo™, the girl in the skirt/bathing suit and the boy wearing purple. These issues challenged his way of thinking. Naz’s bias detection exposed his own bias about the colours boys can wear, which I attempted to illustrate in the last comment. Following this, I asked Naz about the title of the book and how the content would change if it were his book:

Researcher: The title is Things We Like, and what are the things in there that the kids like?

Naz: Beach, pets, going to pick apples.

Researcher: Now if you were going to write that book would those be the same things that you would like?

Naz: If it was my book, I’d put, me like going to the beach, me like going to play basketball, me like sleeping in my bed.

Obviously, Naz’s book would look completely different from the one he had read to us. I feel that more prodding on my part about the reasons behind what was represented in the
book could have resulted in Naz making a connection between experience, ways of thinking and choice, just as he had done with his pickle story (see page 99).

Sinbad also was a bias detective. He used the book, Dog Breath (which we did not completed together) and was very enthusiastic about his task. Much like Naz, Sinbad focused on the things in the pictures that did not make sense to him. The difference, however, was that his Post-it™ notes included an analysis of his choices. I have explained a little bit about the pictures he is referring to, using italics. Sinbad’s comments (exactly as they appear on his Post-It™ Notes) are in regular type.

- The wall paper is peeling due to the smell: The wall paper cant’nt [sic] peel off because it don’t [sic] have a nose.
- The Mona Lisa is holding her nose: Pictures can’t [sic] smell bad breath.
- The plant in the living room where the dog is standing is dying: The tree cant’nt [sic] die because [sic] it can’nt [sic] smell.
- The fish in the fish bowl is dying: The fish cann’t [sic] smell the bad breath because [sic] its under water [sic].
- Skunks walking by while the children are walking the dog are holding their breath: The skunk should not hold there [sic] breath because the skunks is [sic] stinkyer [sic].

The pictures in the book all work together to give us a strong image of the dog’s bad breath. Sinbad was aware of the intentions of the illustrator, however, his analysis included the basic facts and how the pictures flew in the face of reason (see Appendix J for the completed bias detection by Sinbad).

Both Naz and Sinbad’s work was based on the mismatch between what they saw in the pictures and what they knew as their reality. This was the whole point of our work together; that they would begin to really look at what they saw in pictures and not just accept them without question. Naz and Sinbad’s work showed that they were really examining the pictures as part of the story, not just turning the page and going on to the next line of text. It also showed that they were thinking and questioning what they saw:
Naz in terms of how things should be, reminiscent of our many discussions about gender roles and rules; and Sinbad about the reality presented in the pictures.

What these two boys’ work illustrated to me quite clearly, was that bias and bias detection was not a skill that the students truly understood, although they used the word bias often when highlighting things that did not make sense to them. Using bias detection as the context for our work, however, provided the opportunity to examine pictures closely and talk about what they thought of the illustrations. Regardless of whether bias was something that they grasped, critical literacy was taking place.

Conclusion

My data analysis focused on the students’ incorporation of analytical thought into their observations of the pictures in the three stories we read together. I examined the links the students made between their experiences, their ways of thinking about an issue, and their choices. I focused on their ability to go beyond simply observing what is on the page to noticing what stands out for them about the picture, asking questions about it, and expressing their thoughts as well as considering the experiences that could have influenced the choices the author/illustrator made.

Through the data I have presented in this chapter, I have attempted to show the different ways in which the students used questioning and observation in examining the illustrations in the stories we read together. Their observations, more so than their questions, tell a story of the students beginning to look at pictures with a critical eye. The students’ use of the critical thinking skill of observation led to some interesting discussions, during which their various life experiences were shared. I believe these
discussions assisted in the development of the idea that experience leads to a way of thinking and impacts choice.

The students' own observations and response to my questions suggested they were beginning to understand the idea of a way of thinking, regardless of whether the specific word bias held any meaning for them. Pictures began to be seen as one way of thinking (i.e. DJK's observation that not all girls wear dresses, page 97). The students' discussions allowed for sharing of their own ways of thinking. A few of the students seemed to begin to make the connection between the author's identity and experience influencing their choice for the pictures (i.e. James' observation that maybe the author of *The Perfect Father's Day* had a husband and child, page 112). In some cases, (DJK, Bond, & Veronica) it appeared that a link was being made to the impact on the reader of how things were represented in pictures (i.e. Bond feeling happy that he wasn't the only one wearing a flowered shirt, page 111).

Overall, I was pleased to see the ways in which questioning and observation were taking place while reading. This gave me hope that the pictures and eventually the text could be taken as one way of thinking, rather than, as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) says, as gospel. With reference, therefore, to my new question, bias detection did encourage the students to read critically. Unlike my expectation, however, that the students would *learn* to detect bias (which would therefore impact their critical literacy), bias detection encouraged critical reading by being the context in which the students' observation and questioning skills developed during our work together. Reading critically requires critical thinking skills. Most skills, when practiced, have the opportunity to improve.
Chapter 6: Conclusion
-or-
So, what about it?
Wrap it up...

How do I conclude? How do I take our time together and make something of it in a little package? Neat.

Time. Sharing. Opportunity Priceless moments that speak for themselves About community, chances, safety. Ways of thinking about who you are, what you can do, and what you should do, rather than what you are doing Easy to get caught in the plan instead of letting it unfold, rather than what should be

Giving thanks for the trust, the "realness," the sense of comraderie. And for teaching me the simple truth and beauty of what is.
Prelude

Was bias detection an effective way to improve the critical thinking skills of students considered to be “at-risk?” Given that I abandoned my initial focus on improvement in favour of examining the students’ process of using questioning and observation, this question was difficult to answer. The students involved used critical thinking to examine the pictures of the stories we read together. Bias detection provided the context in which I encouraged the students to observe and ask questions about the pictures. Bias detection was the term they used, however the data suggested that they did not fully grasp what this entailed. I do not think that the students learned to detect bias so much as they learned to use questioning and observation when reading, and perhaps even began to understand why this was necessary. The fact that the students were using the critical thinking skills of observation and questioning suggests to me that over time, their critical thinking skills could improve due to practice.

What was clear to me was that using bias and bias detection provided a context for examining books. Within this context, students became more critical of what they were reading, particularly through their observations. In addition to bias and bias detection, I felt that my effort at valuing the students’ knowledge, providing a space for them to share ideas, experiences, and opinions, and acknowledging their oral participation as literacy also went a long way in encouraging them to ask questions and make observations. In the end, I felt that the students were practicing critical literacy. Whether this was due to bias detection or to having the opportunity and purpose to use critical thinking when reading would require more research.
Bias and Bias Detection

Was bias detection instrumental in the students’ process of using critical thinking skills when reading? I realized in Session #6 that the word bias was being used by Bond and Sinbad in particular, but that the examples they were showing did not connect with the definition of bias as I wanted to interpret it (as a limited view, that could, if pervasive, be detrimental to readers’ sense of self and their experiences). Our working definition of bias was a person’s way of thinking. This seemed to make sense to most of students and they were able to make suggestions about what the pictures suggested about the author’s way of thinking. What the students were doing was beginning to approach bias by pointing out the things that did not make sense to them, and seeing the contrast this presented for how they experience the world, as McFarlane (1986) pointed out in her work. This could have been an important starting point that I unfortunately did not take full advantage of. Things that don’t make sense indicate a different way of thinking and can uncover a bias. Had we had more time, I think we could have made this connection between ways of thinking and bias in a way that may have made bias an accessible word for the students. As it was, I was thrilled with the students’ observations and discussions. Their lack of the specific understanding of bias almost became a moot point.

I discovered that bias detection was a difficult concept to explain and to understand (for myself and for the students). Bond was able to make it simple and provided our working definition: a person’s way of thinking. It was a great place to start. With this in mind, we were able to read stories together and make observations about the pictures. The students’ observations of the pictures and what did and did not make sense to them prompted them to share about their experiences. Their understanding of bias as anything
and everything that did not make sense to them in the picture, while initially frustrating, was valid. If it does not make sense it could be because your experience is different and therefore your reality is telling you otherwise. It is really that simple: "one way of showing bias, is to test pictures against children’s experiences" (McFarlane 1986, p. 23). If the students were making observations, seeing discrepancies, and talking about them, was this not critical thinking? The students may not have been able to get to the big issues (i.e. racism) my agenda wanted them to ferret out, however they certainly practiced their critical thinking skills in a way that made sense to them.

The Teacher as Part of the Equation

Having outlined how elusive the concept of bias and therefore bias detection was, I must include my role in the effectiveness of bias detection in improving critical thinking skills. I was determined to teach the students about bias, rather than explore it with them, encouraging them to share their experiences as the starting point for our inquiry into bias in books. Had I used their lives as starting points, we may have arrived at the concept of bias from ways they understood and related to. I feel this would have been more powerful and that the students may then have been able to grasp the concept and the ramifications of bias in books. As it stands, despite the comments by students such as DJK, Naz, and Bond (discussed in Chapter 5), I didn’t have a strong sense of the students’ overall understanding of bias and bias detection. The elusiveness of understanding bias could have been because I was trying to teach the students something that they knew and understood in a different way than I was presenting it.
My approach reminds me of how difficult it is to unlearn the system's way. My experiences and reflections during the project show the gap between what the schools and teachers expect of students and the students' knowledge and experiences. Acknowledging that this gap exists is reflected in the view of Hopfenberg et al. (1993) that it is the situation rather than the student, that is "at-risk." As well, Thomson (2000) believes that we place the responsibility on the child and their family when it actually should be the system we are examining. This suggests that the gap begins and becomes an issue in response to what is taught, how it is taught, and what is left out. My approach in this the curriculum project also made me more aware of the silence that is created when the curriculum does not affirm or legitimize the varied experiences of students (Giroux 1992). I still felt that I had to teach them something first, forgetting that they came with knowledge of their own and that I, as a teacher, did not hold it all. My realization of this saddened me as it went against my beliefs about students' abilities and the necessity for respect of all students' abilities and knowledge.

Beyond what the students did, the changes in my outlook and questions I have asked myself during this process are also important in addressing my research question about bias detection improving critical thinking. What I have been left with is a profound respect for the knowledge that we all carry, and a greater awareness of the fragility of different ways of knowing in the face of a system and the way it is. I have been reminded of, and confronted by, the way that teachers' assumptions about our students' ability and knowledge can limit or boost their achievement. Ellsworth (1989) writes of moving away from the shoulds and into more practice that is more reflective of what is
happening in the classroom. I have realized how difficult it is working outside of the way it is, even with the best of intentions.

Using Critical Thinking Skills

Questioning and observation were the critical thinking skills that I encouraged the students to use, under the framework of connecting experience with choices. As the data analysis of the previous chapter showed, some of the students demonstrated a number of connections with respect to linking experience, ways of thinking, and choice. For some students, like DJK, the fact that a picture only showed one way of thinking became evident (not all girls wear dresses). Naz in particular was able to clearly articulate the link between his experience with pickles, his resulting bias against them, and the choices he makes when ordering a hamburger to order it without pickles. Sharing experiences and opinions gave the students the opportunity to hear each other’s points of view about issues that arose in the pictures that they found interesting. Bond realized that pictures can make a person feel good about themselves and DJK seemed to grasp that pictures can be limiting in what they portray. Finally, James was able to see the possibility that the author’s identity and experience could have an influence on her pictures. These observations suggested to me that the students were beginning to understand that pictures carry messages. Over the six weeks, the students used their critical thinking skills of observation and questioning and begin to ferret out some of the messages in the pictures of the three books we read together.

The enthusiasm with which Naz and Sinbad shared their bias-detection with the group and especially the amount and type of observations that Sinbad made lead me to
reaffirm my belief that these students (and "at-risk" students in general) were missing opportunities to shine. They boys were clearly interested and involved in what they were doing. Unlike the response journals, Naz and Sinbad completed the bias detection exercise and brought the books in to share with the group. This spoke volumes to me about interest and motivation, reflected in following question: What is it about what we expect from and have these students do that contributes to their being considered "at-risk"? Both Hopfenberg et al. (1993) and Means et al. (1991) discuss this question in their work and programs with students "at-risk". Sinbad was clearly able to read the story. He then made observations about the pictures, focusing on what did not make sense, as well as why this was so. He was able to articulate his findings orally and in writing on the Post-It™ notes. Despite his observations, he was still able to see the motivation behind the author’s choice to be silly.

As Sinbad shared his work, a book that was chosen because it was funny (Dog Breath – the terrible tale of Hally Tosis) became a little ridiculous to Naz and DJK who offered their opinions along with his towards the end. Quite simply, they got something different out of the book than the first time we read it. I was reminded of Naz and Wolverine giggling in the library about how funny Dog Breath was. I was struck by the possibility of change in Naz’s view of the book as he saw the pictures as not making sense (“The sun is too far away.” & “There has to be a bias on the next page.”). Using critical thinking skills had changed his experience of the book to some extent. Dog Breath was possibly still funny, but there seemed to now be more to it for Naz. This was exciting for me, as the idea of there being more to a book than meets the eye (than the face value) was the point I was hoping the students would realize. I felt that this
realization could make reading more interesting, and could make reading critically, important.

"At-Risk" Students and Advanced Skills

Examining the use of advanced skills to practice basic skills (Means et al. 1991) I designed the project around working on the advanced skills of critical thinking while providing the opportunity to practice the basic skills of reading. What happened, however, was that we used the "advanced" skill of bias detection as a purpose for practicing the "advanced" skill of critical thinking (specifically observation and questioning). All of the nine students took turns reading; therefore this "basic" skill was still practiced and a part of our work. The whole point of advanced skills providing a context for basic skills practice is that it makes the practicing meaningful (Means et al. 1991). The students were making observations about the pictures, asking questions, talking about what was there and why it was like that, and sharing stories that related to the issues that were raised. Reading was a part of this process, because we were using books to detect bias and practice the critical thinking skills of observation and questioning. In fact, Sinbad in particular was very eager to take Dog Breath home to read and look for bias using his Post-It™ Notes. He was equally excited to share his work with the group. Reading was required for both of these activities.

Oral 'Literacy'

The nine students "at-risk" exhibited the "advanced" skills of critical thinking, in their observations of and questions about the pictures in the three books we read together.
It is important to note, however, that in addition to reading, the importance of oral communication within literacy became apparent to me. During our work together, I was struck by how eloquent some of these students were in their oral language, sharing well-formed opinions (especially Veronica) and asking thoughtful questions. The students’ seeming ease and comfort with oral communication required that I re-examine my emphasis on writing being a more important signifier of literacy. I discovered I had a bias towards writing as part of literacy, without much consideration for the oral form of literacy that reflected the histories of oral storytelling and oral traditions from around the world.

My struggle in reconsidering the response journals was about the word, “allow.” Even thinking it sends shivers up my spine, but it was there nevertheless: “Should I allow them to not complete their journals, not make entries? It’s important!” “Will telling the students that it’s okay not to do the journal entries let them off the hook?” “Am I lowering my standards because it’s not working?” “Are my expectations not high enough?” “If I insist, would they do the entries?” Finally, I let my heart speak and realized that it was not about lower expectations, permission, or letting the students off the hook. It was about recognizing their ways of being, what they were most comfortable with and seeing the value in what they were bringing to the discussions. Their oral work was brilliant, important, and showed critical thinking just as effectively as written work could have. The students were demonstrating critical literacy in a way that was comfortable for them.

Given that their comfort lay in oral communication, their written work may not have shown their ability as well – enter the achievement versus ability debate. Schools place a
heavy emphasis on written forms of communication. Although I was conducting my research within a school, I was able to adjust to the students. It felt good to be able to acknowledge their preferred method of communication and to have their oral participation be ‘enough’. This opportunity confronts Delpit’s (1995) argument in favour of teaching skills so that the gap between what students “at-risk” know and what they are required to know to succeed in the school system becomes smaller.

Answering the Question

Is bias detection an effective way to improve critical thinking skills of students “at-risk?” What happened in these six weeks? On the surface, nine students spent twelve periods with me, and showed signs that some of them were beginning to: understand the connection between experience, ways of thinking and choice; make some links to the author’s identity and experience influencing their pictures; understand how a picture can validate a way of being or can limit self-expression; and question and observe the pictures with a critical eye.

The students demonstrated their ability to connect with the pictures in the stories we read, comparing their lives to what was presented, and making observations about the differences (e.g. cats aren’t allowed in apartments; I’ve never seen a chair that big; my dad never wears running shoes). Occasionally these observations were challenged by the responses of another student in the group who had a different experience (e.g. cats are allowed in apartments; I was beaten in basketball by a girl once; I -Veronica- love the colour blue). These are examples of the students’ using their own lives as sources for learning (Bigelow 1990). If we had spent more time together and had I had more success
letting go of my expectations, these conversations may have been more involved (more opinions, highlighting differences and similarities and making connections). I say this because the conversations could have resulted from the students' sense of what was important, rather than mine. As it stands, the students' observations, combined with my questions did show the ways in which they were observing and questioning the pictures based on what they knew and understood to be true. Over time, as they continue to practice critical thinking while reading, it stands to reason that these skills could improve.

The skills that they were using were critical thinking skills (questioning and observation). Since I changed my focus from improvement (product), to use of (process) critical thinking skills, I cannot answer my research question in the manner in which I had intended. I am confident, however, that using skills often leads to greater confidence with them as well as their improvement. If I apply this concept here, then the fact that the students were using and practicing their critical thinking skills could imply that these skills could have improved. Since bias detection provided the context in which critical thinking was encouraged, then in effect, bias detection did have a role in the use and possible improvement of critical thinking skills in students considered to be “at-risk.”

The context of bias detection prompted observation of pictures that otherwise may have remained entertaining. Naz, Sinbad, Wolverine, and DJK's comments showed that were thinking about what they were being shown. During our time together I listened as particularly DJK, Wolverine, Sinbad and Naz asked questions and shared ideas related to the pictures, beyond what was on the page. There was movement from just accepting to observing, questioning, thinking, and feeling about what was being shown. This, to me, is the basis of critical thinking. Was bias detection effective in achieving this end? To
the extent that by encouraging bias detection I encouraged the students to question, I believe it could be. In so much as the students did not clearly show that they understood bias detection, it is difficult to say. However, more importantly I believe that the spirit behind the bias detection, the respect, and my attempt at valuing their knowings and feeling honoured to learn with them accomplished much more.

Postlude

This project has meant a great deal to me as a teacher and as a researcher, but mostly as a human being concerned with justice and possibility for everyone. The conclusion, therefore, must include more than just the information I can extrapolate from analysing the data. It must include more than the answer to the research question I began with. It must also speak of what I have learned spending almost ten hours with a group of young people with a lot to say, healthy curiosity, kind hearts, varied self-expression, and (often) different opinions about the way things should be.

In conclusion, I must return to a quote that inspired me in my work. “I have to work to make sure they understand that it’s okay for them to challenge what’s in the book. It should be simple for them, but like kids everywhere they want to accept the book as gospel. Now they know that that will never do” (Ladson-Billings 1994, p. 93-94). The discussions that the students and I had, reminded me that not everything will be challenged. Some things are already the way it is. The sharing of ideas and opinions, and the drama skits presented, created the opportunity for the students to see even their thinking as only one way, making room for different realities and therefore different choices. Challenging begins with open eyes that see and observe. Observation can lead
to questions, incorporates thoughts and feelings to make connections and comparisons, and can inspire agreement or dissention in others. I have seen the enthusiasm for observation grow in some of the students who participated, giving me every confidence that they have started the process of becoming critical thinkers and therefore critically literate. I, on the other hand have been reminded of how much there is to learn, how having expectations and being tied to outcomes can deprive us of the moment and the wealth and wonder that it holds. And I am humbled and grateful to have shared time with nine remarkable students.
Appendices

-or-

A glimpse into the machinery
Annemarie Shrouder
Learner-Investigator
Dunrankin Dr. P.S.
(905) 677-2202

March 6, 2001

Dear Colleague,

As you may already know, I have been a teacher at Dunrankin Dr. P. S. for the past 3 years, teaching Grade 4/5 and Grade 5, after receiving my B.Ed. at the University of Toronto in 1996. During the past two years I have also been studying at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education / University of Toronto part-time, working on my Masters degree in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education.

This year I am working on my thesis. My goal is to pull together my teaching experience and my studies so far and produce a project that improves critical thinking skills by teaching bias detection to students. I believe that bias detection can be a tool to develop critical thinking skills for any students, however the student population I have chosen are those students who are not working at the level of their peers in the classroom. Some of these students may be receiving in-school support. I would like this project to be designed in collaboration with the students and their parents.

I have chosen this group of students, since teaching them advanced skills such as critical thinking are often not a priority. We often think that to do the advanced skills we have to have mastered the more basic skills. It has been shown that advanced skills provide context and meaning for doing/practicing basic skills. I am committed to working with this group of students to show that they can do it and that it is important for all students to learn this skill, not just the advanced students.

I hope that success for the students in the project will provide access to these types of skills for other students who are struggling. Since we will be reading and writing as part of bias detection, we will be practicing these skills. I think that having an interesting reason for doing them makes a difference. Bias detection will have an impact on literacy – both reading and writing, which is beneficial to any students, but particularly to those who are having difficulty with these skills.
Learning about bias and how to find it in a story helps to uncover the messages (hidden and obvious) that the story contains. Bias detection is about asking questions about what we read. It is about examining a text for the messages in it, because of what the author has included or what he/she has left out. Knowing how to do this may make reading a completely different experience. Knowing that these messages exist, and being able to find them, involve questioning and challenges us to interrogate the text rather than accepting it at face value. It has been shown that exposure to advanced skills improves overall performance in the long run.

One, or more, of your students may be participating in this project. The group will meet on for two 40-minute periods per week (afternoons) for 6 weeks beginning in April 2001. We will arrange the schedule together. During this time we will be reading books, sharing how we understand them, using the Bias Bookmarks, and doing activities that help to ask questions about the book. The students will have a response journal to record their thoughts, questions and comments (book or tape).

Your participation, should you consent to it, involves referring students from your class who are below grade level in Language Arts, who may be interested in participating. This is a crucial part of the process and your assistance would be greatly appreciated. Students whom you refer will be given a letter of introduction to take home with them on March 19 after meeting with me.

Although this work is not specifically part of the curriculum, there are two expectations within the Ontario Language Curriculum that will be addressed through the work we will be doing together: Making judgements and drawing conclusions about the content in written materials (reading); Listen and respond constructively to the ideas of others when working in a group (Oral and visual communication).
Appendix A (cntd)

All data obtained from the students will be kept confidential, however positive comments regarding their growth and participation will be shared with you, so that they may be included in their June report card, if you wish. The final results of the project will be shared with you and the rest of the school staff at a later date.

Please complete the portion below and return this letter to me as soon as possible. A copy will be given to you for your records. If you have any question, please feel free to speak with me at school, call me at home (416) 910-8653, or contact me via email at ashrouder@oise.utoronto.ca.

Sincerely,

Annemarie Shrouder

_________________________________________

Name: ____________________________________

___Yes, I would be willing to recommend students who I think would be appropriate participants in this project.

___No, I am not willing to recommend students who I think would be appropriate participants in this project.

Signature: _________________________________ Date: ____________________
Critical: Literacy – Our Stories

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I would like to invite you and your child to be a part of my Master’s Thesis project, which has been approved by the Peel’s External Research Screening Committee.

Now that you have been introduced to the project at our meeting and have had a chance to talk about issues that are important to you for us to address within bias detection, please take a few moments to review this information and decide if you would like to give consent for you and your child to be involved.

The following is an outline of the project:

**Introduction/Getting Started (March 19-30):**
- Information session with the students during school time.
- Parent/Student information session.
- Student questionnaire (oral or written) re: their success in the project.

**The Project (April 2, 2001 – May 11, 2001):**
- I will meet with the students for two 40-minute periods per week - these sessions will include reading a story together (out loud), responding to the story, learning about bias and using the bias bookmarks. Sessions will be audiotaped, with permission.
- Students will be asked to keep a written (or audiotaped) response journal – to which I will respond (where appropriate), as well as post-it notes for them to use at home when reading.
- I will be in contact with you (parents/guardians) about the books read through a weekly letter as well as possible meetings and communication notes sent with the student (to be decided by the group). Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.
- Focus group discussions with students after the completion of each book about what activities they enjoyed and found useful and those they did not.

**Wrap-up (May 14-18):**
- Student questionnaire (oral or written) re: their success in the project.
- Closing celebration together (students & parents).
Indicating Consent:
By signing this form I am indicating my consent for my involvement as a parent as well as for the participation of my son/daughter ___________________________ in the project. I understand that my child will be involved in student sessions over the next 6 weeks, and will be learning how to find the obvious and hidden messages (bias) in stories that Annemarie Shrouder will read to the group, and that these sessions will be audiotaped (with permission). I understand that my child will be sharing their discoveries about the messages in books with the group through activities as well as in a response journal. I understand that no grades will be given for my child’s participation although two expectations within the Ontario Curriculum (Language) are addressed through this work. These have been shared with me.

Please check one:
___ I have attended the introduction meeting,
___ I have received a phone call about the introduction meeting as I was unable to attend,

and was part of the discussion about bias and our realities being presented in books. I was invited to share my thoughts regarding issues of concern to me as a parent that could be part of this project. I understand that I am considered part of the project and that my input is valued. I understand that I as a parent am welcome to join in some of the student sessions, and will be kept informed, as part of the parent community of this project, by Annemarie Shrouder. I have been given a detailed information sheet, and have had the opportunity to obtain any additional information as well as satisfactory answers to my questions.

I understand that confidentiality will be maintained during the study as much as possible within the school (no detailed sharing of student information with teachers, administration or other parents), but that classroom teachers will be given general feedback regarding the positive participation of their student(s) (if my child wishes), which may be used on their June report card. I understand that all names will be kept anonymous in the written thesis. Tapes and data will be destroyed upon acceptance of the thesis (estimated date: December 2001).

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time and to discontinue my, or my child’s, participation in the study without negative consequences.

I have read and understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: ____________________  Signed: ______________________________

(Participant)

Signed: ______________________________

(Principle Investigator)

Witness: ______________________________
Critical: Literacy – Our Stories

Dear Student,

I would like to invite you to be a part of my Master’s Thesis project, which has been approved by Peel’s External Research Screening Committee.

Here is what we will be doing together until the end of the school year:

• An information meeting.
• You will be asked to tell me (or write about) what will make you successful in this project. If you choose to talk to me about it, if it is alright with you I will tape what you say and type out your answers and we will read them over together to make sure you said what you wanted to say.
• You will have the chance to write an introduction for yourself that I will use, if you like.
• The group will meet for two periods per week for 6 weeks. When we meet we will be reading picture books together, talking about them, doing activities with them and writing how we feel about the stories. I will teach you how to be a bias-detective and find the messages in the stories we read.
• You will have a response journal (either a tape or a book) to record your thoughts, feelings and questions about the books we are reading and what you are learning. I will listen to/read these and answer your questions if I can.
• We will talk about what worked/didn’t work and what you liked/didn’t like after each book to make the next activities better.

After 6 weeks:

• We will talk about how you feel about your participation (or you can write about it). If you choose to talk to me about it, if it is alright with you I will tape what you say and type out your answers and we will read them over together to make sure you said what you wanted to say.
• We will have a celebration when we are done.

Please read and fill out the next page to let me know if you would like to be a part of this project.
Appendix B2 (cntd)

Indicating Consent:

By signing this form I am saying that I want to be a part of the project. I understand that I will be involved in student sessions over the next 6 weeks, that we will be learning how to find the obvious and hidden messages (bias) in stories that Miss Shrouder will read to the group. These sessions will be audio taped. I understand that we will be sharing what we think and feel about the messages we find in books with the group through activities as well as in a response journal.

Miss Shrouder has explained what we will be doing to the group and I was able to ask questions about it.

I understand that being part of this project is up to me, and that I can change my mind about being a part of the project any time, without a problem.

Please check one:
____ I have read the consent form, ___ someone has read this consent form to me,

and I understand it. I sign it because I want to, and I have been given a copy.

Date:____________________   Signed:__________________________  (Participant)
Signed:____________________  (Participant’s Parent/Guardian- re: student participants)
Signed:____________________  (Principle Investigator)
Witness:____________________
Dear Colleague,

I would like to invite you to participate in my Master’s thesis project, which has been approved by Peel’s External Research Committee. As the teacher of a student (or students) involved, your role would consist of recommending students from your class that you feel would be interested in participating. Now that we have met as a group and you have learned about the project, please take a few moments to read over this form and fill it out if you wish to give your consent to participate.

The following is an outline of the project:

Introduction/Getting Started (March 19-30):
- Information session with the students during school time.
- Parent information session.
- Student questionnaire (oral or written) re: their success in the project.

The Project (April 2, 2001 – May 11, 2001):
- I will meet with the students for two 40-minute periods per week - these sessions will include reading a story together (out loud), responding to the story, learning about bias and using the bias bookmarks.
- Students will be asked to keep a written (or audiotaped) response journal – to which I will respond (where appropriate), as well as post-it notes for them to use at home when reading.
- I will be in contact with parents about the books read through a monthly letter as well as possible meetings and communication notes sent with the student (to be decided by the group). Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.
- Focus group discussions with students after the completion of each book about what activities they enjoyed and found useful and those they did not.

Wrap-up (May 14-18):
- Student questionnaire (oral or written) re: their success in the project.
- Closing celebration together (students & parents).
Indicating consent:

By signing this form I am indicating my consent for my involvement as a teacher of one of the students who will be participating. I understand that my student will be involved in student sessions over 6 weeks, and will be learning how to find the obvious and hidden messages (bias) in stories that Annemarie Shrouder will read to the group. I understand that no grades will be given for the students’ participation although two expectations within the Ontario Curriculum (Language) are addressed through this work. These have been shared with me.

I have attended the introduction meeting given by Annemarie Shrouder, and understand that my participation involves referral of potential student participants. I have been given a detailed information sheet, and have had the opportunity to obtain any additional information as well as satisfactory answers to my questions.

I understand that confidentiality will be maintained during the study as much as possible within the school (no detailed sharing of student information with teachers, administration or other parents), but that I will be given general feedback regarding the positive participation of my student(s), which I may use on their June report cards. I understand that all names will be kept anonymous in the written thesis. Tapes and data will be destroyed upon acceptance of the thesis (estimated date: December 2001).

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time and to discontinue participation, which will not affect the participation of my student(s).

I have read and understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: ______________________ Signed: ____________________________

(Participant)

Signed: ____________________________ (Principle Investigator)

Witness: ____________________________
Dear

I have been a teacher at Dunrankin Dr. P. S. for the past 3 years, teaching Grade 4/5 and Grade 5. I am completing my Masters degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education / University of Toronto. I am interested in critical thinking and critical literacy - teaching students to think about, question, understand, and be involved in what they are reading. Within critical literacy, I am focusing specifically on detecting bias in stories. Bias detection involves finding the messages in the books we read (obvious and hidden) and using them to understand the story, ourselves, and each other, better.

I will be starting a project about teaching bias detection that will include up to 12 Grade 5 students who are experiencing difficulty in school. Your child has been recommended as a possible participant. I have chosen these students because we usually tend to focus on improving their basic skills, so they can “catch up”. I believe that it is important for all students to learn advanced skills, and want to show that this is possible. The project is about using bias detection as a way to improve critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is about questioning, formulating opinions and evaluating, not just accepting ideas. In the process, they will be practicing their reading and writing skills.

You and your child are invited to an information meeting, which will be held at the school on **Wednesday March 28 at 7:00pm in the Library**. This meeting will last approximately 1 hour. I will give you more information, and it is an opportunity for me to hear about issues that you think are important for us to look at when we are looking for bias and messages in stories. This is important because it will be our project. We will also go through a short bias-detection exercise, so you will have an idea of what your child will be doing, should they be one of the participants.

Please indicate below if you are interested in coming to the information meeting at the school and return the letter to the school by **Wednesday March 21**. If you have any questions, please contact me at the school (677-2202) or via email at , and I will be happy to speak with you.

Sincerely,

Annemarie Shrouder

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**Name:** __________________________ **Child’s name:** __________________________

____ Yes, I am interested and will be at the information meeting with my child.

____ Yes, I am interested, but I cannot make the meeting. Please call me.

Phone number: __________________________ Best time to call: __________________________

____ No, I am not interested.

**Signature** __________________________ **Date:** __________________________
Hi everyone, thank you for being here with me today. Before we start, I want to make sure that you all know my name and that I know yours

*Introductions*

(word depending on the group – some, many) of you will know that I have been a teacher here for 3 years, and some of you will even know that I am also going to university. I am doing my Masters degree – who knows what a degree is?

*Student responses*

So a degree is similar to what you will get when you graduate from here in June – it shows that you have finished all the grades so far and done all the work (like one big report card).

For me to get my degree, I have to do some research. How many of you like doing research projects?

*Student responses*

What is the first thing you must do when you are going to start a research project?

*Student responses*

Think of a question. So, I have done that, and my question is about teaching you to be detectives when you read and find the messages, and using that to improve your critical thinking skills. What is critical thinking?! It is about not just accepting something because it is there, really asking questions about it.

What is the next thing you have to do when you do research?

*Student responses*

Get the information to answer the question. When you do research projects, how do you get the information?

*Student responses*

Well, I need to get my information by actually doing a project about my question with a few students to see how well it works. That is why you are here with me, because your teachers thought that you would be awesome students to have in my group. So, today I’m going to tell you a little about how it would work and then you get to think about if you would be interested in being a part of it. It’s up to you. Any questions?
What we will be doing together is learning how to be detectives when we read stories, because stories have obvious messages and also hidden messages. These hidden messages are called bias. We will be reading books together (probably picture books and short stories because they are short and we won’t have a lot of time together), and acting out, drawing, or talking about how the stories make us feel, what they make us think of.

Then we will be learning how to read the stories in a different way – to be detectives. Being bias detectives means we will read the story and find the other messages in the story. We may do activities to help us be detectives and we will write in response journals (or talk into tapes) and talk about what we discovered. You may also want to do some detecting at home when you read and share your discoveries with us. All of our sessions together will be taped, if that is okay with you. This will help me to think and write about your questions and how you are learning over the course of our time together. We will be meeting two periods a week in the afternoon for 6 weeks starting in April.

After we finish each book, we will talk about what worked and what didn’t work, what you liked, and what you didn’t like, so we can improve our work for the next book. You can do this in a group or if you prefer, can talk with me yourself, or write it in your response journal.

Any questions?

Before we actually start, I will be asking you what you think it will mean for you to be successful in this project. What will make you proud of yourself. You can tell me or write about it. If you tell me, I will be taping you if that is okay, and then I will type out your answers so we can read your answers together afterwards and you can make any changes you need to, if your answer doesn’t sound like what you wanted to say. At the end of the project, we will talk about (or you can write about) how you feel about your work.

Any questions?

You won’t be getting any marks for this, but I will be giving your teacher positive comments about your participation so they can use them on your June report card if they wish. If you would prefer I didn’t do that, let me know.

You don’t have to decide now, maybe you would like to talk about it with your parents. I am going to give you an information letter to take home, for your parents to read with you. Think about it and bring the letter back by Wednesday March 21 to let me know what you have decided.
Dear Parents/Guardians,

Thank you for taking the time to come to the Parent/Student Information Meeting concerning my thesis entitled Critical: Literacy – Our Stories.

The purpose of this meeting is to give you more detailed information about my vision and the purpose of the project, as well as to receive your input about our specific focus within bias detection.

My goal is to pull together my teaching experience and my studies so far and produce a project that teaches bias detection to students. I believe that bias detection can be a tool to develop critical thinking skills for any students, but the students that I am focusing my efforts on are those who are having difficulty in school. I have chosen this group of students since teaching them advanced skills such as critical thinking are often not a priority. We often think that to do the advanced skills we have to have mastered the more basic skills. It has been shown that advanced skills provide context and meaning for doing/practicing basic skills. I am committed to working with this group of students to show that they can do it and that it is important for all students to learn this skill, not just the advanced students.

I hope that success for the students in the project will provide access to these types of skills for other students who are not “at grade level”. Since we will be reading and writing as part of bias detection, we will be practicing these skills. I think that having an interesting reason for practicing skills makes a difference. Bias detection will have an impact on literacy – both reading and writing, which is beneficial to any students, but particularly to those who are having difficulty with these skills.

Learning about bias and how to find it in a story helps to uncover the messages (hidden and obvious) that the story contains. Bias detection is about asking questions about what we read. It is about examining a text for the messages in it, because of what the author has included or what he/she has left out. Knowing how to do this will make reading a completely different experience. Knowing that these messages exist, and being able to find them involve questioning and challenges us to question the text rather than accepting it at face value. It has been shown that exposure to advanced skills improves overall performance in the long run.
Appendix E (cntd)

If your child is part of the project, they will meet with me in a group for two 40-minute periods per week for six weeks beginning the week of April 2, 2001. During this time we will be reading books and sharing our responses to the messages (in writing, by acting, through art, or by talking about it). We will be talking about bias together and coming up with our own questions to use for finding bias in the books we read, based on the issues we discuss tonight. All of these sessions will be audiotaped (with permission). If the students wish to share their learning with their peers, these presentations may be videotaped (with permission). These tapes will be destroyed once my thesis is accepted (estimated date: December 2001).

Your child will have a response journal, which may be a book or a tape. This is for them to record (or have someone record for them) their thoughts, feelings, questions and ideas about the books we read, or books they read at home. I will be reading/listening to these and writing back. These responses will help us to find the messages within the story and begin to transform the book so that it is meaningful to us.

Reading critically is more than just reading each word and understanding it. Because of this, the controversial issues that we deal with everyday in our lives will come up, usually around stereotypes. Some of these may be issues that are of concern to you, and you will have the opportunity to discuss these during the meeting. Some of these issues may be uncomfortable at first, but I believe that the more we talk about them and understand them, the more we can deal with them in a positive way. Through our work together, students will have the opportunity to see their experiences as sources of learning. They may decide that this is something they want to share with their classmates. I believe that the students involved will benefit from participating in the study by practicing their reading (and perhaps writing) skills, as well as questioning what they read. In addition, I hope that their enjoyment, interest and motivation for reading, their understanding of others, as well as their self-confidence, increases.

Although your child will receive no grades for their work in this project, positive comments regarding their participation will be shared with their classroom teacher, which they may use on their June report card. Although our work is not part of their graded work, there are two expectations within the Ontario Language Curriculum that will be addressed during our time together: Making judgements and drawing conclusions about the content in written materials (reading); listen and respond constructively to the ideas of others when working in a group (Oral and visual communication).

All participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I would like this to be a collaborative effort, sharing information and ideas both ways, keeping each other informed. These are your children, you know them best! However, if you do not wish to be involved, but would like your child to be a participant, that is fine too.
Appendix E (cntd)

All data obtained from students and parents will be kept confidential. The final results of the study will be shared with you, the students, the school staff, and the school board. This may help the teachers that wish to create programs like these in their classrooms for the benefit of all students. The names of all the participants, the name of the school and of the school board will be kept confidential. Students will be invited to think of their own pseudonyms as well as write their own introduction, which may be used in the thesis.

Following the introduction meeting, if you are interested in being a part of the project, please complete the consent form and leave it with me. If at any time you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me at the school (677-2202) or via email at , and I will be happy to speak with you.

Sincerely,

Annamarie Shrouder
Agenda – Parent Meeting  
Wednesday March 28, 2001  
7:00 pm – Library

1. Hand out information sheets as parents come in  
2. Knapsack analogy  
3. Drawing our homes  
4. Reading together – is this our reality?  
5. Revisit the home pictures and compare to a home picture that might be shown as THE home picture  
6. Discussion around – issues that are important to them/us re: questioning what we read

Other issues:  
- Right now – 2 periods per week, negotiated with the teachers – would after school instead of during class time be better? 3:40-4:20 – not out of class, easier for parents to come? (dates right now – does this work? April 18, 24, May 3 – 2:40pm)  
- No grades, positive comments re: participation if the students wish.  
- Can opt out any time.  
- Their expectations  
- Meeting again? When, where?  
- Communication – short note every Friday, feel free to call any time, or send a note.

On chart paper:  
1. The Knapsack  
2. Our homes – time to draw!  
3. Reading together – are we in these books?  
4. Sharing our pictures  
5. Talking about what is important – where is the bias for you?

Student participation:  
Talking / writing about success  
Introducing themselves (in writing)  
2 periods per week for 6 weeks  
response journal for homework (notebook or tape) to record thoughts about the stories and our work together.  
Feedback sessions after each book  
Ending celebration  
Parent Participation:  
Information meeting (tonight)  
Any other meetings we decide on  
Welcome to attend on April 18, 24 or May 3 (2:40 pm)  
Ending celebration
Appendix F (cntd)

1. I'm thinking of a knapsack, and students as a knapsack filled with many gifts, talents and ways of being and seeing the world. The system, unfortunately, considers certain things to be necessities for success, and if those are not present, that we don't have the means to reach the goal. So often we try to help put those things in the knapsack, instead of working with what is there. There are many ways to reach the same goals.

Items for the knapsack - a ruler, a measuring tape, a sewing measuring tape, string, a rock (can tell you what is longer and shorter based on their measurements with the rock, the string etc).

Exercise – if you want to see how long the table is. You could use a ruler, a measuring tape, string, your arm length, etc. All would tell you something about the table - length, height, width. If we limit it to one way - say a ruler, what happens to the kid who would chose to use a measuring tape or string because that is what they know?

These different ways of doing things ultimately reach the same goal, and show and use important skills just the same as using the ruler. It's a different way of looking at the skills we have, the knowledge we bring to school and how it is shown. It allows the students to come to school with a knapsack full of important and useful things, rather than asking “what is that?”

2. I've been in that seat, asking for the ruler, trying to get the ruler in the knapsack. I want to try something different, something that acknowledges who each student is and what gifts they bring with them, in their knapsack, and honouring that, rather than focusing on what is missing.

3. Draw a picture of your home from the outside - everyone gets a piece of paper and a pencil. Don't share your picture with anyone. Save it for later.

4. Read a story together - look at each picture, talk about each page - is your reality represented here? Where? How? Why not? What is missing? What would have to change to make it a story that tells about your reality? Matthew and Tilly – the neighbourhood, interracial friends, apartment building living, people in the community, the types of games Entry point for talking about what matters to us when our kids are reading, and the types of things that we need to focus on when we question what we read.

5. Show the pictures of their homes from the outside. Hold up the picture of the French flashcard house. If I show you this house and say, THIS is what a house looks like, how will you feel? Will you feel like you did a good job? Will you bother to draw your home again, or will you draw one that looks like the one I have told you IS a house? If you have room to say “what about this? This is where I live, this is what it looks like” Will that make a difference? It gives room, space to be who we are. THAT is what I want to do together.
**Appendix G**

**Observation Checklist (group)**
Measuring behaviour/participation to gauge effectiveness of the session and student growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naz</th>
<th>Wolv</th>
<th>Ver</th>
<th>Bond</th>
<th>DJK</th>
<th>Sinbad</th>
<th>James</th>
<th>Wes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharing Ideas</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Sharing Stories</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Asking Questions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Responding to Questions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Not participating/paying attention</strong></td>
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</tr>
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</table>
Dear Parents/Guardians,

Many of you know me since I have been a teacher at Dunrankin for the past 3 years. This year I am teaching only part-time, as I am completing my Master’s degree at the University of Toronto. I am pleased and grateful that the Peel District School Board has given me permission to involve Dunrankin students in my research, which will focus on improving critical thinking skills (e.g. questioning, interpreting, analysing) by learning how to find bias in reading material.

After the March Break, I will be inviting a small group of Grade 5 students and their parents to participate in my project, which will run for 6 weeks (2 periods a week). I will work with students who are having some academic difficulty and hope to help them develop the skills that provide a meaningful context to practice the basics of reading.

This project is a partnership. The input of the students and their parents/guardians is an important part of its success and they will help to focus the work at an information meeting. I will keep parents/guardians informed and their participation is welcome. Parents/guardians who are not able to participate may still have their children join the project.

If you have a child in Grade 5 who is having difficulty in Language Arts and is getting ISSP support or a modified program in class, then this opportunity may interest you. Your child may bring home a permission letter after the March Break. If you agree to his/her participation in the project, please complete and return the letter by March 23. If your child does not bring home a permission letter, but you would like him/her to be considered for the project, please call me at the school (905)677-2202 or contact me via e-mail at (ashrouder@oise.utoronto.ca).

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Ms. A. Shrouder
April 6, 2001

Dear Parents/Guardians,

We have started our work! I am looking forward to the next 6 weeks!
Here is what has happened so far this week:

- The students have chosen their codes and pseudonyms, and have been given their response journals or tapes
- The students have been asked to think of ideas for our work together
- Today we read “Dog Breath” by Dav Pilkey, and they have been asked to respond in their response journals. It is about a dog who has bad breath, and her owners want to give her away. In the end she saves the day.

I am sending you our schedule, with the dates that you are welcome to join us if you are free. If you are coming, just come to the office and let them know you are here. Most of the time we will be working in the staff room.

Please remember that you can reach me at school every morning, or send a note with you child if you have questions, concerns, or ideas for our work together. I really value your input.

Thank you and have a good weekend,

Annemarie Shrouder
April 12, 2001

Dear Parents/Guardians,

This week we began talking about stereotypes, how they lead to bias (one way of looking at something). The stereotypes that the students thought of were in two areas: racism (judging someone because of their race/colour) and sexism (judging what someone could do because they are a boy or a girl). We had a great discussion about examples and ideas about both of these issues on Monday.

On Wednesday we talked about stereotypes some more, but the conversation was more about what things we could or couldn’t do – for example, boys shouldn’t wear pink. I think that this conversation was interesting for the students, they all had something to say about these types of “rules”, and perhaps that is where we will start when we read our book next week – who decides the way it is?

Wednesday April 18 is one of the days you are invited to join us, if you are free. Also, please feel free to contact me with any questions, concerns and ideas at any time. Have a great long weekend!
April 27/01

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I apologize for not sending a letter last week as I was away on Friday.

Over the past two weeks we have begun actually reading the books and asking questions about the messages that are in the pictures. Every student has been given a small sticky note pad to use at home with the books they are reading. Hopefully you have already seen them doing this. This week two students brought in their books with their sticky notes stuck to the pages they had questions about, and read them to the group.

It is hard to believe that we only have 2 weeks left! So far, most of our discussions have been about bias towards girls and boys. This seems to be the topic that the students see the most. This week they decided they would like to change a story but do a drama about it. We will be starting to work on this next week.

Once again, if you have any comments or questions, please feel free to call me at school.

Thank you!
There once was a dog named Hally, who lived with the Tosis family. Hally Tosis was a very good dog, but she had a big problem.
The only way they could save their dog was to get rid of her bad breath. So they took Hally Tosis to the top of a mountain that had a breathtaking view.
They hoped that all the excitement would leave Hally breathless...
...but it didn't.
Endings and beginnings

And so,
the voices are silent
the conversations are over
the typing has stopped

and we are all
a little different
for having spent time together

and here I sit
looking at your
words
in print,
staring
at what
I have made
with your words
and my thoughts

Ending and beginning
standing in a
new place
with a full heart
of new knowings
for having spent
time with you
and shared…
and listened…

Giving thanks.
References
-or-
Who's in the Background?


Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario (1999). We’re Erasing Prejudice for Good. Toronto: ETFO.


