Experiences in Critical Literacy:

Students Deemed “At risk” in Canadian Schools

By

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Abstract:

Recently Ontario included critical literacy in the Language Arts curriculum. I plan to investigate what impact critical literacy will have on Canadian schools. I will present ideas in a critical narrative framework; drawing on pre-existing data-sets of experiences I gathered teaching in an urban Ontario school board for the last six years. I will also review research by other academics working in critical literacy, student engagement, and democratic education. I plan to investigate the effectiveness of using critical literacy-based activities with students deemed “at risk” in our school system. I will also explore the impact of critical literacy on the relationships between students, teachers and administrators. I believe this process will allow me to reflect, interpret and explore my experiences, as well as encourage others to draw their own opinions about the impact of teaching critical literacy in Ontario schools.
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Thanks also to David Booth, your work on literacy and gender resonated with my experiences as a teacher. Your assistance and advice on navigating the intricacies of OISE’s thesis writing and submission process, and as well as your ongoing flexibility during this process, helped to make this thesis a reality.
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Chapter One
1.1 My Narrative Beginnings

The weekend before summer school began, the principal of a West End Toronto summer school called to ask if I was still looking for a position. She was quite honest about the “challenging” job she needed to fill. Throughout our short conversation, she was sure to clarify that I had experience working with Special Education and other deemed “at risk” students. She also asked about my experience teaching in “inner city” environments. She felt these previous experiences were important because the students in this challenging class were predominately from troubled neighbourhoods.

Although the school was quite far from these communities, it was the closest location offering remedial credits at the Applied Level, courses for students who do not plan to continue on to university. The vice-principal informed me that many of the students in the Applied Level class were enrolled in a “credit recovery program” for the following fall, which allows struggling students to gain two high school credits for each course they pass in the program. The majority of the students had already failed more than half of their secondary level courses. I was a little concerned about the difficulties the job presented, but I had dealt with challenges before.

The classrooms were not locked before school started, so students often arrived before the staff. I was expecting to walk in on a rowdy, wild classroom. When I arrived, I quickly saw that the rules of the school were being tested. I could hear the beat of the bass from “illicit” mp3 players and cell phones were visible on desks. Many of the students were wearing hats, although they were aware that it was against the school rules. However, what caught my attention was the ambiance of the room. Instead of the
unruliness I had expected, the class was strangely subdued. Throughout the afternoon, I felt as though I was speaking to myself. My questions received only one-word responses. None of the students seemed to have any questions or concerns about what was expected from the course and/or by me. The class was quiet, too quiet. On more than one occasion, I had to awaken students from naps. It quickly became clear this class was going to be quite challenging, but not in the way I had expected. The challenge I seemed to be facing was to find a way to engage these students who were not demonstrating much, if any, interest in their own education.

During the next few days, the mood of the class remained consistent. I followed the basic outline the department provided. However, it was clear that the students were not interested in the material and did not participate more than was absolutely necessary. Throughout the week, two questions kept recurring to me. Why were these students so disengaged from their studies and, how much change could I really expect during a one month program? After some thought, I decided it might be possible that the students demonstrated little engagement because they had only experienced limited success. If all they had experienced was failure, why would they bother to keep trying? My hypothesis was that I should make this month as different from their regular school experience as possible. I believed that, if the students were offered new academic experiences and opportunities to achieve success, they might be less likely to associate the work in this program with past academic failure. I was informed that the course must include a novel study, an independent study unit focusing on media, and grade-appropriate basic reading and writing skills. As I brainstormed effective strategies to increase the students’ engagement, I thought of critical literacy.
Critical literacy was not yet a major focus within the Toronto District School Board; therefore, this would be a fresh experience for these students. By completing critical literacy-based course projects, students would learn essential skills needed in today’s multi-media society. For example, they would learn how to identify perspective, bias and stereotypes in multiple forms of text. Most importantly, critical literacy strategies encourage students to engage with the issues they are learning about. Students are encouraged to form opinions and even to take action about the topic they are exploring. My “challenging” class definitely needed encouragement to engage. I hoped that by learning about the social issues affecting their lives, they might be encouraged to take simple actions, such as completing the course successfully.

1.2 A Critical Literacy Outline

Although the requirements of the course were established, it was up to individual teachers to create a course outline. The outline needed to be approved by the department head, then submitted to the principal and distributed to the students. I felt confident that my outline detailing a novel study based on an available but seldom-used text and a critical magazine analysis project met the department guidelines. I was quite surprised when the department head wanted to meet with me to discuss my outline.

The first concern she had was whether or not the novel was suitable for the course and the students. I had selected the novel “The Outsiders” which is set in the 1960’s. It investigates the challenges that marginalized working class “greaser” teens experience in school and within the wider society. I believed my students would be able to make connections with the characters in the novel, especially since the themes of the novel: gang involvement, family struggles and discrimination were also experiences they faced.
in their own lives. “The Outsiders” lends itself to critical literacy activities such as identifying bias, perspectives and stereotypes.

The department head felt that the novel was too dated and was concerned about finding appropriate teaching and learning resources (chapter questions, chapter summaries, quizzes, etc.). I explained that although I was sure I could find the appropriate resources on-line, I did not plan to rely on chapter questions, etc. as the basis for my unit. After much debate, we agreed that I could go forward with the unit, if I also included chapter questions and quizzes.

The next part of my “discussion” with the department head focused on the independent project, a critical magazine analysis. The project involved students selecting a magazine and identifying the audience, perspective, purpose and bias of the magazine. The students then had to create an original cover for their own edition of the magazine, aimed at the target audience but challenging the bias that they had identified. The department head felt that this project was too advanced for the class because the students would not be able to understand or identify the concepts. I felt frustrated having to justify my choices because I believed that my plan was reasonable and would be effective. I explained that I would teach and model the terms and would provide time and opportunities during class to practice identifying numerous examples. I was most frustrated with the department head’s opinion that the project would be too challenging for my class. Although she had not met or worked with these students, she had formed opinions about their capabilities based on what she had heard about them and the neighbourhoods in which they lived. Although I was cautioned to have “reasonable expectations”, I strongly felt that these students would benefit from trying something
new. I was sure that if they were provided with support and time, they would be successful.

1.3 Piloting Critical Literacy with Summer School Students Deemed “At Risk”

When we started the novel study, there was some muttering about the setting being in the “olden days”. However, the complaints faded as I continued to introduce the novel. I knew that assigning the book as an independent reading task would not be realistic, so I suggested that we read the novel aloud and asked if there were any volunteers. Volunteers would earn bonus marks. I was quite surprised when several students readily volunteered. By the second day, I had a regular rotation of readers who were daring their peers to read. I answered endless questions about how I would be keeping track of the “bonus” marks. After some intense debate, it was decided that we would make a chart. Readers would get a checkmark by their name every time they read aloud. I was happy to see that the students finally seemed to have some interest in the course. A passing guidance counselor told me that she was shocked to see that I had applied-level students willing to read in front of their peers. Her comments made me realize that within a few short days, the atmosphere of the class had changed. The students were starting to take more responsibility for their learning by participating in our class activities.

I assigned my “mandatory” chapter questions as homework on a rotating basis as students were also working on their magazine analysis projects. Keeping in mind that many students probably had little confidence in their academic abilities, I established a routine of taking up the answers five minutes after class started by having students write
their answers on the blackboard. Point-form answers were accepted; but full sentence responses were encouraged. During the first five minutes, it was the assigned students’ responsibility to make sure they had an answer to write. It was nice to hear that the students were actually engaged and had opinions about what we were studying in class. I tried to keep the questions open-ended. For example I asked why they thought an event in the novel happened instead of asking a specific question about the content. I also focused on aspects of critical literacy. For example, we explored stereotypes in the text and compared them to stereotypes in today’s society. As I observed the students discussing and writing their responses, it was clear that they were engaged with the novel.

Assessment of the unit was based on participation (reading aloud), one essay, a media project and two tests. The essay component of the unit caused a great deal of anxiety. In fact, the majority of off-task behaviour that I had to deal with during the month occurred during the work periods dedicated to working on the essay. I attributed this behaviour to past negative experiences while writing essays. In order to alleviate the students’ stress levels, I broke the task into manageable components. I also met with individual students to reinforce their strengths as writers and address areas of need in a supportive learning environment. Eventually each student completed and submitted a reasonable essay. The unit tests had short multiple-choice sections based on the novel contents and a short answer paragraph section comparing the social climate and issues described in the text with today’s society. Moreover, students were also asked to explain the critical literacy term that was addressed in the question. For example: “There are many stereotypes presented in this novel. What is a stereotype? Describe one stereotype
we have read about. Do you think we have stereotypes in our society, today? Give one example and explain why you believe it is a stereotype”.

For full marks, students had to answer the questions in a proper paragraph with correct spelling and grammar. The whole class passed both tests with marks ranging from the 50’s to 90’s. We discussed the tests and the correct answers once everyone handed them in. Additionally, after the first test, I modeled level one (50%) answers on the blackboard and we discussed how to turn them into level 3 or 4 (70-100%) answers. This reinforced what was expected of the students. Overall, I felt that the novel unit was quite successful because my goal of engaging the students with the text had been accomplished and the students were succeeding.

I introduced the critical magazine analysis project after we had started the novel study. Student engagement and enthusiasm was already on the rise. The class was quite receptive to the project, especially when they learned that they could choose the magazine. I knew that finances were a challenge for students so we discussed where it was possible to get magazines for free or at a reasonable price. I also gathered some magazines and brought them to school. I set a deadline for students to have a magazine and was happy to see that everyone had an appropriate magazine by the due date. I introduced the terms that the students needed to analyze effectively during min-lessons. The students then identified and explained their opinions using the magazines I brought in. For example, after teaching the term “target audience”, I organized students into small groups and had them identify and explain their opinions about the target audiences of the magazines. I had the groups orally present their opinions since students would have to present their own critical magazine analysis at the end of the course. Although
some terms were more difficult for the class to understand than others, by the end of the course everyone had completed an analysis of their chosen magazines. It was apparent from some of the students’ magazine covers that they had a thorough understanding of the bias of the magazine and had put a lot of thought into how those biases could be challenged. From the department head’s reaction to the project, I knew the critical analysis was an ambitious task for an Applied Class. It was clear from the students’ final presentations that they were proud of their work. I also felt proud watching them speak to their peers about their opinions, especially when their newly developed media skills were revealed. For example, one student made a statement along the lines of “I never really thought before that the goal of this magazine was probably just to sell basketball stuff.” This illustrated that he had begun to understand the significant role of advertising in this magazine.

As summer school drew to a close, I felt a sense of accomplishment about teaching this “challenging” class. The atmosphere had completely changed and it was amazing to watch the students engage in academic tasks on a regular basis. Unfortunately, not everyone who started the program completed it. One student had been expelled for shattering a glass door during a conflict with the hall monitor and another student was expelled for throwing pens and crumpled paper balls at a supply teacher when I was away. For the majority of the class, the program had been a success. I hoped the students were returning to the regular school system with a more positive attitude and some new and improved skills. However, the program did not end on a completely positive note for me, as I was required to attend another meeting with the department head because she was concerned about my completed mark sheet.
The staff had been told at the start of the summer that we would have to hand in copies of our mark sheets and mark breakdown for the course. The department head had questions about my mark sheets because all the students who attended the whole program passed. She asked me a few questions about my marks and made sure I knew that my marks and mark sheet would remain on file in the continuing education department. Although she did not actually come out and say it, I felt she was insinuating that the assigned tasks and my marks were not accurate reflections of the students’ academic abilities. It was discouraging, because from my point of view, I had more challenges dealing with the department than I did with the “challenging” class. I truly believed that using critical literacy as a teaching and learning strategy was a good decision. The students’ participation and completed tasks supported this belief.

Although teaching summer school presented some challenges, it was also a very rewarding experience. I was excited that using critical literacy did engage these deemed “at risk” students. This engagement was evident in the high level of participation and enthusiasm. Moreover, as the students examined the social issues of today’s society, they seemed to develop an increasing awareness of obstacles that were challenging their success. Those who completed the course took action and applied themselves to gaining the credit, which in some cases prevented them from becoming another “at risk” student having to enroll in a credit recovery program. However at the same time, I became aware that critical literacy strategies might receive resistance from administrators and/or department heads. It led me to wonder what effect teaching critical literacy and required skills would have on the teacher? What impact would there be on the relationship between the teacher and administration? I wondered if the success my students
experienced during the summer school program could be repeated with other deemed “at
risk” students. I also wondered that if teachers experience resistance and criticism for
using a critical framework, would the students experience this resistance when they
adopted critical literacy strategies? What would happen if students actually began to take
action and those actions affected their schools? These questions stayed on my mind long
after the program was over. Eventually, they evolved into my research questions for this
thesis, and are presented in the following in chapters.
Chapter Two

2.1 Research Questions

When I think about my teaching experiences, I realize that, in addition to investigating my experiences with critical literacy, I also have to address the concept of “at risk” because almost all of my experiences have been teaching students deemed “at risk”. Throughout my career I have remained unsure of what the implications are for labeling a student “at risk”. Who decides if a student is deemed “at risk” and what is the purpose of the label? In order to gain a better understanding of my students, I plan to explore this term and the implications of being deemed “at risk” in the Toronto District School Board. The underlying question I will address in my thesis is, if students deemed “at risk” engage in critical literacy, how are relationships between students, teachers and administrators affected? What impact does incorporating critical literacy have on students and teachers in a school board that has only recently started to acknowledge critical literacy as a teaching strategy?

In this thesis, I plan to reflect on my experiences teaching critical literacy. Critical literacy is a challenging concept to define as many researchers have selected to explore different aspects of this framework. According to White, “critical literacy develops the capacity to read and represent, linking the development of self-efficacy, an attitude of inquiry, and the desire to effect positive social change (2008, p. 24)”. Pullin and Cooper believe critical literacy refers to “the attempt to make invisible assumptions and practices affecting individuals and society visible by identifying what is not working in traditional approaches and structures, then offering solutions and alternatives (2008, p. 38)”. While on the other hand, McKinney believes “critical literacy work can be strongly text focused...
involving linguistic analysis of ideologies in texts (2008, p. 99). Generally, critical literacy “represents a shift towards a more sociological model of reading and writing, where literacy is viewed as an avenue for developing social viewpoints and interrogating social norms” (Heffernan and Lewison, 2005, p. 108).

2.2 Rationale and Hypothesis

I am interested in using critical literacy as a teaching strategy because most of my teaching experiences have been with students from various minority backgrounds, many of whom have difficulties succeeding in mainstream society. I intend to explore whether or not critical literacy can be used to effectively engage these students. Since my experience at summer school, I have used critical literacy based activities in various academic environments and grade divisions, but so much time is spent on the day-to-day details of teaching that I have not had the opportunity to thoroughly reflect on my experiences. I believe that writing a narrative thesis will enable me to explore and reflect on my personal teaching experiences.

I decided to incorporate critical literacy into my teaching practice because I believe this framework would help students, like mine, who have been traditionally labeled “at-risk” by the school system. According to the TDSB (2007), academic failure can result from “emotional and family problems, learning disabilities or socio-economic barriers, to parental expectations and a host of other complex issues” (p. 5). Researchers analyzing statistics from the school board have adopted the term “at risk” to describe these students. For example, Milton (2008) examines statistics to determine the percentage of TDSB students from different backgrounds who are deemed “at risk” for poor educational outcomes” (p. 17). However, she does not specify whether these
students have failed or are just receiving poor marks. The TDSB’s published definition of “at risk” is consistent with my experiences teaching in various schools across Toronto. I have observed students with special education needs, students with low academic achievement, and students who are failing, all referred to as “at risk”. Most often, I have heard the term used in conjunction with allocating extra support to classes and students. For example, after completing term report cards teachers fill out “at risk” forms for students who have the lowest marks in their classes so administration can consider if those students require additional levels of support.

**Student Engagement**

Although the term “at risk” is widely used in the education system, it is not without controversy, as students from minority and low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be disproportionately represented in school boards’ statistics of students deemed “at risk”. I am hoping that participating in critical literacy-based tasks will allow those students considered deemed “at risk” to become more involved and engaged in the topics they study. The First National Report from the Canadian Education Association, “What Did You do in School Today?” published in 2009 examines levels of engagement in Canadian youth. Wilms, Firesen and Milton (2009), believe disengagement from school leads to inequality in Canadian society, “not only because it places a large number of students at a disadvantage as they move into adult roles, but because disengagement is disproportionately experienced by students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and students from ethnic minority and Aboriginal communities” (p. 7). They further assert “many problems experienced by students in middle and secondary schools- such as disengagement, dissatisfaction with their schooling experience, and dropping out are
significantly linked to the learning environment” (Wilms et al, 2009, p. 6). The report made many recommendations for improving learning environments, such as tasks that “require and instill deep thinking”, “immerse the student in disciplinary inquiry”, “are connected to the world outside the classroom”, “have intellectual rigour” and “involve substantive conversation” (Wilms et al, 2009, 34). I believe many of these goals/recommendations can be achieved through the use of critical literacy as a teaching and learning strategy.

American research, such as Crafton, Brennan and Silver’s (2005) work on critical inquiry in a first-grade classroom, and Australian research, such as Comber, Thompson and Well’s (2001) work in a low-income grade 2/3 classroom indicate that incorporating critical literacy strategies have a positive effect on their respective students. Research conducted in Canada includes Cooper and White’s (2005) study of incorporating critical literacy into a grade 3 class in Toronto. I am hopeful that my Canadian students from different grade divisions, who, not unlike the students I teach, labeled “at-risk,” will become more engaged in their learning through participating in critical literacy-based activities.

**Gender and Academic Success**

In addition to being members of minority groups, the majority of the students I work with are male. Most of my teaching experiences take place within the special education system, where boys are disproportionately represented. I am interested in the recent attention to the topic of boys and literacy, and the realization that boys seem to struggle to achieve the same level of success as their female counterparts. For example, Booth (2002) recounts that “parents and teachers line up to ask me questions, and they
are almost always about boys in literacy trouble: they don’t read, won’t read, don’t write, can’t write, can’t spell” (p. 12). I share Booth’s (2002) assertion that “those of us who are responsible for educating boys are deeply concerned over the plight of many of them who can’t or won’t enter the literacy club” (p. 12). I believe that the question of boys’ success in school is very relevant to the students with whom I work because they are extremely disadvantaged in our school system. Not only are my students from low-income families and minority backgrounds, they are also male. American researchers, such as Tyson (1999), have attempted to reach male students by creating reading groups to explore realistic fiction from a critical literacy framework. I am hopeful that the boys in my classes will also experience increased levels of engagement when they have the opportunity to participate in critical literacy-based activities.

**Impact of Critical Literacy**

I am interested what impact using a critical literacy framework will have on students and myself, as teacher. I am especially interested in what the impact (if any) will be, since I am working in a school board that has only just recently started to include critical literacy strategies. Although some critical literacy skills are included in the Ontario Language Arts Curriculum, the expectations are not as clearly detailed as they are in curriculum documents from other countries.

**Critical Literacy in an International Context**

Much of the research I found was based in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, where critical literacy has historically had a larger role in the English curriculum. For example, the Tasmanian Curriculum English-Literacy K-10 Syllabus includes references from Freebody and Luke, well-known scholars in the area of literacy. The
syllabus advocates for a balanced literacy program, emphasizing critical literacy philosophy of “understanding the purposes and uses of texts for different cultural and social functions” (Department of Education Tasmania, 2010, p. 5) and the “understanding that ideas and information in texts are not neutral and can be challenged” (Department of Education Tasmania, 2010, p. 5).

Similarly, critical language knowledge is included in South Africa’s Revised National Curriculum Statement including the standard that a student “examines how language is used to construct gender, race, the environment, health and how the reader is positioned- suggests ways of rewriting texts to create other possibilities” (Department of Education, 2005, p. 121). The critical literacy framework is relatively new to Ontario and, although some school boards such as the TDSB are beginning to offer critical literacy workshops to its teachers, it is still a relatively new concept for many teachers and administrators. This leads me to consider the impact of teaching students critical literacy skills to encourage them to ask questions and take action on issues they perceive as problematic, when the majority of teachers and administrators are unfamiliar with this framework.

2.3 Critical Theoretical Perspective

Heffernan and Lewison (2005) suggest “working from a critical literacy perspective of literacy represents a shift towards a more sociological model of reading and writing, where literacy is viewed as an avenue for developing social viewpoints and interrogating social norms” (p. 108). Critical literacy tasks encourage learners “to question what they are hearing, reading, and viewing and to look at the meaning, purpose and motive behind the way in which the text has been structured, organized and
contextualized” (Ralfe, 2009, p. 309). Critical literacy has evolved from the field of critical theory. Willinsky (2005) suggests “critical literacy can be said to own a striking debt to the twentieth-century legacy of Critical Theory” (p. 3). Critical theory is considered to be “a body of work that was produced in large part, by the Frankfurt School” (Willinsky, 2005, p. 3) and provides a “critique of contemporary sources and cause of oppression and repression” (Willinsky, 2005, p. 3). Ira Shor further developed the framework of critical literacy in his work on education (Willinsky, 2005, p. 7) and Paulo Freire in his work educating the oppressed. Willinsky (2005) suggests that Freire’s work has “proven an inspiring point of departure for many working in critical literacy” (p. 7).

I first became familiar with the concept of critical literacy through the work of Ira Shor. I was introduced to Shor through course readings at OISE. Shor questions the difference in academic performance between students from majority and minority backgrounds in his 1999 article, “What is Critical Literacy”. He raises the concern that the current educational system does not offer an equal playing field for different groups of students. Shor (1999) believes that students from the dominant culture are able to function better in education systems because educational pedagogy and curriculum are influenced by the dominant culture. Thus, students who share the same values, culture, language and discourse as the educational system, are more likely to do better. Shor’s work helped me gain insight into the struggles that deemed “at risk” students can face in the classroom. Moreover, Shor (1999) believes critical literacy can help students gain a better understanding of how people make sense and act in the world. Shor’s ideas offered
me the hope that my students could become more engaged in their learning and thus, experience greater success.

In order to gain a greater understanding of how to implement critical literacy tasks in my teaching, I researched how other North American educators and academics have used critical literacy in their classrooms. Much of the work in critical literacy has been undertaken by North American researchers working with primary-aged students: including Heffernan and Lewison’s (2005) experiences desegregating a grade three lunchroom table (2005), Crafton, Brennan and Silver’s work with critical inquiry in a grade one classroom (2005), Cooper and White’s work with a grade 3 class in Toronto (2005) and Burns’ exploration of issues of war with her grade one students (2009).

Additionally, extensive research has been published on implementing critical literacy with students from the junior and intermediate grades. Works such as Ciardiello’s (2004) with grade seven and eight students about young heroes, Tyson’s (1999) experiences implementing the use of contemporary realistic fiction with fifth grade African American boys, Wilson and Laman’s (2007) collaboration with a middle school teacher to implement critical literacy-based activities in her classroom and Powell, Cantrell and Adam’s (2001) description of a fourth grade class’s action research project all focus on implementing critical literacy strategies in elementary schools. Additionally, research on critically literacy has been published at the secondary level, such as Roger’s (2002) critical conversations about literacy with inner-city African American youth.

My thesis is also influenced by international research on critical literacy. For example, work from Australia such as McGregor’s (2000) experiences with opinionated adolescents, and Comber and Wells’ (2001) action research with Wells’ grade 2/3 class.
Work from South Africa, such as Ralfe’s (2009) exploration of the effectiveness of including critical literacy expectations in the South African curriculum have also influenced my understanding of critical literacy. These qualitative research-based papers also influenced the methodology for this thesis, which is presented in the following chapter.
Chapter Three

3.1 Qualitative Research

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) qualitative researchers “stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p. 10). I was first exposed to qualitative research through a qualitative research methods course at OISE. Until this point, most of my educational experiences were strongly anchored in quantitative research, as my undergraduate degree was focused on the sciences. Qualitative research did not play a large role in the social sciences until the last half of the past century. However, according to researchers such as Polkinghorne (2005), “in the last 40 years since their reemergence, qualitative methods have had a significant impact in the disciplines and positions of sociology, education, and nursing” (p. 137). A main characteristic of qualitative research is that it relies on peoples’ lived experiences or, as Polkinghorne (2005) asserts, “the experiential life of people is the area qualitative methods are designed to study” (p. 138).

The idea of conducting research based on an individual’s lived experiences interested me because the concept was vastly different from what I had considered to be “valid” research. Polkinghorne (2005) suggests that “people have access to much of their own experiences, but their experiences are not directly available to public view. Thus, the data gathered for study needs to consist of first-person or self-reports of a participant’s own experiences” (p. 183). Although there are many different frameworks within the field of qualitative research, I am most interested in narrative research because
I believe it will enable me to learn more from my experiences teaching critical literacy and allow me to share these experiences with others.

**Narrative Research**

I first learned of narrative as a research methodology when taking Carola Conle’s course “Teachers’ Stories”. During the course we were encouraged to reflect on our experiences as teachers. As a relatively new teacher, most of my time had been spent organizing and implementing lesson and unit plans. Until this course, I had not had much time or opportunity to reflect on my teaching practices. Learning about Conle’s evaluation of teachers’ stories, through both her course and published works (2001), led me to wonder what I could learn from reflecting on and exploring my own personal experiences, particularly about the process of implementing a framework I am interested in, critical literacy. According to Bullough (2001), since narrative is an emerging form of research, its “methods are borrowed” from other disciplines (p. 15). Narrative researchers have to assert “the authority of the study… from the frame or frames of the borrowed methodology as well as from the virtuosity of scholarship in the piece of writing itself” (Bullough, 2001, p. 15). Therefore, my thesis will be strongly influenced by numerous academics. I will draw on work linked to the development of narrative research, such as Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) research on narrative inquiry as a research framework. My thesis will also be influenced by more current work in the field of narrative research such as Moen’s (2006) reflections on narrative research and Bollough and Pinnegar’s (2001) guidelines for self-study research (2001, 13-21). I will also draw on work by poststructuralists working with narrative research including
Bluemenreich’s (2005) work with HIV positive children, and Chase’s (2005) concept of “analytic lenses”.

**Teacher Stories**

Early research in the field of narrative research focused on Connelly and Clandinin’s work with “teacher stories”. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that the study of narrative is the study of “the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Narrative researchers collect these lived stories and record them as narratives (Moen, 2006, p. 2). I plan to use a personal narrative, or a “teacher story”, to explore and investigate my experiences teaching critical literacy. Connelly (1990) suggests that narrative research methods are increasingly accepted in education “chiefly because teachers, like all other human beings, are storytellers who individually and socially lead storiied lives” (p. 2). Moen (2006) suggests that using narratives “enables us to study teachers and their teaching in movement, in a process of development and within the teacher’s social, cultural, and institutional setting” (p. 4). According to Connelly and Clandinin (2000), “to understand what happens when teacher and student meet in teaching-learning situations, it is necessary to understand their stories” (p. 315). Moen (2006) suggests that for narratives to be effective, the story must be significant for the narrator (p. 4). In my thesis, I plan to explore and reflect on the experiences I had teaching critical literacy at different locations and grade divisions within the Toronto District School Board. To me, these experiences are significant because critical literacy has recently been adopted by the school board but has not yet been implemented on a wide scale. I believe writing a narrative thesis will provide me with greater
understanding of my teaching experience, and provide me with insight as to whether or not critical literacy is a useful strategy to use with students deemed “at risk”.

**“Three Dimensional Narrative Inquiry” Analysis**

I plan to use Connelly and Clandinin’s (2000) “three dimensional narrative inquiry” method in my thesis. Connelly and Clandinin assert that personal narratives take place within “a three dimensional narrative inquiry space” (p. 316) of temporal, personal/existential and place dimensions. They suggest that a teacher’s knowledge is placed on each of these dimensions (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 316). The temporal dimension is influenced by Dewey’s concept of continuity and the idea that new and future learning experiences build on the past. My narratives will demonstrate the temporal dimension of narrative inquiry because my experiences will come from a pre-existing data set of experiences I gained during the last six years of teaching critical literacy in different schools and with students from different grade divisions.

Throughout the narrative process, I hope to reflect on what I have learned in order to raise issues that could be addressed in the future. My narrative will be strongly influenced by the personal/existential dimension of narrative inquiry because, as Connelly and Clandinin (2000) suggest, a characteristic of a teacher’s professional knowledge “is its dependence on the outside world” through factors such as board and government policies, curriculum mandates and school administration (p. 4). I have many ideas on how to include critical literacy in my English class; however, the project I actually assign is strongly influenced by the curriculum expectations for the grade I am teaching, Ministry of Education policies, school board, and school administration. The third dimensional of narrative inquiry is “place”. Place will play an important role in my
narrative of critical literacy as I plan to explore the experiences I have had teaching critical literacy in different schools within the Toronto District School Board.

**“Analytical Lenses” Analysis**

In addition to Connelly and Clandinin’s (2000) “three dimensional narrative inquiry” framework, my thesis will also be influenced by Chase’s (2005) concept of “analytic lenses” (p. 651-679). Chase asserts that there are five “analytic lenses” through which researchers write narratives. The first analytic lens focuses on the idea that “narrative is retrospective meaning-making the shaping or ordering of past experience” (p. 656). Chase (2005) believes that narrative research “communicates the narrator’s point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place” (p. 656). In my thesis I will be retrospectively reflecting on my teaching experiences working with “at-risk” students in the Toronto District School Board.

According to Chase (2005), the second “analytic lens” is concerned with “narrative as verbal action” and the idea of “voice” in the research (p. 657). The idea of voice “draws our attention to what the narrator communicates and how he or she communicates it as well as to the subject positions of social locations from which he or she speaks” (Chase, 2005, p. 657). I believe it is important for me to acknowledge my point of view with regards to the experiences I narrate so the reader is aware that my opinions are influenced by my own background experiences and biases.

The third “analytic lens” refers to the idea that “narrative researchers view stories as both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances.” The fourth “lens” asserts that narratives are “socially situated interactive performances” that are “produced during particular times and in particular places” (p. 657). Chase (2005)
believes this is important because narratives “emphasize patterns in the storied selves, subjectivities, and realities that narrators create during particular times and in particular places” (p. 657). In my thesis, I am reflecting on teaching critical literacy activities in different schools and with students from different age groups. I realize the stories I present are told from my point of view and are my experience of the events. I will strive to narrate events as authentically as possible.

Chase’s (2005) fifth “analytic lens” states that researchers “view themselves as narrators as they develop interpretations and find ways in which to present or publish their ideas about the narratives they studied” (p. 657). I am planning to present reflections and interpretations of the event in a separate section from my narration of an experience to make it clear that I am sharing my interpretation of the event. I am hoping to uncover patterns of what is different and what remains the same in each of my experiences.

**“Rich Thick Description” Analysis**

Although the narrative method offers opportunities to explore individual experience, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) caution that this value of the narrative, the insight into a lived experience, can become problematic when researchers are tempted to tweak their experience to create a “Hollywood plot” (p. 10), where the story is slightly altered to have the desired outcome. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Geertz’s idea of “thick description” (p. 17) can be used to make sense and interpret situations. Moen (2006) summarizes the concept of rich, thick description as meaning the “narrative presents both the context and the web of social relationships” and the “researcher describes in detail the participants and the settings of the study” (Moen, p. 8). According
to Moen (2006), the rationale behind using rich, thick description is that, if the narrator provides enough information, the argument can be made that it “enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of their shared characteristics (p. 8)”. This rationale is suited to my thesis, as I am inquiring whether critical literacy can be used to engage students deemed “at risk” in a variety of settings. Therefore, I will strive to include rich, thick, description as I narrate my different teaching experiences.

**Autobiographical Analysis Guidelines**

Rich, thick description can also be used to meet three of Bullough and Pinnegar’s (2001) guidelines for writing autobiographical forms of self-research (p. 13). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) wrote their eight guidelines to address concerns about how to evaluate the quality of qualitative research, particularly narrative inquiry (p. 13) or in their words “what makes a self-study worth reading?” (p. 16). Bullough and Pinnegar’s (2001) first guideline is that “autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection” (p. 16). Other guidelines are that “powerful autobiographical self-studies portray character development and include dramatic action” (p. 17), and that “quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to persons in contexts or setting” (p. 18). These guidelines could possibly be accomplished by including rich, thick description so the reader can develop a clear idea of the context of the experience and the individuals being portrayed. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) also offer the guidelines that “self-studies should promote insight and interpretation” (p. 16) and that “autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand”
I hope to meet these guidelines in my thesis by concluding each section with a reflection interpreting both my specific experience and the current research on the topic.

Additionally, they present the guideline that “biographical and autobiographical self-studies in teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator” (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 17). I believe my thesis will meet this guideline as I am writing about incorporating a new framework, critical literacy, into my teaching practice and describing the challenges of implementing a new strategy. Incorporating a new teaching strategy is something all teachers in today’s education system can relate to. Moreover, I plan to explore how this strategy affects the different relationships within a school (among teachers, students and administration). I believe these are complicated relationships and can have either a positive or negative impact on both student engagement and a teacher’s career.

Bullough and Pinnegar’s (2001) also present the guideline that “authentic voice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the scholarly standing of a biographical self-study” (p. 17). In order to meet this guideline I plan to relate the specific experience I describe in each section of my narrative to current research in the fields of critical literacy, student engagement and student populations who are deemed to be "at risk".

**Poststructural Analysis**

A further concern about narrative as a research method has been raised by poststructural academics such as Richardson and St. Pierre, and Blumenreich. Postmodern academics “suspect all truth claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural, and political struggle” (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). Poststructuralism is a form of postmodernism that “links language, subjectivity,
social organization and power” (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). According to Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), “language is how social organization and power are defined and contested and the place where one’s sense of self- one’s subjectivity- is constructed” (p. 961). The influence of the poststructural movement can be seen in the work of Blumenrich (2005), who worries that authors of narratives “run the risk of constructing a tale that reproduces conventional and dominant language” (p. 77) such that the researcher ultimately has control of how the story is told and what is included.

Blumenreich (2005) offers “three aims” researchers can utilize in order to “make space for formerly silenced voices and to offer emancipatory potential” (p. 88) in their narratives. Blumenreich’s (2005) first aim of writing a poststructural narrative is the concept of “complex lives, shifting identities” (p. 80), which summarizes the poststructural idea that a person’s identity is not fixed but can change due to influences from their daily lived experiences. Blumenreich (2005) suggests that a poststructural narrative can achieve this aim by attempting to portray “complexity of their lives and the fluidity of their identities” (p. 80) when describing the individuals in their narrative. The second aim is to “make the researcher visible” (Blumenreich, 2005, p. 84). Blumenreich (2005) suggests the researcher must understand the role he or she plays in the narrative process for example, by recognizing that “I am not an objective authority who operates independently of social constraints” (p. 85). The third aim is “creating an oppositional picture” by challenging the “dominant discourses through which our society understands” (Blumenreich, 2005, p. 85). In this thesis I am trying to create an oppositional picture in our school system, a picture of students deemed “at risk” successfully engaged in their schooling. I believe it is important for me to try to achieve these “three aims” since these
students are seldom viewed positively in the education system. I think it is especially important for me to be conscious of the second aim because not only is my teaching practice affected by my own opinions and biases, it is also influenced by school climate, administrators’ decisions, board policies and ministry documents.

One of the main concerns raised about narrative inquiry is its level of accuracy. One of the main ideas presented in critical literacy is the concept that writing is not neutral, but rather influenced by the author’s social, cultural, racial and economic background. This issue is also a factor affecting narrative writing. Thus, Moen (2006) suggests when working with narrative research “it is important to remember that the individual in question is irreducibly connected to her or his social, cultural, and institutional setting” (p. 4). Moreover, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) point out that “experience and memory are, thus, open to contradictory interpretations governed by social interests and prevailing discourses” (p. 962). Therefore, I realize that the stories I present in my narrative are told from my point of view, that they are my experiences of the events that took place during the critical literacy units I taught, and my perceptions are undoubtedly influenced by my personal background and biases. If a different person involved in the situation, such as a student or administrator, narrated the experience, it is possible the event would be recounted differently and their reflection and interpretation of the event would likely be different from mine.

I am strongly influenced by Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) idea of “crystallization” as a way to deconstruct traditional notions of validity” (p. 963). They believe that in moving away form the traditional idea of triangulation of data, we can move towards a “crystallization” of information. What we believe and feel about an
experience depends on our point of view. Through crystallization “we feel how there is no single truth, and we see how texts validate themselves. Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). I do not claim the narratives I present in my thesis are “the truth”, but rather my truth of my lived experiences.

Additionally, I understand the importance of connecting my experiences to other research in the fields of narrative research and critical literacy. I plan to begin each section of my thesis with a specific story recounting a specific experience I had teaching critical literacy in the Toronto Public School Board. I will then connect my experience to work by researchers working in the field of education, particularly in the areas of critical literacy, student engagement, student empowerment and multicultural education. I will conclude each section of my thesis with a reflection of how my experience either supports or questions current research on the specific topic. I hope to establish a sense of flow and continuity in my thesis by creating a link between questions or ideas I developed during the specific teaching experience, my own concept framework and the story I use at the beginning of each section of my thesis.

3.2 Possible Outcomes

As Moen’s (2006) summary of Ricoeur’s theory of narrative writing suggests, the narrative research process involves three stages (p. 6). The first stage involves “fixing” a story in text. Fixing the story in text allows the second stage to occur, where the narrative is now “autonomized” from the moment it occurred and can then be analyzed. In the third stage, the narrative is able to assume its own importance because it can be relevant to other contexts. In the fourth stage the narrative is considered an “open work” and can
be engaged with to draw upon a range of interpretations. By the conclusion of my thesis, I hope to have reached the fourth stage of narrative writing, and explore my reflections and interpretations of my teaching experiences in order to interpret whether or not critical literacy is a useful method to engage students deemed “at risk” by the school system. Moreover, I hope that by “fixing” my experiences in text I will gain some distance from them, and be able to investigate what other issues arose during my teaching experiences such as, how did teaching critical literacy have an impact on relationships between individuals in the schools where I worked? In addition, by “fixing” my experiences in text and reflecting on them from a distance, I will gain an awareness of other challenges that may be relevant to my experiences but might not yet be accessible to me.

Moen (2006) suggests that recording experiences as narratives allows teachers to make public their experiences and their interpretations of them. As Moen states “narrative research in which teachers’ voices are heard in their stories of experience offers an opportunity to present the complexity of teaching to the public” (p. 10). It is my belief that in my short career as a teacher, I have had exceptional, but complicated, experiences working with our city’s students who are deemed to be “at risk” using a framework that is in the initial stages of implementation by my school board. “Fixing” my experiences in text will provide me with the opportunity to reflect, interpret and explore. More importantly, it will “open” my experience for others to interpret and allow others to draw their own conclusions.
Chapter Four: Critical Literacy as a Tool for Inclusion

4.1 Situating the Researcher

After teaching summer school, I was assigned to teach an intensive support program for students with Behaviour and Mild Intellectual Disabilities at an inner city senior public school. Teaching an Intensive Support Program (ISP) special education class for students with academic difficulties and behaviour exceptionalities is both an incredibly rewarding and challenging experience. One of the most significant difficulties I faced teaching ISP students is overcoming the negative attitude my students often demonstrate towards school. Their opinions about school are strongly influenced by their past academic failures. To be admitted into the ISP program, students must demonstrate consistent difficulties performing at their age-appropriate grade level. Psycho-educational assessments identify our students’ academic difficulties as resulting from Mild Intellectual Disability (MID), Learning Disability (LD), or interrupted schooling. Social, emotional and/or anger management issues resulting from behaviour exceptionalities have also created additional education challenges. In addition to their learning difficulties, most of our students are diagnosed with combinations of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, (ADHD), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or conduct disorders. These combinations of academic and behavioural challenges have triggered our students to associate school with failure. These failures result in an aversion for most activities associated with education. In order to meet the needs of these challenging students there are multiple staff members allocated to the ISP program. I was assigned as a full time special education teacher. There is also a full time child and youth worker, a full time special needs assistant, and a
half-time educational assistant. Together we work to make school as successful an experience as possible, for our students,

In addition to worrying about academic failure, our students also face the challenge of being somewhat isolated within the general school population. Students in the ISP class tend to live outside of the school area, as the school board centrally assigns the program location. Students arrive in our class expressing concerns about not knowing anyone, since the school is so far from their neighborhoods and friends. In order to begin to address these feelings of isolation, we decided to experiment with integrating the students into the wider school population. The ISP program has its own classroom that acts as a “home base” for our students to start and end their day and to complete individualized lessons. The ISP class has lately, also become a place where regular students from the general school population can be sent if they demonstrate behavioral difficulties and need time to calm down. Thus, our students are used to visitors. History and Geography is team-taught with another special education class so that students gain experience learning at an appropriate academic level, in larger settings. Students are integrated with the mainstream population during lunch, art, science and physical education classes while directly supervised by ISP staff. Although students become self-conscious when their peers ask why they are in a “special” class, they enjoy interacting with the rest of the student population and look forward to the integrated classes.

The decision to integrate ISP students was made by former administration. The current principal consistently questioned this decision, often in front of the class. Our new administration envisions a future where my students remain in our allocated classroom throughout the day, and only participate in selected school wide activities. The
fact that the class is centrally assigned to the school is a point of frustration for the new principal, who makes it clear she was unaware the school had an ISP class, when she accepted the position. My new principal’s opinion of the class is consistently a point of tension between administration, staff, and increasingly, the students. Implications are made about the class being a burden. The principal has publicly stated her inability to deal with the ISP students, often in front of them! As a result, the students feel alienated in their own school and express anxiety about participating in school-wide events when they know the principal will be present. These feelings of isolation, coupled with their general aversion to academic tasks and environments, make it extremely difficult for our staff to engage our students in school activities.

4.2 Engaging Intermediate Special Education Students in Critical Literacy

After observing how incorporating critical literacy strategies helped engage my summer school students, I decided to teach my ISP literacy lessons from a critical literacy framework in hopes of increasing their levels of engagement in both academic tasks and school activities. My hope was that students would be less worried about achieving success when completing these activities as critical literacy can incorporate texts that are different from regular reading lists. Including non-traditional texts lets students learn about issues that concern them. I hoped the students’ interest in the topics would override their concern about not achieving success. Moreover, since critical literacy activities are more open-ended than traditional tasks, students would not have to worry about getting the “right” answer. I also hoped students would become more comfortable discussing and dealing with topics that affect them, which could enable them to apply
strategies used in the classroom, to wider school issues. My theory was that by providing students with a sense of success and the tools to discuss and deal with important issues, they would feel more comfortable in the school, and thus increase their levels of engagement.

### 4.3 Critical Literacy as a Tool for Inclusion

My opportunity to include critical literacy activities arose during February when the school’s annual fundraiser was held. Each February the school holds a week of 1950-60s activities, which includes watching TV shows and movies form the 1950-60s, a school dance-a-thon and a culminating community fundraising dance. This fundraising week has been problematic for some of the staff members who feel it overrides the usual February focus of Black History month. It has also been a challenge for the ISP students for multiple reasons. The class is composed of many of African-Canadian students whose parents emigrated from the Caribbean. Students (and their families) have difficulties relating to the 1950-60s theme of the fundraiser, especially since they do not see themselves reflected in any of the media resources used to promote the week. An additional challenge for my students during the 1950-60s week is that most of the activities are school-wide events. Since the ISP students do not feel welcome by the administration, they often felt uncomfortable and self-conscious participating in school-wide activities and events.

My plan was to increase the students’ engagement and participation in the fundraising week activity by linking the week to a topic that interested them, Black History Month. However, instead of focusing on Black History Month in general, my class specifically examined “Black History in the 1950-60s”. In planning the Black
History unit, I tried to incorporate critical literacy activities from each of the text-based categories that Behrman, an academic working in the field of critical literacy, identified. I hoped using a variety of critical literacy activities would pave the way for students to engage in social action and confront the issues in their learning environment that frustrated them. I utilized one particular strategy “reading from supplementary texts” by providing students with historical packages focusing on Black History during the 1950-60’s. Students read the packages together, used them to complete questions and reflections and then discussed the information they learned. As students discussed the material from the packages, they began to question why there were not any African-American people in the TV shows and movies they watched during the school-wide events. They then participated in a “reading from a resistant perspective” activity and brainstormed movies that were set in approximately the 1950-60s and included Black characters. They came up with *Glory Road*, *Remember the Titans*, and *Hairspray*. After viewing each movie, students engaged in “reading multiple texts” which led to further discussions and reflections on the movies. The students soon realized that all the movies and texts dealt with some aspect of segregation, racism and the civil rights movement. As students learned more about issues from the 1950-60’s that interested them, they became more eager to participate in school wide activities. However, they wanted to participate on their own terms. The Black History in the 1950-60’s unit was meant to only involve the ISP students, but since other students are often in the class, they also participated in different aspects of the unit. In fact, these students became integral advocates for the ISP students as they attempted to engage in their own social action and change our school community.
4.4 Challenges of Student-Driven Inclusion

Although students participated in the school-wide activities more successfully than in previous years, the 1950-60s week was not a complete success. I had hoped that by challenging their feelings of isolation through participating in school-wide activities, students would improve their relationships at school; this was not exactly the case. Since students outside the ISP program participated in the “Black History in the 1950-60s” unit, the ISP students established stronger friendships with students from the other special education class than the wider population. However, these relationships heightened the tension between the ISP students, the administration, and the regular school population, as my students’ friends felt comfortable supporting and/or advocating for them during conflicts. For example, when the principal was frustrated with an ISP student, his friend bluntly announced he thought she was “only treating him that way because he was in the ISP program.” This comment suggests that he and others felt comfortable speaking up for their ISP friends and demonstrated that many students felt that those in the ISP class were treated differently from the other students in the school.

Moreover, some teachers and the administration often misinterpreted our students’ actions. For example, on the last day of the 1950-60s week, students were encouraged to come to school dressed in period clothing in order to win house league points for their class. Having completed our class unit, our students decided not to dress-up like the actors from the school-wide theme, but instead wore costumes they saw in the movies we watched in class. This decision resulted in them not being awarded house league points because they were not wearing acceptable 1950-60s costumes. Our students tried to explain why they felt their costumes reflected aspects of this time frame.
Ultimately they were told by the administration and teacher running the 1950-60s week, that their style of clothing was not reflective of the clothing shown in the school-wide events. The students were disappointed that they were not given house league points after they had taken the time and effort to organize what they, and the ISP staff, believed were appropriate costumes.

Additionally, administration’s lack of understanding of the ISP students’ home circumstances was demonstrated at the “1950-60’s” community dance. The community dance traditionally takes place in the evening, and students are encouraged to return to school if they bring an adult “chaperone”. The dance is a fundraiser for the school, and students can purchase tickets for $5, while adult tickets are $10. Having become more engaged in the school during the week, our students wanted to attend; however the community dance presented many obstacles. Transportation had to be arranged for the students since they lived outside of the school’s area. Our staff either organized carpooling and/or provided bus tickets if students did not live near a peer whose parent/guardian could drive. The concept of being able to bring an adult “chaperone” was also a challenge for our students, as few of them come from “traditional” two parent homes. Most of our students are one of many siblings living in a single parent home, while others live with extended family members or in group homes. Since we knew even the best meaning of our parents and guardians would have trouble attending the dance, the ISP staff volunteered to work at the dance, specifically to supervise the students from the ISP class. The final challenge facing our students who wanted to attend the dance was the cost of the tickets. The majority of students’ families receive some form of financial assistance and the cost of the tickets was not in their budget. The ISP staff met
with the teacher organizing the community dance and agreed that our students would have tickets waiting for them at the door.

The night of the dance arrived and the students were excited to attend. The dance began with no issues and it was better attended than expected. The teacher who organized the event had planned to work at the door, selling tickets to families and giving our students their pre-arranged tickets. However, when she was called away to attend to another issue, the principal and a student volunteer took her place. The principal had already been informed that our students were attending, and that our staff would be supervising them, but I guess that had slipped her mind when our last student arrived. First, she told him that he wouldn’t be able to come to the dance because he did not have an adult with him. The students tried to explain that our staff was going to watch him. The principal argued that he was supposed to bring a parent because the teachers were there to run events, not to watch students. The student volunteer who played on the basketball team with our ISP student, decided (without the principal’s knowledge), to come and find someone from our staff. Meanwhile the ISP student continued to try and explain to the principal that he was unable to bring a parent with him because he did not in fact have parents. The principal moved on to tell him that he would have to buy a ticket if he wanted to attend. The student, who is in our class for anger management issues, began to feel frustrated. He thought the principal was not listening to him and was embarrassed because now there was quite an audience of parents and students watching the confrontation. When the Child and Youth Worker (CYW) and I arrived at the scene, the student was angrily trying to explain that a ticket was being held for him because he did not have the money to buy one. “Why do you want everyone to know about my
life? This whole school doesn’t need to know I’m poor!” The student was now yelling at our principal. At this point the CYW and I tried to de-escalate the situation. She tried to calm the student down while I reminded the principal that the ISP staff was indeed at the dance to supervise our students, and that we had arranged for tickets to be held at the door by the teacher organizing the event. The principal informed me that if the student did not behave himself and treat her respectfully, he would be forced to leave. This event increased the tension between the administration and the ISP staff and students. We were frustrated that although we had tried to organize ahead of time for the dance to be successful, our preparations were not consistently followed. Moreover, we were disappointed because we felt our students were demonstrating the critical literacy philosophy of taking action to create social change by attempting to make school events inclusive and accessible for everyone. However, their attempts were not as successful as they had hoped.

4.5 Analysis

The Role of Identity

The theme of identity emerges within my narrative. I believe the ISP students did not see their identities reflected in the school’s 1950s-60s unit until they were introduced to new material about those decades. According to Smith (2006), “identity is never a stand alone phenomenon; it is always constructed through the scaffolding of Others” (p. 31). Smith (2006) points out that we live in a society of “insiders” and “outsiders” that is maintained through the dominant group’s control over who can join (p. xxv). His (2006) summary of Girard’s idea suggests that the “demonization of others is constructed through a dynamic of scapegoating through which others are consigned to take the blame
for my own insufficiencies” (p. xxv). Human civilization, unfortunately, has a strong history of identifying and persecuting those who do not conform to the expectations set by the dominant group. Demonizing the “other” fueled most notorious events in recent human history, the Holocaust, Segregation in the American South, Albanian and Rwandan genocides, and South African Apartheid. In Smith’s book *Trying to teach in a season of great untruth: Globalization, empire and the crisis of pedagogy*, he asserts that mistreatment or “othering” of those who are not part of the dominant culture occurs in our school system. He explains that students who do not, or cannot, conform to society’s expectations are viewed as problematic. Smith refers to this mentality as “badAppleism” (p. xxv).

Smith’s (2006) book includes a case study of a young student’s dealing with “badAppleism” in the public education system. He (2006) suggests the difficulties this student and many others experience, result in part from the “zero tolerance” philosophy that exists in today’s educational system. According to Smith (2006), “zero tolerance” means, “tolerance for students’ disruptive behaviour is increasingly being defined in “zero” terms with preferential attention being given to the more behaviourally compliant, “academic challenged” students” (p. 28). Smith (2006) believes the “zero tolerance” concept is motivated by the increasing pressure of globalization on schools to produce students ready to enter the global market. Smith observes two main problems with the “zero tolerance” philosophy. The first problem is that teachers are “depriving themselves of an opportunity for their own practices to be creatively refracted through a lens of failure” (Smith, 2006, p. 29). The second concern Smith (2006) raises is that students’ academic futures can be impacted because they are viewed as problems for the
educational system to solve (p. 29). While I understand Smith’s concern about the academic success of these students, what I also find concerning is the impact that being considered a “bad apple”, has on these already vulnerable students’ sense of identity.

I believe the students I work with are representatives of the “bad apples” or “others” in the school system. In addition to having a minority background and coming from low-income families, the ISP students’ academic and behavioural challenges set them apart from their peers. I think these “othering” differences explain in part why students deemed “at risk” have so many challenges coping in a school system developed for an average student from the dominant culture. I believe these students are aware of both their own academic challenges and how others view them in the school system. Perhaps over time, their repeated failures become normalized and internalized. I worry that experiencing so many struggles prevents them from seeing themselves as having the potential necessary to achieve success. Thus, being a “good” student, or displaying interest in school, does not become incorporated as part of their identity.

Moreover, because students deemed “at risk” tend to be from minority backgrounds, their identity is shaped by different cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and media exposure than those from the dominant culture. These students do not share the same knowledge and life experiences as the majority of adults they encounter in school. These social differences may make it even more difficult for these deemed “at risk” to connect with the educators and materials they interact with because they view the world from a different perspective. I believe identity influenced the conflicts between the ISP students and the school staff during the 1950-60s week. I think the differences in identity between the staff and students made it difficult for the school as a whole, to participate
successfully in the unit. Moreover, I question if the fact that the ISP students, who are already deemed “at risk”, affected how the involved staff dealt with the conflicts as the students already had the identity of “bad apples” in the school.

**Political and Social Climate**

Connelly and Clandinin (2000) suggest that teaching is influenced by multiple external factors, including the government, school board, standardized curriculum and school administrators. I believe the pressures from external sources have become more intense in recent years due to increasing scrutiny of the education system. Smith (2006) believes that many of the challenges facing those who work in today’s educational system result from globalization and the rise to power of many neoliberal politicians in the developed world.

According to Rogers, Mosley and Folkes (2009) “neoliberalism is a set of economic and social policies and processes that work to expand the free market and eliminate government expansion of social programs” (p. 127). The rise of neoliberal politics is strongly associated with the Regan Presidency in the United States and the Thatcher era in the United Kingdom. Researchers in both these countries have raised concerns about the impact of these policies on their educational systems. Rogers and his colleagues (Rogers, et al, p. 2009) are involved in different aspects of the American education system and believe that neoliberal-influenced policies “result in the diminishment of public and democratically governed spaces while increasing social inequalities” (p. 127). British researchers have also observed the relationship between neoliberal policies and inequality. For example, Beckmann, Cooper and Hill (2009) assert that in England “these changes have made the provision of education services more
unequal and selective, intensifying ‘racial’, ‘gendered’ and class-based hierarchies as a consequence” (p. 311). Researchers assert that neoliberalism increases inequalities by encouraging public services, such as schools to adopt a more “efficient” “business model” of operation. This “business model” involves seeing students not as individuals, but as “human capital” which needs to be properly prepared for the “global work force” (Smith, 2006, p. 21). Beckmann et al (2009) assert that neoliberalization of England’s education system is “having profoundly harmful effects on the lives of individuals and society” (p. 311). This harm occurs through a variety of neoliberal influenced strategies. For example, the structures of schools have changed to create a “culture of ‘new managerialism’ in education” (Beckmann, et al, 2006, 313), which is focused more on the economics of the education “industry” than anything else. According to Beckmann et al (2006) “school principals have become increasingly focused on short-term economic objectives, failing to acknowledge the role of education in promoting a caring, cohesive, democratic society” (p. 313). Neoliberal policies have also led to the creation of new curriculums to “harmonize” student learning in order to create a globalized standard of knowledge (Smith, 2006, p. 21). This harmonized curriculum often results in a decrease in the role that local issues play in education, even though local matters have the greatest impact on students and are the issues they can relate to. Neoliberal influenced governments often favour certain sectors of education over others. For example, they tie “the financing of education to target projects such as the technolization of instruction and the privileging of science and technology subjects” (Smith, 2006, p. 84) at the expense of community-based and social justice initiatives (McCaskell, 2005, p. 3). Moreover, others including McCaskell (2005), assert that neoliberal inspired governments have introduced
policies that change both how public school boards are structured and the way they receive their funds p. (3).

Although neoliberal governments are most strongly associated with the United States and the United Kingdom, other Western governments have also been impacted by neoliberal agendas. For example, Smith (2006) argues “public education, first in Britain, then in the United States, New Zealand, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Ontario, began to fall to the logic of market rule” (p. 21). In Ontario, this “fall” occurred during Mike Harris’s terms as Premier during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mike Harris’s neoliberal influenced policies affected all of Ontario’s school boards. However Toronto, which is by far the largest board in the province, was dramatically affected. In the Greater Toronto Area, the central cities: Etobicoke, Toronto, North York, East York, York and Scarborough, were amalgamated into the city of Toronto. Prior to amalgamation each city had independent public services, including school boards. The goal of amalgamation was to merge these services. For example, the original school boards were fused to form the Toronto District School Board, the largest school board in the country. However, what remained consistent during the amalgamation process was the number of elected trustees. As McCaskell (2005), a former school board employee explains, during amalgamation “the Toronto Board used to have 22-25 trustees for the old city of Toronto. Now for the much-expanded metro, there are still 22 trustees who are responsible for areas that are as large as federal ridings” (p. 3). Changing the size of the board, without changing the number of trustees left too few board members to adequately deal with the many problems that quickly arose, in the newly formed school board. Various departments from within the old school boards, such as community support
workers, central office workers, human resources and others were let go in a bid to “improve efficiency” in the new system.

Later in his term, Harris removed even more power from local school boards when they ran into trouble creating “balanced budgets”. As Moore (2003) a reporter for the CBC explains “Ontario had passed a law forcing school boards to adopt balanced budgets” (p. 2) and boards across the province were encouraged to “close schools in order to save money and balance the books” (p. 2). When school boards were unwilling to resort to such drastic actions in order to produce a balanced budget, provincially appointed auditors were assigned by the government to solve the problem. However, creating a balanced budget was more challenging for the boards than in the past because the Harris government had also introduced a new funding formula that reduced the amount of money school boards traditionally received. According to Moore (2003), the government “stripped local boards of the power to levy taxes to fund their schools, creating a centralized system of education grants” (p. 1). Moore (2003) explains that although teacher unions demonstrated the formula “reduced the annual per-student funding by $1 250” (p. 4), the government maintained the budget was adequate. However, Moore’s (2003) investigations revealed that the actual impact was that “schools lost librarians and had to share principals. Teachers were dipping into their own pockets to finance class projects. Waiting lists grew for special education assessment” (p. 4). McCaskell warns that this formula was “extraordinarily inadequate for urban schools. There simply isn’t money to run the kinds of programs and meet the needs of Toronto’s diverse communities” (p. 3). The new funding formula remains in place today.
In addition to changing how the public school boards were funded, the Harris government also adopted the neoliberal ideal of a harmonized curriculum by creating a new elementary and secondary curriculum and set of standardized tests. The new syllabus, “The Ontario Curriculum” was introduced in 1998 and was designed to “eliminate the need for school boards to write their own expectations, and will ensure consistency in curriculum across the province” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 2). The Ontario Curriculum is a series of documents for each grade (kindergarten to grade 12) with set learning expectations that teachers across the province are required to teach.

At the same time, the government also introduced EQAO tests (Education Quality and Accountability Office tests). Although the curriculum only makes references to harmonizing academic studies across the province, EQAO overtly demonstrates the influence of neoliberal ideals and the pressures of globalization. According to their website “the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO, 2010) is an independent provincial agency funded by the Government of Ontario). The EQAO tests are administered in Grade 3 and 6, and Literacy and Numeracy skills are further tested at the secondary level. The EQAO website also states that their organization is responsible for organizing Ontario’s participation in national and international assessments. According to the organization, these competitions are important because “this information assists in setting educational priorities and is valuable for improvement planning. It also serves to measure Ontario students’ achievement against national and international benchmarks” (EQAO, 2010). This statement illustrates EQAO’s value of the neoliberal ideal of a globalized curriculum with the goal of preparing students to enter the world’s workforce. ETFO, the Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario, asserts that “over the past fifteen years, the amount of testing in our schools has increased” (ETFO,
2010) at a cost of $33 million dollars a year. The Federation claims that this money would be better spent elsewhere in the education system (ETFO, 2010). According to Smith (2006), the emphasis on standardized testing in today’s school system also results in a high emotional cost for educators. Smith suggests that teachers are frustrated because “they find themselves pressured to instruct only in terms of measurable achievement results (p. xxxvi)” and ignore issues that they feel may be more relevant to their students’ lives and experiences.

I believe both the staff and students in the middle school I taught at were strongly impacted by neoliberal influenced decisions. Although it has been years since the Harris government has been in office, the majority of policies remain in place. I think this neoliberal agenda was in part responsible for the stress-laden environment that existed during the 1950-60s unit at my school. The school’s budget had been systematically reduced each year, resulting in the cancellation of programs such as family studies and design and technology. Staff members constantly worried about their teaching assignments and extra-curricula involvement because every year more programs, such as music, inter-school sports teams, field trips and presentations are in jeopardy of being discontinued. In order to continue offering these activities, the school relies on fundraising to raise additional money to cover the costs. Although staff members have questioned the appropriateness of the 1950-60’s unit that glorifies this era by omitting information about the controversial aspects of these decades, the unit can be depended on to consistently raise money. Canceling the 1950-60s week would require other staff members to take on the responsibility for raising the thousands of dollars the unit generates. No teachers (myself included) were willing to sign up for the daunting
undertaking or raising enough money to replace the 1950-60s week. Thus, the 1950-60s week continues. However, unlike previous years the ISP students were aware that the week did not present a completely accurate view of those decades and felt confident challenging the expectations for the events. Unfortunately the staff dealt negatively with the students’ challenges, both in terms of the content of the week and their right to participate. I believe part of the reason these conflicts occurred was because of the amount of pressure on the staff to generate a profit in order to overcome the budget shortfall that resulted from the neoliberal- influenced funding formula that still remains in effect.

4.6 Reflections

The experience of being a new teacher is overwhelming. I did not have the time or knowledge to constructively reflect on this experience when it was occurring. Now, looking back as a more experienced teacher and benefiting from my course work at OISE, I believe there are many things that could have been changed to make the 1950’s-60s week more successful for both the staff and students.

I believe the students’ participation in our extended 1950s-60s unit demonstrated that critical literacy could be used successfully to engage students. I believe our extended 1950-60s unit was effective because of the extra materials we presented, and the ways we incorporated them spoke to the students’ identities as minorities in the dominant culture. Based on the students’ comments while watching the movies (*Glory Road*, Remember the Titans, and Hairspray) and their responses afterwards, they felt a connection between themselves and the characters in the movies. The students were able to relate to our movies easily because our movies featured characters from different racial and cultural
backgrounds. This relationship was demonstrated when the students asked us why the school did not show movies with “more people like them”. The students were also able to relate to the movie because they saw a connection between their personal struggles and the struggles of the characters. In both cases these struggles revolved around the idea of being an “outsider”. The students felt like outsiders in the school and were uncomfortable participating in school-wide events while in the movie, the characters were struggling to overcome obstacles created by the dominant society. The ISP staff also encouraged the students to think about how the characters in the movies were able to successfully achieve their goals. I think the students’ sense of identity began to shift slightly during the unit. While still feeling hesitant about engaging in the school, they began to contemplate if there were ways they could participate in activities. We supported the students’ discussions about how they could succeed at reaching the class’s goal of participating in school wide events. We, like the students in our class, viewed the situation optimistically and focused on how we could succeed, not on the struggles we might face on the way to success. I did not predict the impact that the ISP students’ engagement in the 1950’s-60’s would have on the rest of the school, particularly on the staff organizing the event and the administration. When I decided to introduce new material about the 1950’s-60’s era, I did not have a thorough understanding of identity, and how much influence this concept would have on how individuals act and respond to events. I did not realize the potential for conflicts to emerge between the ISP students and the staff members organizing the events. I did not realize the two groups’ identities were so different that they could result in the groups seeing the same events from completely different viewpoints.
In retrospect, the unit we developed to extend the school-wide activities had the potential to explore the challenges of being an activist and the difficulties of standing up for what you believe in. In each of the movies and texts, characters dealt with negative consequences when others were unhappy about their attempts to change the status quo. For example, in Glory Road the basketball team’s hotel rooms are vandalized when the team wants to start the first all African-American line up in a championship college basketball game. While the class discussed this event, we as a staff approached it from the viewpoint that it was unjust that the basketball players were treated this way. We did not explore the event from the more realistic angle of how society responds to attempts to take action against prejudices and create change. Although we did not know how the staff was going to respond to the ISP students’ attempts to participate in events, I believe we should have supported their newly found identities as activists and more effectively prepared them for potential negative outcomes. Looking back, I should have prompted the students to think about possible ways to address the events that later took place. For example what would they do/say if the teacher did not like their costume? What if we were not at the door when they arrived at the dance? In retrospect, we should have prepared the students for more than just success.

On the other hand, I should have also explained to the staff what our class was hoping to accomplish. When I joining this staff, I found that some members were very intimidating by working with ISP students. They had decades of extensive teaching experience and had been at this specific school for many years. I believe this group of teachers had good intentions behind their creation of the 1950-60’s week: raising money to support school programs. However, I am not sure they understood the needs and
interests of all the students in the school. Moreover, they certainly believed that no one with less teaching experience should ever question how the school was traditionally run.

For example, a few of the newer staff questioned whether a 1950-60’s unit (focusing on Elvis, Rock and Roll, and ice cream floats) was relevant to the community we worked in? We were told that it had raised a great deal of needed money in the past. That was the end of any discussion. The unit was running with no changes. I think that my being apprehensive, as a new teacher, about challenging the teachers’ ideas and opinions, influenced many of the decisions I made. In retrospect, I at the very least could have sent an email explaining that my class was watching and reading additional material about these decades and I was encouraging them to actively participate in the events. Perhaps the staff would be more understanding of my students’ costumes if they knew how much time they had spent learning about this era and how much interest they developed in what was popular during these decades. I believe the staff responded poorly to the student’s costumes because they were used to students wearing the same Elvis inspired costume every year, and did not remember that other styles were also popular during the 1950-60s.

I believe that the ISP students were known to be problem students or “bad apples” and that their costumes were just another example of them being “difficult”. I also could have also sent an email on the day of the community dance reminding the staff and administrator that the ISP students who couldn’t afford to purchase tickets would have pre-arranged admittance. I think the staff and administration were so focused on the need for the event to make money they forgot the dance was also about student and community participation. They were reluctant to admit the student who did not have the money to
pay because from their perspective, the only point for the event was to raise funds.

While for the students, the point of the event was to participate in a community event.

What I learned from living this experience, fixing it in writing, and analyzing the narrative, is that these students who are deemed “at risk” have more potential and capability than is often thought. With support, the students in the ISP class were able to participate in school wide events, but more importantly they were able to challenge the school’s traditions to make the events of the 1950-60’s week more relevant to their lives. However, I also learned that not all teachers are necessarily concerned with the needs of all the students in the school. In some cases, some teachers can be quick to judge students as being “difficult”, or just see them as “bad apples”. But most importantly, I learned that for change to be successful, both staff and students need intensive preparation, preparation that I did include in the ISP class’s extended 1950-60’s unit but did not include in my dealings with all staff and administration.
Chapter 5: Critical Literacy as Tool for Media Analysis

5.1 Situating the Researcher:

Due to the “inner city” status of the middle school I worked at, it had been granted funding and training to form a “Go Girls” group. By the time I arrived at the school, the school’s special education staff had taken over the program and this group became one of my responsibilities. The group met during term two and focused on topics and issues of the girls’ choice. We used incentives such as snacks and pizza lunches to originally encourage girls to attend the program, but after a few weeks the “Go Girls” became quite popular with all the female students. The main goals of the program were to encourage the development of positive social skills, self-confidence and self-esteem. “Go Girls” wrapped up at the end of the term with a “Girls’ Night” program, organized by community groups and the schools’ guidance counselor.

Shortly afterwards, the special education staff was approached by a group of boys from the basketball team we coached. The boys felt it was unfair that we did not have a boys’ group at the school, and that “only the girls got to do fun things”. The majority of the boys who approached us were from the school’s special education classes, where we were focusing on developing self-advocacy skills. We were quite impressed the boys had taken it upon themselves to raise the issue of forming a Boys’ Group on their own. We tried to see if we could find any male teachers willing to organize the group, but no one was interested. I, and the rest of the special education staff, decided to take on the challenge of organizing this group, since we already knew most of the boys who wanted to join the group.
5.2 Sponsoring a Student-Focused Organization for Boys Deemed “At Risk”

We met with the boys to discuss what their expectations for the group were. It was decided that like the girls’ group, we would meet once a week at lunch. Instead of providing “incentives”, we would hold the meetings in the family studies classroom and make healthy lunches. The boys suggested topics they wanted to discuss and learn more about, such as healthy food, high school, media and gang involvement. We thought the boys’ suggestions were quite appropriate. We decided we would address their ideas and also include topics we believed would also be relevant to these students. Since the group would be working on developing positive social skills, we placed a post on the staff e-mail asking teachers to encourage any boys who could use support in developing social skills to attend. The result was that the boys who expressed interest in the group were widely considered to be the “trouble makers” of the school. The members of the group were deemed “at risk” by the school board for multiple reasons: the neighbourhoods they lived in, their socio-economical and cultural background, and special education exceptionalities. Additionally, many of the boys were known to be involved in gang activity and some were already involved in the criminal system. We decided that our goal for the boys’ group was to build self-confidence and increase awareness about issues affecting their lives, so they would make more positive choices.

After we had a few successful meetings, we were approached by the administrator and informed she was concerned about the “rowdiness” of individual boys in the group and anxious about having them all together at one time. We explained that, between the staff members involved in sponsoring the group, we taught all the students in question
and dealt with their rowdiness on a daily basis. We also reminded her that we were used to dealing with this group of students because we had already successfully coached them on the boys’ basketball team. The administrator then raised further concerns. She and other “unnamed” members of the staff felt it was unfair that these “problem” students were getting rewards, such as healthy lunches and viewing media clips, when they caused so much “trouble” within the school. At this point, we explained that from our point of view, the aim of the program was to help these “troubled” students begin to make positive choices within the school setting, as well as within the larger community. We also reminded her that the group was open to any boy who was interested. Moreover, since we asked teachers who they felt would benefit from joining the group, all the staff members had input into who would participate in the group.

At the next meeting, after our discussion with the administration, we had planned to make personal pizzas. We had booked the family studies classroom in advance using the required office sign-out system. However, when the lunch period arrived, we found that a community-based group had already set up in the family studies room. When they had arrived, they had been told by the administrator to set up in that room, although when we checked in the sign-out binder, there were other spaces available for them in the school. During the next few weeks, the family studies room was given away multiple times, even though we had signed up in advance to use it. This made it much harder for us to “reward” the boys by making healthy lunches.

We soon decided that in order to avoid the “double booking” issue, we would hold the meetings in one of the special education classrooms. However, we continued to have difficulties. The school lunch period was organized so that all the students eat lunch
in the cafeteria, unless they are meeting with a teacher. To ensure staff members were aware of the meetings, we posted the dates and times of the Boys’ Group meetings on the staff e-mail server and had announcements made on each morning that the group was meeting. However, even with this proactive planning, the administration repetitively stopped and questioned the boys about where they were going. During one lunch hour, my co-worker and I turned into a stairwell and overheard the administrator quizzing one of the boys about “why would he want to spend so much time with a bunch of teachers?” Although both the staff and students were frustrated with what we perceived to be deliberate challenges to the boys’ group, we continued to meet once a week.

5.3 Critical Literacy as a Tool for Media Analysis

We incorporated media awareness into the Boys’ Group because we felt we could use media to target the other issues we wanted to discuss, such as racism, peer pressure and gang involvement, through our specific choices of media. Also, the boys enjoyed watching or listening to media samples (movies, sports media, music and music videos), and participated actively in the discussions. One of the teachers had a background in anti-oppressive education and, with my developing knowledge of critical literacy, we were able to engage the boys in meaningful discussions about both the explicit and implicit messages being conveyed in the media samples. The students began to suggest media sources and, once screened to ensure they were appropriate, the group often viewed and discussed media provided by one of the members. During this school year we had learned that media studies would be gaining increased emphasis in the Ontario Curriculum. We hoped that exposing students to media analysis during our
meetings would not only provide a topic to discuss, but would also help them in their English class, since the entire staff was focusing on media during this term.

During the year, the school demographic had changed slightly because the Regent Park public housing complex was beginning to be demolished and families were being relocated to other neighbourhoods throughout the city. A few of our students were directly affected by this and had transferred to our school when their family was relocated. Moreover, many other boys had friends and family who had been moved because of the demolishment. The message from the city was that Regent Park was being demolished because the buildings were too run down to justify repairing and that by rebuilding while also making the neighbourhood a “mixed income” development, the high levels of crime associated with the neighbourhood would decrease. During Boys’ Club, some of the boys found media related to the Regent Park issue and students discussed their feelings about the project. For example, they compared the official messages the city released with the messages they heard from the adults in their lives. Students were particularly focused on the aspect of the relocation, and how much choice the families had about where they would be relocated. The boys were also concerned about the impact of a “mixed income” redevelopment. They seemed to realize for the first time that they, or their family members, were different from many of the people living in the city because they lived in subsidized public housing complexes. They began to understand that they were viewed as “poor” and because of this, they were “different” than the politicians who had the ultimate decisions about public housing in the city. One of the students even had a music video his cousin’s hip-hop group “Point Blank” made about Regent Park and the impact of poverty on the residents. We were quite impressed
at the level of critical analysis these students, who were deemed “at risk” by the school system, were able to engage in when they felt connected to the topic being discussed. We were also impressed by how engaged the students seemed to be, as they would stop by the classroom at the end of the day to continue discussions from our lunchtime meeting or share new media they had found since the last time the group met.

5.4 Challenges of Student-Driven Media Analysis

Perhaps due to their experiences analyzing media during our meetings, the boys began to participate in the media lessons being taught in their English classes. Unfortunately, the other teachers in the school did not receive the boys ‘critical analysis’ of the media shown in their classes positively. During Boys’ Club, if students made what could be seen as a controversial comment such as “the city government discriminates against the poor people” they were asked to support their comment with information from the media we analyzed. In their English classes, several teachers were not supportive of what would be considered critical analysis in our Boys’ Group. This was especially true if the students criticized material that the teacher felt was unbiased. For example, one teacher purchased the Freedom Writers lesson and activity guide thinking that the themes of urban neighbourhoods, poverty and gang involvement would resonate with the students in our inner city school. Freedom Writers was written by a teacher working in an inner city school in the United States and was the basis for a Hollywood movie. The teaching guide is based on the activities demonstrated in the Freedom Writers novel and movie. She hoped the students in her class would be motivated to overcome their challenges and succeed in school, just as the “at risk” students in the movie were portrayed as successful. The teacher expressed her excitement over finding the guide and
offered to share the resource with interested staff members. A few other teachers agreed to join in the unit, as they felt the guide and accompanying movie were very inspirational. Unfortunately, some of the students, particularly the students involved in the Boys’ Group, did not perceive the *Freedom Writers* activities and movie as inspirational.

The unit began with students participating in activities around issues of gang involvement and making positive choices. From the students’ comments they seemed to enjoy participating in the initial *Freedom Writers* activities. The problems began to occur when students watched and responded to media clips in class. Some of the boys responded in ways their teachers had not expected. As opposed to seeing the movie as a source of inspiration, the boys were disappointed because they felt *Freedom Writers* perpetuated stereotypes about visual minorities, especially about those living in inner city neighbourhoods. Or, in their own words, the students did not like how the movie showed “people like us”. The students believed the movie displayed all the stereotypes typically shown about minorities in the media, and questioned why none of the characters challenged these ideas. As the students were shown movie clips throughout successive lessons, they became increasingly frustrated that characters “needed the white lady to come save them from the ghetto”. The boys also became annoyed that the educators of colour in the movie displayed skepticism that the fictionalized students could succeed. They were also disappointed that the movie did not include positive role models for their backgrounds.

The tension between students and the teachers escalated when the classes were assigned to write an essay about the message, or theme, of the movie. Unsurprisingly, the boys and the teachers did not agree on what that message was. The students felt they
should be able to write an essay explaining why they felt the movie was problematic.
The teachers disagreed. This conflict put the staff involved in the Boys’ Club in a
difficult situation. We had encouraged the boys to critically analyze media and, in some
ways, we were quite impressed that they had independently analyzed *The Freedom
Writers*. However, we had not realized that helping them develop critical analysis skills
would put them in conflict with their English teachers. We were torn between supporting
the students’ analysis of the characters in the movie, and supporting our colleagues who
had selected the unit with well-meant intentions.

Eventually, this conflict caught the attention of the principal, who displayed
frustration with all parties involved. The eventual outcome was that the boys could write
about an essay topic of their choice. However, they were disciplined for being
“argumentative” in class, as their arguments to support their points of view about the unit
were considered disruptive by their teachers and the administration. The Principal then
informed all the teaching staff that we were not using media appropriately, although she
did not attempt to explain how she felt it should be used more appropriately. At the next
staff meeting the administration announced that teachers were no longer allowed to show
any media to students, unless it was approved directly by the school administration.

I, and the other staff organizing the Boys’ Club, felt disappointed by this outcome.
We felt that teaching the boys critical literacy skills, such as media analysis, was an
effective means of engaging them in academic instruction. Moreover, we believed that
through this activity the students were gaining important life skills, as they were not only
engaging in learning about issues affecting them but finding ways to express their
opinions in a socially acceptable manner. We felt the students should have been able to
state their points of view in class without being labeled “disruptive. Although we did not want to be seen as in conflict with our colleagues, we wondered if the fact the students had a different point of view about the unit was more disruptive to their teachers than the boys’ actual behaviour. From our point of view, it seemed the administration did not support the students developing critical literacy skills. Instead of encouraging the continued analysis of media, any analysis became virtually impossible as it was challenging for teachers to organize the administrator’s preview of the media. This decision was extremely disappointing as we felt using critical literacy to promote media awareness had been an effective strategy to help this group of boys engage with the world around them.

5.5 Analysis:

**Neoliberalism and Education**

In my first narrative analysis, I suggested that neoliberal policies and the pressures of globalization, negatively affect the education system by reducing government funds to public schools. While reviewing my second narrative, I am struck by how these political philosophies, most typically associated with economics, can create other areas of tension in schools. According to Blumenreich (2005), the aim of a poststructural narrative is to create an “oppositional picture” rather than that of the dominant society (p. 85). However, the “picture” the boys’ group created, a picture of students deemed “at risk” engaged in academics, was not appreciated or accepted by many staff members. I think this lack of acceptance can be attributed to the impact of neoliberal policies, which strongly affected the social climate of our school. In my second narrative, I also see the development, implementation and assessment of a harmonized curriculum emerging as an
area of tension for teachers. In Chase’s (2005) “analytic lens” model of narrative analysis, she argues that narratives are socially situated and are ‘both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances’ (p. 657). I believe the lived experiences of staff members and students in the middle school where I worked are constrained by current neoliberal decisions regarding Ontario’s public services, including education.

**Standardization in the School System**

As stated in my first narrative analysis, one task Mike Harris' neoliberal-influenced government undertook was developing, implementing and assessing a standardized curriculum to harmonize Ontario’s public education system. Although the new syllabus was introduced in 1998, the curriculum is updated on an on-going basis (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 3). Students’ comprehension of the curriculum is assessed not only by their own teachers, but also provincially at Grades 3 and 6 and by secondary-level literacy and numeracy tests. These tests are created and assessed by the EQAO, which openly indicates its support for a globalized standard knowledge and the need for Ontario’s students to be internationally competitive (EQA0. 2010).

Ontario’s implementation of a standardized curriculum is in keeping with neoliberal philosophy, as neoliberal politicians are credited with the introduction of the “standards movement” (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, 203). According to Mulcahy and Irwin (2008), “the standard’s movement of today can be traced back to the 1980’s Ronald Regan presidency” (p. 204). Mulcahy and Irwin’s (2008) article, “The Standardized Curriculum and Delocalization: Obstacles to Critical Pedagogy”, maps the development of educational standards from the industrial revolution re-structuring of factories into a
“hierarchical bureaucracy” (p. 204). Mulcahy and Irwin (2008) assert that during the 1980’s, there was a rebellion against the liberalist policies that had dominated American society for the previous two decades (p. 204). Generally, the swing back to conservatism was associated with “a returned allegiance to big business and standardization” (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, p. 205). Education was specifically impacted through the standards movement as “a reaction to the liberal 1960’s-1970’s child centered programs (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, p. 204).

The valuing of standards beginning in the 1980’s continues to dominate education today, as is evidenced by current North American education initiatives, including the American No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. The NCLB legislation was implemented nationwide by the Bush administration in 2002 with the goal of improving academic success of “disadvantaged” students on mandatory statewide tests (US Department of Education, 2001). The neoliberal influence on the NCLB legislation is demonstrated by the document’s strong emphasis on standardized curriculum and assessment. The NCLB authors believe that “improving, strengthening accountability, teaching and learning by using State assessment systems (US Department of Education, 2001)” is possible. In fact, the NCLB document suggests that these State assessment systems are “designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging state academic achievement and content standards and increasing achievement overall, but especially for the disadvantaged” (US Department of Education, 2001). This philosophy suggests the authors of the NCLB believe the best way to improve the academic success of students deemed “disadvantaged”, or as we would say in Canada “at risk”, is through implementing and emphasizing standardized curriculum and assessment.
Challenges of Implementing a Standardized Curriculum

What I find most interesting about the NCLB legislation is that those attributed as most influential to the policy’s development, including Margaret Spellings and David Dunn, are not educators, but lobbyists and/or other politically motivated individuals (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, p. 203). Mulcahy and Irwin (2008) are quick to point out that although the Texas Association of School Boards employed Dunn, he worked as a financial lobbyist (p. 203). This is quite similar to the situation in Ontario, and the development of our province-wide harmonized curriculum. The curriculum was developed and is updated under the supervision of the Minister of Education. However, more often than not, the Education Minister does not have any first hand experience, or qualifications in the field of education. For example, the current Minister of Education, Leona Dombrowsky, is not qualified as an educator in Ontario. Politically, Dombrowsky is most known for her previous cabinet positions as Minister of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Although Dombrowsky entered politics as a school board trustee, she served on a rural Catholic board, far removed from the issues facing Southern Ontario’s complicated urban schools. However, Minister Dombrowsky has not let her limited first hand knowledge of the education system prevent her from embracing neoliberal beliefs regarding harmonized curriculums and standardized assessment. One of the reasons she was appointed to this position was her active role in the Education, Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Smith (2006) raises the point that “planners showing little interest in what teaching is in its own right and with scant concern for the effects of new plans on the quality of life for either
teachers or students” (p. 25) is becoming a common concern in our schools. Across North America harmonized curriculums are being developed, implemented and assessed by politically motivated individuals, who often have never spent time inside a classroom, is proving problematic.

The implementation of harmonized curriculum and assessment has been associated with decreased morale among educators. Unions, such as the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) (2005), assert that teachers feel “overworked, and report that work-related demands have had a negative impact on their personal lives and on their health” (ETFO, Advice for Members, 2005). This is due in part to the requirement that teachers’ need to complete additional tasks in order to support the new harmonized system. The EFTO website (ETFO, Advice for Members, 2005) explains how “new Ministry and board initiatives are being downloaded on teachers at a fast rate. EQAO, CASI, DRA, web-based reporting are just a few of the initiatives designed to improve student learning.” (ETFO, Advice for Members, 2005). Frustration with the current conditions in education has been documented across North America. For example, Mulcahy’s (2008) experiences working in the New York school board demonstrated to him that teachers are dealing with “an array of difficulties that includes overcrowded classrooms, under-funded schools, and an increasingly restrictive set of curricula” (p. 206). Moreover, due to standardized assessment teachers are now under increased stress, as they feel answerable to explain why students do not achieve expected levels on these tests (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, p. 206). The impact of these new demands on teachers’ job satisfaction has been explored by various teachers’ organizations. The American National Educator’s Association asserts that 20% of first
year teachers leave the profession, and after 5 years 50% of new teachers have resigned. (National Educator’s Association, 2010). This finding is comparable to Matthew, Rodrigue and Brand’s (2005) Ontario-based research, which asserts, “across the province there is concern about the number of new teachers leaving the profession. The attrition rate is estimated to be 30%” (p. 8). This research demonstrates that teaching in North American has become a stress-fueled occupation.

**Standardization and the Impact of Curriculum Resources**

The standardizing of the provincial curriculum has expanded markets for government sponsored and commercially produced “curriculum resources”. Given the amount of workplace stress, it is easy to understand why teachers will use available assistance in planning, instructing and assessing the curriculum content. However, the economic and philosophical implications of this curriculum cannot go unquestioned. For example, some curriculum resources are advertised by school boards as “free”, such as the EQAO information and practice documents, and the Ministry produced Curriculum Exemplars. Teachers across the province are encouraged to download and use them to ensure they are adequately covering curriculum content and appropriately preparing their students for success. Of course, these resources are not actually free, but are produced using government funds.

Curriculum resources have become an essential part of schools. School boards create lists of endorsed curriculum resources including: textbooks, assessments, kits, reading sets, computer programs, manipulative packages; and, educational DVDs. However, the need to use the approved resources can pose economical challenges for schools. For example, the middle school I worked at had to purchase new textbooks
when ours became outdated. The committee based their selection on explicit links made to the curriculum and not the instructional strategies and/or types of activities the textbook incorporated. What made the selected text stand out from the others was that it came with a teacher’s manual of curriculum-based lesson and unit plans. This was important to the teachers because demonstrating how they cover the curriculum is a major component of teacher evaluations. The committee selected this text, with its strong curriculum connections, even though there was not enough money to purchase complete class sets. The committee felt it was more important for the teachers to have resources based directly on the curriculum than it was for the students to have a textbook they could take home with them.

Independently purchasing additional curriculum resources, such as the *Freedom Writer*’s unit, has also become common, especially among new teachers or teachers with new teaching assignments. Cooper (2003) explains that pre-made resources are popular because “overworked teachers who may be bereft of new and creative ideas find these prepackaged curriculum aides a valuable resource” (p. 137). These resources are created to be as easy as possible to understand and as user friendly as possible. Cooper (2003) asserts that the goal is to make these products “teacher proof by providing step by step instructions, and in some cases even teacher scripts” (p. 136). Using professionally prepared resources ensures teachers are covering the curriculum content because resources are often aligned with regional curriculum content. With the introduction of many new tasks and responsibilities when harmonized curriculum is introduced, coupled with the increased pressure in regards to not only their performance, but also the
performance of their students on standardized tests, it is easy to understand why many teachers are content to use prepackaged curriculum resources.

Although these resources do have some benefits, they are not without controversy. One concern is that these resources usually focus on basic reading comprehension and generic writing skills at the expense of higher order thinking and applying knowledge to real life problems. There are also questions about the philosophy behind the development of these resources. Some researchers, such as Cooper (2003), are concerned that in addition to controlling what academic content is covered, these resources also indoctrinate students with the dominant culture’s values by encouraging the transmission of “social policies” (p. 137). Smith (2006) suggests that in the current era of globalization, people often do not feel their concerns and/or issues are being reflected in their work (p. 26). I believe this is also true of students. Their personal interests, experiences and challenges are not taken into account during the design of generic curriculum units. In today’s complicated classrooms, it seems unlikely that a pre-designed resource can effectively meet the needs of all the students in the classroom. Cooper questions whether “such generalized approaches to issues thought to affect children, really do help them and their teachers make sense of the complexity of the life world in which they are already embedded” (p. 137). Moreover, Smith (2006) points out that “effective teaching depends most fundamentally on human relationships” (p. 26).

Generic curriculum resources are depersonalized and are created for any teacher to use with any class. They are not conducive to developing relationships between the staff and students.

**Critical Literacy in Public Education Systems**
Although curriculum resources are readily available, some educators explore other methods of covering the curriculum if they feel their students are not benefiting from generic resources. Many educators, particularly those working in the area of critical literacy, believe that students learn best when working in conjunction with a teacher to address the issues that affect their lives. For example, I decided to include critical literacy in my classroom when I saw my students were not engaged, or making connections, with the resources purchased by the school. The other staff members and I, who were involved with the Boys’ Group, decided to incorporate critical media analysis as a strategy to engage students in academic discussion. We believed that using this strategy would facilitate an analysis of the issues affecting the boys’ lives and thus help them engage with the material.

According to Luke (2000), the critical literacy movement primarily began in the Australian public education system (p. 1). During the 1980’s, Australia moved in a different direction than the standards focused North American schools. Through the nation-wide implementation of the “Early Literacy In Service Program”, Australia continued to develop a “personal growth model” of literacy education (Luke, 2000, p. 4). Luke (2000) asserts that this model was in part “based on the belief among critical educators that reader response and personal voice approaches to literature study in the secondary school had emancipatory power for individual and socioeconomic groups” (p. 4). Then, the Australian education system was critiqued by feminist, post-colonial studies, sociological theory. Educators began to take interest in ideas by scholars such as Friere, advocating that education should not be fixated on teaching standard sets of information but rather on developing students’ abilities to question because “only an
education of question can trigger, motivate, and reinforce curiosity” (Freire, 1998, p. 31). According to Luke (2005), the focus on strategies such as “whole language, process writing and personal growth was subjected to rigorous critique in the early 1990’s” and this critique was “transformed into practical agendas and materials for teachers across Australia” (p. 5). Luke (2000) suggests this was the beginning of a critical literacy strategy that hoped to “generate vigorous classroom debates over what texts attempt to do, which ideologies are represented, and how students can used them in different social fields” (p. 5). By the time critical literacy was being recognized internationally, it was defined by the Australian school system as “teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students towards active ‘position takings’ with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live” (Luke, 2000, p. 7).

When critical literacy emerged as a legitimate teaching strategy, concerns were raised about how it could be implemented in standards-focused schools, such as those in North American. Australian educators already discovered that critical literacy teaches a very different literacy than that which is assessed by standardized tests. Luke (2000) states that “how a state educational system evaluates and gauges approaches that ask to be judged on their realization of social transformation and change is, obviously, way beyond available regimes of surveillance and evaluation” (p. 14). This is a serious concern, even in Australia, as schools boards are pressured by conservative politicians to implement standardization. The impact of standardized assessment on critical literacy programs is quite problematic. Luke (2000) asserts, “standardized tests are themselves biased towards very different operational definitions of literacy” (p. 14). This is quite
challenging for North American educators who must demonstrate how they are preparing students for standardized tests such as EQAO. In fact, Luke (2000) questions, “can one move an educational project that engages with critique of the worlds of work, community life, government, media, popular and traditional cultures into the mainstream of state-mandated curriculum” (p. 15).

I believe that one can, and that many teachers are successfully implementing critical literacy in their North American classrooms. However, to do so is a demanding and complicated process. In Ontario, teachers can include critical literacy strategies in their language arts programs, as critical analysis skills are included in the provincial curriculum. However, these skills are not emphasized on standardized assessment so the decision to use critical literacy strategies as the basis for a literacy program is difficult. I believe all teachers, even those who fundamentally oppose standardized testing, want their students to achieve academic success. Even if teachers strongly believe their students will benefit from critical literacy strategies that will allow them to investigate and engage with the issues affecting their lives, it is hard to rationalize taking instructional time away from the skills which are the focus of standardized tests. This is especially the case in schools where there is strong administrative and/or community pressure on students to achieve on the provincial standardized tests.

Another challenge of teaching a unit based on critical literacy is that it takes more time, effort and preparation than using a commercially developed unit. Teachers must design the unit and demonstrate connections with the provincial curriculum. To do this, teachers must have a strong knowledge of not only the curriculum, but also of critical literacy strategies and how they can effectively be implemented in classrooms. However,
one of the largest differences between Australia and Ontario is how and when teachers are exposed to critical literacy as an effective teaching strategy.

In Australia, educators are exposed to critical literacy as part of their pre-service teaching programs. For example, Luke (2003) asserts that in Australia, federally funded reports “advocated the inclusion of functional grammar and genre study, critical literacy and text analysis, second language acquisition models and Vygotskian psychology as core components for teacher education” (p. 13). This is not the case in Ontario. Teachers who learn about critical literacy are primarily those who continue on to post-graduate work, take additional qualification courses, or are active within the various teachers’ unions. All of those institutions and organizations advocate for the increased role of social justice in education, and encourage the use of critical literacy as a method of accomplishing this goal. I know it is possible for teachers to successfully create, implement and assess these units as all my classmates at OISE incorporated critical literacy into their teaching during our “Critical Literacy in Action” course. However, new teachers, teachers with new assignments, and those overwhelmed with the always increasing workloads in the public education system often have little or no knowledge of critical literacy, and do not understand what their colleagues are trying to accomplish when using this strategy in their classrooms.

Another challenge facing teachers hoping to use critical literacy is the government’s and school boards’ confusing treatment of this strategy. While mentioned in the Ontario Language Arts curriculum, it does not have a prominent role; it is almost as if critical literacy was added as a token to appease those involved in post-graduate education and union activities. Unlike other literacy strategies, such as balanced literacy
or reading comprehension programs, critical literacy is rarely addressed as an effective strategy in its own right. In my experience, critical literacy is often glossed over during workshops focusing on “questioning”. In the Toronto District School Board I have also seen critical literacy included in workshops organized by the Equity Department, where it is presented as a strategy to teach social justice issues. However, my experiences at these workshops were that critical literacy was quickly mentioned as one possible strategy to teach perspective. Why people develop different perspectives or how these multiple perspectives impact our society is not questioned. The potential of critical literacy to help students understand the issues affecting their lives and how they can take action to create change is not explored. Recently, I have heard from teachers working with board literacy consultants that new prescriptive curriculum resources that include tasks based on critical literacy strategies are being developed. The idea is that these resources have specifically been developed to use in model schools and with other students deemed “at risk”.

Although I have not seen these resources, from the conversations I have had with teachers implementing them on a “trial” basis, they require that students read text(s) about specific social issues and complete questions and tasks that include identifying perspective. Ironically, in an uncritical literacy practice, it is proposed that all students will read the same text and complete the same tasks, regardless of their gender, background, neighbourhood or interests. Teachers, who often know no better, are told that this unit is “critical literacy”.

From my perspective, the practices I have seen and heard about in the public school system do not present an accurate presentation of the critical literacy strategies I learned through postgraduate studies and union activities. I believe the “critical literacy”
presented by the school board is representative of the strategies Luke (2000) warns about in his article “Critical Literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint”. Luke (2000) cautions that, like other strategies with the potential to develop dissent and/or critique society, critical literacy can meet with “repressive tolerance” (p. 13). Summarizing Marcuse, Luke (2000) suggests many modern governments deal with these strategies by tolerating them. He explains that often governments decide, “to tolerate it, and therefore appropriate it, to mainstream it and thereby steal away its potential threat to existing economic and social relations” (13). According to Luke (2000), this response can be applied to critical literacy, and he questions whether attempts to implement critical literacy into the public education systems has “watered down its potential for consequential social analysis and action” (13). I believe this watering down is what I have observed while working for a public school board. Critical literacy, even the name critical literacy, is being appropriated by school boards through the process of taking a small component of the strategy, for example determining perspective, and representing it to teachers who are uneducated about this topic, as being “critical literacy”. This makes it more difficult for those trying to implement authentic critical literacy strategies as the basis of their language arts program, since their colleagues and administrators often do not share their definition, understanding, or values of critical literacy.

5.6 Reflections

I think the conflict that developed between the students from the boys’ club and their Language Arts teachers was partly the result of the teachers’ dependence on curriculum resources, such as the Freedom Writers unit plan. These resources have become increasingly popular since Ontario implemented a harmonized curriculum.
Moreover, I think the conflict was resolved in an unsatisfactory manner because the teachers and administrators did not have the same knowledge and experience using critical literacy strategies, such as critical media analysis, as those of us who were working with the Boys’ Group. In retrospect, I think I did not act to help resolve this conflict because I was unable to see the situation from any other perspective than my own. Not seeing this situation from other people’s perspectives caused me to lose an opportunity to advocate for alternatives to curriculum resources, and the benefits of using other strategies such as critical media analysis. Those of us working with students in the Boys’ Group felt the situation was very frustrating because it seemed our efforts with the students, and the boys’ own achievements, were not being appreciated. I felt my colleagues and administrator did not respect or value what we accomplished and did not recognize the students were successfully engaging in academic discussions about the issues affecting their lives. While living the situation, I was so caught up in my own frustration I failed to realize that other staff members might not understand that the critical media analysis skills the boys developed were valid forms of learning.

I think part of the reason I was unable to see the conflict from any other perspective was that, like the Language Arts teachers, I was also a new teacher and under a lot of workplace stress. I agree with the research that suggests stress levels are very high among new teachers, or teachers with new assignments. As a new teacher, I felt under pressure to perform and to ensure that the students did well, and, I am sure my colleagues felt the same way. What I failed to take in to account however, is that everyone reacts to stress differently. I felt the most effective way for me to deal with the pressures of teaching was to continue my own education by enrolling in postgraduate
studies and participating in union activities. I was fortunate that through these courses, I learned new strategies that engaged my students, such as critical literacy. However, there are many reasons why teachers cannot seek additional education at the start of their careers. I believe that many teachers turn to curriculum resources because they know they have to be able to demonstrate they are covering the curriculum and do not know there are alternatives. I think that as time goes on, these teachers become so used to using curriculum resources they become dependent on them. They cannot imagine how they could cover the entire provincial curriculum without using these pre-made resources. I believe that it is not that these are “bad” teachers, they are just so busy dealing with the other challenges of being a teacher, that they never stop to consider what it is they are actually teaching. They do not take into account their students’ own interests and experiences. They simply teach what is in the resources without questioning. This reliance on these resources and the acceptance of the ideas and messages presented in the resources is what I believed caused the conflict between the teachers and the boys from the Boys’ Group.

I think the teachers using the *Freedom Writers* Unit Plan were so used to relying on curriculum resources they did not realize the document they were using was written from a specific point of view, and might not be interpreted the same way by everyone. I don’t think the teachers realized their unit’s content could be questioned, or that there might be other answers to the questions they assigned, other than the “right” answers detailed in their resources. I believe the teachers selected the *Freedom Writers* unit with good intentions; they thought the students would enjoy the movie and be inspired by the characters success at an urban school similar to their own. I think the Language Arts
teacher just did not consider that the students might have different opinions about the movie and find it to be more stereotypical than inspirational. So, when this issue developed, the teachers did not know how to resolve it in an effective manner. Although I was not present in the classrooms when this specific conflict occurred, I am aware that the teacher’s and students’ accounts of the events were quite different. The students felt that they had stated their point of view about the media and activities they watched in class using the strategies they learned in Boys’ Group. The teachers felt the students were being difficult and acting defiantly. My personal opinion is that the truth of the situation was probably somewhere in the middle. Perhaps the students were expressing their point of view, but doing so in a manner that was not appropriate for a school environment.

Similar to the issue raised in my first narrative, we had not prepared the students from Boys’ Group for negative responses to their newly developed critical literacy skills. Unlike the experience described in my first narrative, where the ISP students were encouraged to integrate and interact with other members of the school community, we did not realize the boys would be applying the skills they learned in the Boys’ Group to other situations. In fact, we did not even realize this was a possibility, as we had not expected the students to gain a deep enough understanding of critical media analysis skills to be able to make this transition. So, although on one hand, the Boys’ Group staff was happy that the students applied the skills we scaffolded in the Group to other situations, we were again unprepared for the fallout that critical literacy strategies created in the school. When the conflict occurred in the classroom, and was eventually brought to the
administration’s attention, we were unprepared to address and advocate successfully for both the boys and the benefit of critical literacy skills.

Part of the challenge with this issue is that we were reluctant to openly confront the other teachers and administrator because we did not want to be seen as criticizing them. In this climate of neoliberal-influenced policies, we understood the amount of pressure the other staff members are under. Moreover, we knew that there are serious impacts of questioning a co-workers’ teaching and that unions often become involved, so we were reluctant to be responsible for creating an even more stressful climate at the school. While myself and the other staff members involved in the Boys’ Group believed in the potential benefits of using critical literacy strategies and were thrilled with how engaged the boys had become in critical media analysis, we were unsure of how involved we wanted to be in the conflict between the students, teachers and administrators. In retrospect however, we should have taken on more of a role in this issue, as we had some responsibility for the situation and were very unhappy with the principal’s decision to ban the use of unscreened media in the school.

When reflecting back on the situation, I realize now that I could have used the same strategy that helped me as a new teacher continuing to learn about education, in order to facilitate discussion about the benefits of critical literacy and the importance of the boys’ points of view. Since I was aware that the other teachers were not involved in postsecondary studies or additional qualification courses, and that the principal had not engaged in these activities recently, I could have shared the information I learned in my courses with them. Out of respect for everyone’s level of stress about the situation, I could have done this in a very non-confrontational manner. Thinking about it now, I
simply could have found appropriate articles about the issues we were dealing with and left them in the teachers’ and administrator’s mailboxes.

In the process of writing my thesis I have found many articles that would have been relevant to the situation. I could have shared articles such as Rogers, Mosley, and Folkes (2009) article “Standing Up to Neoliberalism through Critical Literacy Education” to point out the importance and usefulness of this strategy in today’s public schools. Providing copies of Cooper’s (2003) “When Curriculum Becomes a Stranger”, would bring attention to the problems with generic curriculum kits, and Yosso and Garcia’s (2008) “Cause Its Not Just Me: Walkout’s history lessons challenge Hollywood’s urban school formula” which questions the appropriateness of using films set in inner-city school, including the movie Freedom Writers, could have been helpful. This would have allowed me to feel that I was advocating for critical literacy, a strategy that allowed the students in the Boys’ Group to engage in academic discussion. Moreover, the Yosso and Garcia’s article would lend support to the issues of representation and stereotypes the boys raised about the Freedom Writer’s unit. I would like to believe that the way the Language Arts teachers reacted to the boys’ opinions, and the way the administrator dealt with the situation were strongly influenced by their unawareness of critical literacy and its potential to engage the students deemed “at risk” in our school. In reflection, I should have made efforts to increase the staff’s awareness of critical literacy, before conflicts occurred.
Chapter 6: Critical Literacy as a Tool for Social Change

6.1 Situating the Researcher

After working at a middle school for a few years, I decided to try something different. I accepted a job teaching a primary behaviour ISP class in a “model school” for inner city neighbourhoods. The Model School program was initiated by the TDSB to help address the impact of poverty and low socio-economic status on children. Model Schools provide direct increased financial funding and staff support to the selected schools, and indirect support to the neighbouring public schools in the geographical “cluster” of schools. In addition to addressing issues of poverty, the Model School program also aims to develop a sense of community and create spaces for the community to use, such as parenting centres, community gardens and community dinners. It quickly became clear to me that although the increased support from the Model School program benefits the students, it can be a source of stress for staff. In order to retain the increased funding there is far more evaluation and public scrutiny in a Model School than there is in a regular elementary school. More standardized tests and surveys are administered to students; there is increased PD and initiatives for teachers to attend and implement, and there are often school tours and visits from board and ministry officials. My impression, when I first started working at the school, was not that the teachers resented these demands, but that there was a sense of anxiety about meeting the deadlines associated with different aspects of the program. It was clear there was a long-standing tension between the teachers and the administration, as the teachers felt the administration was unaware of, or unsympathetic to, the extra demands of the program. The administration interpreted this as the teachers not supporting the Model School Program.
It was in this stress-fueled climate that my ISP team tried to successfully work with the primary students identified as having behavior exceptionalities. The class was assigned a teacher, a child and youth worker and a special needs assistant to support them. The students in the class ranged from grade one to three, and their learning exceptionalities included oppositional defiance disorder, mental health issues, and autism. What all the students had in common was the inability to function successfully in a regular school setting without increased support.

At the end of the first term, the principal held a meeting with the ISP staff to inform us that she believed the students would be most successful if they were integrated into age appropriate classrooms, for half of the school day. My ISP team had hoped our students would have more opportunities to participate in the classes they enjoyed, such as physical education and the arts, through integration. We were a little overwhelmed with the half-day approach. We did voice concerns about two issues that could arise. Our first concern was how the regular classroom teachers would react to having both special education students and staff in their rooms for a large portion of the school day, especially given the existing stress levels of the staff working in the school. Our second concern was whether all of our students were ready to be integrated into a regular classroom for such a long time on a daily basis. All the students had demonstrated the ability to participate in short school-wide events, such as concerts and assemblies, as long as they had direct adult support. However, attending a concert or assembly once a month is quite different from being integrated every morning. We agreed we would make integrating the students as successful an experience as possible, given the school climate and our students’ special needs.
When we informed the students they would be spending more time in regular classrooms most of them were excited. They had already expressed interest in having more opportunities to engage with their mainstreamed peers. However, some of the students displayed anxiety about being in a regular classroom. This was a reasonable concern because they had all been placed in the ISP program due to a lack of success in a regular school program. We reassured the students that one of the ISP staff would be there to support them. After the first week of integration, it was clear that while many of the students were benefiting and enjoyed being integrated, the plan was too ambitious for at least two of the students. The classroom teachers expressed frustration about the level of disruption these few overwhelmed students added to their classroom. They felt those students’ demands were too intense to be addressed in a regular academic setting, even with an ISP staff member present. The teachers asked me to meet with them and the administration to discuss the situation. At the same time, I had become alarmed at some of the comments one of the students was making in regards to being integrated and had consulted with the school social worker about the safety of that student, his peers and the staff involved, if he remained in the regular class. The social worker agreed that a large class might not be the best learning environment for our two most challenging students, and also volunteered to attend the requested meeting.

At the meeting, the classroom teachers, the social worker and I advocated that it was not in the best interests of the classes involved or these two specific students, to be integrated for long periods of time. The principal believed strongly that integration was always in the best interest of everyone, and seemed frustrated we did not all agree. However, by the end of the meeting it was decided that these two students would not be
integrated for literacy. Their literacy program would be planned and delivered by me in our ISP classroom. Although I knew having these students remain in the class was in their best interest, I also knew I would find it challenging to develop a literacy program that would engage both of them.

The two students were in Grade 3, but read at a Grade 1 level. Getting them to consistently demonstrate their reading abilities was a challenge! They did not want to be seen as “good” students. Both were diagnosed with Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), and wanted to engage in conflict regularly. Having ODD made it difficult for the students to follow adult requests and instructions. Expecting them to co-operate with each other and the teacher (me) was a trial. Teaching them was frustrating because I found it almost impossible to engage the boys in any school related task. The only way I could convince them to participate appropriately and to complete academic tasks was to create an incentive program. Then, when the students actually attempted to complete the work, they made it clear they were only doing it because they wanted the “reward”. In addition to dealing with ODD, one of the students also had severe ADHD and working on any task for more than a couple of minutes was extremely difficult. The other student was diagnosed with a mood disorder, and his perception of reality was often different from others. He constantly felt the other student was trying to irritate him, and would then instigate a conflict, further distracting the ADHD student. I felt more like a professional negotiator, or referee than I did a teacher. I was often frustrated with the whole situation.

6.2 Engaging Primary Special Education Students in Critical Literacy

When I accepted the position, I had hoped to incorporate critical literacy strategies in my primary grade teaching. However, as the year progressed, I was
disappointed that only a few opportunities arose. Due to the class dynamics and the volatile nature of our students, attempts to engage students in even simple discussions often ended in major class conflicts. One of the few activities that did engage the whole class was listening to reports about Barack Obama, and watching segments from his campaign and inauguration. The majority of the students were African-Canadian of Caribbean descent or recent African immigrants. They all consistently followed the news about the upcoming American election. The class was able to participate successfully in short meaningful discussions about why it was important that Obama was elected.

A more thorough opportunity for students to engage in critical literacy arose when the staff launched a school-wide Black History Month competition. The competition involved questions being read over the public address system as part of the morning announcements. Students researched the answers using posters placed in the school’s front hall. I was not sure whether our students would want to participate since it involved a significant amount of reading. However, the students’ competitive nature won out and they were eager to try to beat the other classes. The posters were quite challenging and I was surprised how much effort they put into finding the answers. Everyday during literacy, the two students who were not integrated, would spend at least fifteen minutes reading the posters, trying to find the correct answer. What surprised me even more than the amount of determination the students displayed, was that they wanted to engage in conversations about what they had read. Each day the trivia question focused on a different important African-Canadian or American. After they answered the trivia question, the boys discussed why that person was important, and what had changed in society since the time that person was alive. Although I sometimes had to negotiate
conflicts over the students’ point of view, they were quite interested in each other’s opinions and what staff members thought about the topic. I realized the students were genuinely engaged in what they were reading and discussing when they began to give the class Child and Youth Worker (CYW) an oral summary of what they had read, and everyone’s opinions about the issue, when the CYW returned to the class. They began to eagerly wait to see what he would say, and it was clear they valued his opinion as an African-Canadian adult. As the month progressed, the students began to ask for simple reading materials about the individuals they were learning about. The students read their books with an adult at school and then took them home to share with their families. The two students who completed the daily trivia questions encouraged the rest of the class to read the posters during recess so they could participate in the discussions when they returned from their integrated classrooms. The students began to demonstrate the ability to advocate and express their own thoughts and feelings appropriately even if their point of view was being questioned.

In our discussions about famous African Canadians and Americans, we focused on how that individual made positive choices, and how that positive choice impacted others. We were impressed that the students were consistently willing to engage in conversations and were demonstrating critical thinking skills. However, I was not sure about how well our emotionally challenged students actually understood the historical events they were reading and discussing. We finally realized how deeply engaged the students were with these historical individuals, and how much they were learning from participating in the Black History month competition, when one of the students had a conflict with a peer and a school staff member during recess.
6.3 Critical Literacy as a Tool for Social Change

This student returned to the ISP classroom escorted by a staff member who saw him put his hands on a peer. The student was irate because, in his opinion, no one asked him his point of view of what happened and because the other student in the conflict was allowed to remain outside for recess. When the student tried to explain his side of the story (that the other boy had pushed him first), the staff member told him that she knew the other student would never do such a thing. Although the ISP staff tried to diffuse the situation (as we felt a power struggle was occurring between the staff member and our student) the argument continued and our student grew more defiant and disrespectful. The staff member announced that she was going to inform the administration and demanded that our student stay inside for the rest of the recess. On hearing this, the student became even more agitated, threatening the staff member and the administration. Although none of the ISP staff had witnessed the conflict at recess, we did believe that our student’s story should be heard before any decisions were made. And, in retrospect probably one of us should have accompanied the staff member to the office to participate in the initial discussion.

The staff member returned and informed us that the principal had decided our student was not to go out for recess until further notice. Students in the ISP class enjoy recess and losing a recess period is guaranteed to cause a major tantrum and has even caused some students to go into crisis. We knew this decision would cause our student to act out, especially since he viewed the situation as unfair. By this time, the rest of the students had arrived back in class and felt this situation was unfair. They made comments such as “no one ever listens to us because we are in a behaviour class.” Seeing
the situation was quickly spiraling out of hand, the class CYW asked the class how they could handle the situation in a positive manner. He asked the students what the famous Black people we had been reading about would do in this situation. While the other students contributed ideas, the student involved in the conflict announced that he would be like “Rosa Parks and stand up for himself”. We were a bit concerned what he envisioned as “standing up for himself,” but were pleased that he had independently seen that there were non-violent options for solving a problem. The other boys in class loudly encouraged him to “be like Rosa!”

6.4 Challenges of Student-Led Activism

The student announced he was going to the office to speak with the principal because he “knew his rights”. The ISP Special Needs Assistant (SNA) followed him to make sure there were no issues, but we all felt that his wanting to speak to the principal was a positive decision. Even if he did put his hands on his peers, we felt he should still have a chance to tell his side of the story. As well, we knew he was getting anxious about how long he would miss outdoor recess. When the secretary informed him that the principal was too busy to see him, the student sat down in the chair in front of the office and informed anyone who walked by that he was “like Rosa and was not moving”. The Special Needs Assistant also asked to speak with the principal, but was also told that she was too busy. The student remained outside the office for the rest of the day. We took turns supervising him, as we felt his decision to sit at the office and wait to speak with the principal was probably the most positive choice he had ever made while upset. During my supervision turn I asked the student to explain to me how he was being like Rosa. I was impressed that he was able to tell me the similarities he saw between the two
situations. Rosa Parks refused to get up from her seat on the bus because she thought it was wrong that only white people could sit there. In comparison, he refused to move from the office bench because he thought it was wrong that the principal did not speak to him before taking away his recesses. Although the situations were obviously not quite the same, from the point of view of a nine year old, both he and Rosa Parks stood up for something they believed in without resorting to violence or other inappropriate behaviour. At the end of the day, the CYW asked to speak with the principal when he saw her in the hallway. He tried to explain that we believed it was important the student be able to tell his side of the story, even if the consequence of no recesses remained, because he was attempting to solve a problem in a positive manner. However, the CYW was told that it was “the ISP job to deal with ISP student issues”. This was quite frustrating since we had not given the student the consequence of losing recess and did not know when he was going to be allowed to go outside again. We were very disappointed that the principal would not discuss the situation with the student, especially since he was putting forth his best effort to resolve the problem as positively as possible.

The situation was resolved the following day by the students’ mother, who had previously called the school trustee over other issues that she was unhappy about. When she phoned the principal, she explained that she was particularly upset about the fact that her son did not know how many recesses he would have to miss. The principal informed her that as a result of the conflict, the student would miss recess for two weeks.

The student was extremely angry that this decision was made without his input. During the two weeks he had recurrent violent temper tantrums about the situation. He consistently made rude, racist and disrespectful comments towards the principal, stating
that his making the inappropriate remarks were worth any consequences he might be
given. The student displayed an even more negative attitude towards the administration
and school in general for the rest of the year. He no longer wanted to participate in the
Black History Month trivia competition or displayed any interest in learning more about
the topic. I found it even more challenging in trying to engage him in any academic tasks
for the remainder of the school year

An additional complication that may have resulted from the situation was that the
CYW who tried to advocate for the student, was not re-hired for the position when his
temporary contract was finished. This was unfortunate, as the ISP staff believed he was
an excellent support for the program. Both the staff and the students were very
disappointed he could not keep the position. When he asked the administration about the
decision, he was told it was the due too a clerical mistake in that he had not submitted
paperwork on time. However, he felt that was not actually the case, but that he was not
hired because he was seen by the administration as “causing problems”. The CYW
leaving the program during the school year was very traumatic for the students, as they
had already established positive relationships with him. The student who was involved in
the conflict took the decision especially hard and often stated that the CYW was the “only
person who ever stuck up for him and now no one will take care of me”. We were
saddened that he felt that way, and tried to reassure him that the SNA, and the new CYW
and I all cared about him. However, he had trouble moving past the CYW’s departure for
the rest of the year. As a program staff, we were disappointed and frustrated with how
the administration dealt with the student’s when he more positively expressed his anger
and advocated for his point of view by sitting on the bench waiting to have a discussion
with the principal. Moreover, while we wanted to believe the original CYW was not re-
hired because of a technicality, it was hard not to question if that was the only factor that
influenced the decision.

6.5 Analysis

“Business Models” of Education: Power Issues in Schools

Bullough & Pinnegar’s (2001) article “Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical
Forms of Self-Study Research” provides useful strategies for writing and analyzing
autobiographical research. I have tried to be conscious of many of these guidelines while
writing this thesis, such as the idea that “autobiographical self-studies should ring true
and enable connection” (p. 18) and that “biographical and autobiographical self-studies in
teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator” (p.
17). However, when reflecting on my third narrative I became aware that three of
Bullough and Pinnegar’s guidelines are especially relevant to this experience. Bullough
and Pinnegar (2001) suggest “quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to
persons in context or setting” (p. 18). They believe that issues of self-study “should
promote insight and interpretation” (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 18) and just as
importantly, that “autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly
and the author must take an honest stand” (p. 16). I believe both of these guidelines
connect to my third narrative because I realize all those involved could view the situation
differently. While I understand that the only perspective I can truly understand is my
own, I believe it is important to understand the factors that might impact other people’s
opinions and decisions.
When reflecting on my third narrative I continue to observe the negative impact of neoliberal politics on the public education system emerging as the common theme of my experiences. However, in each analysis I have observed neoliberal policies impacting the education system in different ways. In my first analysis I observed the financial impact of neoliberalism and globalization on schools. In my second narrative I examined the challenges of delivering and assessing a common curriculum. In my third analysis I observe the impact of implementing neoliberal-based policies that promote a “business model” of education and the struggle for power that results in schools. This “business model” of education promotes a “one size fits all” type of product, which is delivered through a strongly reinforced hierarchical system. Unfortunately, this “product” of education does not seem to meet the needs of all students, and the hierarchy of power results in conflict between individuals at different levels.

**Historical Hierarchies of Power: “The Great Chain of Being”**

Public schools, like many institutions, are organized into a hierarchy of power with government officials responsible for policy decisions and curriculum development, superintendents and administrators ensuring policies are put in place, teachers implementing policies by delivering the curriculum to the best of their abilities, and students learning as much of the content as possible. This hierarchical system of power and authority is based on the “factory model” of organization used during the industrial revolution. However, this concept of organizing people into different tiers is not a new creation. The ancient Greeks and Egyptians developed the first recorded hierarchy of organization, the “Great Chain of Being” in attempts to create order in their world (New World Encyclopedia, p. 2). The Great Chain of Being was then adopted and expanded by
philosophers, such as Aristotle, who “viewed the universe as being eternal and made up of a number of distinct forms of being” (New World Encyclopedia, p. 2). Aristotle believed that all beings have souls that are classified into a hierarchy based on their specific powers (New World Encyclopedia, p. 2). The concept of a hierarchy of humans was refined by the neoplatonists who adapted the Great Chain of Being into a “Chain of Emanation” (New World Encyclopedia, 3). Those who valued ideas and intellectual matters were closer to the top than those who focused on material possessions (New World Encyclopedia, p. 3). During the scholasticism period, religious scholars such as St. Augustine, theologized the hierarchy into Christianity by placing God firmly at the top of the structure (New World Encyclopedia, p. 3). However, this type of organization is not limited to Christianity. Structural hierarchies of society can also be seen in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and traditional Chinese thought (New World Encyclopedia, p. 1). Once the hierarchy was incorporated into Christianity “the place of human beings takes on a greater moral significance” (New World Encyclopedia, p. 3). The purpose of life was understood to be to get as close to God as possible. Perhaps even more importantly, the Great Chain of Being was incorporated into medieval politics as “divine right”, a method to organize society and keep people in their “proper place”. God was located at the top of the structure directly above the King and Lords, demonstrating they were closely related and “solidified the King’s position at the top of humanity’s social order was the doctrine of divine right” (New World Encyclopedia, p. 4). At the very bottom of the hierarchy were serfs, separated from the royalty by the other layers of society (New World Encyclopedia, p. 4). This organizational structure of society was accepted as a fact of life
and commonly referred to in popular culture and works of literature, such as Shakespeare’s plays.

Power Structures in Schools

Although today’s society might not be as clearly organized through a structural hierarchy system of power, it continues to organize our public and private institutions. Organization of the school system through a hierarchical structural of power has actually increased through implementation of neoliberal policies that create a “business model” of education. For example, in addition to becoming involved in the financial aspects of the education system, neoliberal politicians have also turned education into a standard, often commercially produced, product to be sold by regulated institutions. White (2010) suggests that those with the power to influence the education system often endorse a “business model” and believe “the market will produce the best possible outcome in regards to education” (p. 6). However, he then explains that relying on the market to create an educational system that truly benefits everyone is an unrealistic expectation as “the extreme existence of institutional racism implies that formal public schooling is unjust and does not foster inclusive communities” (p. 6). White (2010) suggests, “schools are alternatively seen as agents of change oriented to the creation of a more just society, as well as socializers of the young, adapting students to the current social structure” (p. 8). In this era of neoliberalism, it is unclear what changes politicians would aim to create through the school system. What social structure are students being adapted to in our current social climate? Are students expected to learn and understand the “business model” that increasingly organizes our public institutions, such as schools? Are they taught not to question the decisions of those with more authority, regardless of how
those decisions might affect them? The goal of the current education system is of great concern to Ochoa and Pinela’s (2008) as their research suggests that neoconservative perspectives of societal equality is often based around “the idea that equal opportunities exist and that social and economic differences stem not from systems of inequality but rather from individual and group deficiencies in work ethics and cultural attributes” (p. 46). This raises further questions of what type of positive or progressive change can society reasonably expect to occur in schools, if those at the top of the hierarchy share this point of view? Ochoa and Pinela (2008) assert that when the education system is thought to be an equitable institution, which research suggests is the belief of many North American politicians, it can “hinder an awareness of power differentials, privileges, and the relational aspects of power, privileges and exclusion” (p. 46). This has proven to be a valid concern because Ochoa and Pinela (2008) believe “prevailing ideologies of color and blindness or ‘power evasion’ are influencing students’ perspectives and classroom dynamics” (p. 46). I believe students from the dominant culture demonstrate higher levels of achievement and engagement in academic tasks not only because they can better relate to the standardized curriculum, but also because they have a better understanding of how to adhere to the hierarchy of power that organizes the school system.

**Power and Educational Administration**

According to the “business model” of education those who hold the most power and influence in a school are the administrators, principals in North American schools and the head teachers in the United Kingdom. Within the “business model” philosophy, principals and head teachers are responsible for ensuring that educational policies and standardized curriculums are put into place. For example, as Mulcahy and Iwrin (2008)
explain “regulations, mandates, expectations, demands and information are dictated at the highest levels of the hierarchy and ordered effective” (p. 202). In North American schools, it is the principal’s job to ensure standards are being met.

In addition to this responsibility, neoliberal policies have changed the role that administrators have traditionally played in schools. In the past, principals and/or head teachers were often the most experienced staff members in the school and were seen as a source of support and guidance for other teachers. The implementation of neoliberal-based policies has changed the role of administrators to that of a site-based manager. As Beckman, Cooper, and Hill (2009) explain, placing educational administrators into a managerial role has created the “culture of the managerialism” (p. 313). This “culture of managerialism” is created when the differences between teachers and administrators become more visible. For example, when Mike Harris was elected as premier in Ontario, he removed principals and vice-principals from teachers’ unions. This act made it quite clear that teachers and administrators were on different levels of the power hierarchy. Moreover, the removal of administrators from teachers’ unions decreased the atmosphere of collegiality in schools. Beckman et al (2009) believe that a result of the neoliberal “business model” policies, is that “schools have become places where authority, rather than collegial culture, establish the ethos and purpose of school” (p. 313). In most school districts in North America, administrators are not only responsible for student success, but for staff through regular teacher evaluations. It seems logical that teachers would be reluctant to seek guidance or engage in other collegial behaviours with the same people who assess them, as they may worry that raising questions or concerns could create an impression of lack of competence.
The expectation for administrators to be responsibility for the authority in schools, places increased stress on principals, teachers and students. With the growing emphasis of success on standardized tests, there is little tolerance for students who have difficulty following school rules and thus take time and attention away from class lessons. According to Smith (2001), those who are not able to meet expectations for appropriate behaviour are viewed as jeopardizing their peers’ chances of success (p. 28). As Smith (2001) explains “tolerance for students’ disruptive behaviour is increasingly being defined in “zero” terms with preferential attention given to the more behaviorally compliant “academically challenged students” (p. 28). Students, who are not able to meet the expectations for behaviour, as well as those who are not achieving the expected level of success, are viewed as a “problem” or “at risk”.

However, there are few resources for principals to access to deal with these “problems”. Beckman et al (2008) assert “the intensification of work and more accountability under neoliberalism are having detrimental effects on teachers and pupils/students” (p. 313). Teachers are under increased stress to deliver high student achievement on standardized assessment and often do not feel there is enough time and/or resources to meet additional students needs. Support staff, such as social workers and psychologists, are shared between multiple schools and only available for a few hours a week. Special education programs and initiatives, which might be helpful in assisting some students to experience increased success, do not have near enough spaces for the number of students who need this kind of support. Moreover, the waiting lists for psycho-educational assessments to determine which students are eligible to receive extra support are long, and waiting lists for the support are even longer. Principals themselves
receive little extra training to deal with their increased job responsibilities. In Ontario the requirement, other than teaching experience to become a principal, is to take a two-part “Principal Course” and sit for a school board interview. The principal courses are similar to teachers’ additional qualification courses and are one term in length and involve attending a weekly class or online meeting. These courses are hardly the equivalent of a university business degree that most commercial employers require for managerial positions. Yet that, increasingly, is the job principals are expected to perform. Although in the neoliberal-influenced education system administrators are expected to implement the decisions made higher up the hierarchy, as well as maintain authority in their schools, they are provided with little support or training to make this happen.

**Power and Teachers**

Many researchers throughout North America and the United Kingdom have raised concerns about the lack of power teachers currently hold in the education system. The regulations, policies, and curriculum dictated by those at the top of the hierarchy and enforced by school administrators are expected to be delivered impartially by teachers (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, 202). Or as Mulcahy and Irwin (2008) explain, once new policies and curriculum are introduced to the school, “subordinate teachers are then expected to impose approved information on classrooms” (p. 202). The difficulty is that since teachers have little influence on curriculum development, they feel powerless over control of the content they teach (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, p. 202). As a result of the implementation of standardized curriculums, Mulcahy and Irwin (2008) assert the “voice of teachers, tends to be disempowered and de-professionalized” (p. 202). Multiple researchers suggest that the climate and instructional strategies used in today’s society are
ineffective. Beckmann et al (2008) believe that today’s schools and school administrators are too focused on the neoliberal priorities of economic goals, and are “failing to acknowledge the role of education in promoting a caring, cohesive democratic society, built on the notion of ‘citizenship’ where ‘critical participation’ and ‘dissent’ are viewed as desirable” (p. 315). Instead, today’s schools seem to be more focused on meeting pre-selected goals than on developing relationships between individuals in the building.

However, although there are teachers who acknowledge this need, and challenge the use of “transmission models” as the main teaching strategy, their actions are often not appreciated by their administrators. Teachers who modify, augment, or supplement standardized curriculums often face negative consequences (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, p. 206). When teaching in a Brooklyn, New York public school, Mulcahy observed that “teachers who departed from the prescribed curriculum were generally identified at the district level and frequently faced reprimands, citations on permanent performance records, and termination of employment (Mulcahy and Irwin, 2008, p. 206). My personal experiences and observations working for a large public school board support Mulcahy et al’s beliefs. The role of politics and the impact this has on teachers has also been observed by other academics. When reflecting on his experiences having been denied tenure because his conservative university did not endorse critical pedagogy work, Giroux states “to presuppose for one minute that politics is trumped to virtue of intellectual production, by virtue of playing the game, I found entirely false” (Qualitative Research Discussions, 2010). I believe this is also the case teaching in the public school system. I felt incorporating critical literacy into my teaching had a positive effect on students’ levels of engagement, their intellectual production. However, in my experience,
departing from traditional teaching strategies made my relationships with administrators more challenging. Each negative experience with administrators left me more discouraged and increasingly questioning whether my efforts to increase student engagement were worth jeopardizing my relationships with those who evaluate me. When speaking about the role of an educator in a 2007 interview, Giroux states that “in these positions you fight for what you believe in, hopefully you do it collectively, then you are more protected” (Qualitative Research Discussions, 2010). I believe there are many other teachers working in the current education system that feel the standardized curriculum and traditional teaching strategies are problematic. However, the fear of possible negative consequences impacting their own career dissuades them from challenging the status quo. Ultimately, teachers working in the public education system have very little power to control what and how they teach as their decisions are strongly influenced by the potential for negative consequences for not adhering to the expectations outlined in neoliberal-based educational policies.

**Power and Students**

Current research presents contrary information about how much power students' hold in today’s schools. On one hand, neoliberal policies promoting a strong hierarchy of authority places students firmly on the bottom. In most North American schools, students have little input into what or how they learn. Students in the current school system are limited by standardized curriculums and government policies. According to Giroux (Qualitative Research Discussions, 2010) since the 1960s, the “metaphor of schools as factories and schools as modes of social and cultural reproduction began to emerge and become dominant in the language”. However, not all students experience success
through current school programs. Ochoa and Pinela (2008) emphasize that when students from the dominant culture attend school they are more likely to experience an “education system in which school officials and course curriculum reflect and affirm their social locations and perspectives” (p. 47). Thus, these students “are more likely to exhibit higher levels of entitlement, ownership and confidence in the classroom compared with students whose schooling has been less positive” (Ochoa and Pinela, 2008, p. 47).

Similarly, White’s (2010) experiences as a teacher in the public education system led him to realize that “students with learning disabilities or those from ethnic or religious minorities often fare worse throughout their school career than those who ‘fit the mold’” (p. 5). Some researchers believe this discrepancy results in part from the traditional education philosophy that treats students as “empty vessels” (Ochoa and Pinela, 2008, p. 46) and does not acknowledge their lived experiences. As Ochoa and Pinela explain (2008) “when students are treated as empty receptacles into which knowledge is deposited, what they know and experience is often devalued and disregarded” (p. 46).

This is concerning because in addition to finding it difficult to make connections with curriculum aligned with the dominant culture, students from minority backgrounds may experience a disconnect between what they know is important to their personal lives and what they are told is important by their school. Giroux (Qualitative Research Discussions, 2010) who faced challenges in the public school system but, went on to become a recognized academic, explains that what was important to him as a working class child growing up in poverty was being able to “defend yourself, talk fast, and negotiate terrains in ways the knowledge I got from school was not very helpful” (Qualitative Research Discussions, 2010). Moreover, because students are at the bottom
of the hierarchy of power in the school system, there are no official channels for them to raise their concerns about the school system. Although the goal of the school system is to educate children and youth, they often have no control or input into how this education occurs.

However, although there may be few, if any, recognized means for students to express their frustration with the school system, they find ways of influencing their schools and exerting power in unofficial ways. Even in our current “business model” of education and climate of “managerialism”, the authoritative school system cannot completely control the opinions, thoughts and actions of students. Although many students are able to succeed in the current standardized programs and can efficiently navigate the hierarchy of power, there are others who cannot, or do not, follow the expectations schools set. As Law and Davies (2000) explain, school authority is based around the idea that children understand what is “good school behaviour” (p. 208) and choose to behave appropriately. However, they caution that although the majority of students realize what is expected of them “this should not be taken to indicate that this take-up is not extraordinarily complex” (Laws and Davies, 2000, p. 210). Laws and Davies (2000) believe that students are given a short period of time to demonstrate behavioural expectations for new educational settings but if they fail to adopt these behaviours they are viewed as problematic and a threat to order in schools (p. 213). They suggest that these students are thought to “threaten to undermine the power and control that teachers, and principals perceive themselves to need, for the smooth running of their schools” (p. 313). However, Laws and Davies (2000) assert that viewing these students as problems, or in Canada “at risk”, actually gives them a sense of power in their school
They believe “the power is attributed to them on the assumption that they do know the right thing to do, and that they are capable, unlike others, of choosing to ignore what is right and good” (p. 213). Although students have little official power in the school system, the power of the individual student who demonstrates non-complaint behaviour is undeniable. All teachers are aware of the potential for disruption in their classroom if students are unwilling or unable to cooperate. Law and Davies (2000) assert that the behaviour of these deemed “at risk” or “problematic” students could sometimes be understood as rational reactions when students are placed in situations where they have no power or control (p. 212-213). However, in this climate of “business-model” education with its culture of “managerialism” where administrators are supposed to maintain authority over the school, it is much easier to label these students “at risk” or “problems” than to try and understand why they do not demonstrate appropriate behaviour.

Moreover, with some teachers beginning to incorporate critical literacy into their classroom practice, increasing numbers of students are learning how to analysis, discuss and take action to change issues that concern them. These students who are often able to follow the expectations for behaviour, but are disappointed with the school system, are beginning to take risks others will not and voice their frustrations. For example, working with a group of female Australian secondary students, McGregor (2000) discovered that “these students are articulate, intelligent young women who have experienced high levels of frustration with the ways in which they have been educated” (p. 221). McGregor (2000) asserts that these students “lamented a lack of a critical perspective within their classes and saw a lot of school work as contrary to “real” education” (p. 221). Working
with McGregor, these students established a “Social Justice and Equity Group” at their high school and worked to “critically read” (McGregor, 2000, p. 221) the school and local community by circulating surveys to their peers focusing on concerns about the school. However, attempts to make changes to culture and climate of the school were not well received. As McGregor (2000) summarizes “the problem for these students, however, was that such challenges to the dominant narratives of Riverside State High School were not necessarily going to be welcomed” (p. 224). She explains that in addition to the topics mentioned in their survey, “other unspoken questions about the workings of the institution itself and ways of harnessing ‘power’ needed to serve the interests of students, rather than the interests of the institution, in the maintenance of the public imagery of inclusive harmony” (McGregor, 2000, p. 224) were posed. McGregor (2000) asserts that the adults in the school did not appreciate these students’ efforts (p. 225). The students in the group were viewed as problematic for the rest of the school year (McGregor, 2000, p. 225). Similar to my third narrative, McGregor’s research demonstrates that although students are learning how to identify and hypothesize potential changes about issues that concern them, they are powerless to actually take action or create change without the support of the adults in the school.

6.6 Reflections:

In reflecting on my third narrative, I believe the neoliberal creation of a “business model” of education and the resulting struggle for power contributed to the conflict that occurred in the junior public school I work at. The “business model” of education endorses a clear hierarchy of authority and power in the school system. The roles and responsibilities of each level of the hierarchy are clearly articulated and individuals are
expected to adhere to them. In part, this hierarchy is monitored and reinforced through the “climate of managerialism” (Beckman et. al, 2009, p. 313). I believe this particular school was more affected by the culture of managerialism than most because it was part of a “model inner city schools” program. Being designated a “model” school resulted in increased funding and staff. However, this increased support came with increased surveillance.

As part of the model school program, officials from the ministry of education, officials from the provincial OFIP programs (Ontario Focused Intervention Partnerships), the area superintendent and other area principals visit and assess the school on a regular basis. Each visit includes presentations and/or meeting with the administration, a school tour involving examining bulletin boards, classrooms, student work, teacher daybooks, discussions with students, and concludes with another presentation or workshop. The point of the presentation would be to explain what had been observed on the tour, what they observed being accomplished and what they felt needed to be improved. The school would usually be given a certain amount of time to accomplish this goal and then be revisited to see if there was observable progress. In addition to these pre-scheduled tours, various school board employees often visited the school. All these visits occur in addition to the regular assessment processes that take place in a North American school system, such as standardized assessments. I believe this continuous close scrutiny, the heightened “cultural of managerialism”, places increased pressure on everyone in the school to demonstrate their competence and ability to perform what they believe is their role in the school system. However, I think part of the reason why this conflict over the recess dispute occurred was because not everyone agreed with the expectations of the
roles in the hierarchy of power in the school system, which led to conflicting views of what was expected from each individual involved in the situation.

During the conflict, I did not really have the time or ability to reflect on why it might be occurring. From my point of view, it appeared the student’s efforts to make positive choices by using the strategies he learned about during our critical literacy activities to advocate for himself were not being appreciated by the administration. During the situation I felt the administrator involved with the conflict, did not handle the situation in a productive way and did not treat the student or the ISP staff fairly. I was quite frustrated, as I assumed the administrator did not see the student’s issue as a serious concern that needed to be addressed. Although I still do not philosophically agree with the administrator’s actions, in retrospect understanding the impact of neoliberal polices on the role of an administrator and the creation of a “culture of managerialism” in schools has made me more aware of all the factors that could have influenced the administrator’s decision.

Of course I was aware that administrators dealt with serious discipline issues in the school; however, I never really appreciated the pressure placed on administrators in the current school system to maintain authority in their schools. I believe that being the administrator of my school would be even more challenging due to the presence of an intensive support program. Having the responsibility to maintain authority in a school with an ISP program would be extremely difficult, as these students do not always react to situations in ways that can be expected. The student involved in the situation had quite a reputation in the school for being a “problem”. From past experiences, the administrator was aware that the student often resorted to dramatic temper-tantrums that
she was powerless to control, as he does not demonstrate respect for authority figures. Although during this conflict, the student did demonstrate different behaviour and was calmly sitting and waiting. However, the comments he was making, such as making references to historical civil rights activists, indicated he would voice his concerns more strongly, if he did not agree with the outcome of the dispute. Understanding now that administrators are expected to maintain authority, and knowing how often our school had visitors from the school board and ministry of education, I wonder if perhaps the administrator was reluctant to deal with the student directly. With his history of defiant behaviour, perhaps the administrator was concerned that although he was approaching the situation using new strategies, he would react negatively when he found out the consequences for his recess dispute and would again challenge her authority and power in the school.

As ISP staff we felt it was our responsibility to help our students experience as much success as possible. We were excited about our student’s engagement with the black history unit trivia questions and were impressed when the student made the connection that there are other ways to solve problems than resorting to violence. However, in retrospect we did not handle the conflict effectively, as there was conflict and misunderstanding over each person’s responsibility and role within the school. For example, we as the ISP staff, felt it was the administrator’s responsibility to listen to the student’s point of view and explain her decisions about the situation. However, she believed it was the ISP staff’s responsibility to deal with the student. The ISP Child and Youth worker felt it was his job to advocate for and with the student. However, the principal felt the Child and Youth worker’s job was to implement the consequences she
assigned, whether or not he agreed with them. Although the Child and Youth worker strongly believed the situation was not dealt with effectively, he was powerless to do anything about it because the hierarchy of power in the school system makes it futile for him to challenge the principal’s decisions.

I was and still am quite troubled about the situation described in my narrative. Although I quite like my administrator on a personal level, I agreed with the Child and Youth worker that the situation was not dealt with fairly. However, I felt torn between advocating for what I felt was right and wanting to avoid becoming more involved in the situation. As a new teacher in the school, I was uncomfortable with the idea of challenging or contradicting the administrator of my new school. Like research suggests, the fact that the administrator is the person who evaluates me and has the potential to negatively impact my career, concerned me. As did the fact that in addition to formal consequences for challenging the authority in a school, many teachers know of examples of teachers contradicting or arguing with principals and receiving informal negative consequences, such as not being asked to contribute to decisions that will impact them. Ultimately, I did not confront the situation because I was too afraid my actions would result in negative consequences. However, if I could re-live the experience I would handle it quite differently.

If I were dealing with this situation today, I would like to think that I would find a way to advocate for both the ISP student and staff without putting myself in jeopardy of experiencing negative consequences. Now understanding the pressure administrators are under in our school system, I would like to think I could find a way to help resolve the conflict satisfactorily for everyone. Although I know that ultimately I do not have the
power to make the administrator see the situation from our point of view, I would like to think I would be able to make it easier for her to address the situation in the way the ISP program had hoped she would. Moreover, keeping in mind Giroux’s (Qualitative Research Discussions, 2010) comments, I would try to ensure the ISP staff took action as a collective group to decrease the likelihood of one person being targeted for retaliation.

I will never really know if the Child and Youth worker’s contract was not renewed due to clerical errors or due to the administrator’s discretion. However, if I was dealing with the situation today, I would make sure that we as the ISP staff approached the issue in a non-confrontational manner as possible.

To address the situation more effectively and drawing on my new knowledge of the hierarchy of power in the school system and the changing role of administrators, there are a few things I would do differently to resolve the situation more effectively. Ideally, when the staff member announced she was going to take the problem to the administrator I would accompany her to explain the student’s point of view. However, since I was new to the school, but knew that this staff member had a long established relationship with the administrator, I am not sure I would have the confidence to take this action, even with the new knowledge I have about the school system. Instead, I think that when this staff member went to the administrator, I would have taken a few minutes to speak with the other ISP staff members to discuss how we would like to see this situation resolved. We could then write a note or email to the principal explaining our point of view and our ideas for how it could be dealt with. This would allow us to express our ideas as a collective group without engaging in a direct confrontation.
I would try to protect the student from the consequences until we knew the principal had at least read our thoughts about the topic, in hopes that we, as the program staff, would be able to advocate for him. However, if our efforts did not change the principal’s decision about the consequences for the recess dispute, I would encourage the student to take action, and advocate for himself in a different way. Since the student saw a connection between what he believed was his mistreatment, and the mistreatment of those he read about during the Black history trivia questions, I would encourage him, and the peers who were encouraging the conversation, to extend this connection to include other activists in addition to Rosa Parks. As the students hopefully listed other famous activists, we as the ISP staff would emphasize the role that writing has played in civil action. For example we could reflect on Martin Luther King’s famous speeches, Nelson Mandela’s many important lessons from prison, and so on. As the students ideally began to see this connection I, or another ISP staff, could suggest the student write a letter to the administration to state his point of view. Writing a letter would allow the student to take action and voice his opinion about the issue, but would not put the administrator in a situation where her authority could be visibly challenged. The administrator could then respond to the student in writing, preventing her from having to have a face-to-face debate with the student. Although the student only had basic literacy skills, the high levels of engagement he displayed during the Black history trivia questions suggests to me that he would have been motivated to write and read a letter, if he knew he would get assistance from the ISP staff.

While I will never really know if these ideas would have resolved the situation more effectively, I would like to think they would have made a difference. The amount
of pressure placed on administrators to maintain authority in the school, coupled with the lack of power of everyone else in the organization hierarchy to take action, undeniably creates tension in schools. I would like to give the administrator the benefit of the doubt that she did not want to address the issue out of concerns about maintaining her role of power and authority in the school and was busy with the many increased responsibilities of being principal that have been introduced by neoliberal influenced policies. While I can not personally change the impact that neoliberal policies are having on the school system, I would like to think that if I was reliving the situation today I would be able to find a way for the student to express his point of view in a way that would not cause the administrator to feel uncomfortable.
Chapter 7

Overall Analysis:

Fixing my teaching experiences in narratives in order to reflect and analyze them (Moen, 2006) enabled me to realize that incorporating critical literacy strategies led to similar experiences in each narrative. Although there were some differences, for example the specific critical literacy strategy I used with each group, these differences were mostly due to the students’ diverse ages and needs. However, even considering these differences, I am struck by the similarities. In each narrative, I was surprised to realize the impact that politics, particularly neoliberal influenced policies, have on the educational system and the social climates of schools. When I was introduced to critical literacy at OISE, I was hopeful that incorporating this framework into my teaching would help increase my students deemed “at risk” engagement with their studies. When reflecting on each narrative, I was amazed by how interested the students became in their schoolwork during our critical literacy units and activities. However in retrospect, I believe that in designing these units I underestimated the challenges of trying to create change in public institutions. In the course of each narrative, as the students engaged in critical literacy and began to draw on these strategies in order to take action in their school, both they, and those of us working with them, faced obstacles we were unprepared to meet.

Before beginning this thesis, I had a general awareness that governments and politics had some impact on the school system. For example, I knew the provincial government had some role in the negotiations for teachers’ contracts and that the government also has some influence over the creation of new programs, such as the full
day kindergarten program currently being introduced across the province. However, I was not aware of exactly how great an impact government policies have on the day-to-day life in schools. In attempting to gain insight into the sources of tension at the schools where I worked, and to better understand the actions and attitudes of my colleagues and administrators, I researched current political ideas influencing Western governments. I discovered that neoliberal politics, encouraging financial conservatism and the modeling of public institutions on private business, have been influencing government decisions and policies since the Reagan and Thatcher eras. And yet, until a year ago I had very little understanding of what neoliberalism was or how it impacts the schools. Moreover, I do not think I am alone in my ignorance about this topic as none of the colleagues I spoke with while writing this thesis knew what neoliberalism was, or how it impacted schools, either. However, whether or not the impact of political decisions is well understood by those they affect, the reality is that teachers and students are dealing with the impact of government decisions and policies on a daily basis. As Smith (2006), Rogers et al (2009), Beckman et al (2009), Moore (2003) and many others assert, neoliberal-influenced policies have a profoundly negative impact on today’s public education system.

I observed how neoliberal policies create different sorts of tensions in the schools where I have worked. Throughout my experiences, I came to realize that the pressure to cope with reduced budgets created tension between staff trying to raise money to supplement the school’s funds and the ISP students who were unable to afford tickets to the community fundraising events. I observed how the neoliberal belief in a standardized curriculum and the commercialized resources used to support this curriculum can became
problematic if students begin to question the values and beliefs of the materials they are taught. And, I witnessed how the pressure to adhere to the school system’s business-like hierarchy of authority can lead to conflicts between those in different positions of power in the school system. The intended focus of my thesis was on critical literacy, not neoliberal policies. However, one of the key aspects of critical literacy is to take action. In reflecting on my experiences, I believe that in order for strategies aimed to create change to be successful, there must be a strong understanding of the factors influencing the social system. I believe that several of the challenges I experienced in the narratives occurred because I did not understand how current political philosophies impact the school system. Thus, I did not anticipate the challenges I ultimately faced.

When I first learned about critical literacy through my course work at OISE and started reading about other educators’ experience using a critical literacy framework, I became hopeful it would also benefit my students. As I read articles by those such as Cooper and White, and others who used critical literacy strategies with students from a wide range of ages and backgrounds, I became encouraged about the potential of including this strategy in my own teaching. At this point in my career, all the students in the classes I taught were deemed to be “at risk” by the school board. Although my students were given this label for various reasons including their socio-economic status, racial or cultural background, and/or learning exceptionalities, they were all considered to be “at risk” of not achieving success in the public school system. When working with these students I have consistently found that one of the greatest challenges is that they tend not to be interested in academic tasks or schooling, in general. As I began to learn more about students who struggle to succeed in school, as well as the concept of
“identity”, I started to question if my students were failing to succeed because so much of what they are taught in school is not meaningful to them. What I found most promising about incorporating a critical literacy framework was that students would have the opportunity to learn about issues that interest and affect them and they could also take action and create positive change. I was hopeful that the opportunity to learn about issues that interest them and to create change in their own lives would increase the students’ engagement with their academic tasks, and thus, their performance in school.

Similar to other educators, such as Heffernan and Lewison, (2005), Crafton, Brennan and Silver, Powell, Cantrell and Adam (2001) and Cooper and White (2005)’s research on the potential of critical literacy strategies, I observed the benefit of incorporating critical literacy into my classroom. The most important change I noticed was how my students’ level of engagement and attitude towards school improved when I introduced a critical literacy framework. When I first experimented with critical literacy with my remedial summer school class, I was amazed how the students’ attitudes towards learning changed over a relatively short period of time. Not only were they achieving success on tasks they felt were daunting, such as critical magazine analysis and essays, they were taking responsibility for their own learning. In my first narrative, incorporating critical literacy strategies, such as reading from supplementary texts, reading from a resistant perspective and reading multiple texts, allowed my intermediate ISP students to overcome their insecurities about their role in the school and find ways to participate in school-wide events. In my second narrative, introducing the students in the school’s Boys’ Group, (a group for students deemed to be “at risk”) to critical media analysis, allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of the issues affecting their lives. Some
students became so skilled with this strategy they even challenged curriculum resources being used in their other classes. In my third narrative, one of my most volatile primary ISP students was able to learn and implement non-violent conflict resolution skills by making connections with historical figures he read about during the school’s Black History Month trivia competition. I believe my experiences indicate that incorporating critical literacy strategies into teaching practice help students deemed “at risk” engage with their school work. Moreover, I believe these narratives suggest that students deemed to be “at risk” for school failure, are able to achieve academic success when they are given the chance to learn about topics that have meaning in their lives.

Unfortunately, not all my experiences incorporating critical literacy into my teaching practice were positive. In each narrative, the staff I worked with and I, ran into challenges as students began to use their newly developed critical literacy skills. However, my experiences incorporating critical literacy occurred over a fairly short period of time. Thus, I did not have time to reflect on what went wrong in one situation before I was busy living the next. Now, having had time to reflect on the narratives, I believe the challenges that occurred in each situation can be attributed to three different issues: a lack of understanding of the sources of tension in schools; a lack of awareness about the critical literacy process by the rest of the teaching staff; and a lack of communication and understanding of what the students were aiming to accomplish among students, staff and school administration. Moreover in retrospect, I believe there were strategies we could have used to ensure incorporating critical literacy was a positive, as well as engaging, experience.
I believe a large component of what makes critical literacy a useful strategy is the fact that students have the opportunity to identify problems and try to create change. In each narrative the students were able to identify issues and/or events in the school that concerned them. In the first narrative students from the ISP class could not see a way to successfully participate in events with the rest of the school. In the second narrative, students believed that the curriculum resources used in their English classes were promoting stereotypes about minority groups. In the third narrative, one of the students did not deem the consequences and treatment of a recess conflict were equitable. In each of these situations, the students were able to identify something they felt was problematic in their school and either create, or participate, in a potential solution. However, I do not think that those of us working with the students realized how complex and complicated the factors creating these problems are, or that it would take more than a simple solution to solve them.

In reflection, when working with students to solve problems, I would now try to understand the cause(s) of the problem before attempting to solve it. Writing this thesis has shown me the value of understanding how political decisions, especially those influenced by neoliberal philosophy, can create challenges in the school system. From now on I will take more interest in politics. For example, I will learn how new government policies might affect the day-to-day life in schools. Also, I will take more of an interest in politics at a personal level by learning the various political parties’ views on education before taking part in elections. Moreover, I plan to keep current about the issues impacting schools by continuing to read the resources I discovered while researching this thesis, such as union and university publications. I believe this new
found knowledge will make it easier to understand why the issues that students and staff identify as problems are occurring, and thus, assist in creating helpful solutions that are possible for everyone in the school.

Another issue I encountered during each experience was a lack of support for the critical literacy-based initiatives the students, and those of us working with them, were trying to implement. For example, in the first narrative, staff members organizing the 1950-60’s fundraiser would not award house league points for the ISP students’ costumes because although they reflected the targeted time period, they were not represented in the specific media that those teachers provided. In the second narrative, I observed how classroom teachers became frustrated when students in their English classes began using their newly developed critical media analysis skills to analyze classroom resources. In the third narrative, I witnessed that a staff member did not recognize when one of the most volatile ISP students was trying to express his point of view using non-violent conflict resolution strategies he learned about during our critical literacy unit. Although the specific issues were quite different, in each case the students did not receive the support that my teaching team had hoped they would.

In retrospect, I believe a large factor in why we did not receive this support was because the rest of the staff did not understand what it was our students were trying to achieve or why they were even trying to create change in the first place. In researching the origins of critical literacy for this thesis, I realized it is not always a strategy teacher candidates are exposed to in faculties of education. In fact, I only learned about critical literacy while taking post-graduate courses at OISE. Thus, I believe it was somewhat naïve of me to expect those who have had only limited, or no exposure, to critical literacy
teaching and learning strategies to be supportive of the outcomes. In the future, I would make a stronger effort to ensure we clearly communicate with the rest of the staff that our class was participating in a critical literacy unit and specifically what the students were hoping to accomplish. I would also be sure to provide an overview of the critical literacy framework, and explain why it is an appropriate strategy to use with students who demonstrate difficulties engaging with school. I would make it clear that students were trying to challenge the issues and/or events they found troubling, using socially acceptable methods to create positive changes in the school, and that the students were not trying to create problems. I would hope that this increased understanding of the students’ actions would increase the support they received.

I am also hopeful that increased communication about our critical literacy-based initiatives would increase teacher support for multiple reasons. In reflecting on the narratives, I believe that many teachers are resistant to change, especially to changes that affect things that are important to them. Whether it was refusing to accept alternative costumes for a themed event, reluctance to acknowledge alternative points of view about resources used in their classrooms, or the inability to recognize when a volatile student was making an effort to use non-violent conflict resolution strategies, the teachers I dealt with in the narratives, were not quick to embrace student-led change. I believe this increased communication about why students were trying to create these changes, in particular explaining how this desire for change was driven by the fact that these students did not feel valued or understood by their school, would make teachers more sympathetic and supportive of their initiatives. Moreover, I believe that another reason the staff was reluctant to accept the students’ actions as valuable is because like Smith (2006), I
believe my students were seen as problems or “bad apples” in the school. I am hopeful that learning more about how the students feel about their role or lack of a role in the school, would help teachers realize that even these deemed “at risk” students can, and want, to be involved. I am hopeful that with increased understanding of these students and what they hope to achieve through critical literacy initiatives, other teachers in the school would be able to recognize that the students were not being “bad apples” or trying to cause trouble, but that their efforts to create change were attempts to contribute to their school in ways that were meaningful to them.

I believe that in part, the reason that those of us working with the students failed to communicate our plans with the rest of the staff was because I am reluctant to engage in conflicts and/or disagreements with colleagues in my workplace. However, when reflecting on my experiences, I see the potential where I could have used simple strategies to share what my students’ activities consisted of in each narrative. For example, I could have requested to have an “ISP” or “boys’ club” update placed on the monthly staff meeting agenda and presented a quick summary of critical literacy and our plans to incorporate it in our class. Alternatively, I could have created a quick memo to place in teachers’ mailboxes outlining why we were incorporating critical literacy, what we were hoping to accomplish through this strategy, and include references for materials with more information about the potential of using a critical literacy framework. Or, given the increasing role of the Internet as a source for in-school communication, I could have sent an email to the school list explaining critical literacy and including links to relevant websites. If I had thought about it beforehand, all of these strategies could have been implemented in each narrative. In the future, I will take more responsibility to
communicate with the rest of the staff about our plans to incorporate critical literacy and what the students hope to achieve, in order to increase the support they receive.

In addition to not receiving support from other members of the school staff, we also ran into difficulties with school administration when trying to implement critical literacy initiatives. Although the specific issues we tackled were different in each narrative, each experience involved conflict(s) with the administration at the school where I worked. In my first narrative, I witnessed a conflict about whether or not to allow students to participate in school-wide fundraising events when they could not afford tickets. In my second narrative, I participated in disagreements whether the boys deemed to be “at risk” deserved to form a group, similar to one that already was in place for girls, to increase their self-confidence and media awareness. There was further conflict with the administration when the same boys began to apply the skills they learned in the “boys’ group” to the materials used in their English classes. In my third narrative, I observed how tension was created when a student wanted to express his views about a recess conflict to the administration and when staff members from our program, tried to advocate for him. In each of the narratives, one of the common themes that emerged was conflict between those trying to create change and the administration of the school. I am hopeful that increased knowledge of what students were attempting to change coupled with information about the potential benefits of using a critical literacy framework with students deemed “at risk”, might decrease conflict with administrators.

In reflecting on my experiences, I believe part of the reason these conflicts occurred was due to the fact that in today’s education system, principals are expected to maintain authority in their schools. When completing research for this thesis, I
discovered that one of the implications of neoliberal policies was to restructure the school to resemble a “business model”. This “business model” of education moved principals out of their traditional role of advisors and into management type positions where they are increasingly responsible for authority and business in their schools. This change in role is important because in the schools where I worked, the students from the centrally assigned ISP classes are considered to be an extra burden for the administrators’ efforts to maintain authority in their school.

I believe the students’ attempts to create change in the school was seen as causing additional discipline issues for the administrator to deal with. Perhaps the students’ actions were even seen as a challenge to the administrator’s authority because regardless of the specific situations, in each narrative these students deemed “at risk” felt the need to express their point of view about the issue in question. However, keeping in mind the concept of identity, it is possible that students from minority backgrounds do not see the situations and/or events that were taking place, in the same way that the adults from the dominant culture do. I believe the students’ actions were attempts to create a school atmosphere where everyone’s experiences and perspectives are valued. In all of the narratives, the changes the students wanted were not drastic, but rather augmented traditional school activities to make them more inclusive of those not from the dominant culture. None of these changes that the students wanted to make, took away from anyone else’s experiences. Whether it was trying to attend an event they could not afford a ticket to, watching a movie from a different perspective than staff expected, or wanting a chance to discuss how a student felt about a situation, the proposed changes did not have a negative impact on other students in the school. I am hopeful that explaining what
specific changes students are aiming to accomplish, while learning more about the potential positive benefits of critical literacy will help administrators realize that students are not trying to challenge their authority, but rather make the school somewhere they feel valued.

Reducing conflicts with administration is important. Researchers such as Mulcahy and Irwin (2008), White (2010), and Beckman, Cooper, and Hill (2009), explain in this new “business model” of education, principals have increased power to administer consequences to maintain discipline in their schools. Whether it was having it shared that students come from poor families in front of their peers, needing to have all media screened by the administrator before showing it to students, or possibly not having a job contract extended, in each narrative students and/or staff members faced consequences for their attempts to create change through critical literacy based initiatives. I am hopeful that if administrators had a better understanding of the positive benefits of critical literacy, the potential for conflicts will decrease. The greatest potential I realized in incorporating critical literacy was how students displayed an increase in engagement during our activities. I believe that as these “at risk” students become more engaged in their studies, and begin to create positive changes, they will develop a more positive outlook about school in general. I think that as students continue to participate in critical literacy activities they will feel an increased sense of belonging and demonstrate an improved attitude towards schools, which will decrease the amount of difficulties they are thought to present to administrators trying to maintain authority.

Although I did not think of it while living these experiences, there are many different strategies I could have used during each narrative to ensure that administrators
are aware of the potential of critical literacy in order to reduce conflict. Some simple strategies would be to ensure that my administrators were included in the initiatives I use and to inform the staff what my students were working on. The first strategy would ensure that administrators were at least familiar with the critical literacy framework before I approached them for further discussion about this topic. I would then try to meet with the administration to explain why I believe this strategy would be helpful not only for the ISP students, but for staff as well. I would express my hope that with increased exposure to critical literacy activities, students would become more engaged with school in general and present less of a challenge for authority in the school. I am optimistic that by participating in such a conversation, the administration would realize that they would also benefit from the incorporation of a critical literacy framework in our class.

Moreover, although teachers’ and administrators’ schedules are hectic, in reflecting on these experiences, I believe it would be valuable to meet or at least keep in contact with the administration on an on-going basis about what changes the students were aiming to achieve in the school. I am hopeful that this on-going communication would reduce conflict with administrators because they would be aware of what students were working on and not be surprised by the students’ actions. Moreover, increased understanding about what and why the students were hoping to achieve, might help administrators realize that the students were not trying to challenge their authority and thus, help to reduce conflict.

Although I would like to believe that putting these strategies into action might have prevented some of the conflicts that the students, and those of us who worked with them faced, I believe we should have been better prepared for the possibility of potential
conflict. I think that it was quite naïve of me to assume that there would be no difficulties in creating change in the schools where I worked. In retrospect, although I am hopeful the strategies to reduce conflict would be successful, I believe we should have been better prepared, and we could have helped the students be better prepared, to face consequences. One way this could be accomplished is by investigating how famous activists dealt with adversity during critical literacy units in order to increase the students’ awareness of the potential for conflict. This would also provide students with different strategies to deal with any tension that might develop. Moreover, if conflicts did occur and the possibility of consequences arose, I believe that Giroux’s suggestion that, “in these positions you fight for what you believe in, hopefully you do it collectively, then you are more protected” (Qualitative Research Discussions, 2010) is sound advice. I would encourage students to act together when they were accomplishing goals, instead of having one student represent the groups’ efforts, which was what seemed to happen in the narratives. I would also utilize this strategy of acting together if staff members found themselves facing consequences for their actions incorporating critical literacy. For example in the third narrative, different members of the ISP staff approached the administration individually about how the issue was being handled and this conflict may have possibly led to one of the staff member’s contracts not being extended. Instead, I now believe we should have approached the administrator together, and attempted to explain why this issue was important to the student and offered suggestions about how the situation could have been resolved in a way that would benefit everyone. Although I am hopeful that strategies to decrease tension between staff, students and administrators
would have been effective, my experiences have taught me to have a plan for dealing with conflicts when trying to create change in schools.

During the process of fixing and reflecting on the narratives, I was struck by the similarities between each experience. I believe that incorporating critical literacy strategies was a positive decision, because in each situation students demonstrated increased engagement by participating in our critical literacy activities. However, the students and those of us working with them encountered similar difficulties in each narrative. In order to make our critical literacy-based initiatives more successful in the future, I will be sure to communicate more effectively with the staff and administration in the schools. I am hopeful that with increased communication and understanding, those students who are deemed “at risk” will be able to create positive changes so that all students can feel valued in their schools.
Chapter 8

Future Considerations:

**Teachers Unions:**

- Teacher unions are the only organizations in the education system that do not receive government funds. Teacher unions might want to take advantage of this and provide members with clear, direct information about the impact that neoliberal policies are having on the education system.

- Teacher unions already support practices that encourage critical literacy by holding free workshops and creating and distributing documents about the benefits of critical literacy. However, these services could be promoted more widely as many teachers do not know the resources exist.

- During school visits, teacher unions representatives could ensure that teachers are aware of their rights and what recourses they might have if conflicts/disputes arise with administration.

**Teachers:**

- In order to increase support from other staff members, teachers planning to introduce a critical literacy framework into their classrooms could take steps to ensure that their colleagues are aware of what critical literacy is and why it is being introduced.

- In order to increase understanding and decrease conflict with principals, teachers introducing a critical literacy framework could also meet with principals ahead of time in order to explain the potential benefits that critical literacy might provide for everyone involved.
- Teachers could also create a plan to deal with possible conflicts by ensuring they have the support of direct co-workers. Everyone needs to be on the same page about how to deal with conflict.

- Teachers might want to prepare both themselves and their students for the possibility of conflict and consequences before trying to create change in the school. They could also try to deal with negative situations as a united group in order to decrease the risk for any one individual.

**Principals:**

- Principals could try to keep an open mind about the potential of critical literacy to engage deemed “at risk” students in their schoolwork, and thus have the possibility of decreasing discipline issues in the school.

- Principals could attempt to consider the changes students want to create in the school from a neutral perspective and not just see this as another problem to deal with.

- Principals should reflect on whether there are explanations for the behaviours demonstrated by “at risk” students. For example, students may not feel valued in the school.
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