Learning to Question the World: Navigating Critical Discourse around Gender and Racial Inequities and Injustices In a Second and Third Grade Classroom

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Learning to Question the World: Navigating Critical Discourse around Gender and Racial Inequities and Injustices In a Second and Third Grade Classroom

by

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One of the guiding principles of this study is that students do not work in isolation when learning about the social worlds in which they live but, rather, collaboratively construct new meanings alongside a diversity of peers who each offer their own experiences, knowledge, questions, desires, and expectations. This acknowledgment of the ways in which we learn in community speaks, of course, to my development as an educator as well. Much of who I am, as well as the work I set out to do while engaged in this research, reflects the contributions of so many of the colleagues, friends, and students I’ve had the pleasure to learn alongside throughout my career.

I would first like to thank the entire staff at New City School during the initial years of my career for helping me learn to see the world from a vantage point other than my own. Having just emerged from twenty-two years inside the homogeneous cocoon that was my childhood and college years, it was dedicated administrators such as Tom Hoerr and Barbara Thomson that pushed me to begin questioning the nature as well as the purpose of education. Meanwhile, educators and activists within the school community, such as Joe and Kate Corbett, provided a powerful model of what it means to not only be informed about local and global inequities and injustices but to take action on our convictions.

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Without doubt, I would like to thank my family. There was never a single second during the entirety of this process when I was not fully aware of the fact this was a collaborative effort – not to mention, a collaborative sacrifice. I am grateful for the
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who was far more gracious, patient, and supportive than the self-imposed demands of my
endless schedules and deadlines deserved.
ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, situated within a critical theory frame (Friere, 1970; Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2016; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008), explored the ways elementary students engaged in and constructed meaning from critical classroom discussions exploring inequities and injustices as related to gender and race. The questions guiding the study were: (1) How do my students construct meaning during class discussions regarding issues of equity and injustice around gender and race?, (2) What role do I play in constructing, shaping, and maintaining opportunities for students to create meaning during these discussions?, and (3) What tensions do my students encounter when engaging in discussions about gender and race? The participants for the study were second and third grade students. Data sources included class recordings, photographs, student work, field notes, interviews, lesson plans, and my reflective teaching journal. Constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965) was used to analyze the data. Findings demonstrate carefully developed opportunities for critical classroom discourse supports students to observe, question, and critique oppressive social practices enacted upon marginalized communities in the United States. The tensions emerging from a diversity of perspectives and relationships within the classroom complicated these discussions while also providing data from which new curriculum could be developed. The broader implications from this study propose a need for classroom teachers to create spaces within their classrooms where students can learn to not only question the world but develop an ability and willingness to engage in critical discourse alongside others in an
effort to create an informed citizenry willing to confront issues of oppression (Fifer & Palos, 2011; hooks, 1994; Long, Souto-Manning, & Vazquez, 2015; Macedo, 2006).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ iii

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................... vi

LIST OF TABLES ....................................................................................................................... x

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................... xii

CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Overview ................................................................................. 1
   Statement of the Problem ...................................................................................................... 2
   Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................................. 4
   Type of Study and Research Questions ............................................................................... 5
   Definition of Terms .............................................................................................................. 7
   Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................ 7

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review ................................................................................................. 15
   Defining Social Justice Work ............................................................................................... 15
   Navigating Difference through Classroom Discourse ....................................................... 22
   Teacher Agency .................................................................................................................. 35

CHAPTER 3: Classroom Context .............................................................................................. 47
   Beliefs, Curricular Structures, and Practices ....................................................................... 50
   Explorations ....................................................................................................................... 55
   Morning Meeting ............................................................................................................... 56
   Literacy Workshop ............................................................................................................. 62
   Integrated Units of Study ................................................................................................. 69
CHAPTER 4: Methodology........................................................................................................78
  Methodological Overview .................................................................................................79
  Teacher Research ...............................................................................................................81
  Research Site and Participant Selection...........................................................................83
  Data Collection and Procedures.......................................................................................85
  Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................95
CHAPTER 5: Findings ..............................................................................................................112
  The Nature of Knowledge ...............................................................................................113
  Drawing on Multiple Resources to Construct Meaning ..................................................124
  Explaining Issues of Inequity and Injustice around Gender and Race .........................159
  Tensions around Discussions of Gender and Race .........................................................181
CHAPTER 6: Implications ......................................................................................................203
  Personal Reflections on My Teaching .............................................................................206
  Implications for Teaching ...............................................................................................220
  Implications for Future Research ....................................................................................226
REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................229
APPENDIX A: Student Consent Form.................................................................................243
APPENDIX B: Interview Questions.....................................................................................244
APPENDIX C: List of Classroom Discussions Transcribed for Study ...............................245
**LIST OF TABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>Collaboratively Constructed Professional Beliefs</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2</td>
<td>Daily Forecast</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.3</td>
<td>Sampling of Student-Generated Questions in the Classroom Journals</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.4</td>
<td>Questions Framing the Class Inquiry into Normalcy as a Social Construction</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Preliminary Codes Generated to Guide Future Data Collection</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
<td>Student Hypotheses within Discussions of Gender and Race as Shared by Speakers who Identify as Part of the Dominant or Non-Dominant Group</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1</td>
<td>Instances of Personal Connections</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.2</td>
<td>Common Frames Used by Teacher and Students</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.3</td>
<td>Instances of Teacher-Provided Context within Class Discussions</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.4</td>
<td>Instances of Claiming Gender and Race-Related Injustices are related to Power</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.5</td>
<td>Instances of Claiming Gender and Race-Related Injustices are Explainable</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.6</td>
<td>Instances of Students Framing Gender and Race-Related Injustices as Exaggerated or Untrue</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.7</td>
<td>Comparison of Hypotheses Challenging and Supporting Reality of Gender-Related Injustices</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.8</td>
<td>Comparison of Hypotheses Challenging and Supporting Reality of Race-Related Injustices</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1</td>
<td>Participation in Gender-Related Discussions</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.2</td>
<td>Participation in Race-Related Discussions</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.3  Student Participation during 33 Discussions of Gender and Race .............210
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Two students work from a manual to construct circuits during Explorations .................................................................55

Figure 3.2 Classroom journals spread across the floor during Explorations ...........56

Figure 3.3 Student highlighting of an article promoting the positive practices found in zoos .................................................................65

Figure 3.4 Student mark-up of an article condemning zoos and circuses for unethical treatment of animals ...............................................................65

Figure 3.5 Student speaks to the reality of zoos from the perspective on an animal activist .................................................................66

Figure 3.6 A student draws from the various non-fiction articles to create a list of the positives and negatives of zoos he feels are most important to him .....67

Figure 3.7 Class chart showing where each student placed themselves on a spectrum in regards to declaring zoos as good or bad for animals ...............68

Figure 3.8 Class power chart demonstrating how choices are made for them, by them, and negotiated between multiple parties when visiting a grandparent’s house ............................................................................71

Figure 3.9 Class poster tracking the ways in which normalcy is both used and disrupted in a variety of picture books ........................................73

Figure 3.10 A visitor from the local university speaks to the class about her experiences immigrating to the United States from the Congo and Kenya ........................................................................................................74

Figure 3.11 Student’s notes listing those things she felt she already knew about China before our Study ........................................................................75

Figure 3.12 Class poster detailing the misconceptions we held about China prior to engaging in our study ........................................................................76
CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Overview

A number of years ago, when I was first exploring what it meant to address issues of social justice in my teaching, I brought my class to the carpet at the conclusion of an inquiry into the social construct of “normalcy” and asked students to discuss ways they might demonstrate greater empathy for lived experiences different than their own as well as actions they might take to publicly support those who were being mistreated. As students spoke to sticking up for schoolmates being victimized by unkind words and working to challenge notions of dressing, acting, speaking, or being “normal,” Ellis, a small Black child who did not often contribute to such discussions, turned to me and said “I used to wish I was white.” Taking a moment to process her statement, I proceeded to offer a fumbled response failing to address the seriousness of Ellis’ admission before wrapping up the discussion and moving on to the next part of our day. As teachers tend to do, I later reflected on this moment wishing more than anything I could go back and respond differently. I decided that if I could revisit this moment I would be deliberate to acknowledge Ellis’ feelings, openly question what might have brought her to feel this way, and invite the class to share their own stories of times they were made to feel as though they wanted or needed to change themselves in some way. Furthermore, I would relate her experience to our study of the ways in which the politics of social norms offer power and privilege to those that are White, Christian, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied and invite the class to continue looking for, critiquing, and sharing the harmful messages they observed in their daily lives that supported these constructs.
The personal and cultural connections students make when provided opportunities to engage in critical discourse around issues of equity and justice support them to not only understand and relate to the particulars of these topics but help their classmates create new meanings in relation to the workings and effects of oppressive beliefs and practices. In the years since Ellis pushed me to reconsider my understanding of the world and my teaching, many other students have sat alongside me and shared their own observations, experiences, and concerns in regard to beliefs and practices they deemed to be problematic. My challenge within this work has been to better understand and facilitate the ways in which my students were interacting with this curriculum as well as the role I was to play as we worked to critique dominant ideologies that actively and passively oppress marginalized communities within our society.

**Statement of the Problem**

White Americans find it as difficult as white people everywhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. And this assumption – which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt white standards- is revealed in all kinds of striking ways, from Bobby Kennedy’s assurance that a Negro can become President in forty years to the unfortunate tone of warm congratulation with which so many liberals address their Negro equals. It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal- an achievement that not only proves the comforting fact that perseverance has not color but also overwhelmingly corroborates the white man’s sense of his own value. (Baldwin, 1963, p.94-95)
Baldwin’s words continue to ring as true today as they did more than fifty years ago when he observed the ways in which White Americans, a construct undergoing many contested changes throughout our nation’s history, yielded their power to strategically position themselves as the standard by which all marginalized communities of people were compared. This cultural dominance has long been bolstered by the development and implementation of a colonized curriculum where students of all races and ethnicities receive messages of “Whiteness as brightness” in which the intrinsic value of White culture is reified as it serves to constitute the standards by which all students are to learn and exercise specific values, language structures, and customs. Furthermore, this hidden curriculum (Nieto, 2002) selects which histories and stories get memorialized as well as the perspective from which these histories and stories are told. The result of this work offers more than just a curriculum void of cultural relevancy; rather, it supports a hegemonic racial hierarchy in which coercion-based systems of racism, such as enslavement and Jim Crow, are replaced by consent-based systems of racism through which oppressed populations are positioned to assimilate to the dominant culture as though this forced transformation were a natural outcome of a unified nation (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Stephens II, 2014).

It is within this racist fog students come to school surrounded by stories and questions concerning, among others, the policing of Black bodies, the misrepresentation of Black males, and the silencing of Black voices. Yet, oppression takes many forms and acts upon many communities whereby constructs such as gender, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are used to create intersectional hierarchies that privilege White, Christian, European-American, heterosexual males. Drawing on Dewey’s (1903)
conception of education as meeting the needs of a democracy, many have continued to call into question the act of declaring education’s primary purpose as providing students the skills necessary to dutifully play their part in a future workforce (Apple, 2013). In a time when our country is facing so many urgent issues related to the ways in which race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation preclude one’s ability to secure and retain basic civil rights, there has been a call for education to play a key role in creating an informed citizenry who is willing confront issues of oppression (Fifer & Palos, 2011; hooks, 1994; Long, Souto-Manning, & Vazquez, 2015; Macedo, 2006). Yet, even those teachers who do work to create spaces within their classrooms where these issues can be pondered find themselves mired in uncertainty as to what counts as knowledge, what topics are open for discussion, and what role teachers should play in the construction of this knowledge (Bender-Slack, 2010; Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000; Gless & Smith, 1991; Hess, 2004; Kelly & Brandes, 2001).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, provided the tensions that exist when inviting classroom explorations of politically-charged topics related to prejudice and oppression, this 16-month study sought to better understand the ways students in my second and third grade classroom created meaning when engaged in critical discussions about inequity and injustice as related to gender and race as well as my role in this knowledge construction. Secondly, understanding such discussions can cause fear and trepidation, this study sought to identify the specific obstacles students encountered when engaging in critical discourse.
Type of Study and Research Questions

To better understand the ways my students engaged in class discussions about gender and race, I conducted teacher research, as informed by critical discourse analysis, to investigate the following questions:

1. How do my students construct meaning during class discussions regarding issues of inequity and injustice around gender and race?

2. What role do I play in constructing, shaping, and maintaining opportunities for students to create meaning during these discussions?

3. What tensions do my students encounter when engaging in critical discussions about gender and race?

To answer these questions, I implemented qualitative research methods. I conducted observations while using a research journal and teaching journal to both collect and reflect upon field notes gathered in the classroom (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Audio recordings, video recordings, photographs, lesson plans, and student work artifacts were collected to fuel on-going thematic analysis (Glesne, 2011). Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to identify and differentiate emerging patterns which were then subjected to peer debriefing with colleagues, university faculty, editors, classroom parents, and students to elicit critique of current hypotheses as well as refine the future direction of the study.

Significance of the Study

Much of the research into classrooms dedicated to addressing issues of social justice has worked to identify obstacles teachers face (Bender-Slack, 2010; Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000) or their understanding of what it means to teach for social justice
(Bender-Slack, 2010; Lee, 2014). Other studies have detailed teacher concerns about addressing controversial issues (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000) as well as the many ways in which teachers work to reveal, conceal, or minimize their own vested interests in these topics when creating knowledge with students as well as creating knowledge for students (Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Schultz, 2008). Still more studies and vignettes have looked at the challenges middle, high school, and college students face in revealing their own thoughts and beliefs (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994; Thomas, 2013) and the ways in which they confront and even avoid competing interpretations of what constitutes truth and curriculum (Allen, 2014; Leland & Harste, 2001; Thomas, 2013). The vast majority of these studies have consisted of surveys, teacher interviews, student interviews, intermittent classroom observations, or a single curricular unit of study. While there is certainly much to glean from such information, there remains a need for prolonged studies of elementary-aged students engaging in class discussions around issues of social justice.

The significance of my study was to spend an extended period of time, sixteen months, with the same group of students to detail the ways in which 7, 8, and 9 year olds in my classroom approached and constructed meaning from issues of gender and race within the frame of working for social justice. Doing so allowed me to see where topics of social justice and critique intersected with my students’ personal experiences and investments as well as the effect this had on the nature of their engagement with and understanding of issues of injustice and inequality.
**Definition of Terms**

Key terms related to and embedded within my study will now be defined to better understand the development, execution, and representation of my research. The term *social justice* is not addressed in this section as it will be explored in detail in the review of literature.

1. **Critical discourse:** Discourse addressing social practices as they relate to issues of power (Gee, 1999).
2. **Culture:** A system of social values, behavioral standards, world views, and beliefs created and maintained by a group to give meaning to the world and their lives (Gay, 2010).
3. **Ideology:** Systems of belief that assign meaning to the world. In critical terms, ideologies are often viewed as those meanings that support one group’s domination over all others (Kincheloe, 2008).
4. **Racism:** An ideology that justifies the oppression of an entire race under the premise they are inferior or deficient (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009).

**Theoretical Framework**

My research was guided by the ontological and epistemological beliefs I drew from critical theory. Critical theory is built upon the belief that the actions of a society are rooted in struggles for power. That is to say, to study a phenomenon one must first recognize the social constructions of class, gender, religion, physical and mental ability, ethnicity, and race as they relate to power and the dominant culture. To work within the critical theory tradition one must ask how these privileges and forms of oppression are framed and who benefits from the framing.
In this section I will describe key tenets of critical theory that informed the whole of my research as well as its implications.

**Political Nature of Education**

Critical theory posits that education is an inherently political act (Banks, 2008; Friere, 1970; hooks, 1994; Nieto, 2002) in which language acts as a political instrument (Baldwin, 1997) to shape society through the means of knowledge production. It is this process of shaping society that prompts critical theorists to “provide a more thorough examination of how structures of race, class, and gender shape the educational experiences” of marginalized students (Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2016). A key aspect of such critique has been to identify the ways a hidden curriculum, defined as the implication of power and privilege within language, culture, and learning (Nieto, 2002), works to maintain the existing social order (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Woodson, 1977/1933). But one example of hidden curriculum is the mandated use of ethnocentric history texts that not only advocate war, colonization, and capitalism, but recount history from the perspective of wealthy, White, Christian males (Asante, 1991; Harris, 1992; Zinn, 2005).

Recognizing the presence of such colonizing ideologies at play within education, critical theorists support theoretical positions drawing upon tenets from, but not limited to, Chicana/Latina feminism (Villenas, 2006) and Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) when rooting their work in a decolonizing framework dedicated to achieving greater social justice. Wilson (2005), a Dakota scholar, states that such a framework calls on researchers to develop a critical consciousness about “the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the
degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices” (p. 13). Critiquing education from this de-colonizing framework calls on critical theorists to recognize the ways in which students from marginalized communities are coerced to cross cultural borders (Giroux, 1992, 2005) in order to succeed in the classroom.

Finally, because education is an inherently political act, critical theorists view any attempts at neutrality with efforts, deliberate or not, to maintain the status quo (Banks, 1993; Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Solozorro & Yosso, 2009) as they act to uphold and reproduce the legitimization of power held by dominant groups.

**Education as a Means to Transform Systems of Domination and Oppression**

Paolo Freire (1970) not only acknowledged the political nature of education but embraced it. In doing so, Freire viewed education as a process of liberation in which those who have been marginalized identify the causes of this and transform their lived experiences in the face of oppressive structures. This reflects DuBois’ (1902) desire for an education dedicated to developing individuals willing and able to disrupt the existing social order. Ladson-Billings writes that such an education calls on teachers to challenge marginalized students “to view education (and knowledge) as a vehicle for emancipation, to understand the significance of their cultures, and to recognize the power of language” (2009, p. 102). In doing so, students receive a liberatory education (hooks, 1993) in which they not only receive access to knowledge holding cultural capital but they also learn to critique social beliefs and practices of the larger society (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010) in order to one day “create a new status quo through the ideological and political tools that are available” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 119).
Because oppression cannot be ended by the enforcement of civil laws alone (Bell, 1992), critical theorists view schools as essential in creating a critical citizenry who is prepared to challenge and transform the status quo. Critical theory’s ultimate goal, therefore, is an “enhanced public awareness of the sources of domination and a subversion of ideological forces that will jointly initiate fundamental changes in consciousness and power” (Prasad, 2005, 140).

**Individual Actions Situated Within a Larger System**

A key ontological belief of critical theory is the presence of systems. Systems are underlying networks of power that heavily inform the minds and actions of individuals through the reification of dominant ideologies (Johnson, 2006). These ideologies, built upon the dominant culture’s norms, values, and desires, work to legitimate the power of dominant groups (Gay, 2010; Solorzano & Yasso, 2009). An example of a dominant ideology is the oppositional categorization of people based on race and ethnicity in which whiteness is normalized and a hierarchal order is established to view people of Color as separate and subordinate (Crenshaw, 1995).

Such ideologies become so commonplace they appear to be the result of a natural order and subordinated groups unknowingly work to maintain these ideologies despite the oppressive outcomes they may produce. This relationship between systems of domination and the individual actors who are both informed by and work to maintain them constitutes what critical theorists refer to as hegemony. Hegemony speaks to the active preservation of one group’s norms, values, and desires under the guise they are inevitable (Crenshaw, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Any considerations of change are limited within the parameters of the existing system because there is a failure to consider
the fundamental system at play could even be altered. Banks (1993) speaks to the dangers of unchallenged hegemonic ideologies, arguing:

I have encountered many folks who say they are committed to freedom and justice for all even though the way they live, the values and habits of being they institutionalize in public and private rituals daily help maintain the culture of domination, help create an unfree world. (p.6)

Critical theorists, therefore, call on education to produce and implement “forms of pedagogy and counter-knowledge that challenge students’ internalized ideologies and subjective identities” (King, 1991, p.134). The acknowledgment that one’s subjective identity resides at the intersection of the multiple social groups within which they self-identify or are assigned by those acting upon them, termed intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), is important in this work in that the lived experiences of oppressed populations are viewed as multidimensional and complex. This acknowledgement and the work that grows out of it acts to combat the racist smog enveloping us in such a way that we freely internalize negative stereotypes about ourselves and/or others (Delpit, 2012).

Knowledge as Historically Situated and Contextual

As with all of education, critical theorists believe knowledge construction lacks neutrality provided the fact it is both historically and culturally situated (hooks, 1993). Knowledge is thus viewed as being directly related to power as those working from a critical theory paradigm “interrogate all bodies of knowledge to unearth the interests shaping them” (Prasad, 2005, p. 141). This takes the form of ideology-critique – the critique of ideological forces at play throughout a society. Nothing is taken for granted as everything is considered, according to Prasad, with “skepticism about the innocence of
social and institutional practices, however innocuous and commonplace they might seem” (p. 153). Dialogues among different social groups become a key tool with which relationships of power are located. Acquiring knowledge through dialogue is necessary because knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed, occasionally around a consensus, and taking “form in the eyes of the knower rather than being formulated from an existing reality” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2013, p. 218).

This belief that knowledge is contextual, residing within us but created in relation to others, demonstrates the stark difference between critical theory and the positivistic paradigm in which “research is assumed to be concrete, separate from the researcher, and understandable through the accurate use of ‘objective’ methods of data collection” (Prasad, 2005, p.4). Refusing to believe in the possibility of neutrality or objectivity, critical theorists understand and embrace their role as researcher in the production of knowledge. Doing so, they openly position themselves in regards to their political relationship to the phenomena under study as well as to the participants of the study.

Critical Theory as a Qualitative Research Tradition

Prasad describes the critical theory tradition as an “amalgamation of diverse ideas and theories that are all oriented toward social critique” (p.143). The designation of critical theory as a diversity of ideas and theories demonstrates critical theories’ insistence that it not be viewed as a set of pre-packaged methodologies or formulaic pronouncements. Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2013) assert that to be defined as a criticalist one must use their work to critique the presence and manifestation of relationships of power and accept the following assumptions:
(1) All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; (2) Fact can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; (3) Language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); (4) Certain groups in any society and particular societies are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable; (5) Oppression has many faces, and focusing on only one at the expense of others often elides the interconnections among them; and finally (6) Mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression (p. 341).

Working from shared assumptions allows those working within the critical theory tradition the freedom to employ a wide variety of methodologies. This ability to work within and across many methodologies, termed *bricolage*, allows researchers to draw from a wide variety of methodologies such as ethnography, semiotics, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and discourse analysis while also accessing the tools of analysis and critique that fit their needs. In doing so, they “move beyond the blinders of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2013). Bricolage, therefore, is seen as an emancipatory research construct allowing researchers to select from and between multiple sources of knowing while retaining a critical edge and ethical tone in their analysis.
Critical theory also allows the researcher to let go of notions of neutrality or objectivity. Understanding knowledge production as a product of historical and cultural contexts in which power and politics play a key role, critical theorists announce their partisanship and ultimate goal of not only understanding systems of power but transforming them. This transformation comes about in the form of praxis as the researcher helps actors develop a critically grounded program of action to address issues of injustice (Friere, 1970). The role of praxis within the design and goals of the research allow those working within the critical theory tradition to not only foreground the act of speaking with marginalized groups rather than to or for them (Lather, 2004) but to go one step further and bring them in as participants in the research process itself (Prasad, 2005).
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways my students engaged in and constructed meaning from classroom discussions addressing issues related to gender and race, the role I played in supporting their ability to think critically about such topics, and the tensions they encountered during this work. This chapter will provide a review of theoretical work framing social justice work in the classroom as well as research studies exploring issues related to the implementation of such practices. The literature review has been organized around three key theoretical concepts: (1) Defining Social Justice, (2) Navigating Difference through Classroom Discourse, and (3) Teacher Agency. The first section, *Defining Social Justice Work*, contextualizes social justice teaching as it identifies diverse ideologies working to provide specific, and sometimes competing, conceptions of the role of education and the practices that constitute social justice teaching. The second section, *Navigating Difference through Classroom Discourse*, discusses the challenges of engaging students in critical discussions that address the intersection of power and difference. The final section, *Teacher Agency*, examines the complications teachers face and the stances they adopt when confronting the inherently political nature of teaching.

**Defining Social Justice Work**

**Purpose of Education**

Progressive scholars have long pointed to and debated competing conceptions regarding the role of education within a society (Apple, 2013; Counts, 1932; Dewey,
16

1903; Friere, 1970, Giroux, 1988; Macedo, 2006). It has been their claim that the dominant ideology framing most curriculum and classroom practice serves to do little more than train a future workforce of docile workers (Apple, 2013) who serve as human capital willing to “do the nation’s chores without asking too many troublesome questions” (Evans, 2000, p. 298). Such schooling - substituting standardization and patriotism for civic education, multicultural education, and critical thought – avoids issues of difference and power, thus shaping student identities, thought, and knowledge within the context of a fictitious common culture (Johnson, 2006) reflecting and reifying the dominant status of White America. Parker (2006) warns that such practices ignore the unique identities and abilities students bring with them to the classroom while working from a false assumption of civic oneness. Parker challenges this frame with that of a civic wholeness; one that openly welcomes and explores diversity in all its forms.

Understanding that education is never neutral (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2010), progressive scholars have also called attention to the fact classrooms work to maintain the status quo as they make implicit an unquestioning acceptance of cultural norms. This has created a demand for a different type of education in which the purposes of schooling are transformed to reflect the needs of democracy (Dewey, 1903). While many have gone so far as to call on education to be a source of social reconstruction (Apple, 2013; Counts, 1932; Sleeter & Grant, 1987), at the core of these ideals is a dedication to social justice as schools promote a participatory democracy in which students operate from principals of nondiscrimination and non-repression (Hyde & Laprad, 2015) while rooting their classroom studies in justice, questioning, analysis, resistance, and action (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2015).
What is Social Justice?

**Social justice as social and economic mobility.** The challenge in such work is that teaching for social justice, for all its richness and complexity, is not well-defined. While the term social justice has more recently come into vogue, it has also come under fire and, as a consequence, been both abandoned by some who claim to support it and co-opted by those who feel threatened by it (Picower, 2012). Some have even gone so far as to use the term social justice to frame schools’ efforts to promote ideals of equity and mobility as justification for practices rooted in cultural and linguistic assimilation (Williamson, Rhodes, & Dunson, 2007). In such cases, students are molded to fit the ideal of a singular American society based on claims they will later be able to use this cultural capital to attain a higher station in life. A historical example of this are the U.S. boarding schools of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that worked to strip Native American children of their cultural beliefs and ways of being with the promise of greater social and economic mobility. The consequences of these schools, as described by Davis (2001), were to wage “cultural, psychological, and intellectual warfare on Native students as part of a concerted effort to turn Indians into ‘Americans’” (p. 20).

A more recent example of assimilation practices is detailed in Jacobs’ (2014) study of the literacy practices of five Black and Latina/o families experiencing homelessness while living in a shelter. Jacobs sought to collect the participants’ life stories to learn how their life, literacy, and schooling experiences shaped their beliefs about the future. She found, in part, that these five families were confronted with school expectations for their children to assimilate to dominant cultural and linguistic practices in order to achieve scholastically. Specifically, Jacobs found parents: received messages
from teachers speaking to a need for stronger academic discourse in the classroom (as opposed to the vernacular varieties of language found within the families’ immediate communities), were requested to abandon their language and speak only English with their children, and presented special education plans based on linguistic differences between Spanish and English. As with the boarding schools of so long ago, these children were promised a better future so long as they were willing to recreate themselves in the image of what the dominant culture demands an American should sound like. Speaking to the misguided aims of such practices, Williamson, et al. explain “Scholars who subscribe to the notion of assimilation and individual advancement as social justice confuse the battle to acquire the privileges of Whiteness with the desire to assimilate” (p. 198).

Though the notion of social justice has been used in these and other unjust ways, there are many examples of teachers working to offer students a high quality education while honoring the funds of knowledge they bring from home as well as making certain the curriculum is relevant to their lived experiences, desires, and needs (Howard, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). The promise of social justice work dedicated to increasing student achievement, agency, and self-actualization is that it addresses the instructional gap that has long failed students of Color across lines of race and ethnicity.

**Social justice as critique of power and privilege.** Dating back to debates between the ideologies of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, a persistent question of social justice has long been, “Is it an education that will give students skills to alter the social order, or is it an education that will enable students to fit themselves into a higher station in that social order?” (Williamson et al., p. 195). Beyond leveling the playing field to provide marginalized children an equal opportunity to achieve
academically, other social justice scholars and teachers have called for measures that provide students the skills to challenge and change the social order itself. These scholars and teachers dedicate themselves to confronting issues of equity, access, power, and oppression (North, 2006; Picower, 2012; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Vetter & Hungerford-Kressor, 2014) in an effort to make certain all students are prepared to compete for jobs and economic advancement within the workforce as well as work toward providing a critical citizenry dedicated to building a more just society (Fifer & Palos 2011). W.E.B. Du Bois (1930) spoke to this desire when insisting “the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters, it is to make carpenters men” (p. 64). However, this challenge to repurpose education from its present state to one dedicated to confronting issues of privilege and power is difficult for many to understand, accept, or envision. For many educators claiming to teach for social justice, they find limited congruency between their beliefs and goals and those of colleagues making similar claims.

Much of what emerges from teacher education programs dedicated to culturally relevant teaching and multicultural education speaks heavily to a desire to help students better achieve and, thus, move into a higher station but falls short in regards to challenging the inequities that continue to act upon marginalized communities of Color. This was demonstrated in Lee’s (2014) study examining the teaching practices of three teacher candidates in a social justice-oriented teacher education program. When confronted with a classroom of children, the teachers felt unsure about their ability to address such issues, if they thought to address them at all. Other than a single instance in which one teacher was responsive to the children’s questions about skin color, all three
teachers’ understandings of social justice defaulted to meeting the needs of diverse learners. Lee attributed this to the fact the student teachers’ professors lacked a unified understanding of social justice themselves and provided more implicit than explicit information in regards to what this might look like in a classroom alongside children. Being so, the teaching candidates lacked clearly articulated goals for their teaching and put into practice the one message they did receive throughout all courses – teaching all learners. North (2006) suggests teachers would greatly benefit in their desires to teach for social justice if only “the individuals and groups implicated in the policies and practices designed and executed under the banner of ‘social justice’ would [enter into] an explicit discussion of both the theories underlying this label and the desired consequences of its use” (p. 507).

**Social justice as local and action-oriented.** Those scholars working to provide a bridge between theory and more clearly defined outcomes call on teachers to adopt practices that support students to take action based on their understandings and convictions. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) view this element of political action as a culmination of classroom work that supports students into: (1) learning to use language to question the world, (2) interrogating the relationship between language and power, (3) analyzing popular culture and media, and (4) constructing an understanding of the social construction of power relationships. Calling on teachers to outgrow traditional practices, Picower (2012) challenges that any conception of social justice teaching must move beyond community service days and charity drives and create rich inquiries that “actively connect the concerns of students and their communities to the larger constructs of oppression in the form of racism, classism, gender subjugation, homophobia, ageism, and
ableism” (p. 4). An example of such work, situating social critique within the community of the classroom, is captured in Allen’s (2014) dissertation study of the ways in which her Latina/o students used critical multicultural texts around issues of immigration to make sense of the social issues confronting their community. Her willingness to teach responsively into her student’s lives, curiosities, and concerns allowed her to “close the cultural dissonance that often presents a cultural clash between [students’] home and school environments” (p. 176) while providing an opportunity for her students to “critique structures which affect their personal lives” (p. 120). Allen’s teaching was firmly rooted in the lived experiences and concerns of her students and their families in regards to immigration policy in the United States.

Another study by Bender-Slack (2010), in which 22 secondary teachers participated in a phenomenological three-interview series regarding their definitions and purposes for social justice teaching, used microanalysis and open coding to categorize the teachers’ beliefs into a social justice framework capturing the ways they were positioning themselves and their classrooms within this work. She found that a small minority of the teachers, four in total, viewed social justice as an exploration and critique of values and politics with an expectation of transformation. These four teachers spoke to the role of activism in helping their students grow into a more critical and engaged citizenry. However, 82% of the teachers in the study failed to recognize or support such goals. These teachers viewed social justice teaching from a more conservative frame wherein their goals were to either explore feelings and fairness from a safe distance or model socially just behavior while avoiding topics that might upset students. Until such discrepancies between conceptions of what is, what might be, and what should be are
resolved, efforts in the name of teaching for social justice will continue to face significant struggles in taking root.

**Gaps in the Literature on Defining Social Justice**

What appears to be missing from research into pedagogical beliefs and practices related to teaching for social justice is a representation of classrooms and teachers at the elementary level. A detailed search and retrieval of studies into the experiences of teachers engaged in social justice teaching revealed that much of this work focuses on the beliefs of pre-service, pre-k, secondary, and post-secondary educators while there are far fewer studies identifying the goals, beliefs, and practices of educators teaching for social justice within elementary classrooms.

Another gap in the research is an absence of studies exploring the relationship between teachers’ personal experiences, motives, and goals and the reflective practices they employ over time to build a bridge between theory and practice. Many studies worked to reveal motives and goals, but each of these provided only snapshots. None of these studies involved daily observations of students or the ongoing revision teachers engaged in when defining and refining their beliefs, goals, and practices. Each of the studies presented a static view of the teacher based on limited data. There is a need for studies that follow teachers for an extended period of time as they interact with and respond to the successes and struggles placed before them within the context of their own expectations as well as those of their students, parents, administration, and society.

**Navigating Difference through Classroom Discourse**

The challenges of building healthy and constructive classroom discourse in hopes of constructing meaning around issues of power and equity are many. For instance,
unlike the ways in which young children are immersed in worlds of rich speech and plentiful print before they speak or read their first word, children are far less likely to have many experiences with critical discourse. Hess (2004) writes, “Teaching young people how to do something well in school when there are few models for them to emulate outside of school is difficult” (p. 260). Yet, schools are the ideal places for such work given the fact the classroom, for most, offers the first prolonged opportunity to step outside the protective, homogenous bubble of home and into the complexities of a diverse world (Hess, 2004; Parker, 2006; Tenorio, 2014).

Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) propose a three-ring model for instruction aimed at helping children navigate the diversity of their world while becoming critically literate citizens engaged in building a more equitable world. The outer ring consists of personal and cultural resources. These are what students and teachers access in the creation of the curriculum and include, but are not limited to, personal experiences, books, media, home literacies, textbooks, and student interests. The second ring consists of critical social practices. These are the precise practices students and teacher engage in when critically inquiring into the world around them. The final, inner, ring is the construction of a critical stance in which the dispositions and attitudes of teacher and students guide their work as critical literate beings. It is within this framework of resources, practices, and dispositions that meaning is constructed both in and out of the classroom.

In this section of the literature review I will discuss key components of navigating issues of gender and race with children as reflected in the existing literature. Topics will
include: (1) Negotiating Multiple Interpretations, (2) Learning and Challenging Difference, and (3) Discourse as Knowledge Construction.

**Negotiating Multiple Interpretations**

Pointing out the fact social studies curriculum continues to be rooted in an approach to teaching history that draws on de-contextualized and incomplete representations of history (Loewen, 1995; Zinn, 1980), Evans, Avery, and Pederson (2000) explain that attempts to construct issues-centered social studies classrooms have been historically thwarted by the “realities of schools as tenacious bureaucracies resistant to change; the dominant influence of social studies textbooks on classroom discourse; and the basically conservative orientation of social studies teachers toward content and instruction” (p. 295). Positioning the textbook as indisputable fact serves to not only deny opportunities for a broader collection of perspectives, experiences, and contributions to stake their place in the construction of history but also positions students as passive in the process of knowledge construction. However, attempts made to disrupt normalized interpretations of history are often met with politically-situated conflict over what can be questioned and what cannot.

Leland and Harste (2001) state the tensions regarding what interpretations can and cannot be questioned in history classrooms surface during literature discussions as well. After reading a children’s book titled *The Paper Bag Princess* to their undergraduates, they suggested to their students there was a possibility the beloved fairy tale was, in truth, providing a message that women can only achieve happiness through marriage. The students balked. Reflecting on this, Leland and Harste claim, “[People] don’t want to be pushed out of their comfort zone by an interpretation that interrogates norms they have
always taken for granted” (p. 209). Leland and Harste’s students brought their personal meaning to the text and were slow or unwilling to be flexible in considering interpretations that pushed against normalized ways of seeing the world.

Critical scholars confront such conflict, declaring the need for critical discourse in classrooms to allow students opportunities to navigate such tensions in their beliefs or between their world view and those of others around them. Schreiber and Moss (2002) suggest the implementation of belief irritators, engagements designed to complicate existing beliefs. These belief irritators serve to guide learners into genuine doubt. Working with teachers, Schreiber and Moss describe a professional community which “constantly act[s] as belief irritators and collegial skeptics – continually asking questions, challenging both explicit and underlying assumptions, and providing alternative viewpoints and paths to travel as members try to resolve doubt” (p. 31). Within such a community, learners come to see conflict as an opportunity to learn rather than a problem to be solved.

However, there are some topics teachers tend to avoid in fear of how student doubt may be negotiated and articulated. This is particularly true of highly personal topics (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000). Linker (2015) writes, “Some of the most challenging debate contexts – and ones that are rife with faulty reasoning – are those where self-identity, social identity, and social relations come together as the primary focus” (p. 9). Two examples of this are race and class. Linker suggests a discussion of affirmative action in the abstract would be relatively comfortable for a group of people but would be all-together more difficult to navigate were the stated beliefs of discussants contextualized within societal practices related to race and social class.
For this reason, when teachers and students work to create meaning together they often shift their conversations away from lenses that are likely to create conflict. Thomas’ (2013) study of seven high school English teachers learning to analyze their classroom discourse for moments of conflict found one classroom’s handling of the book *Dangerous Minds* fell into a pattern in which the students and teacher sought out areas of agreement while avoiding conflict-laden topics lying within the text. When the word *nigger* appeared in the book there was classroom talk, prompted by the teacher’s questioning, about why the character would use such a word. The discussion remained safe as the teacher and students worked to confine any meaning-making to the fictional characters in the book rather than bringing discourse about the taboo word into the context of their own contested worlds in and out of the classroom. Doing so would have provoked an exploration into what this word means and its many uses within different contexts and between different groups of people as well as invited interpretations the White teacher would have found difficult to confront.

At one point in the discussion the teacher alluded to Black leaders from the NAACP to warrant her claims about the inappropriateness of the word despite the fact some students in class used the word within groups of their peers and saw no harm in doing so. The teacher’s normative White middle-class ideology was at odds with many of the Black students in the class and the potential for tension between competing perspectives made it easier to contain the discussion within the pages of the book than to interact with it on a personal level where self-identity, social identity, and social relations come into play. This illustrates one scenario in which teachers avoid delving into a sensitive topic. However, in avoiding topics such as these students are robbed of
opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives. Gorski and Pothini (2014) contend that a key component of addressing important issues, despite the temporary tension it may elicit, is to take stock of the perspectives of multiple stakeholders if we want learners to develop an ability to think critically and resolve issues facing their communities.

**Learning and Challenging Difference**

Categorizations such as race and ethnicity are concepts we learn and then use to make sense of the world (Linker, 2015). For instance, stories about the internment of Japanese-Americans or the struggles faced by Malcolm X throughout his life are rooted in their lived experiences as shaped by their particular ethnicity and race. Without an understanding of ethnicity or race we would likely draw different meanings from these stories. However, these same socially constructed concepts have been used throughout history to serve the social and economic needs of those in power, largely Whites (Willinsky, 1998). From this history, each of us has grown up within our own skin and within our shared social worlds to create meaning from the differences between ourselves and others.

Many of these meanings regarding difference may have seeped in without our knowing. Ghoushal, Lippard, Ribas, and Muir (2012) conducted a study in which they used a computer program to engage participants in an Implicit Associations Test. The test was designed to reveal implicit biases of participants based on the time it took them to respond to photos that confirmed or challenged unconscious associations based on gendered and raced norms. Ghoushal, et al. found that our unconscious minds, even those of us who consider ourselves particularly enlightened in regards to issues of race and gender, are likely to harbor prejudices picked up from our social context whether or not
these prejudices are ever acted upon in any way. Kim (2016) claims the basis of these
associations begins as early as age three when children start to notice differences in skin
color. A few years later, at age five or six, children access these concepts of difference to
learn “superior social norm[s] regarding the social status of different races and ethnic
groups” (p. 402). These norms lead to the construction of stereotypes as young children
strive to make sense of the world by making generalizations based on specific instances.

Kim’s (2016) qualitative case study of kindergartners in South Korea draws upon
these understandings of children’s knowledge of race and ethnicity to study the students’
literary discussions about racial diversity during whole group read aloud. She found that
students were able to perceive differences between Asians, Africans, and Whites and
reported negative attitudes toward Africans and African Americans while preferring their
own group, Asians. The kindergartners viewed Africans and African Americans as poor,
barefoot, and beggars. This was due, in part, to the fact the school had earlier watched a
movie about global poverty where Africans were portrayed only as poor and needy.
Another source of the children’s perceptions came from their parents who, in interviews
with Kim, shared similar racial and ethnic assessments and spoke about home discussions
with their children regarding the need to help poor Africans. Kim’s findings reveal the
need for a curriculum addressing issues of difference even, if not especially, within
homogenous classrooms and schools.

Picower (2012) conducted a multi-year study of undergraduate pre-service
teachers in her courses to study how racial identity informed their conceptions of
themselves, their students, and teaching. She also worked to reveal how her
undergraduates would respond to belief irritators that challenged preconceived
assumptions they had about people of Color and urban communities. Picower found her students believed in many negative stereotypes, often rooted in a deficit-model and characterized by fear for personal safety. These hegemonic assumptions were based on personal experiences, media reports, and stories they had heard about neighboring schools. In discussing these issues, the language Picower’s students used positioned the teachers as part of a broader White collective sharing similar concerns and fears of the Black community. Picower engaged her students in watching, reading, and discussing a variety of videos and texts that shared first-hand experiences of people of Color. In doing so, she provided a human connection to these issues as well as historical knowledge needed to better understand the ways in which institutional racism is deployed on the lives of people of Color. These stories created a cognitive dissonance, or belief irritators, to disrupt the student’s understanding of race and urban communities of Color. Some students claimed they understood, at the conclusion of the class, what they had learned in the past was incomplete and biased.

Linker (2015) refers to this as intellectual empathy, defined as the ability to interrogate history or social inequality as well as its role in creating and maintaining systems of oppression within business, education, politics, and religion. Helping students come to understand their misconceptions and stereotypes play into a hegemonic system of oppression calls on them to develop a greater sense of self-awareness that invites the critical role of discomfort as a catalyst for change (Leland & Harste, 2001). Linker (2015) suggests that to help others develop the skills necessary for a more effective understanding of social inequities we must support them in: (1) understanding the invisibility of privilege; (2) knowing that social identity is intersectional; (3) using the
model of cooperative reasoning; (4) applying the principal of conditional trust; and (5) recognizing our mutual vulnerability.

**Intersectionality.** As important as it is to help students recognize the presence and effects of racism, classism, sexism, etc, it is critical to avoid presenting the notion of a one-dimensional, dichotomous world. Our goal is to help students develop an equity literacy that supports them in understanding that problems are messy and that viewing something through the lens of culture helps identify the intersectionalities at play at a given moment (Crenshaw, 2009). Multiple and related systemic elements at work to simplify or “unsee” the complexity of our own experiences make social identity and social difference difficult to discuss. In its wake we are left with an oversimplified set of either-or categories that is supposed to capture our experiences in oppositions, male or female, White or Black, straight or gay, Christian or other religions (or none)…This set not only narrows the range of possibilities for describing our experiences but also positions one side of the duality against the other. This means that the very language we use to describe our experiences is already loaded with opposition. (Linker, 2015, p. 5-6)

Speaking to monolithic identities such as race, class, or ethnicity fails to recognize the multitude of identities each of us possess and disclose or conceal, given the opportunity, at any given moment.

**Discourse as Knowledge Construction**

**Forms of discourse.** As they work to make sense of the social world around them, children enter into classrooms with a wide variety of questions, experiences, and opinions that serve to frame the ways they interact with new information and situations.
Thus, classrooms become potential sites of diverse perspectives and powerful discourse in which students work to collectively negotiate and critique new knowledge. Parker (2006) states, however, much of this potential is lost as classroom discourse too often takes the form of recitation. Challenging this as poor practice, Parker advocates for the implementation of seminar and deliberation as two classroom discourse structures to promote both learning and governing within diverse classroom settings. Seminar refers to engagement with a rich and challenging text where discussants explore a central question across multiple and often competing interpretations. Such a structure addresses the issues Leland and Harste (2001) faced when challenging their undergraduates to consider embedded sexist messages within a fairy tale as seminar calls on students to continually consider and create meaning from a diverse set of interpretations that challenge their world view. Students are positioned, in these instances, to speak and listen with the stated goal of learning in the company of others.

Parker’s second structure, deliberation, is much like seminar with the exception that learning is no longer the primary goal of the discussion. Rather, exploring a central question, discussants engaged in deliberation work to speak, listen, and decide upon a course of action. This may call on students to address issues within the classroom, school, or broader community. In doing this work, Parker argues decisions must be made within the social context of the classroom for four reasons: (1) the problem is shared, thus the solution should be shared; (2) inquiry, where results are often disputable, invites and relies upon multiple viewpoints; (3) the multiplicity of alternatives grows from collective thought; and (4) participants learn of the social worlds of others through discursive engagements calling on them to find a shared solution.
Challenges of discourse. It is often challenging for students to initially engage in such discussions because they have not had similar experiences in other contested spaces nor have they been exposed to these practices outside of school. Lusk and Weinberg (1994) argue that students enter the classroom with inhibitions often preventing them from authentic and deep engagement with debatable issues. Lusk and Weinberg identify three sources that frame the challenges students face within the interactional context of such critical classroom discourse. The first is peer interaction. They write, “[Student] concerns about their relationships as peers may take precedence over their concerns about their roles in the class, and may create a reluctance to say anything in class which might jeopardize their relationships as friends” (p. 302). Teachers, then, are called on to help students recognize these tensions growing out of their overlapping roles as friends, students, and citizens while helping students learn the difference between the notions of disagreeing and disliking. The second source of tension addresses differences in power where students may see teachers as experts or, at the very least, believe teachers want to be treated as such. Working within this context, students are hesitant to challenge the ideas or perceived stance of the teacher. The third source of tension emulates from what Lusk and Weinberg refer to as the politics of voice. This extends the differences in power between students and teacher to the network of power existing amongst the student body itself. Lusk and Weinberg explain

‘Power’ here is related to the ability to minimize the costs to one’s personal and professional reputation which might be incurred by speaking, especially by dissenting from the views of others (i.e., not ‘going along with the crowd’). Although the demographics of each classroom vary and affect the power of
students in that setting, members of dominant groups in the larger society generally experience more freedom to express their views in the classroom. That is, members of dominant racial (white), gender (male), sexual (heterosexual), and class (middle and upper middle) groups will risk fewer costs in speaking in class on a controversial topic than will members of nondominant groups. Another way to describe the varying costs of voice in the classroom is to say that members of nondominant groups are discredited more easily in the participants’ minds. (p. 302)

Teachers, therefore, have to work to deliberately address the challenges of classroom discourse around controversial and personal issues while rooting these discussions in generative practices that help students confidently and successfully engage in similar work outside the classroom walls. These classrooms, built upon relationships of trust, work to disrupt the notion that discussion is about being right or viewed as a form of competition and, instead, become spaces where students and teachers alike can speak passionately from their own experiences (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994) while being protected from harmful perspectives promoting stereotypes or hegemonic assumptions.

Without taking such measures, teachers may risk disrupting their classroom community (Vetter & Hungerford-Kressor, 2014). However, it is often difficult for teachers to determine how and when to respond to students knowing their response to the situation will likely affect the willingness of students to continue sharing their beliefs publically. As Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor note, if children are afraid to say things that may be biased there will be no opportunities for the class to hear multiple perspectives and to critique these openly. Thus, navigating discourse around controversial
and personal issues calls for a delicate balance on the part of teachers. Rogers and Mosley’s (2006) research confirms this. In their study of the ways in which a group of White second graders and their White teacher took up issues of race in their critical literacy program, they revealed discomfort on the part of the teacher when one of the children challenged the notion that racism continues to be a problem in the United States since “MLK changed everything” (p. 479). The teacher recognized the student was speaking from a position of Whiteness and wanted one of the other children to challenge this, but none did. The teacher struggled with whether she should critique the statement or move on, recognizing the possibility that her critique may serve to silence the group and “ultimately relieve them of the responsibility of examining white privilege and racism” (p. 479). Therefore, another issue at play when engaged in classroom discourse is the question of when and if it is the teacher’s place to create meaning for students and the future ramifications for having done so.

Another challenge of critical classroom discourse is that not all topics will feel important to all students. Allen’s (2014) study of third grade Latina/o students reading and discussing picture books addressing issues of immigration and the lived experiences of immigrants found that some students did want to pursue such discussion, seeing little value in them. One student asked if the class could just move on while another, asked what he might want to change in regards to the inequities identified within one of the books, declared “I would like to change nothing because I think nothing needs to change” (p. 171). Allen, playing the dual roles of teacher researcher, viewed this as an opportunity for students to critique and feel supported in regards to the challenges many of their families were facing yet was met with disinterest and disbelief by some.
Reflecting on this, she noted the students’ “personal interpretations often did not align with the perspective of the majority; however, it created moments of critical dialogue between the students” (p. 171). Within these moments of critical dialogue, students not only felt a right to dissent but demonstrated a willingness to challenge the dominant views of the class without regret. Allen viewed this not as a challenge to the purpose or effectiveness of the discussions but an indicator “the level of engagement that the texts offered students, as they actively engaged with one another around topics of expertise, was even more valuable” (p. 172) in that students learned to engage in discussions in an authentic manner rather than one dictated by perceptions of the teacher’s expectation.

Gaps in the Literature on Navigating Difference through Classroom Discourse

The current research into the ways students and teachers enter into discussions about difference reveals a need for further studies addressing three issues at play in this work. The first is the need to identify ways students draw on their personal and cultural resources to create meaning around issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc. The second is the need for studies that reveal the implications of teacher discourse on the ensuing and future discourse patterns of students. The third is a need for studies identifying the specific challenges younger students face in engaging in controversial discussions. The issues raised in the current research speak much more to students in middle school, high school, and college and may not accurately reflect the experiences of younger students.

Teacher Agency

The development of teacher agency is critical if teachers are to become more confident in their abilities to approach controversial topics as well as feel less vulnerable
to possible repercussions accompanying such discussions or studies. Understanding that teachers are burdened with the expectations of the social system in which they work—students, parents, colleagues, administration, district and state personnel, the immediate community, the national and international community, etc—this section will explore issues at play when teachers aim to work within sociopolitical contexts to attain greater autonomy in a quest to create democratic classrooms reflecting the personal and professional beliefs guiding their practice (Meier, 1995).

**Sociopolitical Nature of Teaching**

To better understand the lengths to which our teaching represents a political act, it is important to make explicit the fact all teaching is rooted in values. Kelly (1986) writes, “Values are taught by all teachers…Values are taught whenever an adult stands before children and acts, speaks, and reveals his convictions” (p. 115). These values serve to inform the beliefs, practices, and goals of each and every teacher standing in front of a classroom of students (Counts, 1932; Ferguson, 2001; Gay, 2010; Perlstein, 2004) as well as shape the developing beliefs, practices, and goals of their students. However, it is essential to note that values are socially constructed within a sociopolitical sphere in which we adopt and then reify the ways of being of that social system. Speaking to this dynamic relationship between individuals and social systems, Johnson (2006) explains

The first [way in which we are informed by social systems] is a process of socialization through which we learn to participate in social life. From families, schools, religion, and the mass media, through the examples set by parents, peers, coaches, teachers, and public figures — in short, from just about every direction we are exposed to ideas and images of the world and who we are in relation to it and
other people. We learn to name things and people, to value one thing or kind of
person above another, to distinguish what’s considered “normal” and acceptable
from what is not. (p. 78)

For teachers walking into classrooms for the very first time, such socialization,
from a very young age, has taught them about the particulars of student-teacher
relationships, communication, instruction, assessment, expectation, community traits, and
so on. Often, these learned particulars privilege the dominant culture (Gay, 2010;
Howard, 2010; Johnson, 2006; Macedo, 2006; Nieto, 2002) and are rooted in neoliberal
ideals such as competition, individualism, meritocracy, and color-blindness (Apple,
2013). It is these values, reflecting the needs of the free market, that shape much of the
educational landscape and act as a norm against which all other ideologies and practices
are compared.

**Stance.** When Brian Schultz (2008) accepted a teaching position in a troubled
Chicago school he knew he wanted to facilitate learning in his fifth grade classroom that
was rooted in helping students challenge the oppressive societal norms at play in their
school and neighborhoods through involvement in public policy. Together, he and his
students worked to document the poor conditions of their dilapidated school and
construct an advocacy campaign calling for the school district to provide them a better
learning environment. However, despite the fact he recognized and embraced the political
nature of his teaching, Schultz was hesitant to adopt the label *activist teacher*. His
hesitation was in publically naming the work he was engaging in alongside his students.
This tension led to important pedagogical questions that would define who he was and
what he aimed to accomplish as a teacher. Schultz writes
While I may have been aware of my status as an activist teacher, I struggled with this label. If I identified with this label, why was this a constant struggle for me? What does it take for teachers to reconcile the interests of their students, their ethical and moral obligations as educators, and the notion of not “rocking the boat” in today’s educational and political climate? (p. 127)

Though Schultz was aware no teacher can ever engage in ideologically neutral practices, he found it difficult at times to publically declare the nature of his work as that of an activist teacher because such a stance fell outside what most would consider accepted societal norms – inviting skepticism and criticism. Yet, this was the stance Schultz took each day in his classroom as he and his students learned together what it meant to challenge the status quo and demand change. Bigelow (1997) reflects on a similar awakening in his teaching when he realized “to pretend that I was a mere dispenser of information would be dishonest, but worse, it would imply that being a spectator is an ethical response to injustice” (p.14). Thus, in becoming increasingly deliberate in our practice and articulating the need for and benefit of teaching for social justice, an important aspect of stance becomes naming the work being done in the classroom, situating this against sociopolitical norms and expectations, and creating meaning from both the convergence and divergence of these two competing ideologies.

Another aspect of stance relates the ontological and epistemological beliefs of teachers in terms of what counts as knowledge and how it is created within the classroom. Progressive education consistently draws claims of indoctrination from conservatives who feel threatened by what they view as a liberal assault on traditional American ideals and knowledge (Gless and Smith, 1991). Critics claim progressive education, in tandem
with the mass media, is working to brainwash children into a resentment of, among other things, White America (Fifer & Palos 2011) and capitalism (Kemen, 2011). Progressive scholars counter these claims by deconstructing the traditional teacher-student power structures that situate teachers as all-knowing and students as empty vessels to be filled (Friere, 1970). In doing so, educators take a stance toward teaching and learning that demands their students become critical thinkers rather than passive consumers of information (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2010) while all members of the classroom, big and small, move fluidly in and out of teacher and learner roles. A key component of this restructuring of power relations is the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue. Friere (1970) speaks to direct links between dialogue and critical thinking when declaring, “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 92-3).

However, inviting students to draw on cultural and personal resources in the co-construction of meaning around controversial issues leaves many teachers feeling unsure about the specifics of their role. Understanding that topics related to social justice are viewed by many to be controversial – such as oppressive uses of power as viewed through lenses of race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, and sexual orientation - do teachers engage freely with students? Do they reveal their own beliefs and commitments? It is one thing to invite students into a discussion and facilitate it’s development but quite another to become an active player within that discussion knowing that despite a teacher’s best efforts to minimize power structures they are always present.
Michael Kelly (1986) identifies four stances teachers take when confronted with the notion of tackling sensitive topics. The first, *exclusive neutrality*, is one of avoidance. When teachers engage in exclusive neutrality they claim their obligation to serve many publics calls on them to avoid controversial topics because it is too difficult, if not impossible, to be fair and impartial to all vested parties. The second, *exclusive partiality*, is a stance characterized by a one-sided presentation of what constitutes truth with the expectation students will accept this as undeniable knowledge. The third, *neutral impartiality*, calls on classrooms to provide an open hearing in which all students are actively involved in critical dialogue to construct new knowledge. The fourth stance, *committed impartiality*, mirrors neutral impartiality but demands the insertion of the teacher’s personal views as one of many sources.

Kelly and Brandes’ (2001) research reflects a variety of stances taken up by teachers confronted with controversial issues. Their two-year qualitative study sought to identify the tensions and contradictions arising between the stated philosophies of undergraduates voluntarily enrolled in a social justice-oriented teacher education program and the realities they encountered in schools during their practicum. Twelve students from a cohort of thirty-six were selected to reflect the demographic profile of the cohort as a whole. Kelly and Brandes found that despite the fact each of the student teachers believed schools play an important role in building a democratic citizenry, there was little agreement in regards to how this goal was to be met. While none of the teachers in the group chose to eschew controversial subjects, the researchers identified five categories to describe the stances student teachers took in relation to neutrality when addressing such topics: (1) teacher neutrality as possible and desirable, (2) teacher neutrality as possible...
and occasionally desirable, (3) teacher neutrality as impossible but a worthy ideal, (4) teacher neutrality as neither possible nor a goal, and (5) feigned teacher neutrality as support of existing power structures in society. The student-teachers’ responses and shared experiences revealed competing ontological and epistemological beliefs in regards to the supposed presence of absolute truths and the role teachers should play in guiding students through these. As with Kelly’s (1986) categorizations of the diverse stances teachers take, Kelly and Brandes’ (2001) research of social justice-oriented teachers reveals that a myriad of stances are adopted even within educators who believe in the need for critical discourse in the classroom. In another study of social justice-oriented teachers, Bender-Slack (2010) concluded that those who chose not to espouse a political stance or a desire to change student’s minds around social injustices worked to de-radicalize and de-politicize the notion of social justice.

Kelly and Brandes (2001), troubled by the implied messages such passivity teaches students, suggest a new and preferred stance to supplement those presented by Kelly (1986). This stance, termed inclusive and situated engagement, is framed as a means of inviting the perspectives of both teacher and students. In these discussions, the teacher’s views are situated within competing views and open to critique by the class. In doing so, students are taught the generative process of resisting the fixation of belief through authority as they openly interrogate information and further develop their evolving beliefs. Such practices remove teachers from the notion of indoctrination. In taking on such a stance toward the creation of knowledge, social justice teachers root themselves and their classrooms in the democratic process of critical discourse around multiple perspectives.
Obstacles. Many of the stances taken up by teachers inclined to teach for social justice are in response to real and perceived obstacles standing in their way. One such obstacle is fear. 82% of the 22 teachers in Bender-Slack’s (2010) study declared they were oppressed by fear. It was this fear, the teacher’s reasoned, motivating them to not question institutional obligations as they worked to both comply and self-monitor their practices even in the absence of others. Similar to Foucault’s (1977) definition of the coercive forces of a central Panopticon concealing when prisoners were and were not under surveillance, teachers in Bender-Slack’s (2010) study lived under the fear of an unseen gaze from parents, colleagues, and administrators. The researchers contextualized their participants’ fears as the result of “sponsor teachers, students, parents, and even voices in their own heads advising them” against inviting controversial topics into their classrooms (p. 442).

Another obstacle facing social justice teachers is the notion of creating a safe classroom. Safe classrooms are those that pursue only topics that avoid an emotional stir from students and eschew conflict. Evans, Avery, and Pederson (2000) describe these issues, termed “taboo topics,” falling outside the ideal of a safe classroom. Thus, in creating classrooms that avoid conflict teachers allow taboo to take control as the teacher’s fear of the unknown prompts a pedagogy of avoidance. Evans, Avery, and Pederson’s study of 32 social studies student teachers found that the more personal a topic is – sexual orientation, religion, racism – the more likely a teacher was to avoid it. On the contrary, the further removed a topic was from the personal experiences of students, the more likely teachers were to access them. Evans, Avery, and Pederson argued that safer topics were often adopted because “those topics do not threaten the
belief system of the culture” (p. 295). While such a stance works to ensure an environment in which no student feels uncomfortable speaking out in favor of or in opposition to dominant or alternative ideologies, Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor (2014) argue that without opportunity for students to engage in these contested issues students are denied opportunities to hear multiple perspectives made public and to openly critique these ideas. In working to support the notion of the “safe” classroom, educators deny students the opportunity to engage in democratic discussion of important issues facing their communities (hooks, 1994). Bender-Slack (2010) disputes the possibility that a conflict-free classroom can offer opportunities to tackle issues of power and oppression. She writes, “If social justice is about transgressing boundaries and transforming power relations, maintaining security and protection can be challenging because the inequities of society are played out in the classroom and must be examined” (p. 193). To avoid opportunities to transgress these boundaries in the name of conflict-free classrooms is to make the political choice to be complicit in a colonizing education that serves to silence voices of dissent and demonstrate an “intolerance of those who are culturally and ideologically different” (Evans, Avery, and Pederson, 2000, p. 299), thus demonstrating the political nature of a supposed neutral curriculum.

Fear and the selective framing of what constitutes a safe classroom are not the only obstacles teachers face in taking a social-justice oriented stance in their teaching. As mentioned earlier, there is much debate regarding what constitutes teaching for social justice. Differing views about the purposes of democracy education work to dilute and, at times, even immobilize efforts by progressive educators (Hess, 2004). From this arises conflict over what constitutes curriculum within our schools.
Curriculum

At the heart of social justice teaching is a consideration of what counts as curriculum. This harks back to debates over the purposes of education and the tangible goals of social justice teaching as well as recognition of the political nature of teaching. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) write “Critical educators are aware of their own complicity in maintaining the status quo” (p. 168) and work to combat hegemonic curricula. When teachers are willing to step beyond the demands of standards and testing to tackle issues and invite critical readings of texts they support students in constructing generative practices and stances that support a more equitable democracy and active citizenship (Fifer & Palos, 2011; Friere, 1970; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015; Michie, 2009). According to findings from a study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, the cultivation of an “open classroom climate for discussion is a significant predictor of civic knowledge, support for democratic values, participation in political discussion, and political engagement” (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001). On the contrary, the avoidance of such a curriculum makes schools culpable in the reification of oppressive ideologies and oppressive acts within their own school walls. Despite claims of safe classrooms, this lack of curriculum addressing issues of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion serves not only to support the unquestioning acceptance of dominant ideologies but create an emotionally and, at times, physically unsafe environment for minority students (Reddy, 1998).

Falsehood of neutrality. While teachers worry about the possibility of forcing politics on their students when they challenge traditional resources and ideologies (Schultz, 2008), issue-neutral education continues to remain sheltered from accusations
of constituting a political project itself (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). In Kelly and Brandes (2001) study of 12 beginning teachers committed to social justice, the researchers found teachers were often reluctant to move outside what they considered a neutral stance when addressing controversial issues. However, there were times some of these teachers chose to name and claim a belief. One situation in which they felt comfortable taking a stand was when interpreting a topic as moral or ethical rather than as a controversial social issue. Another situation warranting a more agentive stance was when confronted with the desire to represent oneself as emotionally and intellectually invested in societal issues. Doing so allowed teachers to move outside the one-dimensional frame of classroom teacher as dispenser of knowledge while also providing a model for students of how one can voice a minority opinion in the presence of others – especially an opinion that provides a counter-narrative to negative views and untruths that work to further oppress marginalized groups. Bigelow and Peterson (2002) support the need for such stances to be made when arguing,

For educators to feign neutrality is irresponsible. The pedagogical aim in this social context needs to be truth rather than “balance” – if by balance we mean giving equal credence to claims we know to be false and that, in any event, enjoy wide dispersal in the dominant culture. (p. 5)

However, the teachers in Kelly and Brandes’ (2001) study found the waters to be choppy in regards to how perspectives can or should be introduced to the class. The teachers’ hope of creating a balanced look at multiple perspectives was occasionally met with accusations of bias for having shared alternative perspectives at all. In taking such a position, these students declared that neutrality is not only the act of silencing alternative
perspectives but actively refusing to question or critique dominant ideologies. Hess (2004) points out that, in regards to the relationship between classroom critique and conservative claims of the politicization of education, even assuming students might question certain things will be seen by some as indoctrination. However, Hess is quick to make the argument that attempting to navigate what counts as controversial is like taking aim at a moving target in that public opinion changes over time in regards to what is perceived as controversial. But a few examples of this include women’s suffrage, the internment of Japanese-Americans, and the aims of the Civil Rights movement.

**Gaps in the Literature on Teacher Agency**

A retrieval and research into studies addressing the intersection of social justice teaching and teacher agency reveals an over-representation of the experiences of pre-service teachers and social studies teachers. As stated in other sections, there are far fewer studies working to analyze the experiences of elementary-level teachers navigating issues of social justice within their teaching. The existing studies also rely very heavily upon interviews while there are far fewer studies tracking the day-to-day interplay between efforts to teach for social justice and issues of working within a sociopolitical context that challenges teachers to overcome obstacles in creating a curriculum and practices that challenge the status quo.
CHAPTER 3: Classroom Context

During the year-and-a-half of teaching that constituted the timeframe of this study, I often found myself listening in on my students’ questions and thoughts consumed with feelings of amazement, puzzlement, pride, concern, and at times discomfort. Working collaboratively to negotiate a curriculum alongside seven, eight, and nine year old children is messy – especially when this curriculum is rooted in identifying and interrogating injustices that each of us, at times, play a significant role in maintaining. To understand the ways my students went about creating meaning from such topics it is important to first grasp the context within which these discussions occurred. Descriptions of my findings would mean very little without a broader understanding of the beliefs and curricular structures that framed this work as well as the specific challenges we encountered.

My classroom curriculum is rooted in the principles of a social justice education. A social justice education is one that moves beyond a mere appreciation for all people, working instead to promote a participatory democracy in which students and teachers work side-by-side to critique and disrupt injustices as related to, but not limited by, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and gender. During this dissertation study the curricular and instructional decisions I made in the name of teaching for social justice were deliberate, yet exploratory in nature. For instance, prior to reading aloud Cheyenne Again (Bunting, 1995), the fictional story of a small Cheyenne boy taken to an off-reservation boarding school to be stripped of his cultural ways, and sharing a segment
from an online video in which a Muslim woman is both verbally attacked and denied service in a New Jersey deli, I carefully selected each text with the intention of helping my students better understand the histories and lived experiences of marginalized groups in America as well as the privileges being White and Christian play in these instances. I wrote in my teaching journal

This morning I read *Cheyenne Again* to the kids. I think when I go back and listen to the tape I'm going to find I was working hard to get them to feel upset with the white people in the story…Of course, this is what I assume Eve Bunting intended when writing this book. The off-reservation boarding schools were terrible in their treatment of students and the complete disregard they had for their funds of knowledge, culture, etc. Yes, I was purposely looking to have them come to the realization the Whites were ugly and unjust to the Native Americans. I was creating knowledge for them in my book choice, the way I read it, and the ways I talked about it.

The same was true of the video [my student teacher] showed the kids today from the *What Would You Do?* series. It was a narrative intended to tell a particular story - that some Americans unjustly see Muslims as non-Americans who are threats to our society. It showed that they think they should dress the part of an American and leave their religion/culture behind in order to be integrated into a certain vision of American "normal."

These [resources] show two times when I am very comfortable constructing an experience in which the kids are to come to a specific point/moral rather than thinking critically. Or, are they thinking critically? No, I don't think so. That said,
what I'm doing right now is going beyond the idea of a multicultural education - one that limits itself to lessons of tolerance or superficial understandings of culture. We are working to see how difference is used to hurt others and soon we'll think about how this knowledge might change us. (Teaching Journal, February 9, 2016)

While I continued to wrestle with what it meant for my students to think critically, I both recognized and accepted the role my text selections played in shaping meaning for my students in regards to historic and present-day injustices. I viewed such texts as essential to enlightening students – providing them a sense of historical and present realities from which to contextualize current acts of systemic discrimination.

As one aspect of my continued inquiry into social justice teaching, this critique of the relationship between teacher roles and student outcomes demonstrates the ways in which I was working to better grasp my own understandings of social justice teaching so I could become increasingly deliberate in the goals I set and the practices I developed for my students and myself. I used my teaching journal during this dissertation research to develop and explore the beliefs, curricular structures, and practices that constituted social justice teaching in my classroom as well as the role communication played in bringing parents on board with this work. This aspect of my research provided me context to reflect back on when speaking to how my students “suddenly” started questioning and critiquing cultural norms while collaboratively building new understandings through dialogue.
In this chapter I will share the beliefs, curricular structures, and practices that constituted social justice teaching in my classroom over the course of this study as well as the ways this work was carefully negotiated between home and school.

**Beliefs, Curricular Structures, and Practices**

In 1997 I took my first teaching position in a school that dedicated itself to embracing diversity and challenging societal norms. It was a school where students, faculty, and families worked together to engage in civic action. Setting out to build bridges between home and school, parents were invited to help teachers and administrators understand how they could better meet the needs of children and families who identified within diverse communities of race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. In a time when most schools remained mired in traditional forms of education and avoided such topics, this was a school that offered its students and families an alternative in both instructional approaches and purposes for education.

Although this was very different from my own schooling experiences I welcomed the opportunity to embrace new possibilities for what education could be. Having grown up in a small Midwestern town that lacked any degree of racial or ethnic diversity, this experience served as an awakening in which I was confronted with some of my own racist, sexist, ethnocentric, and homophobic beliefs and perspectives. For the first time in my life my eyes were opened to the fact I not only knew very little about the communities of people I had othered but that the vast majority of these communities did not view, or experience, the world in the same way I did. Because I was so naïve to these sorts of issues in most cases I truly learned about the world alongside my students and my colleagues. It was Ayrica’s mother, working multiple jobs while raising two young girls
on her own, that helped me see parent involvement means a lot more than just showing up for school events – in fact, sometimes it means never making it into school at all. It was Vincent that showed me not all of us feel safer in the presence of the police. And it was Michael who taught me what it was like to continually have to confront others for their hateful speech in defense of the loving relationship between two mothers.

While this experience helped me acknowledge the need to address issues of social justice in the classroom, it was not until I relocated to South Carolina nine years later and entered the doctoral program in Language and Literacy at the University of South Carolina that I began to gain the theoretical, historical, and cultural perspectives required to envision the scope of what this work might entail. It was rich texts and the discussions that emerged from them that allowed the likes of Sonia Nieto, Paulo Friere, Derrick Bell, Michael Apple, Kimberly Crenshaw, Lisa Delpit, Michael Foucault, bell hooks, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Donaldo Macedo, and many more to help me not only take on the work of questioning the world but see this same work as a possibility for my students. Over time I began to develop new beliefs in relation to education that would pave the way for the development of new professional goals and practices.

During my time in the PhD program, I have taught at a magnet school in Columbia, South Carolina that has increasingly dedicated itself to issues of social justice as well. Much like my first school, this is a place where many classrooms help students begin to make sense of racial injustice, address the ways stereotypes hinder our understandings of others, and question beliefs and practices that have long been taken for granted. Our school has collaboratively developed a set of professional beliefs that serve as the basis from which we construct practices and inquiries, including those aimed at
working toward a conception of social justice. Table 3.1 presents those beliefs that most
directly frame the work my class and I engaged in during the course of this research.

Table 3.1

*Collaboratively Constructed Professional Beliefs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs about Learners and Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Children are sense makers by nature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Growth and change are not linear and sequential, but rich, complex, and recursive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Children learn by generating new hypotheses, taking risks, and reflecting on the development of their new thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children engage in genuine inquiry when they are invited to pose and investigate questions or issues they find compelling. These questions or issues might be completely self-initiated or related to a specific class inquiry.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs about Teachers, Teaching, and Curriculum</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• When teachers plan, they focus on teaching students <em>how</em> as well as <em>what</em> to learn. They teach the skillfulness of inquiry by helping children learn how to carefully observe the world using tools and strategies of the disciplines; pose and investigate questions from multiple perspectives; use primary and secondary sources; use the language of inquiry and the disciplines; and use reflection and self-evaluation to grow and change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers are natural researchers and use insights from intentional and systematic kid watching to make informed instructional decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Curriculum is created <em>with</em> and <em>for</em> children.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Beliefs about Thought and Language</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Although questions promote a sense of wonder and often frame investigations, genuine inquiry is grounded in authentic conversations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Curiosity is nurtured when children share hunches, personal connections, and anomalies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New thoughts are generated when all participants in the classroom laugh, pose and answer questions, debate, listen, search, describe, teach, negotiate, and hypothesize together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individual insights become part of the class thought collective through formal and informal conversation.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs about Community and Democracy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• All participants in the classroom function as teachers and learners, meaning that choice, ownership, and conversations are at the heart of ongoing learning rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children should feel welcome, safe, encouraged, and respected when engaging in joyful, meaningful, and rigorous learning experiences where all voices are heard, respected, and valued.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strong classroom communities promote collaboration, which in turn enhances academic rigor, independence, confidence, and competence.

- Teachers and students share a sense of curiosity, excitement, trust and respect as they learn new things and think together in new ways.
- You can have democracy without community, but it is impossible to have community without democracy.

**Beliefs about Schooling, Society and Teaching for Social Justice**

- Teachers and students regularly ask how they can make the world a better place by constructing and taking action on new knowledge.
- Teachers benefit from asking the same questions of themselves they ask of their students.
- Classroom engagements are designed to help us live differently in the world, not just prepare students for future tests or the next level of learning/expectations.
- Teaching for social justice is essential. Children are taught to look at the world critically, to examine whose voices are heard, whose are left out; to constantly seek opportunities to change the world for the better.
- Gaps and biases in the curriculum need to be interrogated. This should include calling on students to use what they are learning about the past to better understand the present.
- Current news should be regularly accessed to tackle issues related to inequity and to consider all perspectives. Each of these perspectives creates opportunities for students and teachers alike to take action (though some is taken and some is not).

Working from these beliefs, it was my goal to cultivate a culture of inquiry in my classroom that called on students to think critically about the world around them and, as a natural by-product of this work, address issues of social justice. While I was prepared to launch formal inquiries into relationships of power and destructive constructs such as normalcy, I soon began to realize the tools required for social justice-oriented work fell outside the formal explorations I had developed in preparation for our school year. That is to say, our success in thinking critically about injustices would grow out of other components of our classroom such as the development of classroom relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and compassion. Success in thinking critically would also call on us to effectively work in collaboration with one another and come to see the inevitable
disagreements that grew out of such discussions as potential for new learning rather than uncomfortable conflicts to be avoided. Another aspect I saw as crucial to preparing my students for addressing issues of social justice was to develop their social imagination. This meant to help them understand what might be going on in the minds of others so they could begin to take into account the feelings and interests of multiple players. So, it was not only specific inquiries into social justice or even daily discussions around the kids’ questions about the world that constituted our work. Rather, it also included a wide variety of demonstrations and engagements spread out across the curricular day that allowed us to enter into social justice work with the tools we needed.

I will now provide a description of the curricular structures and subjects that framed our work. Table 3.2 shares the typical daily forecast we followed during our instructional day. This is followed by a description of those curricular structures and subjects that played a key role in this research.

**Table 3.2**

*Daily Forecast*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Structure/Subject</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 – 8:30</td>
<td>Explorations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30 – 8:55</td>
<td>Morning Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:55 – 10:45</td>
<td>Literacy Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:45 – 11:15</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 - 11:30</td>
<td>Read Aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30 – 12:20</td>
<td>Specials – Art, Music, PE, Computer, and Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:20 – 12:50</td>
<td>Recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:50 – 1:45</td>
<td>Math Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:45 – 2:30</td>
<td>Integrated Units of Study into Science and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30 – 2:50</td>
<td>Read Aloud/Pack Up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Explorations

Each day began with a thirty minute classroom structure we called Explorations. This was a time when students could move about the room engaging in self-selected activities that grew from their personal interests. These included, among other options, opportunities to play chess, study artifacts at the science table, assemble puzzles, explore science kits, read a book, play math games, write or illustrate stories, paint pictures, or write in classroom journals (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Two students work from a manual to construct circuits during Explorations. In the background another student chooses to continue work on the biography of Bess Coleman he has been writing during Writing Workshop.

Of the options available during Explorations, it was our use of classroom journals, a practice adopted from my colleague Tim O’Keefe (Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004), that played a significant role in launching mini-inquiries into issues of social justice. The classroom journals provided a place where students could record, and later share, the questions they wanted answered. There were five classroom journals in total. These
included: the science journal, language journal, math journal, classroom community journal, and culture journal (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 Classroom journals spread across the floor during Explorations.

While each of these journals supported students to develop a curiosity about the world around them and continually ask questions about how things work and why things are the way they are, it was their questioning of social beliefs and practices in the culture journal that fueled many of our discussions around gender and race. The questions the students and I recorded in the culture journal, as well as all other journals, were later taken up during Morning Meeting.

**Morning Meeting**

Morning Meeting was a classroom structure in which students circled up on the carpet each morning to preview the day, bring to light and resolve any classroom issues, discuss national and local news events, and discuss questions recorded in our classroom. It was during this daily ritual that student-generated questions about mathematics,
language, science, and the social world grew into the curriculum that fed classroom discussions (see Table 3.3 for a sampling of student questions).

Table 3.3  
Sampling of Student-Generated Questions in the Classroom Journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Math Journal</th>
<th>Science Journal</th>
<th>Language Journal</th>
<th>Culture Journal</th>
<th>Classroom Community Journal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why is a clock a circle instead of a square?</td>
<td>I wonder why sand dollars have lots of holes.</td>
<td>Why do we read left to right and not right to left?</td>
<td>Why do people judge people by their skin color?</td>
<td>Why when people have book recommendations they do it only for their friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many nanometers in a micrometer?</td>
<td>How does the ocean refill?</td>
<td>Why do some words sound the same but are not spelled the same so it’s hard to know?</td>
<td>Why do we need to go to school?</td>
<td>Why do people at our school bully?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was watching a baseball game. The pitcher threw the ball 95mph. I wonder how fast the hitter hit it.</td>
<td>Why did extinct animals grow so big?</td>
<td>Why do we say words but we don’t know what they mean?</td>
<td>Why do people like money and it is just paper?</td>
<td>I hear some people in class say “But I didn’t do anything. Someone else did it.” Why do they blame someone else?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do our bodies move?</td>
<td>How do monkeys clean their teeth?</td>
<td></td>
<td>I wonder why girls dye their hair.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Why in olden times women couldn’t vote?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While assuming it would be the culture journal and, to a lesser degree, the classroom community journal that would fuel our discussions related to social justice, I soon noticed questions in the other journals played an important role as well. Each of these journals was scaffolding my students into becoming more observant of the workings of the world around them as well as cultivating an ability to think through their
observations alongside others to come to tentative meanings. For instance, questioning language practices such as why people use words they do not know the meaning of called on these second and third graders to identify a potentially problematic pattern in the behavior of others, critique its practice, share additional observations and experiences that support the process of meaning making, develop a working hypothesis, and become more alert to this practice in the future. While the work we engaged in would call on us to notice, name, and problematize issues of injustice, we were first learning to see the world with a critical eye in hopes of better understanding its workings. Just two weeks into our first year together I began to notice the value of each of these journals, writing

While these [other journals] are not related in any way to social justice they are experiences in which the kids are learning to engage with the world in a manner that allows them to be awed by the simplest of things and to pay attention to/notice these with greater focus. Inquiry is engagement with the world – noticing it, naming it, questioning it, etc. Without this how could they learn to live in a way where they notice and question power, etc? (Teaching Journal, 8-27-15)

For this structure to be effective in providing space for the students and I to collaboratively construct meaning about the world we had to first learn how to listen carefully to others, build responses that added to another’s ideas, challenge one another when multiple perspectives emerged, and eventually provide support for our ideas with examples from the world or from our previous learning. This meant the act of discourse had to become part of our curriculum. Early on, one of our biggest struggles was to learn to engage with the ideas of others instead of falling into the traditional practice found within many school contexts where students take turns raising hands, sharing independent
thoughts directed at the teacher, and awaiting affirmation for a job well done. My goal for these early discussions was to make our Morning Meeting discussions feel more natural like what one might see around a dinner table, yet allowing for some sort of system of turn-taking in order to best navigate a discussion between twenty-plus speakers. This was not a process that came quickly or easily. After an early discussion where the kids shared out bits of the conversations they had with their families regarding why we go to school, I noted in my journal

More important than what [the students] said was how they heard it. They paid very little attention and showed hardly any interest in the ideas of others. This is consistent with many other parts of our day right now. It’s crucial for them to learn to listen, think, and respond. I’m realizing more and more that certain things have to be in place before we can explore topics such as power, normalcy, gender, etc. We have to cultivate a way of engaging with ideas and one another. This must come first. (Teaching Journal, 8-27-15)

While learning to listen closely to others and build upon their ideas was taken up throughout the day, from literacy discussions to turning-and-talking with an assigned partner during math, science, and social studies, Morning Meeting served as a consistent daily structure allowing students to eventually realize the power of collaborative thinking within the large group. Two weeks after the failed discussion about why we go to school, the class turned a corner. It was a question in the Science Journal that served as an entry point for this sort of collaborative work. I wrote

Today Sophie shared something in the science journal. She asked why it is we drink so much water. This seemed like a rather obvious question, even to the kids
in the circle. However, the coolest thing happened. Emily said we drink water to stay hydrated then Silas added to her idea by saying this is especially the case after recess when they all come in hot from the playground. Braden added that they are also very sweaty, to which I pointed out sweating keeps us cool but probably accelerates the process of dehydration since we are losing liquids from our body. Chase finished the discussion by pointing out we need to stay hydrated to stay alive. I loved this discussion because it was the first time I heard the kids building on to the ideas of others. Each person who shared something pushed our understanding of water, hydration, and life one step further. This was such a perfect example of co-constructing knowledge together. One person's idea led another to think of something else. It's not as though they necessarily had to hear something they didn't already know. It's that they needed to hear something to help them think of the next thing. (Teaching Journal, 9-9-15)

I immediately pointed out to my students what they had done, fore-fronting the power of listening closely to others and connecting our thinking to theirs. In time, this became to the norm for our discussions. In a discussion that soon followed about the practice of wearing earrings, Derrick made the statement boys cannot wear earrings. Many of his classmates quickly contested this supposed truth. In doing so, students demonstrated another aspect of these discussions could be to openly question the validity of a statement made by one of their peers.

During another Morning Meeting discussion early in our first year, Silas shared a story about his father cutting off the head of a poisonous snake that had come into his yard. Sharing his observations of the event, Silas wondered aloud how the body could
have kept moving minutes after the snake was killed. In reflecting on this discussion, I noticed another turning point in the students’ ability to engage in discussions geared toward meaning-making. After Silas’ question, a number of people in class asked clarifying questions to better understand the nature of the event before developing hypotheses to explain the phenomenon. I wrote

    Silas was wondering how the body could keep moving after the head was cut off.

People in the circle followed with a series of impromptu questions for him. This struck me because where I expected the kids to offer him possible answers to his question they instead posed follow-up questions of their own based on the information he gave them. Wow, this feels like the beginning of true inquiry and critical thinking. They wanted to know more to better understand the story he was trying to tell. This is what I want them to eventually do with all sorts of texts - ask answers to help them better make sense of it rather than blindly accept the story they're being told. First, though, I need to build on this experience. I need to support them into [recognizing] the value of asking questions to find out what hasn't been said. (Morning Meeting, 9-10-15)

    It would have been easy for someone to come into our classroom many months later and remark on how well these kids could talk with one another in constructive ways – as though it were some sort of inherent gift they possessed. However, collaborative work such as whole class discussions grows out of experience, reflection, and instruction. While Morning Meeting provided daily opportunities to build experience and grow new possibilities for this work, much of the instruction and reflection supporting rich discussion occurred within our literacy workshop as I accessed a diverse collection of
texts and classroom structures designed to help my students learn to read and think critically - as well as construct purposeful discussions around this work.

**Literacy Workshop**

Literacy workshop consisted of instruction and engagements directly related to reading and writing. For each, students were guided through a mini-lesson where they were supported into a new strategy, worked independently or in small groups to both consume and create a wide variety of texts, then came back together to reflect on their reading and writing for the day. Within this structure, it was reading workshop that we accessed most often to support our inquiries into justice and equity. This was particularly true in regards to helping students learn to construct the sorts of discussions I envisioned for our Morning Meeting. Sitting side-by-side with a “carpet buddy,” they were continually asked to turn-and-talk about what they were thinking or wondering about in response to a shared text. As with our discussions in Morning Meeting, early versions of this work found the kids taking turns making statements at one another with little-to-no back-and-forth. However, direct instruction as to how we might build on the ideas of others helped students learn to listen with greater purpose and to respond in ways that helped their partners know the listener had heard and reflected on the ideas being shared. In addition to building onto the ideas of others, students were urged to consider the role questions play in not only helping to better understand the thinking of others but in helping speakers learn to better organize and articulate their thinking. Writing about these goals and processes in my teaching journal helped me become increasingly deliberate
about the instructional and curricular choices I was making in regards to helping my students become more mindful when engaged in discursive work. I wrote

This week I had the kids share their reading with a partner after silent reading. After spending a few days talking about summarizing, we worked on how we could ask questions of one another when we didn't understand something or wanted to know more about it. This sort of questioning helps the reader [become] more intentional about how they communicate their reading...It also helps the kids learn to listen in a way that allows them to question and to expect to make sense of something - to seek out the information they don't have to [enable them to] better understand a thing. That's critical too. (Teaching Journal, 9-5-15)

While the structures and instruction within literacy workshop supported students into strong discursive practices and stances that promoted meaning making, our curriculum within literacy workshop also provided essential components of our social justice work – particularly the ability to read and think critically. This took a variety of forms. A key example of this was our inquiry into non-fiction texts. The state standards called on students to understand the organization and basic features of non-fiction texts as well as to develop logical interpretations by making predictions, inferring, drawing conclusions, analyzing, synthesizing, providing evidence, and investigating multiple interpretations. To accomplish this, we developed an inquiry into zoos designed to explore their ethical implications. In planning this unit, I aimed to not only meet many of the requirements of our state standards but to help my students acquire generative practices such as critiquing the sources from which we gather information as well as identifying which voices and perspectives are shared and which are omitted. I wrote
In reading workshop we are now launching a study that will eventually lead us to compare and contrast multiple sources of information. This will be our first opportunity to critically read a non-fiction text. We are doing this for a variety of reasons. The overarching goal is to help the kids become critical consumers of information – to learn to question what they read. To this point questioning what we read has meant asking questions of the text that helps us understand it/construct meaning/demonstrate comprehension. However, to ask questions of the text in this new context will be defined as wondering about the author’s intent, subtexting for multiple players within the text, and problematizing the validity of the information we read. Within the overarching goal to help the kids become critical consumers of information, I want them to see that for every fact they read there were a variety of others that could have been selected. I want them to learn to weigh the information they are receiving against the source from which it is found. And I want them to learn to read across many sources of information to compare and contrast what is being said, how it is being shared, and what is missing. I would love for this work to support our [discussions] during Morning Meeting. I see this as an opportunity for the kids to become more comfortable with the idea of challenging ideas to help us make sense of them. (Teaching Journal, 1-25-16)

The inquiry called on students to read articles provided by authors with competing views on the value and ethics of zoos. The students first used these texts to learn how to determine and weigh the importance of information within a long text and later worked to
respond to key ideas and facts within the articles by jotting their thoughts in the margins (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4).

Figure 3.3  Student highlighting important information in an article promoting the positive practices found in zoos.

Figure 3.4  Student mark-up of an article condemning zoos and circuses for unethical treatment of animals.
These articles not only provided students with an opportunity to meet the basic requirements of our state standards but to come to understand the transactional process that occurs between a reader and a non-fiction text – particularly in regards to how one’s own experiences, expectations, and desires work to shape the meanings we draw from such texts. This was further illustrated when students were asked to speak to a perceived reality of zoos as viewed from the perspectives of an elephant, zoo keeper, animal activist, toddler, and mother (see Figure 3.5). Such engagements helped students learn how meaning around a single issue can be experienced very differently based on who is creating this meaning. Leaning to see how an event or issue could be experienced differently among a diverse group of people was crucial in helping students learn to consider the experiences and perspectives of others when tackling issues related to social justice. It was important that students learned that multiple perspectives reside within each issue we encounter.

Figure 3.5 A student speaks to the reality of zoos from the perspective of an animal activist (labeled here as an “animal lover”).
Finally, within our inquiry into zoos students were asked to revisit each of the three texts we had read to create a list of positives and negatives that resonated with them personally (see Figure 3.6). The students then used this information to place themselves on a spectrum with the words “Good” and “Bad” written on opposite ends (see Figure 3.7). The purpose of the spectrum was to demonstrate the fact there is often a middle ground to be found within many issues. My hope was to show students that addressing an issue did not always require them to take up one of two dichotomous sides.

*Figure 3.6* A student draws from the various non-fiction articles to create a list of the positives and negatives of zoos he feels are most important to him.
While this description of our inquiry into zoos demonstrates one way my students engaged in literacy learning while also developing tools needed to engage in issues of social justice, there were numerous other inquiries as well – from discovering underlying messages within a story to identifying an author’s purpose to exploring and creating biographies about people who belong to social groups that are often underrepresented in both fiction and history. Each of our literacy-based inquiries accessed picture books selected to reflect the diversity of our classroom as well as our larger community while lending themselves to discussions drawing on important frames such as power, equality, and conformity. The use of frames will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Beyond book selection there were also formal inquiries rooted in literacy learning that allowed students to explore topics directly related to social justice. For instance, when engaged in an author study of Jacqueline Woodson in our writing workshop we read many of Woodson’s books to find patterns in the themes she chose to write about,
imagine where these ideas may have emerged from, and pay careful attention to how the characters in her books were both alike and different from the characters in books of other authors we had studied. Having previously learned of the massive underrepresentation of Black characters in children’s literature, students noticed that Jacqueline Woodson chose to write about the experiences and perspectives of young Black girls as well as a diversity of family structures. Learning more about Woodson’s views on literature and equity, we found these were intentional choices she made as an author to reflect the world as she has experienced it. The books we explored as part of this author study also provided students new perspectives – drawn from the characters in her books – to access when discussing issues related to gender, race, or family structures during Morning Meeting.

Finally, a portion of the texts read during literacy workshop provided historical context students could later access when constructing meaning from issues they had limited experiences with or knowledge of – such as racism. Because much of our curriculum is integrated, many of these books and the discussions that grew out of them were rooted in literacy learning while also framing our work within integrated units of study.

**Integrated Units of Study**

Integrated units of study were inquiries developed to explore curriculum related to science and social studies while both drawing upon and supporting student growth as readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and social scientists. Our second grade social studies standards directed me to teach students about the diverse cultures, defined by region, ethnicity, and race, that have contributed to the United States’ heritage. Our third
grade standards called on us to learn about our state’s history beginning with Native Americans and ending with the Civil Rights Movement. Working within this broad frame, my students and I constructed a number of integrated units of study. To demonstrate the type of work we were doing, this section will focus on three of these studies. The first was an inquiry into the concept of power (defined as the ability to make decisions for ourselves or for others), the second a critique of the construct of normalcy (defined as cultural norms against which people are compared or judged), and the third a focused inquiry into countries of the world. The first two inquiries were conceptual in nature and provided students with generative frames (power and normalcy) they could access when critiquing social beliefs and practices during our discussions of gender and race. The focused inquiry into countries of the world allowed students to learn about the roles of stereotyping and misconceptions in misrepresenting, and even harming, communities of people with which we have little-to-no first hand relationships. I will now describe each of these three inquiries in regards to how they defined and supported a curriculum dedicated to addressing issues of social justice.

Our inquiry into power was designed to help students see how homelessness and hunger were tied to power as defined by access to and mobility within differing levels of education, employment, and social services. Each December our school organizes a large canned good drive for a local food bank and it was my hope an inquiry into power might contextualize the work our school was doing as well as help students see those who depend upon these donated food items as complex people with no simple remedies for the struggles they are facing.
This unit of study, framing power as the capacity to influence outcomes for oneself as well as for others, drew upon the work Short (2011) had done with teachers in Arizona to help students understand how the construct of power can help us understand issues such as homelessness and hunger beyond the harmful stereotypes and myths that often surround these issues. Before reading books specific to homelessness and hunger, such as Gunning’s *A Shelter in Our Car* (2013), Hazen’s *Tight Times* (1983), and McBrier’s *Beatrice’s Goat* (2004), students developed a working definition for the concept of power, read a variety of picture books to see where they saw power as a present force between various characters, and created a three-column chart for each of a variety of settings (such as home, school, and a grandparent’s house) to list the daily decisions they made for themselves, the decisions that were made for them by others, and the decisions that were negotiated between multiple parties (see Figure 3.8).

*Figure 3.8* Class power chart demonstrating how choices are made for children, by children, and negotiated between multiple parties when visiting a grandparent’s house

When the time came to read books about homelessness and power, students were prepared to identify the multiplicity of issues facing those living in their car, an airport, or
apartment when it came to meeting the needs of their families. This inquiry provided students an opportunity to not only learn how lived experiences within a community of people can be more complex than is understood by those who are not part of that community but also offered power as an important frame to be accessed when constructing meaning around unjust social practices and beliefs.

The second conceptual inquiry - this one into the ways the dominant culture normalizes certain ways of being and uses these notions of normalcy to belittle, abuse, and even oppress entire communities of people - took place a few months after the inquiry into power. The purpose of this inquiry was to help students develop a true appreciation for diversity as well as to see the ways in which a dominant culture can work to coerce others into their ways of being and thus position one as better, or having greater value, than the other. Table 3.4 shows the questions used to frame this inquiry.

Table 3.4

*Questions Framing the Class Inquiry into Normalcy as a Social Construction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are people the same or are they different? In what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do we mean by “normal?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who decides what normal is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is power related to normalcy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways have each of us come to believe in the notion of normalcy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do these beliefs belittle or hurt others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What groups tend to be victimized most by the idea of normalcy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What can we do to combat such practices?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How does interrogating the notion of normalcy change the way we see the world?

What is the role of difference in the world?

What is the value of learning about others?

During this study students first worked to define what is meant by the term *normal*, then offered artistic representations of what many people may think of as normal in regards to the appearance and interests of a second grade student. The discussions that grew out of this project not only pushed students to interrogate their own biases but supported them into creating new meanings from picture books such as *The Name Jar* (2003), *Nasreen’s Secret School* (2009), *One Green Apple* (2006), and *William’s Doll* (1972). During these read alouds students used the lens of a socially constructed sense of normalcy to identify what ways of being were being normalized, what was being othered, who held the power to name what was normal, what conflicts emerged from this, and what actions were taken to resolve these conflicts (see Figure 3.9).

![Class poster tracking the ways normalcy is both used and disrupted in a variety of picture books. Books included in this chart are: William’s Doll, Cheyenne Again, The Bus Ride, The Name Jar, and One Green Apple.](image)

*Figure 3.9* Class poster tracking the ways normalcy is both used and disrupted in a variety of picture books. Books included in this chart are: *William’s Doll, Cheyenne Again, The Bus Ride, The Name Jar,* and *One Green Apple.*
In addition to secondary resources such as books, the students accessed primary resources as well to learn how differences are sometimes used to judge and oppress groups of people. Students interviewed a family member to learn about ways they had been othered at some point in their lives. Classroom guests also served as primary resources for this study. Guest speakers spoke to their experiences growing up Black in the South, immigrating to the Midwest from the Congo and Kenya (see Figure 3.10), coming from France to America to continue their education, and sponsoring Somali-Bantu refugees who had come to America to escape persecution in their home country. These engagements - drawing on personal experiences, engaging with fiction and non-fiction literature, and listening to first-hand accounts from guest speakers- offered students multiple opportunities to see the world through another’s eyes while also providing historical and cultural perspectives to be accessed in future discussions about discriminatory and inequitable practices.

Figure 3.10  A visitor from the local university speaks to the class about her experiences immigrating to the United States from the Congo and Kenya.
The third study in this arc of linked inquiries was a study of countries of the world. While this unit addressed a whole host of literacy and social studies standards as students read from non-fiction texts, collected research, and created expository pieces about various cultures, this inquiry also offered students an opportunity to reveal the problematic nature of believing we truly understand the world others live in. To scaffold students into such research, we worked collaboratively as a class to study China. Students began by listing all they thought they already knew about this country and its cultural practices and beliefs (see Figure 3.11).

*Figure 3.11* Student’s notes listing those things she felt she already knew about China before our study.

As students commenced with reading various texts about China they used these sticky notes to categorize their alleged facts into two categories. One was titled “I was right” and the other “I was so wrong.” After a period of fact-checking their assumptions students collected additional facts, categorized these, and worked in small groups to create posters speaking to various aspects of life in China. Afterward, each of their false
assumptions was collected to create a class poster detailing all we had come to know as misconceptions (see Figure 3.12).

![Class poster detailing misconceptions](image)

*Figure 3.12* Class poster detailing the misconceptions we held about China prior to engaging in our study.

Revisiting these misconceptions gave students an opportunity to reflect upon their growth during the process of conducting research as well as reveal how unknowingly disconnected we can be from the reality of other cultures and people and yet speak to things we *believe* are true about these same communities. When asked where their misconceptions came from, the students pointed to things they had seen in movies and cartoons, read in books of myths, and generalized from their friendship with a student in our classroom whose family is from China. This inquiry allowed the class to not only disrupt some of their misconceptions about the cultures and people of China but to gain a critical perspective for later interrogating assumptions they made about other groups of people, including those within discussions of gender and race.
Conclusion

Our explorations, morning meeting, literacy workshop, and integrated units of study provided predictable structures to frame a broad curriculum growing out of the mandates of the state department as well as the needs, interests, concerns, and wonderings of my students. Though these curricular structures were each unique unto themselves, they all offered students an opportunity to ask questions, look for patterns across multiple sources of data, share out observations, and invite others into the process of meaning making. As time passed I came to believe that teaching for social justice meant working in deliberate ways to support students to become critical thinkers. Doing so meant each curricular structure needed to dedicate itself to the generative practice of helping students learn to listen carefully, access primary and secondary resources, determine what information is most important to understanding, recognize multiple perspectives and measure these against their own beliefs, identify which voices and perspectives are absent, develop hypotheses, and view understanding as an ongoing process. It was nested within the entirety of this work that the discussions constituting my data set emerged.
CHAPTER 4: Methodology

The previous section discussed relevant studies within the existing research to provide context for this study. This section will offer an overview and rationale for my methodological approach.

The initial purpose of this qualitative research was to explore how students constructed meaning when engaged in discussions of inequities and injustices as related to gender and race. However, as the study evolved and students were invited to interrogate the meanings I developed throughout the process of data collection, an additional direction emerged for my research. As students reflected upon classroom data revealing how often each of them participated in our critical discussions, many of the students disclosed the fact there were times when discussions of gender and race made them feel uncomfortable. This revelation contrasted the false assumption I had made that their young age precluded them from the tensions adults often experience when discussing sensitive topics. As such, the scope of my research broadened to include an inquiry into the tensions students experienced while engaged in critical discourse. The questions guiding my exploration were:

1. How do my students construct meaning during class discussions related to issues of gender and race?
2. What role do I play in constructing, shaping, and maintaining opportunities for students to create meaning related to issues of gender and race?
3. What tensions do my students encounter when engaging in discussions about
gender and race?

Teacher research, informed by critical discourse analysis, was deemed to be best-
suited to address the specifics of this research. Therefore, I will begin this section with an
overview of teacher research as a methodological approach. I will also provide an
overview of Critical Discourse Analysis as it will be accessed as a frame for analysis,
though less formally. This will be followed by a description of the participants and
contexts for my study. I will then detail my methods for data collection, organization, and
analysis. Next, I will address issues of validity and trustworthiness. Finally, I will
conclude with a discussion of limitations of the study.

**Methodological Overview**

Qualitative methods were used to study how students engage in and create
meaning during critical classroom discourse around issues of gender and race. Qualitative
study, as a methodological approach, was well-suited for this research because it
concerns itself with understanding a phenomenon within the natural setting or context it
occurs (Erickson, 1986; Holly, Arhar, & Kashten, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer
to this as *naturalistic inquiry*. Situated within a postpositivist perspective, this stance
marks a departure from the positivist paradigm that views the goal of research as
identifying absolute truths that allow researchers to make predictive claims (Prasad,
2005). Qualitative researchers, working from an epistemological belief that knowledge is
not absolute but socially constructed (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Glesne, 2011; Wells,
2000), are careful to avoid such claims. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain
There are multiple constructed realities that can be studied only holistically, inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge (each raises more questions than it answers) so that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes although some level of understanding can be achieved. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.37)

While my research drew upon the naturalistic perspectives, the methodological approach for this study extended into facets of critical inquiry as well – namely, as it pertains to the nature of knowing, the relationship between researcher and research, and the purposes for inquiry. Critical inquiry, like naturalistic inquiry, views knowledge as socially constructed but further asserts knowledge production and any subsequent constructions of reality develop over time as the result of “social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors” (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). As critical researchers study and critique the ways in which sociopolitical factors are at play, they acknowledge not only the influences of their ontological and epistemological beliefs but the transactional relationship between their role as advocate or activist and their findings. Guba and Lincoln (1994) refer to these as value-mediated findings. Finally, critical researchers seek to work toward “changing as well as understanding the world” (Lather, 2004, p. 204). In my study I lay claim to a desire to connect my research to an attempt to confront both differences and injustices (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) in the ways issues of gender and race are taken up in classrooms, reveal oppressive norms and outcomes (Blackburn & Clark, 2007) of uninterrogated classroom discourse in relation to marginalized populations, and reveal hidden beliefs and implicit practices that “limit human freedom, justice, and democracy” (Usher, 1996, p. 22). To achieve this I will
conduct teacher research that draws upon components of critical discourse analysis to collect, analyze, and report the data from my study.

Teacher Research

Teacher research, as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), is a “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (p. 23-24). This work is systematic in that there is an organization for data collection and analysis while the intentionality of the work is evidenced by the teacher’s desire to inquire into specific aspects of teaching and learning emerging from tensions that have developed in their teaching when working alongside students, families, and colleagues (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Teacher research grows out of the work university researchers have historically done in classrooms where teachers served as the object of the study. These etic studies, representing an outsider’s perspective, have failed to recognize the teacher’s own potential for interpreting, critiquing, and theorizing from their practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) write, “This means that throughout their careers, teachers [have been] expected to learn about their own profession not by studying their own experiences but by studying the findings of those who are not themselves school-based teachers” (p. 1). As teachers have moved more and more into the role of classroom researcher, their insider’s perspective – an intimate knowledge of the curriculum, instruction, students, and classroom – has provided unique and invaluable perspectives from which to advance our understanding of teaching and learning.

Teacher research was selected as a methodology for this inquiry to allow me to engage in a systematic study addressing specific questions that emerged from the work I had done over the past eight years to help my students engage in critical dialogue around
issues of social justice. Teacher research offered an emic perspective (Cox-Peterson, 2001) in which I drew upon knowledge from other studies and theorists while creating knowledge from my own classroom that utilized my intimate knowledge of the students’ lives, relationships, and identities as an invaluable tool for analysis. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) refer to this process as knowledge-of-practice. Knowledge-of-practice is defined by the teacher’s ability to “treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation” while creating local knowledge of practice from their own classrooms and “working within the contexts of inquiry communities to theorize and construct their work and to connect it to larger social, cultural, and political issues” (p. 250).

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) grows out of critical linguistics (Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979) and presupposes the notion that language not only works as a means of social construction (Fairclough, 1992), but more specifically constitutes a social practice working to produce and reify systems of dominance through the systematic normalization of one ideology over competing ideals (Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979; Teo, 2000; van Dijk, 1993). Johnstone (2008), speaking to the relationship between these dominant ideologies and the hegemonic practices (Althusser, 1971) they produce, writes "Ideologies tend to be seen as inevitably selective and potentially misleading. Ideologies are thus well suited for use by the dominant to make oppressive social systems seem natural and desirable and to mask the mechanisms of oppression" (p. 54). Therefore, working from the belief that relationships exist between discourse, power,
dominance, and social inequality, CDA aims to “uncover the ways in which discourse and ideology are intertwined” (Johnstone, 2008, p. 54).

CDA also points to a “dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) which frame it” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 55). Frames such as these are sometimes referred to as the social context that frames discourse (Rymes, 2009). Working within a multitude of social contexts, our discourse “both shapes and is shaped by society” (Teo, 2000, p. 12). Rymes speaks to the nature of this dialectic relationship, explaining “not only does what we say function differently depending on the social context, but also what we say changes what might be relevant about the social context” (2009, p. 21).

Being informed by these tenets of critical discourse analysis, rather than prescriptively adopting CDA methodology or methods, the approach I took in this study was to access the frames of power, dominant ideologies, hegemonic practices, and social context while developing and critiquing hypotheses during my analysis of student speech. Doing so allowed me to analyze the ways in which students: (1) drew upon personal and cultural resources in an attempt to construct meaning for their peers, (2) developed hypotheses disrupting, protecting, and normalizing dominant ideologies, and (3) interacted within the social space of this specific classroom when choosing when and how to engage in critical discussions of gender and race.

Research Site and Participant Selection

In this section I will provide relevant context for the site of my study, beginning with a broad lens to contextualize the district in which I teach then narrowing the focus to the specifics of my school and classroom. Next, I will provide a brief overview of the
participants in my study as well as address how this sample was selected and the ways in which they meet the demands of this particular study.

Research Site

Charles Sanders Peirce Elementary (all names are pseudonyms) is located in a suburban community located in the Southeast United States. This area has seen a great deal of population growth over the past fifteen years as large tracts of wooded acreage have been turned into subdivisions and planned communities. Due to this growth, many new elementary, middle, and high schools have been constructed turning Parkway School District (PSD) into the largest school district in the state. In the 2013-2014 academic year, PSD reported that 49% of its students received free and reduced lunch. The student demographics for that year were: 59% African-American, 27% White, 7% Latino/a, 3% Asian-American, and 4% listed as “Other.”

The school site, the Charles Sanders Peirce Elementary, is a magnet school serving 264 students in grades K-5. In the academic years of this study, 2015-2017, the school reported that 17% of its students received free and reduced lunch. The student demographics for these years were 51% White and 49% students of Color. There was no data collected by school officials further describing the vague term “students of Color.”

A partnership between the school district and the local state university, the Charles Sanders Peirce Elementary was created twenty years prior to this study as an alternative for parents and children to traditional modes of education that focused on memorization, seat work, and uniformity. Key features of the school are its dedication to inquiry-based learning, a small community feel, and a budding dedication to addressing issues of social justice in classrooms. Students attending the school travel from all parts of the district. A
blind lottery system is tasked with selecting which student applications are accepted and families attending the school must provide their own transportation to and from the school.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were the students in my classroom at the Charles Sanders Peirce Elementary during two consecutive school years between 2015 and 2017. Therefore, a purposive sampling method was employed in selecting participants. Accessing the students within my own classroom allowed me greater understanding and insight during the course of the study as a result of my close relationship to students and their families. Parental and child consent were obtained from all participants.

Because the study occurred over the course of two consecutive school years, there were some minor changes in the class roster between our second grade school year and our third grade school year. Three students left the classroom during or after our first year together due to parents relocating to continue their careers. These students were replaced by three new students as the other seventeen students remained for a second “loop” year together. Of the 23 students, twelve were girls and eleven were boys. The racial and ethnic makeup consisted of 10 White, 8 Black, 3 mixed-race, one Chinese-American, and one Indian-American student. Students’ ages ranged from 7 to 9 years of age during the course of the study. A copy of the consent form for students can be found in Appendix A.

**Data Collection and Procedures**

Hubbard and Power (2003) state, “The more data-collection tools you have, the better equipped you are to answer any question” (p. 36). To address the research questions posed in this study, data collection included many tools to promote
understanding through analysis. These data sources allowed me to gather rich information about my students and the ways in which they engaged in and created meaning from our discussions related to gender and racial injustices. These data sources included: (a) a research journal, (b) audio and video recordings of class discussions, (c) photographs, (d) student work, (e) lesson plans, (f) newsletters, presentations, and emails, (g) focus group interviews (see Appendix B for interview questions), and (h) a reflective teaching journal. The variety of data resources allowed me to address my research questions from multiple data points while looking for themes and patterns across this diverse collection of artifacts. In deeming what constituted a data source, I played an active role in constructing and shaping this inquiry. For this reason, Glesne (2011) suggests we acknowledge that data collection could just as easily be termed data production. I will address this in greater detail when speaking to issues of ethics, trustworthiness, and rigor.

Organizing data sources within the classroom structures and practices in which they were collected, I will now provide detailed descriptions of these artifacts. These structures and practices include: morning meeting, literacy workshop, social studies, teacher prep, and communication.

**Morning Meeting**

Morning Meeting served as the structural base from which discussions of social justice occurred across the school day. Morning meeting is a time when students sit in a circle on the carpet and share questions, observations, and knowledge with one another related to self-selected topics of interest. Beginning roughly a half-hour after the school day has begun, Morning Meeting was preceded by an exploratory time in which students engaged in self-selected studies and activities. Among these activities were a set of
classroom journals that served as tools to collect student questions, observations, and new knowledge. The classroom journals were labeled by topic as such: Science Journal, Culture Journal, Math Journal, Literacy Journal, and Classroom Community Journal. The majority of classroom discourse around issues of gender and race grew out of the questions and observations students recorded in these journals and brought to their classmates for discussion. The data sources collected from Morning Meeting included:

**Audio and video recordings.** During the first five months of the study, audio recordings were collected on my phone once or twice a week. At that time I was interested in collecting samples of classroom discussions that exemplified the process of students learning to question the world and to build discussions around tensions in their understanding. Some, but not many, of these recordings included discussions of gender and race. As the study moved beyond the general exploratory nature of the first five months, in which I worked to identify patterns and themes I wanted to pursue further, I began recording each and every discussion while keeping notes in my research journal speaking to key parts of our discussions as related to issues of gender and race. Discussions that did not address these issues were deleted afterward. I originally identified more than sixty audio recordings and ten video recordings of Morning Meeting discussions. As I refined the nature of the study these recordings were narrowed down to just those demonstrating the ways students drew upon various resources to understand issues of gender or race as well as construct and share hypotheses to explain the nature of injustices. This consisted of 32 recordings in total. The recordings of these discussions were later transcribed, in full, for analysis.
**Student work.** Various forms of student work were collected throughout the year. Artifacts were collected based on their ability to demonstrate student meaning-making or questioning around topics exploring social justice. Within the context of Morning Meeting, these included student entries written in the class journals. Analysis of these artifacts provided context for the speaking events that occurred within our Morning Meeting.

**Focus group interviews.** At the conclusion of collecting a year-and-a-half of data samples from our critical discussions I invited students to meet with me in small homogenous groupings to discuss the nature of our past discussions about gender and race as well as invite their reflections on this work (see Appendix B for list of interview questions). The purpose of these focus group interviews was twofold. First, I wanted to offer students one final opportunity to reflect on this work and provide insights into the understandings they had developed from our work together. Secondly, I wanted to grant them more time to speak to the discomfort many of them felt at times during these discussions. I had not anticipated student discomfort being an issue, none-the-less a significant part of this study. It was not until the final month of data collection that one student bravely shared with the class that she felt uncomfortable during discussions of gender. Hearing this, many others followed her lead and shared their own concerns and fears. The focus group interviews allowed students not only a smaller setting in which to speak but, in grouping them homogenously by either gender or race, helped students feel more comfortable sharing their fears in regards to how others might interpret or misinterpret their ideas and perspectives.
**Literacy Workshop**

Literacy workshop included both reading and writing. Though they were often taught as separate workshops, instruction and practice as both readers and writers were integrated within one another as students worked as readers to support their writing and worked as writers to support their reading. In doing so, topics related to gender, race, and social justice entered into both workshops during the course of this study. These topics sometimes emerged from a student response or question but more I purposely and explicitly infused these topics and issues into the curriculum through means such as book choice and frames provided for text analysis. This was in contrast to Morning Meeting where students were largely the ones choosing what would be discussed. Demonstrations of learning took the form of class discussions, written reflections, responses to literature, and written conversations with family members. The data sources collected from literacy workshop included:

**Audio Recordings.** I used my phone to record any discussions or read alouds related to social justice. These were primarily collected during the exploratory period which fell within the first five months of the study. As I later refined the focus of the study to include only those discussions around gender and race, many of these earlier recordings served as context to help me better understand the engagements students had experiences that constructed a context for understanding in future discussions.

**Student Work.** Artifacts were collected when determined to reflect meaning making or questioning around issues of social justice. In the context of literacy workshop, these included literature responses, illustrations created as a response to literature or a topic of study, class-created charts, assignment sheets framing the work students were to
complete, news articles with student responses in the margins, and engagements in which
the students took up multiple perspectives within a book or news article. Analysis of
these artifacts provided an opportunity to evidence student meaning-making as
demonstrated outside of classroom discussion. As with the audio recordings, though
many of these engagements did not speak directly to issues of gender or race they did
provide an opportunity to contextualize the students’ abilities to engage in collaborative
meaning-making around issues of social justice as well as their developing understanding
when confronted with instances of injustice.

**Social Studies**

The social studies curriculum provided by the state standards included studies
related the larger topic of community as well as South Carolina state history. My students
and I accessed these vague concepts to study the social relationships between various
groups of people based on constructs such as age, gender, race, and religion as well as
looked at key historical events from diverse perspectives. The class had discussions in
response to many different books, videos, and classroom guests. A significant study
within this curriculum was an inquiry into the ways in which our society uses the idea of
normal to judge and harm individuals as well as large groups of people. Another
significant study was to determine how historians decide what is most important to know
and the ways in which this silences many voices and conceals many contributions and
struggles. Demonstrations of learning took the form of class discussions, written
reflections, research projects, and written conversations with family members. The data
sources collected from social studies included:
Audio and Video Recordings. Audio tapes were used to record any discussions or read alouds related to social justice as well as group presentations during our inquiry into the social construction of normalcy. Though many of these were used to provide context in regards to the specific curriculum students were engaging in to later support them into critical discussions of gender and race, two were included in the primary dataset used to analyze student engagement with and understanding of issues of gender and race. The first of these was a reading of the book *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010). I read this book aloud to the class as part of our study into the social construction of normalcy. *My Princess Boy* tells the story of a young boy who enjoys dressing up and acting like a princess and introduces the obstacles he faces in life for being himself in light of social norms. The second book, *The Bus Ride* (Miller, 2001), re-imagines the story of Rosa Parks as experienced instead by a young Black girl.

Photographs. Photographs of the kids at work were collected when engaged in studies relating to the scope of this study. These photographs were used to help me revisit our studies and elicit specifics, such as the specific students working within particular groups, which may otherwise have become lost.

Student Work. Artifacts were collected when determined to reflect meaning making or questioning around issues of difference and social justice. Within the context of inquiries during social studies, these included: research projects, murals, literature responses, illustrations created as a response to literature or a topic of study, class-created charts, and assignment sheets framing the work students were to complete. These artifacts helped me provide a broader context for the discussions that took place within our Morning Meeting.
**Teacher Prep**

Teacher prep is being defined as all work I engaged in when students were not in the classroom. This included lesson planning, journaling, discussions with colleagues, and professional research. The data sources collected from my preparation included:

**Research journal.** Keeping a research journal was crucial to my research as it provided me an opportunity to collect my observations, begin early stages of analysis, work through developing understandings, and identify struggles as well as new questions that emerged from the research process. While collecting data I kept a physical journal where I could make notes of observations, create initial codes to direct my attention to developing themes, and record any ideas or questions that grew out of the work at hand. I then brought these notes to the computer later in the day where I could expand upon some of the most significant events of the day. My research journal also provided a paper trail that allowed me revisit a timeline of my developing observations and thoughts over the course of the year. This aided in constructing memos in which I reflected on the whole of what I had collected. This was particularly helpful during the early exploratory stage of my research when I was discovering the research potential within these classroom discussions and engagements.

**Lesson plans.** Weekly lesson plans helped establish a paper trail detailing the topics of study throughout both school years as well as the sequencing that was developed in an attempt to help students grow into increasingly critical thinkers. Lesson plans reflected the work within literacy workshop as well as social studies. Because Morning Meeting was responsive to the students’ observations and questions there were no lesson plans to detail this work.
Reflective teaching journal. As with the research journal, the reflective teaching journal was a place to collect my thoughts around the context, practices, and perceived outcomes of my teaching. During the first nine months of the study I reflected in my journal two or three days a week, though I often found the demands of teaching, course work, and mentoring made it difficult to keep up with this journaling as consistently as I would have hoped. When returning to the classroom for our third grade year, I documented and reflected within my journal each time a discussion about gender or race occurred as well as in response to any interaction that I felt supported or challenged our work as a classroom dedicated to pursuing social justice. The details of the teaching journal provided me opportunities to revisit the meaning I was constructing from these events at the time they occurred. This was important information as there were times, when revisiting audio recordings and transcripts many months after the actual discussions occurred, when the meaning I constructed from a particular comment or discussion was differently nuanced based on my current readings or interests. As such, the reflective teaching journal provided an opportunity to create meaning from past engagements while drawing on multiple perspectives or frames.

Communication

Parent communication was integral to establishing trust and helping families come to understand what we were doing in the classroom and why we were doing it. This took many forms, including personal conversations before and after school. While these conversations were included in my reflective teaching journal, all other forms of communication leaving a paper trail were collected and stored in electronic files. These data sources included:
Newsletters, presentations, and emails. Newsletters, parent presentations, and personal correspondence via email were all outlets for information and belief dissemination between the classroom and the homes of my students. Newsletters were written weekly and those addressing our studies related to issues of difference and social justice were collected in the data. A presentation for parents, taking place prior to the school year, was designed to help parents learn about the nature of the classroom and the work we do. The slide show from this presentation is included in the data collected as are all emails sent or received between my school email account and the students’ families. These artifacts will help demonstrate the ways in which I maneuvered within a larger social context of diverse expectations and beliefs.

Organization of Data

All data and research-related content were stored and organized on a password protected Google Drive. Physical pieces of data were photographed or scanned and then saved to electronic files. Folders were created to store related files and these were catalogued daily in my research journal to ensure I could both locate and contextualize specific pieces of data at a later date. Individual files were named with the date the data was collected followed by a brief title describing the content (such as 10_26_15 Pledge HW Sheet for Written Conversation). Audio recordings were saved separately using an electronic transcription program called Express Scribe. This program allowed me to sort recordings by title. All data was then imported into qualitative research software named Hyper Research. Those pieces of data that were coded in this software retained their same title from Google Drive and could be sorted by the codes given during analysis (e.g., Potentially Hurtful Speech).
Data Analysis

I analyzed data sources through a critical theory lens which called on me to identify potential relationships of power as well as ways in which student understanding of gender and race related to a societal maintenance of systems of domination. Data analysis began during the process of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During data collection I engaged in interpretive work. Differentiating this from the more detailed work of analysis, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define interpretation as “developing ideas about your findings and relating them to the literature and to broader concerns and concepts” (p. 159). For my early interpretive work I entered my data in a qualitative software program, Hyper Research, which allowed me to generate codes, annotations, and groupings while writing analytic memos that explicitly named and critiqued the patterns and themes I saw beginning to emerge in the early stages of the research. Engaged in rudimentary thematic analysis (Glesne, 2011), I continued to search for themes and patterns as I coded the data looking for relationships across multiple events. These patterns culminated in the creation of five groupings under which 54 separate codes were organized. The groupings included: Critical Thought, Discourse, Engagement, Meaning Making, and Teacher Agency. Table 4.1 provides an example of codes falling within two of these groupings – Discourse and Meaning Making.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groupings</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Child Social Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child-to-Child Affirms Idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child-to-Child Scrutinizes Idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child-to-Teacher Affirms Idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child-to-Teacher Scrutinizes Idea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preliminary Codes Generated to Guide Future Data Collection
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engaging in Stereotypical Talk/Gendered Speech</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Framing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesitancy to Speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming Self as Part of Issue at Hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potentially Hurtful Discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Kids to Deal with Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-to-Child Affirms Idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-to-Child Scrutinizes Idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meanings Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing Past Classroom Learning Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Thinking over Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denying this is an Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Hypotheses to Explain an Issue/Problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Discussion to Our Lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to First-Hand Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injustices as Explainable Rather than Unjust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Personal Connections to Understand an Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media to Connect to/Understand an Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscommunication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming Players Who Contribute to a Perceived Problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over generalizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting Faces to Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Takeaways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding with Compassion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling as a Means to Build Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Declaring Their Truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Creating Meaning for the Kids</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Raw data was reflected upon in my research journal and analytic research memos while monthly reports allowed me an opportunity to step back and reflect on the whole of the research as I sought “to explain, to give meaning, to make sense of the many disparate
events and ideas” emerging from our class work around issues of gender, race, and social justice (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005, p. 192). This work provided me an opportunity to identify the most prevalent themes, narrow the focus of my research, and make plans for future data collection. Originally I had intended to focus my attention on the ways students worked within the social context of the classroom as well as the interactional context of actual classroom discussions to create meaning from social-justice oriented discussions. I was also interested in learning more about the evolution of my own understanding of social justice teaching as well as my role in introducing and supporting this work over time as I navigated school, district, and family expectations. However, during the first five months of the study the vagueness of these research interests resulted in more data than could be represented in a single study without compromising the ability to provide a clear focus. For this reason, I chose to focus on a critical piece of these interests - how my students were constructing meaning around social justice-related issues, the ways these disrupted or supported dominant ideologies at play within a society that works to oppress marginalized groups of people, and the sources of discomfort they experienced during these discussions. Because student-generated discussions most often centered on issues related to gender and race, as evidenced by the questions students brought to the class during Morning Meeting, these two social constructs were selected as the focus for this inquiry. Early analysis also helped me see there were distinct differences in the ways students went about engaging in and constructing meaning from gender as opposed to race. Studying both allowed me an opportunity to use one to contrast the other.
During this process, daily journaling allowed me to generate *observer comments* (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007) in which I reflected upon and interpreted the raw data I collected in the moment. Analytic memos, written every few days, provided me an opportunity to revisit larger collections of data and write about emerging patterns of behavior, words, key ideas, and events (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005; Hubbard & Power, 2003). Research updates were documents in which I declared where I was in the process of data analysis and where I needed to go next (Glesne, 2011). These updates also provided documents from which to invite critical feedback from parents, colleagues, and faculty advisors. These forms of reflective and generative writing supported the process of interpretation during both data collection and formal data analysis.

This reflection and analysis was rooted in grounded theory. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to analysis that allows researchers to generate theory rooted in the data they have collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To accomplish this I used the constant comparative method to identify differences and similarities between multiple dimensions and constructs. Constant comparative method called on me to revisit pieces of data that were coded in the same way, such as the times in which students developed hypotheses to explain an injustice, and design tables to learn how categorizations (such as type of discussion or positionality of the speaker to the topic at hand) changed from one context or construct to another. The more data I collected and analyzed the more complex and nuanced my frames for analysis became. For this reason, it was important to constantly revisit old pieces of data as well as the codes I had created to critique them from new perspectives. This process resulted in removing, renaming, and merging some codes and then looking through each to identify the specifics of their similarities and differences.
within particular frames of analysis. For instance, in an analytic memo written toward the end of my first month of formal analysis I wrote

New codes today: *Accessing Prior Learning Experiences* and *Change in Thinking over Time*. Both of these feel they will become very significant if they play out over the course of the artifacts to come. They would allow me to see the ways in which the kids build on ideas and frames we’ve established or explored in class to make sense of new information as well as see how the kids are naming things they’ve changed their minds about over time. (Memo, 11_26_16)

One of the revelations shared in this memo, the act of students drawing on previous classroom content to construct meaning during new discussions in Morning Meeting, informed future analysis as well as called on me to revisit old data sources to look for earlier examples of this phenomenon. Doing so provided opportunities to find similarities and differences in the frequency and value of these connections within discussions of gender and discussions of race. Furthermore, I studied the hypotheses students generated to explain inequities and injustices as related to both gender and race in relation to whether or not the speaker identified as part of the dominant group within a discussion or as part of the non-dominant group (see Table 4.2). Such comparisons became an important part of my findings as I indentified distinct differences in some, but not all, speech events and meaning construction occurring within discussions of gender and race.
### Table 4.2

*Student Hypotheses within Discussions of Gender and Race as Shared by Speakers who Identify as Part of the Dominant or Non-Dominant Group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Non-Dominant</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denying</td>
<td>Softens as act or denies as true</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explainable</td>
<td>Frames as inevitable based on context</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted as Real</td>
<td>Personally works from unquestioned belief in stereotypes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals for Injustices as Imagined</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Group Using Power</td>
<td>Claims an issue or injustice is the direct result of a dominant group exerting power</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Out of Habit</td>
<td>Continuation of the status quo</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result of Stereotypes</td>
<td>Attributed to some other person or group believing in stereotypes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals for Injustices as Real</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis gleaned using the constant comparative method provided me an opportunity to access my critical theory lens while drawing upon elements of critical discourse analysis to interpret the patterns I identified within the data. Betsy Rymes
(2009) writes, “The heart of discourse analysis is an examination between context and language in use” (p. 95). To achieve this level of examination, I engaged in an analysis that took into consideration the presence of multiple contexts during any given discursive event (e.g. nature of the discussion, classroom culture, positionality of students to the topic-at-hand, relationships of students to one another, identities of students in relation to one another, etc). Taking this approach and applying the critical component of critical discourse analysis, I worked to identify the ways particular speech events served to challenge or reify oppressive ideologies. This analysis allowed me to “focus on the discursive strategies that legitimate control, or otherwise ‘naturalize’ the social order, and especially relations of inequality” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254).

**Timeline**

Classroom data was collected between August 2015 and December 2016. Recordings from Morning Meeting were collected one or two times per week over the first five months of the study and then daily, as discussions pertained to the specific focus of the research questions, for the remainder of the study. All other data was collected on a daily basis when pertaining to this research. While early stages of analysis took place within the process of data collection and reflection, formal analysis occurred between November 2016 and March 2017.

**Trustworthiness**

Issues facing the validity of my study grow from the fact I situated my study within a paradigm in which objectivity is viewed as a myth (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005) and truths and concepts are known to be both socially constructed (Prasad, 2005) and ever-changing (Willinsky, 1998). It is this departure from belief in a fixed external
reality that brought researchers such as Eisner (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) to reframe the positivist’s claim of validity as the interpretist’s claim of believability and credibility. Concerned with the manner in which such claims may be established by qualitative researchers, Feldman (2003) writes, “Although it may be impossible to show that the findings of educational research are true, they ought to be more than believable – we must have good reasons to trust them to be true” (p. 26). To establish the trustworthiness of my findings and analysis, I drew upon Creswell (1998) while deliberately attending to the construction of knowledge within this research. This included: (1) prolonged engagement and persistent observation, (2) triangulation, (3) peer review and debriefing, (4) member checking, (5) clarification of researcher bias, and (6) external audit. I will now describe how I employed each of these procedures in my study.

**Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation**

As the classroom teacher I was able to go beyond limitations often placed on researchers moving in and out of a research site. Over the course of our two years together in the classroom, I lived and learned beside my students seven hours a day over three hundred sixty school days. This allowed me the opportunity to not only reach data saturation but to also know and understand my students across various contexts as related to physical spaces, social relationships, family contexts, curricular structures, personal desires, enacted identities, and so on. The prolonged engagements I was afforded as a member of the classroom and the observations I made in both formal and informal settings provided me contextual information from which to engage in informed analysis of the research data.
Triangulation

Triangulation is the practice of accessing multiple forms of data collection as well as data sources to glean deeper insights and confirm findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this study I accessed multiple forms of data collection (artifacts, audio and video recordings, interviews, and reflective journaling) and multiple sources of data (transcripts, student writing, written communication between students and families, artistic illustration, photographs, newsletters, lesson plans, news articles, etc), as well as inviting in multiple investigators (collaborative thinking with a dissertation committee, fellow doctoral students, classroom parents, and colleagues) to aid in my analysis. These measures allowed me to validate individual pieces of information against other sources and/or methods to ensure their validity to the study and developing theories.

Peer Review and Debriefing

External reflection by individuals with no personal stake in this research played an integral role in my data collection and analysis. I met frequently with colleagues, parents, and dissertation committee members to discuss the themes emerging from my research as well as to detail the specifics from the data that led me to these themes and developing theories. I also shared research updates with an editor and authors within the field of education to gain their insights into the knowledge I was constructing and the meanings I was drawing from this work. The critiques this broad community of peers offered helped me to scrutinize my own thinking as well as identify the possibility of other forms of data collection to better contextualize my developing understandings.
**Member Checking**

As participants of this study, my students were stakeholders in the collection and analysis of data that would later inform the interpretations presented within my findings. Thus, member checking allowed my students to serve as resources for helping me better understand the meaning of my data. Member checking also offered reflexivity within the study as students came to view themselves as co-researchers working alongside me to better understand and improve the quality of our discussions around gender and race. For instance, rather than relying on my perspective to assess the meaning or intent of a given speech event I was able to follow up with students when confused by any of their speech events within the transcripts of our discussions. Member checking also allowed me to invite feedback when sharing pieces of my developing analysis with the class. These engagements provided students opportunities to not only ensure I had transcribed their speech as accurately as possible but to clarify or elaborate upon any intentions, presuppositions, or interpretations represented in the recording or my eventual analysis.

**Clarification of Researcher Bias**

I used my research journal to reflect upon my positionality and subjectivity at various points while constructing and analyzing data. This was an important process to ensure transparency in relation to the ways my identity, perspective, and relationship to the topic of this study played a role throughout every phase of the research. When selecting peers to review the development of my data and analysis I was careful to include individuals who knew me well enough to critique the role of researcher bias if and when they felt it necessary.
External Audit

My dissertation chair served as an outside auditor to oversee the research process. This included revisiting data sources, coding schemes, constant comparative procedures, and methods of ensuring trustworthiness throughout the entirety of the research process.

Positionality and Subjectivity

To secure claims of validity, research in the social sciences has historically attempted to mask or even deny the relationships between the researcher and the research. This has been due to a fear that acknowledging contextual particulars about the researcher and how these might affect the research would either invalidate or invite strong critique of findings. Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2003) elaborate “There has long been a tendency to view the self of the social science observer as a potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled” (p. 169). However, it is becoming more common practice for qualitative researchers to declare their positionality and subjectivity as it relates to the particulars of the study. Positionality is a form of self-disclosure in which the researcher is transparent in regards to their role in the construction of the research and the need to consider the implications of any “social, locational, and ideological placement[s] relative to the research project or to other participants in it” (Hay as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 157). While positionality addresses who the researcher is in relation to the research, subjectivity speaks to the specific perspectives and desires of the researcher and how these might manifest themselves during the course of data collection, analysis, and writing. In addition to acknowledging the relationship between the researcher and the research, positionality and subjectivity allows the researcher to identify potential issues of
power or privilege at play in regards to who is seen as holding knowledge (Gay, 2010),
what counts as legitimate or official knowledge (Apple, 2013), and to whom this
knowledge will benefit (Macedo, 2006).

During this study, I was engaged in the dual roles of classroom teacher and
researcher. It was often difficult to separate the two as each influenced the other in
multiple ways. For this reason, positionality must be addressed in regards to each role. As
a researcher, my role as classroom teacher was significant. There were numerous
moments where I needed to respond to a student’s comments or redirect a discussion and
as I considered how I might accomplish this I was aware of the fact my response would
become data for the study. This promoted increased levels of metacognition and informed
my ensuing discourse. My role as teacher also shaped the student responses I collected in
my data. Because students viewed me as their teacher – not an outside researcher whose
role and expectations were unknown or unclear – they often responded within the context
of schooling and teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, I held power over my
students despite efforts to create culture circles (Souto-Manning, 2010) where every
opinion was voiced on nearly-equal footing. Students worked to read and meet their
understanding of the classroom expectations I had established and maintained when
speaking into the silence, gazing at me for an approving nod, or speaking from beliefs
they saw others use to receive some level of praise or recognition. Considering this, it
was impossible to disentangle my role as a teacher from my role as the researcher.

It must also be taken into account I am a White, middle class teacher with
transparent liberal ideals who holds an advanced degree. In addition, I did not place my
hand over my heart or recite the pledge alongside my students each morning and I openly
shared the fact I do not attend church or participate in the state mandated moment of silence, a designated opportunity to pray at school. While these details may seem to be peculiarities to my students, they may have become topics of discussion in my students’ homes positioning me in a certain light which could have affected the when, if, and how certain students elected to participate in certain discussions. I also believe the fact I was working on my PhD, rooted in the critique of social beliefs and practices, helped me gain the trust of some parents while making other parents uncomfortable and even skeptical of the work I was doing alongside their children in the classroom to disrupt gender and race-related injustices.

My work in generating questions, collecting data, analyzing the data, and reporting out findings was rooted in my perspectives of the world. Those working from many of the critical paradigms not only acknowledge but embrace this relationship between what one believes and the ways in which this guides the research. Critical theorists see their work as political and make it their means to critique and, therefore, transform oppressive relationships of power. These critical perspectives develop as a result of their personal life experiences and continue to develop as they continually seek out the experiences and perspectives of those who have been largely silenced.

My interest in this study developed from a strong investment in developing a form of progressive education within my classroom that promotes critical thinking around social issues while addressing forms of bigotry, oppression, and hate. Building upon the work of critical theorists from all branches of study (Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, Latina/o Critical Theory, etc), much of my classroom curriculum is integrated within studies of social behavior and its ramifications for marginalized populations – defined
broadly by religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, appearance, dialect, hobbies, and so on. When engaging in this research it was my aim to better understand the relationship between engagement with these issues and the ways in which students collaboratively construct and scrutinize new and existing knowledge.

Ethical Issues and Reciprocity

Considerations of ethics in my research began with a concern for the purpose of the study. Hermes (1998) writes it is not enough to do research for research’s sake but to “serve a specific purpose or need of the community within which it is situated” (p.87). The purpose of my study was to better understand the workings of classroom discourse around issues of gender and race so that I may personally grow as a teacher dedicated to working toward social justice as well as communicate my findings to other classroom teachers in a way that allows them to feel informed in taking on the same work. To do so would be in service of our students, families, and communities as we work to build a future citizenship willing to tackle the significant social issues facing society.

Other issues of ethics in this study involved informed consent, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm. Before the study began I invited my students’ families into the classroom to discuss the work we would be doing together around topics related to social justice as well as inform them of the specifics of the study. I assured parents I was studying patterns of discourse and not their specific children. I let them know their children would be discussing issues that are considered sensitive by some and that many of these discussions would be continued at home and, provided parental consent, reported back to the classroom. I assured parents that all names would be changed and participation could be terminated at any time.
In regards to avoidance of harm, it was my responsibility to remain mindful of the fact the children were sharing perspectives – both their own and their parents – that were sensitive and often “in process.” My role as a researcher allowed me both the power and privilege of interpreting these words and their intentions. This sort of power could lead to gross misrepresentations. Acknowledging this threat, Pillow (2003) calls on researchers to “focus on developing reciprocity with research subjects – hearing, listening, and equalizing the research relationship – doing research ‘with’ instead of ‘on’” (p. 179). As discussed when addressing trustworthiness, I invited students into the process of creating meaning from certain particulars of past discussions as well as accessed them to clarify their own interpretations of intent and meaning within a given speech event.

**Limitations**

A significant limitation of the study involved my role as both the teacher and researcher. It was difficult to skirt the line between these two roles while maintaining the integrity of classroom and my teaching. There were many moments when I wanted to record what was happening in rich detail but needed, instead, to be fully present as a teacher for my students. Times when I attempted to record all I wanted to capture in a given moment were often met with impatient transitional chatter and play that served to stall the momentum we had gained in our collaborative work. For this reason, I worked to navigate a delicate balance when engaged in the dual roles of teacher-researcher. I worked to resolve this tension in two ways. First, notes were generated quickly and efficiently in the moment, sometimes making use of self-generated codes or shorthand, and then elaborated upon during planning periods and at the end of the day. Second, a greater reliance was placed upon the collection of student artifacts, photographs, video
recordings, and audio recordings to allow me to more easily and effectively revisit key moments. As challenging as it was to work as both a researcher and a teacher at the same time, it provided me incredible insider-status in regards to my contextual knowledge of the participants and the research site. Working with my kids across multiple curricular structures, playing with them at recess, eating lunch with them in the cafeteria, spending time with them outside of school, and getting to know each of their families all served to provide invaluable information. Though much of my research focused on our discussions during Morning Meeting the knowledge I possessed about my students and their relationships with one another greatly enhanced my ability to read the data before bringing this information back to the students to reflect upon and critique.

**Conclusion**

My own lack of formal education around issues of gender and race, as well as the intersection of many other identities, drive me as a teacher. That I grew up with bigoted and racist views during the earliest years of my life makes me strive all the more to make certain I am preparing my own students to become critical consumers of the information they receive from schooling, their families and friends, and society at large. I know such work is made difficult not only by the social context of our teaching but by the multitude of issues to be addressed - including the breadth, depth, and framing of these studies-throughout the process of building critical classroom discourse. However, this work is critical to addressing the social turmoil our country is facing in light of the ways significant portions of our population is creating meaning from differences in race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender. The power of this research will be to provide teachers an understanding of the ways in which elementary-aged students engage with
and working to construct meaning around issues that do not always feel close to home for them.
CHAPTER 5: Findings

The discussions my students took up during our Morning Meetings provided opportunities for them to engage in critical discussions as well as negotiate meaning regarding issues of inequity and injustice around gender and race. From my analysis of these discussions, I concluded students drew from a variety of resources to create meaning while sharing diverse perspectives. The ways in which students negotiated meaning alongside their peers constitutes the focus of this chapter. I have organized my findings around four themes. The first theme, *The Nature of Knowledge*, demonstrates the ways knowledge was situated within class discussions. The codes that supported this theme were: curricular work that supports critical thinking, questioning social practices, revealing the social construction of the world, naming self as part of issue at hand, supporting kids to deal with conflict, change in thinking over time, going to primary sources, making personal connections, and students declaring their truth. The second theme, *Drawing on Multiple Resources to Construct Meaning*, describes the resources students accessed to contextualize and understand these issues. Codes that supported this theme included: accessing past classroom learning experiences, curricular work that supports critical thinking, developing hypotheses to explain a problem, going to primary sources, making personal connections, metaphors and media to connect unknown to the known, putting faces to issues, questioning social practices, students declaring their truth, and teacher creating meaning for students. The third theme, *Explaining Issues of Inequity and Injustice around Gender and Race*, explores the nature of the hypotheses students
generated to explain the presence, maintenance, and effects of injustices related to gender and race. Codes from my analysis that supported this theme included: change in thinking over time, denying this is an issue, developing hypotheses to explain a problem, injustices as explainable rather than unjust, making personal connections, and students declaring their truth. Lastly, the fourth theme, *Tensions around Discussions of Gender and Race*, addresses the students’ concerns for themselves and their peers when engaged in open dialogue about gender and race. Codes that supported this theme included: child-to-child scrutiny, engaging in stereotypical/gendered speech, hesitancy to speak, naming self as part of the issue, potentially hurtful discourse, teaching against home value/beliefs, and teacher-to-child scrutiny. The patterns I have constructed within these themes address my primary research questions: (1) How do my students construct meaning during class discussions regarding issues of inequity and injustice around gender and race?, (2) What role do I play in constructing, shaping, and maintaining opportunities for students to create meaning during these discussions?, and (3) What tensions do my students encounter when engaging in critical discussions about gender and race?

**The Nature of Knowledge**

In the first theme, *The Nature of Knowledge*, I describe ways in which the construction of knowledge was positioned within class discussions. This included knowledge as socially constructed, knowledge as taken up differently from multiple perspectives, and knowledge as local.

**Knowledge as Socially Constructed**

As students launched discussions from their daily observations it was important to use this opportunity to help them understand that knowledge is not static, but historically
rooted and socially constructed (hooks, 1993). Just as critical theorists interrogate knowledge to identify the interests shaping them, I worked to support students to begin questioning not only the validity but the apparent innocence of commonly accepted beliefs and practices (Prasad, 2005). In our classroom discussions and inquiries this took the form of students actively working to locate where a particular belief originated from, who it served, and whether or not we saw it as factual or natural based on our own observations, experiences, and studies. In the following example the class worked to understand why females have been historically denied access to educational and leadership opportunities in many places across the globe. During this discussion, Ayrica had earlier supported a negative stereotype about females when suggesting these inequalities were the product of boys being more capable than girls. As Kumail considered the likelihood our beliefs about the roles of men and women have been handed down over time, I worked alongside my student teacher, James, to demonstrate how truths can and should be questioned. Kumail begins this vignette by explaining why he believed the path for men and women has been different in regards to taking on higher posts in society.

Kumail: Like when humans first came on this planet, there was usually boys who risked their lives to hunt down big creatures and the women just went around and they had to take care of all the kids. And the thing was maybe because from that time…everyone kept thinking that since girls started out like that, that’s how they stayed until this time.

Chris: That we tend to keep doing the same things over and over and over?

Maybe so. But I think the important thing is that at some point someone had to
stop and question that, right? And say, “Why do we do that?” or “Is that even right?” But you’re right, maybe people just tend to do the same things over and over without even questioning it.

James  That’s an interesting question that Kumail points out because I wonder if that’s the case, if that started that long ago, I wonder if it’s the same everywhere? Because I know in some countries they used to be different. They used to have more women in power positions and less men doing power things. So I wonder if it’s the same everywhere. Or is it what we…

Chris  So it’d be interesting to look at each of those cultures and see how did that come to be. (Morning Meeting, 2-3-16)

For women and girls to be subjugated to limited roles within a society, some people may believe, as Ayrica suggested, there is some inherent trait not only justifying this but making it seem as though it is natural or inevitable. However, the nature of this belief was challenged by Kumail as he formulated a competing hypothesis to explain the origin of oppressive gendered practices. I then argued beliefs can be passed on without many stopping to consider whether or not they are true or where they have come from while James helped students see that truths are culturally situated when explaining there have been countries in which females were more likely to take on roles of leadership than men. This experience, among countless others, helped students see that when engaging in dialogue we can build upon the ideas of others, and even challenge them as demonstrated by James’ comment about differences across the globe, to collaboratively construct new knowledge and develop new questions.
In the next vignette, students had begun to identify the fact their own beliefs were often a result of social relationships and interactions. This discussion took place in the middle of our second year together as Emily asked why people still occasionally stated blue was for boys and pink was for girls. This topic had been previously broached on multiple occasions with most students coming to the conclusion there was no such thing as a boy color or a girl color. Noticing there had been a significant shift in student beliefs around gendered colors, I asked how so many students came to change their minds on this topic since entering second grade the year before.

Chris: Silas, what were you going to say? How did you change your mind?

Silas: I think it might be some of these conversations might like open me to something new that I might be able to believe. And I think that’s what happened with these colors.

Chris: Cause you talked about it and heard other ideas-

Silas: Yeah.

Chris: -and you started thinking “Well, here’s my ideas. Here’s those ideas. I’m trying to figure out”?

Silas: Mmm hmm.

Chris: Alright. Okay. So hearing other people talk. Emily?

Emily: It’s just kind of because people, someone just brung it up and because I think we got older and we can understand more why should be able to use any color we want or wear any colors that we want.

Chris: So, by getting older do you think maybe you think about things harder than you used to?
Emily: Yeah.

Chris: Like before you’d just be like “Oh, that’s just the way it is” but now you’re like “Why?”.

Emily: Yeah.

Chris: Okay. Derrick, why do you think you changed your mind?

Derrick: Back then when I was little in second grade, when I didn’t understand this, I just stick with some other boys that said “Eww, oh yeah let’s just stick with boy colors. Purple and pink are girl colors. I don’t like that color.” I just changed my mind because I got older now and I grown a year older and I added up another grade and I think that I’ve grown smarter and just saying that every time boy and girl colors…

Chris: You sound like you’re saying that you don’t just listen to your friends. You actually think about things a little bit. Silas, what do you think?

Silas: I think like Derrick I, when I was in, just like Derrick, second grade I thought about boy colors and girl colors. I separated them. I’ve grown up and now I don’t think about what my friends say I just think my own thoughts.

Chris: Okay. So not just listening to friends anymore but actually thinking about what they’re saying and what it means to you? (Morning Meeting, 11-18-16)

Derrick and Silas made explicit the role others can take in creating realities for us as we willingly work to align ourselves and our beliefs with those who are closest to us. However, as Silas pointed out, hearing these ideas critiqued in the presence of others provided opportunities to expose students to new thinking. The diversity of perspectives in these discussions was critical in that it allowed opportunities for students to encounter
ideas and experiences that may have otherwise been left unchallenged. As such, the opportunity to engage in discourse in a diverse setting created the needed space and opportunity to either redefine or revise previous beliefs.

**Knowledge as Taken Up Differently from Multiple Perspectives**

For students to learn to access a diversity of perspectives from others whose lived experiences may help them better understand a particular issue or topic they must first come to understand this diversity of experience and perspective exists. Recognizing and valuing the presence of multiple perspectives is a challenge for many elementary students. They often tend to believe others experience the world or a particular incident as they do. For this reason it was important to provide my students opportunities to consider books, daily conflicts, current events, and historical accounts from the perspectives of multiple players.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, there was one instance in our classroom where this work called on students to research the roles and practices of zoos and then consider their cultural and pragmatic value as viewed from the perspective of a zookeeper, small child, elephant, and animal activist. Other times students were engaged in read alouds and tasked to identify what multiple characters may have been thinking, feeling, or desiring at various points in the story. These sorts of experiences made explicit the relationship between one's identity and social standing and the ways in which they perceive of and act in response to a particular scenario or circumstance. For instance, when reading Jacqueline Woodson’s book *The Other Side* (2001) students were confronted with a story about two girls in the segregated South, one White and one Black, who lived on opposite sides of a wooden fence but were not allowed to cross over it to play with one another.
Though each girl desired to interact with the other and felt a sense of discomfort, the
differences in the ways the Black child and White child were likely to experience this
discomfort allowed students the opportunity to see how this aggression kept the White
girl from making a new playmate while for the Black girl segregated practices and
ideologies of hate went far beyond a single fence or playmate. In considering the
circumstances for each of the girls separately, students were provided an opportunity to
find differences where there appeared to be only congruence.

Despite these curricular engagements, students continued to struggle in regards to
recognizing and finding value in the perspective of others. For example, when a data set
was shared with the class showing the vast amount of children’s literature is written about
or reflective of White culture many of the White students in class failed to recognize this
as problematic – despite the fact three students of Color shared their personal concerns
regarding a lack of literature that represented and valued their racial and ethnic identities.
This lack of diverse literature feeding classroom and library shelves constituted but one
example of a hidden curriculum (Nieto, 2002) working to maintain the existing social. In
this vignette, Braden, a White student, argued that in having this discussion we were
making an issue out of something he perceived, from his perspective as a White reader, to
be harmless.

Braden: I think that it doesn’t really matter because they’re just books. I mean,

so-

Chris: Well, you said it doesn’t really matter. What doesn’t really matter?

Braden: I mean, some of them are all like fairy tales and -

Chris: Are there fairy tales about Black people?
Various Voices: No.

Chris: Are there fairy tales about Latino people?

Various Voices: No.

Chris: Are there fairy tales about White people?

Various Voices: Yes.

Braden: But what I’m saying is that some of them are made up. Some of them are not really based on something true happens.

Chris: Mmm Hmm

Braden: So why would people, so why should we be offended? Why should we be offended? (Morning Meeting, 10-11-16)

From Braden’s perspective, only non-fiction books about Black people would require characters to be Black. As was argued by other White students earlier in the discussion, fiction characters could be any race or ethnicity because such decisions are presumably of little-to-no consequence to the story or its appeal. This perspective spoke to the unrecognized privilege of those students capable of effortlessly accessing a plethora of literature reflecting and valuing their own racial and ethnic identities. These students’ struggles to view the world from a different perspective paralleled the struggles Leland and Harste (2001) encountered when challenging undergraduates to view a beloved fairy tale as implicitly reifying the stereotype women can only achieve happiness through marriage. The struggles my students encountered in acknowledging and finding value in the perspectives of others when constructing knowledge demonstrated a need for consistent exposure to engagements calling on them to identify, consider, and empathize with the lived experiences of those who experience the issue-at-hand differently. As their
teacher, making note of such exchanges in my teaching journal helped me locate holes in my curriculum and instruction so I could teach responsively into specific student needs.

**Knowledge as Local**

As in the previous vignette, failing to recognize or acknowledge the problematic nature of institutionalized oppressive acts positions one to continue passively, but effectively, supporting the maintenance of inequities. For this reason it is crucial that teachers use such opportunities to confront and disrupt inequities, especially those within their own classrooms. Other times it is not the act of negating such issues but the failure to recognize one’s own role within larger systems of oppression that makes us complicit in the maintenance of these systems. As such, the harmful acts of an unjust society that are often critiqued from a seemingly safe distance are, in actuality, the product of our own doing. Unless we are actively working to disrupt injustices in all forms we are working to maintain the very oppressions we claim to disdain (Banks, 1993; Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Solozorro & Yosso, 2009). Recognizing our role in the maintenance of these systems, therefore, supports students to not only think critically about the world but the role they play within it.

In our classroom it was Taylor who helped us recognize the ways in which we failed to locate ourselves within knowledge of wrong doing. Though she was not speaking directly to issues of injustice, the patterns of speech Taylor identified within our Morning Meeting created the possibility for a new level of analysis when constructing knowledge around issues of gender and race. In the following vignette, Taylor shared her insight about our tendency to name others as exhibiting problematic behaviors when we could just as easily have identified ourselves for doing it as well. It was her hopes, as
explained to me privately before this discussion, to reshape the way questions of social behaviors were framed.

Taylor: Why do we say “they” instead of “we”? And when I say that I mean like we’re always saying “they” in the Morning Meeting and we know at least one time we might of done something -

Ronald: “They” and “we” don’t have the same meaning.

Chris: <to Ronald> Can you let her explain? <to Taylor> So, can you give an example? That might help people.

Taylor: Like yesterday when we kept saying “they” when it was, I’m not really sure, but a journal about pushing.

Chris: Why do “they” always push through the door?

Taylor: Yeah. A lot of people that I heard I keep hearing “we”, I mean “they”, because we’re not talking about ourselves.


Taylor: Yeah.

Chris: Instead of us saying “Why do we do it?” because we do it sometimes too. So I think her question is why do we always say “they” like we’re blaming other people and not say “we” when we know that at some point in our lives we’ve done the same things.

Taylor: Yeah.

Chris: Like we’re making it about other people instead of saying “Why do we do it?” knowing I sometimes do it too. (Morning Meeting, 9-16-16)
Though it took some time for the class to come to understand the full meaning of Taylor’s concern, her challenge to name ourselves as an active player took root in future discussions. For instance, in the following discussion two months had passed since Taylor brought attention to our tendency to place the blame on others for problems we saw in our community. For this discussion, James had written an entry in a journal about a recent phrase that had emerged not only in parts of the school and classroom but in pop culture as well. The phrase, “What are those?,” was an insulting response to another person’s shoes intended to belittle them for wearing an off-brand or unpopular model.

James: I have the culture journal, I know I do it, but why do people say “What are those” about shoes? Chase?

Chase: I know I do this too but some people be like <makes face> “What are thooose? Ohhh!” They go crazy. All crazy.

Chris: So, if you do it too why do you do it? What do you mean by it when you do it?

James: I think-

Chris: Wait, I want Chase to. Because that’s the nice thing. If people here do it than they should be the ones we’re asking because they have the best information. The rest of us are guessing. (Morning Meeting, 11-10-16)

Both James and Chase recognized the social practice of “What are those?” as problematic but willingly admitted they still engaged in using it with others. Positioning themselves in this manner allowed the boys to not only recognize their own role in the normalization of a derogatory remark that was becoming increasingly popular but to make knowledge local by speaking to this behavior from the perspective of one who
experienced it first-hand. Though the revelation of our use of pronouns to either implicate or distance ourselves from the roles we play in maintaining hurtful beliefs and practices came too late in this study to see the effects of making students aware of their own roles in maintaining the status quo, it identified a new opportunity for my future teaching in which I can work to support students to become active agents of change who think more critically about their own behavior and speech and the ways these operate within the status quo.

This theme, *Considering the Nature of Knowledge*, described the ways students interacted with one another to both construct and contest multiple meanings while becoming more aware of the importance of accurately locating themselves in relation to the issue being discussed, thus making knowledge local. The second theme, *Drawing on Multiple Resources to Construct Meaning*, will build upon the nature of knowledge by demonstrating specific ways students drew upon resources available to them to construct meaning within discussions about issues of inequity and injustice around gender and race.

**Drawing on Multiple Resources to Construct Meaning**

The second theme, *Drawing on Multiple Resources to Construct Meaning*, describes the ways students drew upon multiple resources of information to contextualize, understand, and speak to issues of inequity and injustice. These included personal connections, past classroom engagements, and teacher input. This section will detail the ways each resource was accessed as well as how students used these resources to construct meaning.
Making Personal and Cultural Connections

Students often drew on personal and cultural connections to make sense of issues brought to the class. In doing so, they provided observations, anecdotes, and experiences from their lived experiences as well as what they observed in media sources such as comics, television, and movies. These connections were made public during class discussions and supported students to: (1) provide examples of the social practice or injustice being discussed, (2) support or disrupt stereotypes, and (3) discount or soften a particular injustice.

Providing examples of the social practice or injustice being discussed. In discussions of gender students drew on a wide variety of experiences spanning their home, school, and evening activities. These experiences helped students not only understand and connect to gender-related injustices, beliefs, and practices but provide examples demonstrating such practices and beliefs to be present in their own lives – and, thus, real. I will now share one of many gender-related discussions where a student shared a personal experience to bring an abstract issue into the lives of their classmates. It was late September and the class had gathered in a circle on the carpet for Morning Meeting. A few days earlier I had shared a news article about a concerned mother who wrote a letter to Party City about the fact there were far fewer career-oriented Halloween costume choices for her daughter and other girls than there were for boys. The mother also took exception to the fact the three career-oriented costumes that were offered to girls were not at all realistic. The mother’s position was that instead of positioning young girls as professional, the girls’ costumes were designed to be cute, fashionable, and even sexy.
Asked whether or not they agreed with the mother’s concerns, students had time to reflect on the article and engage in a written conversation about it at home with a member of their family before making their thinking public. After Silas began the discussion suggesting the woman’s daughter should simply choose from her three options and hope to get luckier next year, others disagreed demanding the boy and girl aisles be combined or, at least, offer similar choices. In the following transcript, Emily recalled a shopping trip with her dad in which she noticed the toy aisles were also different for boys than they were for girls.

Chris: So Derrick’s idea is to have shelves for each but have the same choices there? Or the same number of choices?

Braden: I actually agree with that.

Various Voices: (Students engage in small group discussions around the circle in response to Derrick’s idea)

Chris: What do you want to say Braden?

Braden: I actually agree with Derrick because I think of all the big boys and all the little boys, and girls and all the big girls, I think all of them should have the equal amount. And all of them should have the same amount of career jobs.

Chris: Okay. What were you going to say Emily?

Emily: I went to Wal-Mart and me and my dad were going to get a birthday present for Kylie and I saw Barbies and all that stuff and Doodle Pads and then went to the other section for boys and saw Marvel Craft and Legos and that.

Chris: So they were already kind of deciding what girls like and what boys like. Is that what you’re thinking there?
Emily: Yeah. And I like the boys’ section a lot. (Morning Meeting, 9-28-15)

Emily used a personal experience at Wal-Mart to demonstrate the fact this phenomenon of gendered choices was not only something to be read about in a news article but immediately present in her life as well as the lives of her peers. Emily went further to explain her desire to shop from the boys’ section, using her personal experience of shopping for a classmate’s birthday present to reveal the flawed assumptions behind gendered choices. In doing so, Emily helped her classmates see this issue as real – whether or not they chose to accept it as unfair. These types of connections were common across discussions of gender and were often rooted in familial relationships, family perspectives, gender-related conflicts, peer relationships, observations of broader communities (dance studios, ball fields, shopping centers, etc), and observed representations of gender across various forms of media (comics, television, movies, etc).

The wealth of experiences students drew upon to make connections to issues of gender led me to my interpretation that not only did they regularly encounter such practices but that at seven and eight years old they had already begun to take notice of and passively accept culturally dominant practices and beliefs that made it seem natural to position maleness and femaleness as a binary (Crenshaw, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

During discussions of race, students also drew on personal and cultural connections to demonstrate some aspect of the issue-at-hand as being real. In the following transcript the class was discussing a question Kylie had placed in the culture journal, “Why is there only man presidents and only one is not white?” After various students spoke to issues of power, tradition, and opportunity, James connected this issue to other observations he had made in regards to opportunities for people of color.
Sarah: I thinks it’s why boys be president because the first president George Washington, he was well, you know, a boy. And the next president was a boy. And the next president was a boy. So everyone just got used to the girls living in the White House and the boys being president. But if, like, a girl was president the boy would live in the White House and the girl would also live in the White House but would be president so it would be kind of cool.

Braden: Well, actually if you were, if a girl, wait,…

Various Voices: (Students begin side conversations about role reversals in the White House.)

Kylie: James.

James: Well, what about TV shows and movies? Because it’s White TV shows and movies and there’s more White in presidents also. I think-

Chris: Do you think those two things are related somehow?

James: Yeah.

Various Voices: Yes.

Chris: How do you think they’re related?

James: Because there’s like over a hundred percent White in lots of movies. Like most movies I see, like one movie I saw…it was only White people in that movie. It’s the only thing I saw. I wonder why there’s not really that much Black people?

(Morning Meeting, 5-13-16)

James accessed his cultural resources, in this case media, to draw a parallel between the lack of Black representation in the White House and a lack of Black representation in TV and movies. He recognized that the overrepresentation of Whiteness
was not isolated to just politics but present in broader society as well. Revealing the presence of this issue within the world of popular media allowed James to not only show how it directly touched his own life but how it was present in the lives of his classmates as well. Because White students had not noticed such disparities in the media they consumed, James’ connection to Kylie’s question provided all students in the classroom an opportunity to consider a new perspective as well as broader implications of the issue of representation and how it personally affected the lives of their peers.

While the personal connections made in this section helped students identify ways in which society is capable of marginalizing people in their community based on gender and race, other connections to these topics worked to support or disrupt harmful generalizations. The next section will discuss the ways in which the personal and cultural connections students made during our discussions served to maintain as well as disrupt stereotypes.

**Supporting and disrupting stereotypes as factual.** Though there were no personal connections made to either support or disrupt racial stereotypes, students often shared stories to demonstrate or challenge the ways they perceived females and males to be different. Often, these played upon age-old stereotypes positioning men as strong, physically capable, and indifferent to fashion and women as weak, less physically capable, and consumed by fashion. In the following transcript, Jayda and Sarah had entered the classroom upset that a timed running challenge in PE set higher standards for male students than it did for females in terms of the expected number of completed laps. As Jayda and Sarah worked alongside other girls in the class to declare this an unfair practice, James suggested girls may have different standards because they are less rough.
Following a number of exchanges about the toughness of girls, James accessed his experiences with football to make his point.

James: But mostly the girls don’t play football.

Various Voices: (Overlapping speech in response to James’ claim)

Chris  Guys, I can’t hear James.

James: Maybe the difference is one little sport. Girls do not play football but boys do because-

Emily: (gasps in disagreement) Girls do.

James: Like, I know girls do play football.

Chris: He’s talking about college and-

James: I’m talking about the real sport, NFL football. They don’t.

(Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

Though James played football alongside a handful of girls at recess most days, his experiences playing Pop Warner and watching college and NFL football games were evoked to not only demonstrate that girls don’t play “the real sport” but, I posit, to suggest they are not strong or tough enough to do so. The discussion then turned to whether or not females could compete in football. Ronald supported James’ notion that girls are weaker by sharing one of his own experiences with girls playing sports.

Chris: Ronald?

Ronald: Maybe one reason that we don’t see girls playing football because they’re scared they might get hurt. In baseball there’s like softball -

Sarah: Some boys get hurt.

Ronald: They wear mitts and tons of gear and boys don’t.
Chris: So Ronald, the women’s softball teams that play in high school and college and the Olympics, they don’t wear face masks and they don’t wear protective gear except for the catcher just like baseball players. And I’ll say this too, they’ve had some of the best women softball pitchers face some of the best men’s hitters in Major League Baseball and do you know what happens more often than not? They strike them out.

Various Voices: (Cheering from some of the girls)

Chris: In softball, the pitcher is close to the batter and you have less time to get ready for the ball. And the men just aren’t used to doing softball. If they practiced it they would be really good at it too. But they don’t practice that particular thing.

Ronald: I play baseball in Blythewood and I see the girls and I see a lot of them wearing face masks.

Chris: Yeah? When they’re in the field?

Ronald: Yeah. (Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

Ronald drew on his observations from the community ballpark to support the notion girls were more likely to get injured than boys were when stating that, according to his recollection, softball players had to wear helmets with cages in the field to protect their faces. Working collaboratively to frame the issue of gendered expectations as inevitable due to physical differences between boys and girls, I interpreted James and Ronald arguments as evoking their experiences with sports, a male-dominated field with a long history of both limiting and denying opportunities for females, to reify the common stereotype of girls as both delicate and vulnerable.
However, each and every time a student shared a lived experience laying claim to the validity of a gender-based stereotype other students stepped in to provide their own personal experiences to actively disrupt the limitations and inaccuracies of such generalizations. For instance, after James and Ronald shared their experiences on the football field and at the community ballpark Jayda and Emily resisted the notion girls could not participate fully in dangerous sports. The following excerpt begins with me responding to Ronald after he had just explained the girls wear facemasks in the field during softball games.

Chris: (to Ronald) I’ve never seen that. Jayda, what did you want to say?

Jayda: Well there’s this show called BEEmily and the Bulldogs and it’s about this girl who plays football.

Chris: Oh really?

Jayda: With a bunch of other teenage boys.

Chris: Emily, what were you going to say?

Emily: About Ronald, I think he, this might not be right, but I think he was saying he thought boys are tougher than girls.

Braden: Huh?

James: It’s barely true.

Chris: Was that his point in saying they wear all the gear?

Emily: Um, I don’t know. Maybe.

Chris: (to Ronald) So, was that what you were saying? (to Emily) You have to ask him.
Emily: You were arguing people that said boys are tougher and because one time I was watching soccer and these two girls were going to head butt the ball on each team and instead of hitting the ball they hit each other and one of their heads was bleeding.

Various Voices: Ooooh!

Emily: And she didn’t even cry. (Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

Jayda and Emily drew upon their own experiences with media and sports to disrupt the stereotype being normalized for the group by James and Ronald. Because the stereotype James and Ronald had perpetuated has been so deeply accepted throughout many parts of our society, the onus was on the girls to prove their toughness and ability to compete. At stake for Jayda and Emily, as well as for each of their female classmates, were the ways in which they were perceived and accepted within physical activities not only by other children at recess but by the adult administering the Pacer Challenge and leading their physical education class. For this reason, personal connections acting to provide counter narratives to commonly held beliefs that often inform unjust practices were of great importance within classroom discussions.

**Discounting or softening injustices.** The final way in which cultural and personal connections played an important role in collaborative meaning-making occurred within discussions of race. Because they would not always view the topics explored in class as directly relating to their own lived experiences, there were times when students drew on what they perceived as parallel experiences to better understand, or even evaluate, the issue at hand. In the following vignette the class was reading a book titled *The Bus Ride* (Miller, 2001). Miller’s fictional account of a child taking social action
during the Civil Rights Movement transposes Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat to a young Black girl named Sarah. As this transcript begins, I had just stopped reading at the end of a page to let students turn and talk with a neighbor before reporting their thinking to the whole group.

Chris: Hey, does anyone want to share anything out that you thought the whole group should hear? Chris?

Chris: I noticed that the girl’s mom worked every day and she probably doesn’t even have any time for their life.

Chris: Because she’s working really hard to make sure they have many of the things they need. Yeah. Hey Emily, what were you, what did you want to share?

Emily: Well, I was sharing why do the White people [think] it was much more better to ride at the front of the bus…because it was dirtier, than it, was dirtier. There was dirt between the seats. And I think they like it there because like, I don’t know why they like it up there because I like the back of the bus because it’s bumpier.

Chris: So that makes me wonder, Emily, was it really about the front of the bus being better than the back of the bus or was it about people being told what they could do and what they couldn’t do and if it was fair. So maybe it wasn’t so much the fact it was the front of the bus but just being told you can’t even sit there because of the color of your skin.

Braden: I have a connection to Emily.

Chris: What is it?
Braden: Well, at Punta Cana we rode on these buses to go to different places and I liked the back the best because it was very, very bumpy.

Chris: Right. And I think people appreciate having the choice of where they want to sit and not being told. (Read Aloud, 2-15-16)

In this example, Emily and Braden both shared their experiences with riding buses to explain their own preference for the back of the bus. In doing so, they indirectly questioned the validity of the injustice claimed by Sarah, her mother, and the Black community who eventually organized a boycott to challenge the segregation laws enforced on city buses. Emily and Braden worked to understand the relationships and the demands of the characters in the book by drawing parallels between Sarah’s experience in the book and their own experiences sitting in various spots on the bus. Later in the book, when the bus driver told Sarah she would be breaking the law if she did not return to her seat in the back, Sarah and Derrick interrupted to share their own confusion with the story.

Chris: (reading) So if you don’t want to break a law you should go back to your seat.

Sarah: What’s so important about the front seat?

Derrick: I know, right? It’s just a seat. (Read Aloud, 2-15-16)

As with Emily and Braden’s stories of sitting in the back of the bus and enjoying it, Sarah and Derrick expressed skepticism as to whether this conflict over the front seats was worthwhile. For each of these White children, their personal connections provided a false-parallel between their experiences and that of the Black characters in the book. In accessing their own experiences, I understood their interpretation of this issue as failing
to recognize important differences between the two situations due to a lack of historical context that differentiated Sarah’s experiences in the segregated South with Braden’s experiences on a bus during a family trip to a resort in the Dominican Republic.

Students drew on personal connections to provide examples of social practices and injustices, support or disrupt stereotypes, and discount or soften racist acts and in doing so the meaning they made from their own experiences and the ways they portrayed these meanings in their storytelling became resources for other students to access, interrogate, and build upon. As such, student willingness to go public with personal connections played an important role in helping others make sense of and scrutinize issues of gender and race as knowledge was socially constructed. However, there was a significant discrepancy in regards to the number of personal connections being shared within discussions of gender and race (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1

Instances of Personal Connections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Connections Allow Student to…</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provide examples of social practices and injustices</strong></td>
<td>Students draw on a personal connection to demonstrate this injustice/social practice within the contexts of their own experiences or others in their lives</td>
<td>Gender: 8, Race: 6, Total: 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support Stereotypes</strong></td>
<td>Students draw on personal connections to demonstrate gender or racial stereotypes as reality</td>
<td>Gender: 5, Race: 0, Total: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disrupt Stereotypes</strong></td>
<td>Students draw on personal connections to challenge gender or racial stereotypes</td>
<td>Gender: 9, Race: 0, Total: 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discount or</strong></td>
<td>Students draw on personal connection to...</td>
<td>Gender: 0, Race: 2, Total: 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite the fact there were a similar number of discussions about each topic (17 about gender and 16 about race), students were far more likely to share personal connections during gender-related discussions (22 total connections) than they were discussions of race (8 total connections). Furthermore, when analyzing the content and quality of the eight personal connections within discussions of race only half of those shared were found to have provided context for the issue-at-hand. Of the four that did not provide context, two were by White children working to construct parallel situations in their own lives to empathize with instances of stereotyping (Ronald stated his father had tattoos but was not a criminal) and police violence perpetrated on the Black community (Braden said he was once bullied at a summer camp) while the remaining two were White children accessing their own experiences to discount or soften the impact and importance of racist acts. In total, only three connections were made by Black children speaking to issues of race during our sixteen discussions spanning one-and-a-half school years. The fact there were so few personal and cultural connections being offered by Black students was concerning for two reasons. First, it may have signified an underlying concern on the part of students of Color in regards to sharing out openly and honestly in mixed company. Secondly, it left too much space for those most detached from the realities of these inequities and injustices to step up and reify hegemonic beliefs and practices. Though the number of personal and cultural connections offered by Black students constituted an alarmingly low figure, it was not completely surprising
considering the fact discussions of race were consistently dominated by non-Black children. Representation in regards to who spoke, what they shared, and how this shaped the class’ meaning-making around each of these issues will be explored more fully in future sections. The next section will explore the ways these discussions, as well as other curricular studies, were later accessed as established sources of information for future discussions and meaning-making.

**Accessing Past Classroom Engagements**

The second source students accessed to create meaning when engaged in critical discourse was past classroom engagements. In drawing on these engagements, students accessed previously discussed ideas to accomplish one of three goals: (1) draw a parallel between a new issue and an old one to provide context, (2) access a previously accepted frame for making sense of a new issue, or (3) provide validity to a hypothesis they are developing by presupposing content from past discussions are now accepted as fact.

**Drawing parallels between new issues and old ones.** One way students used previous discussions and curricular content was to draw parallels between the current topic and ideas that had been previously established or contested within similar discussions. Doing so allowed students to contextualize a new issue in relation to others that touched on related injustices, beliefs, or practices to better understand the topic-at-hand. In the following transcript, it was the sixth month of school and Baja had placed a question in the culture journal asking “Why do some people say there are a tomboy and some don’t?” After students clarified for one another what the term referred to there was some discussion that tomboys were somehow different than other girls in regards to their
interests and the way they dressed. Taylor begins this except by placing her classmates’ statements within the context of a previous class discussion about gendered colors.

Taylor: I guess it comes back to boy colors and girl colors when it comes to clothes.

Various Voices: (Students break into simultaneous discussions before quieting back down)

Chris So, wait. It makes me wonder, we’ve talked about tomboys before. I remember Emily was very defiant about the idea of tomboys. She was like “I like to do those things” right?...We talked about that a little bit and we talked about toys and costumes and tomboys and colors and you guys were bringing up a lot of ideas earlier in the year. Does that have something to do with what we were talking about “normal?” Like normal for girls? Normal for boys?

Emily: Yeah.

Various Voices: (Simultaneous speech)

Chris I was just wondering if we just use the term tomboy to refer to a girl who likes things that don’t count as normal for a girl. So we come up with a new name for her. We call her, now, a tomboy.

Joseph: Like the Halloween costumes with the girl side and the boys’ side. The boys have like green and blue stuff. There’s no such thing as boy colors and girl colors. (Morning Meeting, 2-2-16)

Prefacing her statement with the phrase “I guess it comes back to…,” Taylor helped others see a connection between present and past ideas as she referred back to a classroom discussion from the second month of school about the gendering of certain
colors and the ways in which children used this to tease one another. Taylor suggested a parallel between a willingness to believe boys and girls can only like certain colors and boys and girls can only wear certain types of clothing. I, too, referred back to a previous discussion where Emily had resisted tomboys as a real construct before introducing the potential relevance of an inquiry we were currently conducting into the notion of normalcy. I used the phrase “I wonder if this has something to do with…” to direct students to search for a connection between two different, but similar, issues – naming certain behaviors and ways of being as “normal,” and expecting girls to act a particular way or else be labeled as a tomboy. Finally, Joseph built on our ideas by likening these practices – gendered colors, gendered interests, and gendered clothes - to our earlier discussion of the gendered Halloween aisles at Party City. Each of these moves to evoke a previous discussion or study allowed students to not only understand the current issue but begin to see the connectedness between them- the larger ideology at play shaping social beliefs and practices (Crenshaw, 1995). In this case, finding commonalities between gendered colors, gendered interests, gendered clothes, and gendered costume aisles offered students the opportunity to recognize the ways in which our society works to categorize, or socially construct, what it means to be male or female as well as place limitations on what is considered acceptable or accessible.

Students drew parallels between current and past topics of discussion while discussing race as well. In the following vignette, Emily had asked the class why all the bus drivers she saw during a bus evacuation drill the day before were Black. Our student teacher, Mr. Smith, used this as an opportunity to point out the fact many jobs across the
school seemed to be largely populated by a particular race – White teachers, Black cafeteria workers, White office personnel, Black After Care counselors, etc.

James: Building onto Mr. Smith, mostly like the cafeteria people are Black and everything. Mostly I see White people in movies like Captain America, well I only see a few people that are Black.

Chris: So you don’t see many Black superheroes either?

Silas: Mmm mmm.

Chris: So, I’ll add a little more information to this. If you look at different sorts of jobs, being a teacher pays a lot more money, a lot more money, than being a cafeteria worker or a bus driver or a janitor. A lot more money. So if you have that job, you’re doing a very important job to help your community but you’re really not getting paid very much money to do it. So then when we look at this question we say “So why do we notice most of the Black people are getting these jobs that don’t wind up paying much money? But we notice the jobs that do pay quite a bit of money, White people are the people we see with those jobs?”

Taylor: Where they marched…usually White people got better stuff than the Black people. There’s only, the Black people had to sit in the back of the bus. (Morning Meeting, 2-5-16)

Hearing my explanation that some jobs pay much more than others, Taylor remembered the class having read and discussed *The Bus Ride* (Miller, 2001) in which Jim Crow laws relegate African Americans to secondary status as citizens and, among many other oppressive acts, forced them to sit at the back of the bus. Taylor recognized similarities between Miller’s piece of historical fiction and the largely segregated staffing
of well-paid and minimally paid positions within the school. In this way, she drew a parallel between segregated practices of the past, “White people got better stuff than the Black people,” and the present to provide contextual information that may explain why we notice these patterns within the school. In this case Emily’s observation during the bus evacuation drill, Mr. Smith’s connection to staffing practices at our school, and Taylor’s hypothesis this is somehow related to Jim Crow allows the negotiated curriculum within the classroom to disrupt any hegemonic notions that the existing social order is natural or just.

**Accessing a previous frame.** Throughout the year-and-a-half of this study, students engaged in curricular studies where I deliberately worked to offer frames, or lenses, through which they could view injustices and inequities related to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. This work drew from progressive conceptions of what education should work to achieve (Apple, 2013; Counts 1932; Dewey, 1903; Friere, 1970; Macedo, 2006) as I attempted to support my students into critical thinking that would call on them disrupt the status quo. Table 5.2 describes some of the frames used to shift our perspectives as we worked to make sense of a particular social practice or injustice.

**Table 5.2**

*Common Frames Used by Teacher and Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>How It Was Used</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>This frame described the times in which a person or a group of people had the ability to make decisions that affected outcomes for themselves or for others. Example: In discussing Jim Crow laws, one may draw upon the frame of power to point out the fact White people controlled the ability to write, pass, and enforce laws. These laws were then used to protect their own White privilege. Thus, legislative power allows Whites to maintain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
control of opportunities, rights, and social standing within the community.

**Normalcy**

Connected to power, normalcy described the ways in which social beliefs and practices were shaped and/or judged by the dominant culture in an effort to maintain cultural domination – or, a civic oneness. Example: During this same discussion of Jim Crow laws one might access the frame of normalcy to show how Whites used cultural differences to argue Blacks were uncivilized and uneducated as measured against norms established from their own cultural ways of being. Using culturally-normed measures to falsely demonstrate Blacks as inferior allowed Whites to justify the denial of a quality education, equal employment, voting rights to the Black community.

**Stereotype**

This frame described the ways in which harmful measures are taken as a result of oversimplified generalizations assigned to entire groups of people. Example: During a discussion of a wall being constructed between the United States and Mexico to curb illegal immigration, one might frame this issue as the manifestation of stereotypes (illegal immigrants as dangerous) and the ways they inform unjust practices.

**Racism**

This frame described the times in which someone is treated in a harmful or hurtful manner based on the belief they are inferior in some way based on their racial identity. Example: During a discussion of the policing of Black bodies, one might elicit the frame of racism to explain the disproportionate rates of incarceration for the Black community as compared to Whites committing similar crimes.

In a discussion questioning why females around the globe have endured centuries of patriarchal beliefs and practices denying them access to academic and civic rights, Sophie modified the frame of power and then merged this with the frame of stereotyping to help us understand why she believed Taiwan had only recently elected its first female president as well as why girls in Ghana had to fight for their right to an education.

Silas: Um, maybe they just don’t think girls can do what boys can do. Like, they think (it’s) a new thing for them and they don’t think girls can do that.

Chris: Yeah, obviously they don’t think that. Why do you think they don’t, why wouldn’t they think [girls] could? Where does that come from? Sophie?
Sophie: I think that girls and women don’t get to be president and to the Army and go to school. I think that’s because [men] think that women does not have enough power.

Chris: So what do you mean by that? That’s a very interesting statement. What do you mean by that?

Sophie: I think that people think that women is just, I mean, to like cook the food, do the laundry, take care of the kids, and like that. (Morning Meeting, 2-3-16)

In stating “I think that’s because [men] think that women does not have enough power,” Sophie not only accessed power as a previously established construct but added to our collective understanding of it by suggesting, through her language in use, that power can also mean the ability to be successful. This revised definition was explained more fully when she later predicted men would only expect women to find success when working in the home.

Sophie’s growing understanding of the notion of power was merged with a frame often taken up within class discussions, stereotyping. In working to explain why a group of people may look down upon, belittle, or oppress another group, students often drew on the presence of stereotypes allowing one group to feel justified in possessing lowered expectations for marginalized groups. In the previous vignette, Sophie recognized people in other cultures were also grouped by gender and knowing the men seemed to have the ability to determine outcomes for women, predicted this was rooted in the ways the men assess the women and their abilities. In many cases (as will be described later when discussing the ways students developed hypotheses to explain such injustices) students
explicitly named stereotyping as a frame. Other times, such as in Sophie’s case, stereotyping was accessed more implicitly.

Unlike discussions of gender in which students used stereotyping as a frequent frame for understanding an injustice, discussions of race found students more likely to access the frame of power to explain the struggles facing communities of Color. In the following episode Kylie had asked why the United States had only one Black president and no female presidents in all of its history. Silas, searching for just the right word to articulate his thoughts, uses the construct of power to explain how the Black community was unable, for so many years, to determine significant parts of their own outcomes beyond just becoming president.

Silas: I think one of the reasons is because a long time ago Black people didn’t have that much power like in authority. They – I don’t know what kind of word I’m looking for – but now Black people have like more power and are able to do more things than back then. Then they, when they were like disabled through laws. (Morning Meeting, 5-13-16)

In evoking power as a frame for his explanation, Silas stated Black people “were like disabled through laws” to implicate the White community as complicit in these injustices. Doing so positioned his classmates to consider the fact it was not just Blacks working to gain power but Whites working to maintain it. Once the frame of power was established (“Black people didn’t have that much power in like authority”), Silas named a specific way in which antagonistic forces were at work to cripple the Black community (“disabled through laws”). Later in the discussion, Sarah built upon Silas’ notion that power was at play in this issue.
Chris: (Speaking to a lack of Black representation in many facets of our society, including movies) Does it say something about the way we do things in our country? Hmm.

Sarah: Maybe because back then Black people were you know, like, Black and they didn’t have that much power like Silas said. Probably that’s still, that, there’s a little still Black stuff because probably those movies were made at that kind of time. But the Black movies were made at the time we are. (Morning Meeting, 5-13-16)

I prompted Sarah’s response by intentionally asking a question that would force students to consider whether these injustices were happenstance or whether there were actions being taken that supported similar injustices to continue happening again and again – thus, evidence of institutionalized racism. Responding to my prompt, Sarah supported Silas’ use of power as a frame for explaining limitations on the Black community within these fields. In stating “Probably that’s still, there’s a little still Black stuff…” Sarah suggested a power imbalance remains between people grouped by race but she allowed for the possibility it had improved over time as evidenced by the fact she felt there were “Black movies” made in “the time we are.” Power, as a frame, allowed Silas and Sarah to explore connections between the past and the present as well as between multiple discussions related to race.

**Providing validity to a hypothesis.** The final way students used content from previous discussions and curricular studies was to provide validity for a hypothesis they were posing in hopes of explaining a particular issue or injustice. For instance, when I attempted to elicit an emotional response to the lack of representation of communities of
Color in children’s literature by suggesting our class only read books about girls for the remainder of the year as well as only study the historical contributions of females, Ronald reminded me of a hypothetical story I had once told about the possible negative effects our classmate Gabby could experience if she were only ever able to read books about boys.

Chris: But Ronald, it’s still books. It’s still history. Why would it matter?

Ronald: Because remember when you said if Gabby could only just read about boys she would think that just boys are better. It’s the same thing now. Boys keep reading about girls they would think girls would be better.

Chris: Oh, do you think there would be danger in that?

Bringing forth our past discussion allowed Ronald to successfully argue the flaws of my current course of action. Silas later built on Ronald’s connection between the current issue being discussed and past discussions of the effects of lack of representation in literature and history.

Chris  Silas, what did you want to say?

Silas: Kind of like Ronald’s point, like you said about Gabby. If she only learned about boys she would think that like “Oh, boys do this better” because she’s heard so much about doing it. And so that might be happening to the boys instead.

Chris  But if the boys wanted more stories about boys they could just go to a different school for boys or go to a different country or something.

Taylor What? (Morning Meeting, 10-11-16)

As I continued to sell a hypothetical situation positioning the boys in the same way the dominant culture often positions marginalized groups of people, Silas
demonstrated an understanding of past discussions and applied his understanding to a new situation in which the roles of privileged and oppressed had been reversed. Though there were instances such as these where students used past discussions to help themselves and their peers better understand a current topic of discussion, nearly half (three of the seven) involved students misrepresenting past discussions to formulate and justify a hypothesis in direct conflict with the ideals of equity, respect, and acceptance so often at the heart of our work. In the following vignette, James works to use his (mis)understanding of a past discussion to suggest proficiency requirements on the Pacer Challenge in PE were lower for girls because girls were inherently deficient in ways that prevented them from achieving success equal to boys.

James: Well, I’m thinking of like a few days ago or something. Like when we were talking about boys and girls and difference. Maybe because boys are rough and -

Emily: Mm Mm (Denying this statement)

James: Mostly boys are getting rough and sometimes-

Chris: I’m, I’m, I’m not agreeing with that.

James: Some people aren’t.

Chris: Wait, so Chris said he disagreed. Why?

Chris: I’m arguing with James because you’re, Margo is kind of rougher than you.

(Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

James’ understanding of a past discussion was that the class had agreed upon distinct differences between boys and girls that would include physical ability and
roughness (based solely on gender). Later in the discussion Derrick drew upon the same previous discussion James had referenced to make the case girls had lower expectations on this formal assessment because boys were better at athletics.

Chris: So it’s a myth. It’s a make believe that women aren’t as tough. But, do sometimes women learn to believe it? Sometimes they do. Because they keep hearing it from so many places they believe it must be true.

Various Voices: (Simultaneous speech)

Chris: Hey Derrick, what were you going to say?

Derrick: Well, maybe since the boys are better than the girls-

Various Voices: What?

Derrick: -better than the girls like most of them. Maybe it’s because since - remember that article that you said we had to do a written conversation about. The boys-

Sarah: Costumes?

Chris: The costumes?

Derrick: No, the one -

Chris: The soccer?

Derrick: Yeah. The one when, well maybe since men win more games and they get more money maybe they just buy equipment to exercise. Maybe that’s why.

Joseph: What are you talking about?

Braden: Can I build, can I tell Derrick something about that because I’ve seen, I’ve played with one of the best, a really good soccer team last year and I was
playing against, my whole team was playing against, a whole boy team against a whole girl team and they won. (Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

Both Derrick and James drew upon a previous discussion about the US Women’s Soccer team threatening to strike unless compensated with the same pay as the men’s team. During this previous discussion the students learned the women’s team won far more games and were often ranked as the top team in the world while the men’s team had never won a championship and was rarely, if ever, competitive with top teams around the world. Though this discussion helped students learn the women’s team was being paid less money despite outperforming the men and bringing in a greater amount of money for the U.S. Soccer Federation, James and Derrick constructed alternative understandings, or selectively heard what they wanted to hear, to better fit their view of females as inferior to males when it comes to athletic ability. In each case, the hypothesis the boys constructed from their misunderstandings of past discussions (boys are rougher and better at sports than girls) was immediately challenged by multiple classmates, both female and male. This speaks to the power of going public with one’s understandings of key ideas as well as co-constructing meaning through dialogue within a diverse collection of peers.

**Teacher Providing Knowledge for Students**

When and how a teacher chooses to provide information or a perspective on an issue is tricky – particularly when the primary goal is to help students develop generative critical thinking skills of their own. Over the course of the discussions within my data set, there were thirty instances in which I stepped in to either provide necessary information or insert my own understandings in an effort to help students develop a particular stance or belief or think critically about a particular issue or practice. Each of these instances
found me considering the role I wanted to play within the group discussion. Early in the
study I was largely a passive participant, resistant to inserting any input knowing the
students were likely to consider my words to be a “final word” or at the very least the
prevailing opinion. My goal was to deconstruct the traditional relationship of power
between teacher and students as much as possible during these discussions so each of us
could move in and out of teacher and learner roles. As our time together progressed I
began taking more of an active role in discussions as students became more comfortable
challenging the meanings I constructed in front of the class. It was this generative
practice of resisting the fixation of belief through authority I wanted for my students.

In regards to my speech events during these discussions, some taking the form of
my own process of meaning making, this section will focus only on those instances in
which my speech event served to convey information I wanted students to receive and to
accept as truth. These speech events achieved two goals. The first was to suggest an
ultimate truth or message students were to carry forward. The second was to provide
context to situate a social act or injustice. I will now define and describe each of these.

**Suggest an ultimate truth or message to carry forward.** Though my goal was
to help students think critically in generative ways they could apply outside the
classroom, I worked to provide key ideas addressing issues of gender and race in hopes of
disrupting my students’ acceptance of any oppressive beliefs and practices. I wanted to
provide my own knowledge and insights in hopes students might access these to question
and problematize the social practices their classmates introduced in the classroom culture
journal during Morning Meeting. In the following vignette, the class continued to discuss
Jayda and Sarah’s concerns of lowered expectations for girls on the Pacer Challenge. As
various students spoke up to question, condemn, and support these gendered expectations, I entered the discussion multiple times to offer my own understanding of this topic. In this first excerpt Emily begins by responding to a previous statement about boys racing girls.

Emily: Usually, boys do win.

Derrick: Except people say, like, boys are a lot faster than girls.

Chris: Well, let’s put Derrick in a race against Margo.

Derrick: I knew what you were going to do! She’s like a hundred percent faster than me.

Chris: So it’s not always by boy-girl but it’s person-to-person probably, right?

(Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

I extended a challenge to Derrick, who is not overly athletic but believes firmly in the athletic dominance of boys, in an attempt to disrupt his notion that boys are “are a lot faster than girls.” I then named a greater meaning to be taken from this exchange for all the class to consider, “So it’s not always by boy-girl but it’s person-to person probably, right?” Though this was posed as a question, my tone of voice communicated the expectation all students would agree. As such, I used my power as the teacher to control the response and, ultimately, the meaning being constructed. By doing so I allowed my teaching, as is all teaching, to be rooted in values (Kelly, 1986) and among my values at that moment was a mutual respect for the abilities of all people. During my response I also demonstrated the use of the counter-narrative to students where stories demonstrating converse outcomes, such as Derrick losing a race to Margo, can serve to challenge the acceptance of a stereotype. Later in the discussion, Derrick again worked to
support the notion boys are superior to girls. This time he accessed a previous discussion of the US Women’s Soccer team’s potential strike to suggest the men’s team received more money, bought more exercise equipment, and used it to train harder than the women.

Braden: Can I build, can I tell Derrick something about that because I’ve seen, I’ve played with one of the best, a really good soccer team last year and I was playing against, my whole team was playing against, a whole boy team against a whole girl team and they won.

Various Voices: (Many children cheer)

Chris: So I guess, I don’t know, for me this all speaks to…it depends on the boy or the girl. You can’t say just because someone’s a boy they’re this way or just because they’re a girl they’re that way. (Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

Again, I offered a life-lesson to be learned from all this, “…it depends on the boy or the girl. You can’t say just because someone’s a boy they’re this way or just because they’re a girl they’re that way.” In an attempt to minimize the power my role as teacher provided within classroom discussion and meaning-making, though this relationship of power would never truly disappear, I prefaced my statement with the phrase “So I guess, I don’t know, for me this all speaks to…” to illustrate to students I was thinking through this issue right alongside them and working, in the moment, to create my own meaning as well.

**Provide context to situate a social act.** There were seventeen instances in which I entered a discussion to provide needed context to either situate an issue as problematic or to provide a historical perspective to support student understanding. When discussing
gender there were fewer instances, as compared to discussions of race, where students required such background information to understand a given topic of discussion (see Table 5.3).

**Table 5.3**

*Instances of Teacher-Provided Context within Class Discussions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing Context for Understanding</td>
<td>Places where I provide information to students to help them contextualize the issue at hand.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following example, Ayrica had brought in a news article to share with the class about a Ghanaian woman who received an opportunity to attend school as a girl, secured a career for herself, then established a program to provide educational opportunities for other girls in Ghana. I sensed there was a lack of understanding in regards to the fact girls could not always attend school in all countries as they can in the United States.

Silas: It was really nice of her to spend some of her money so people, for girls, to go to school because in Africa there’s a lot of places, well, -

Ayrica: (reading) Around the world there are 62 million girls are not in school.

Braden: 62 million girls are not in school?

Ayrica: Yeah.

Chris: So there are many cultures, and certainly American culture has had these same sorts of issues, where they feel like it’s more important for the boys to be going to school. They think it’s more important for them to have those
opportunities. And those things change over time in a lot of places. Certainly they’ve changed in a lot of ways here in America. And I don’t know a lot about Ghana so I can’t speak directly to this but I know that there are many cultures where they just feel like, Mr. Smith might be able to speak to this, they feel like it’s more important for the boys to have those opportunities. Because that’s what they expect the boys to do. Maybe the things they expect the girls to do in their lives don’t have as much to do with having an education. There are other roles they want them to play within their home or within their community…You know what this makes me think of?...Remember when we looked at the Halloween costumes and we found out the boys’ costumes had like seventeen career costumes and the girls’ costumes only had three? And the police woman looked more like a dancer than she did like a police woman. This may not be so dissimilar in that maybe there are still parts of our culture that still believe [this way]. (Morning Meeting, 10-21-15)

As the discussion began I sensed the students knew very little about education in other countries, not to mention cultural practices that confined the roles of women to childrearing and working in the home. The students’ immediate experiences, having mothers who worked outside of the home as well as interacting with female professionals within their own community, may have provided a dissonance between what they knew and what Ayrica was describing. As I worked to explain that not all girls are provided opportunities to go to school I was deliberate to also reveal the fact the United States has a similar history of oppressing women. Doing so provided students the historical context they would need in the future when making sense of gender-related issues while also
complicating any tendencies to use these sorts of stories to position Americans as universally superior to other cultures.

When discussing race, students more consistently required context to understand why a belief or practice may be considered unjust. Provided the lack of personal connections students offered when discussing issues of race, this lack of context may not be altogether surprising. In fact, as will be discussed later when sharing the hypotheses students generated to explain injustices, many of these discussions found the students lack of context leading to instances of “whitesplaining” – times in which White students, who dominated much of the discussions, spoke to or attempted to access their own perspectives rooted in privilege to explain the lived experiences of the Black community in a belittling or dismissive way. As such, I came to see my role as stepping in to offer historical context, statistics, or stories to problematize injustices that were being accepted as natural. The following transcript provides an example of such an instance. In this classroom example Kylie had started a discussion from a question she recorded in the class culture journal, “Why do people say mostly all Black people are bad and not that much White people?” When questioned about this entry, she clarified

Kylie: Because when I see a lot of news I see a lot of news things saying about how a bunch of Black people are doing bad things but I don’t see a lot of White people do-

Emily: -A lot of Black people do a lot of that.

Kylie: I know a lot of White people do bad things but I barely ever see any White people have the word bad but they would call Black people bad but not White people.
Ronald: Well, some people, I don’t really know their names, but I know some people would just judge people about how they look. About what they do.

Emily: I think Black people never got a good start because Black people never got a good start.

James: What do you mean by that?

Emily: Cause White people always got a good start like cause Black people always have to do poor work and were poor at the beginning of, like, 2015. And now White people… So, like the Black people never really got that good of a start because they always had to do the poor work like pick fruits and veggies from people’s farms and cotton and the White people stayed inside and had a break just like sitting on the couch. (Morning Meeting, 4-6-16)

Two meanings were created by Emily’s speech. One, she claimed Black people do commit a lot of the crime. Second, she excused this supposed unlawfulness as a product of slavery and poor treatment by Whites. In doing so, Emily failed to recognize Kylie’s resentment at the overrepresentation of Black crime on news programs as opposed to White crime. Emily’s concern was not to critique the motives or perspectives of the news programs but to explain why Black crime was, in her estimation, so rampant. Soon after, numerous students, none-of-which were Black, took turns trying to explain why there was so much Black crime and why Black people seem to suffer the brunt of social of physical ills. I felt, listening to their ideas, they were working from the conclusion that Kylie had missed the mark in pointing her finger at the news media rather than questioning why Black crime and hardships persist. I stepped in to support Kylie’s
position while explaining, in an admittedly vague manner, unjust practices of the justice system.

Chris: I think I’ve seen data that has shown that when people go to courts for things they’ve done wrong, that when it comes time for the judge to do sentencing – to decide what your punishment is – that in large groups, when you look across them, White people who have done the same thing as Black people tend to get punished less severely than Black people. Or when people are getting in trouble for using drugs or something like that, that even if we have similar numbers of people doing it Black people tend to go to prison more often for it whereas White people will tend to get off for it. So there are some things that go on in our country that don’t seem to be all that fair. (Morning Meeting, 4-6-16)

Across sixteen race-related discussions and engagements, I entered the discussion twelve different times to help students acquire information intended to provide a different perspective for creating meaning. Without doing so, the limitations of their personal experiences and perspectives, in addition to the dominance of White participation within these discussions, would have likely resulted in collaborative meanings constructed upon information and beliefs that were often false and would have likely perpetuated the status quo.

This theme, Drawing on Multiple Resources to Create Meaning, described ways in which students drew upon multiple sources of information to contextualize, understand, and speak to issues of gender and race. Particularly important from this theme was the fact that personal connections abounded when students engaged in
discussions of gender but were nearly non-existent within discussions of race. This
disparity will take on new meaning within the context of the third theme, Explaining
Issues of Inequity and Injustice around Gender and Race. In this section I will explore
the ways students were interpreting claimed injustices as well the potential dangers
classrooms face when hearing too often from those most heavily shielded from the threat
of future inequities and injustices related to their gender or race.

Explaining Issues of Inequity and Injustice around Gender and Race

In this section I discuss the nature of hypotheses students constructed to explain
the presence of a particular injustice, belief, or social practice. Many of our class
discussions grew from questions positioning students to develop hypotheses that spoke to
the existence of these injustices, beliefs, and practices. The hypotheses students generated
and shared out consisted of inferences used to explain the perspectives and motives of
others. In taking on this work, students often revealed their perspective of how the world
works not only for themselves but for others. As students made sense of the questions
emerging within our discussions, they responded in ways that positioned these claims of
injustice as either real or imagined. In this section I first explore student hypotheses
acknowledging claims of wrongdoing as real and problematic to society. Next, I will
discuss student hypotheses repositioning claims of inequity or injustice as explainable,
exaggerated, or justified will be discussed.

Injustices as Real

The times students accepted particular beliefs and practices as unjust or unfair,
their hypotheses framed these as acts of a dominant group exerting power over a
marginalized population. Within these discussions, Whites and males were considered
dominant groups in that each exerts greater power as well as receives greater privilege than either Blacks or females. When constructing hypotheses to explain the presence of a particular injustice, belief, or social practice, students reasoned these were the result of: (a) relationships of power, (b) maintenance of the status quo, or the (c) effect of accepted stereotypes.

**Relationships of power.** Understanding and recognizing the role of power allowed students to begin tracing injustices back to their potential causes. In these instances, students recognized populations being grouped in one fashion of another, gender or race, and recognized one was positioned differently than the other in regards to their ability to make numerous choices for themselves and others that brought about desired outcomes. For instance, in the following example Kylie asked why Black people were viewed as being bad and committing many crimes when there were White people who committed the same crimes. During the ensuing discussion of the overrepresentation of Black crime on the news, Kumail proposed race was not the only factor at play, but socioeconomics as well.

Kumail: Maybe because the news people are White and mostly White people who are richer than Black people, because the richest man is a White person, so maybe that’s what makes them think [Whites commit less crime]… They think they’re richer than “these small Black people.” Maybe it’s because those people had slaves and because they thought they were richer they were like “These people are poor. They can do work for me.” (Morning Meeting, 4-6-16)

Referring back to the days of slavery as historical context for this issue, Kumail drew upon the notion of intersectionality when suggesting a connection between race and
wealth, “[It is] mostly White people who are richer than Black people,” to suggest there exists a hierarchy between the wealthy and poor, “They think they’re richer than ‘these small Black people,’” to then surmise that greater wealth allowed Whites to not only exert power over Blacks but, provided their elevated status, feel justified in doing so – such as in the case of White news anchors creating reality for viewers when reporting on Black crime. This understanding that Whites have long held significant power in both representing and shaping Black lives was suggested time and again during class discussions as power was used to explain the existence of Jim Crow laws, the underrepresentation of Blacks on television, and the lack of Black presidents.

However, the frame of power was not often used to explain gender-related issues. In fact, whereas there were fifteen instances of students accessing power to speak to an issue related to race, there were only two instances where someone felt power could be used to understand a gender-related issue – this despite multiple discussions around topics such as gender inequality in regards to education, jobs, and pay (see Table 5.4).

Table 5.4

*Instances of Claiming Gender and Race-Related Injustices are related to Power*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Hypothesis Constructed by Students</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions of Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male Speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships of Power</td>
<td>Claims an injustice is the direct result of a dominant group exerting power</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Maintenance of the status quo. When not making claims that dominant groups deliberately use power as a means to shape society for their own benefit, students demonstrated a belief each generation, knowingly or unknowingly, accepts and acts upon the beliefs and practices of past generations. In the following transcript, Kumail responded during a discussion of how various cultures have come to think of males as more capable leaders than females. Kumail imagined what the first days of humans must have been like to establish a historical context.

Kumail: Like when humans first came on this planet, there was usually boys who risked their lives to hunt down big creatures and the women just went around and they had to take care of all the kids. And the thing was maybe because from that time when people all, when only men had those [weapons], they were the hunters and they had to do all the hard work. From that time… on this part of the earth everyone kept thinking that since girls started out like that that’s how they stayed until this time. (Morning Meeting, 2-3-16)

Kumail’s love of non-fiction reading provided him a working understanding of what prehistoric times were like and in accessing this information he suggested a connection between the beliefs and practices of the past and of the present. In a later discussion about the lack of female presidents, Sarah also argued that people tend to fall into previously established patterns when constructing individual and collective beliefs and practices. Here, she hypothesized about why there has yet to be a woman in the Oval Office.
Sarah: I thinks it’s why boys be president because the first president George Washington, he was well, you know, a boy. And the next president was a boy. And the next president was a boy. So everyone just got used to the girls living in the White House and the boys being president. (Morning Meeting, 2-3-16)

As Sarah suggested an origin of how women have come to be underrepresented throughout the history of our country, she situated the relationship between one’s gender and their political opportunities within the context of the gendered roles of the 18th century. As Kumail and Sarah tracked these oppressive beliefs and practices all the way back to early humans and the creation of our government, neither suggested or implied an active effort on the part of a dominant group to yield power but, rather, each suggested these beliefs and practices were mindlessly carried out as people operate within their understanding of how the world already works. In doing so, Kumail and Sarah demonstrated how individuals are both informed by and maintain systems of dominance (Johnson, 2006) while neither offered, nor was prompted by me, to consider how the maintenance of the status quo worked to legitimate the power of dominant groups (Gay, 2010; Solorzano & Yasso, 2009). Additionally, while there were six instances of citing the status quo within discussions of gender this was never used to explain an inequality or injustice within discussions of race.

**Effect of accepted stereotypes.** The final way students generated hypotheses to explain an issue while acknowledging it as real was to call to attention the role of stereotyping in mistreating and undervaluing others. Like power and normalcy, stereotyping was the topic of a unit of study midway through the students’ second grade year that lent itself as a frame for understanding. For instance, in the following discussion
about why it seems so many cultures have been slow to recognize the academic and leadership potential of females, Silas and James suggested this might be related to how females are sometimes viewed by males. In this first excerpt, I began the discussion with an open-ended invitation to Silas to share his thoughts regarding this ongoing and widespread issue.

Chris: Kumail, I see so many people waiting to share something so I’m going to let them start us off. Let’s go with Silas.

Silas: Um, maybe they just don’t think girls can do what boys can do. Like, they think (it’s) a new thing for them and they don’t think girls can do that.

Chris: Yeah, obviously they don’t think that. Why do you think they don’t, why wouldn’t they think [girls] could? Where does that come from? (Morning Meeting, 2-3-16)

Silas spoke to the role of lowered expectations and, presupposing the power of males to make influential decisions based on these determinations, implied that power and stereotypes work in tandem to result in a lack of equal opportunity. This sort of analytical thinking, not just naming an explicit stereotypical statement but inferring the presence of stereotypes as an underlying cause of injustices, developed from opportunities to engage in discussions where student’s ideas were made public and discussed from multiple perspectives to construct new knowledge. Later in the same discussion, after Kylie worked to problematize negative beliefs about females and the work they do, James echoed Silas’s connection to the role of stereotypes when naming specific beliefs some males have in regards to the potential of women.

Chris: Kylie, what did you want to say?
Kylie: Well, I have something just like Sophie’s because I was reading this thing that women had to be, had to stay home and take care of the babies, and when the boys and men didn’t have so much work to do. But my mom just has to do a lot of work every day. She has to cook. She has to do the laundry. She has…

Chris: She has to work and teach. Yeah, she has a lot of things to do, right? So I think back to a time when people thought women couldn’t do all those sorts of things and we see many examples now, right, that that was absolutely wrong. But I wonder why it took people so long to realize that? And I wonder if everyone even does realize that now. I don’t know. James, what were you thinking?

James: Well, probably people think that boys are stronger than girls and they think that men can do more stuff than girls can be. And they probably think that girls shouldn’t be president because all those men who have been president.

And…

Chris: Okay, so that whole idea of men being stronger or having more power or being better prepared to be a leader. I think it would be interesting for us to think about where we get those messages. Where are we learning those things from? Are we seeing it on TV? Are we seeing it in books? Are people telling us this? I don’t remember my parents ever telling me things like that but I remember those sorts of ideas being there. (Morning Meeting, 2-3-16)

It is interesting to note that while both Silas and James spoke to the negative consequences gender stereotypes can have on females, each used the pronoun “they” when naming who was propagating these hurtful and harmful notions. This shifting of the blame was a common practice in the classroom, even when the very same behaviors or
beliefs resided within the minds and hearts of our peers, if not the very person offering critique. As Taylor suggested during a class discussion late in the study, students rarely-if-ever named themselves as complicit in maintaining such behaviors or beliefs.

**Injustices as Imagined**

The times when students did not fully accept claims of injustice as unjust or unfair they implied, or outwardly declared, the critique of these beliefs and practices to be suspect. In such cases, students suggested these issues were not evidence of an injustice but, rather, (a) explainable provided a certain context, (b) exaggerated or untrue, or (c) justified.

**Explainable provided a certain context.** As students worked to construct meaning around race-related issues, a common perspective was to claim any potential injustice as an inevitable occurrence. In doing so, students resisted the notion of unjust practices, instead suggesting what appeared to them to be logical explanations reframing these supposed injustices as without unfortunate matters void of fault. For instance, when Kylie asked why there was a lack of Black characters on her favorite television shows Silas was quick to imply the blame may actually be on the Black community for their own lack of representation.

Chris: Silas, what do you think about Kylie’s question?

Silas: I think they just couldn’t find enough Black people to play on the shows.

Chris: There weren’t enough actors and actresses who were Black?

Silas: Like they couldn’t find…like…like whenever they were looking for people to play in it and then they just couldn’t find enough.

Braden: They just couldn’t. (Morning Meeting, 10-26-15)
By stating there were not enough Black actors and actresses showing up for casting calls, Silas shifted the blame from television networks and casting directors to those being denied roles. As was often the case when these sorts of hypotheses were offered, Silas believed America provides a level playing field for all people and when confronted with information that challenged this notion he sought out a solution that allowed him to retain his worldview – in this case, if more Black actors and actresses showed interest in such jobs we would see them on television.

This tendency to reconstruct a lack of opportunity as a logical result void of any injustice perpetrated against marginalized communities was typical among White students. In another discussion about representation, this time looking at the lack of children’s books about People of Color, two other students sought out an explanation that preserved the perspective of the world as a fair place to all. In this vignette, I had just shared a data set from the University of Wisconsin showing roughly 2,700 of the 3,200 children’s books the University received the previous year were directly about or reflected White characters and White culture while significantly fewer books reflected other groups such as Blacks, Latina/os, American Indians, and Asian Americans.

Chris: Alright, who wants to share out? Why do you think there’s such a big difference? Because it is a big difference. It’s not like it’s 400 to 300. It’s 2,700 to 78. And it’s 2,700 to 28. And it’s 2,700 to 200. Why do you think there’s such a big difference? Gabby, why do you think there’s such a big difference?

Gabby: Why there’s more White people there?

Chris: Yeah.
Gabby: I think it’s because more White people live here than Black people and I think that this country is more like where White people live and normally Black people live across the ocean. And so a lot of different people than White aren’t here and so they write more books about White people. (Morning Meeting, 10-3-16)

Gabby began by claiming the overwhelming dominance of White characters in this data set was due to the fact “normally Black people live across the ocean” – a statement meant to support her understanding of America as primarily White. This was not the first instance in which someone in the classroom used population size to legitimize the lack of representation, or all-out exclusion, of minority groups across various fields and media sources. Similar claims were made by Derrick, Emily, and Kumail. In the data set being discussed in this vignette, 86% of the children’s books normalized Whiteness despite the fact more than a third of the United States population consisted of minority groups. While two Black students in the class claimed this was “unfair” and “disrespectful”, many of the White students felt such practices within the publishing world were logical, rather than alarming.

Other rationalizations were offered as well to frame injustices as explainable. In the following transcript, in which the class discusses the treatment of Blacks during the 1950s and 1960s, Kumail implied Whites may have had a justifiable claim to their power.

Emily: I think, I was thinking about when you said that [Black people] had to have their own water fountain, their own stores, and-

Braden: Their own stores?
Emily: Their own school… I was thinking about that and I was wondering, I was thinking I think people care more about White people than they do about Black people because their, I think because like White people could talk to Black people but Black people couldn’t talk to White people. I thought that was pretty selfish-

Derrick: I know!

Emily: -and usually there’s a lot of stores for White people to go to but there’s like barely any for Black people.

Chris: And I know back then the things that were made available for Black people were rarely ever as good as the things that were available for White people.

Kumail: (Over other voices) Because the White people came to America before Black people. (Morning Meeting, 2-15-16)

Similar to the practice of using population sizes to legitimate White dominance, Kumail referenced the fact Whites came to America before Blacks to suggest Whites felt entitled, or perhaps were entitled, to a higher status. Accessing a common argument from the students own lives in regards to securing preferred seating or placement in the lunch line, “I was here first,” Kumail implied justification for the racist actions of Whites rather than an indictment of their motives, beliefs, or practices. In each of these cases, non-Black students failed to empathize or see these issues from the perspective of those being oppressed. Rather, the White and Indian-American students in these vignettes analyzed the situation from their own perspectives, rooted in personal needs, desires, and expectations, preventing them from developing hypotheses that revealed discriminatory practices as a means to preserve White privilege.
There was a marked difference between discussions of gender and discussions of race in regards to making injustices appear explainable. As Table 5.5 demonstrates, students were far more likely to explain away an injustice related to race than they were a gender-related injustice. Of the fifteen instances in which a student neglected to see an act as anything more than logical, thirteen of these (or 87%) occurred when discussing race.

Table 5.5

Instances of Claiming Gender and Race-Related Injustices are Explainable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Hypothesis Constructed by Students</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions of Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male Speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explainable</td>
<td>Stating an issue is natural provided context</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed earlier, personal connections to issues of race were not only significantly less frequent but, by the standards I laid out, lower in quality as compared to those within discussions of gender. Furthermore, during discussions of race White students dominated the conversations, controlling 76% of speaking events. The fact questions about racial injustices so often led to White-dominated discussions void of personal connections but full of hypotheses trivializing the concerns of others was of significant concern. Yet, framing these injustices as explainable was not the only way student hypotheses worked to reframe inequities and injustices shared in the culture journal and through picture books.
Exaggerated or Untrue. Just as students occasionally drew on personal connections to soften oppressive acts, such as using a personal preference for sitting on the back of the bus to trivialize the complaints of Blacks forced to adhere to segregated practices on buses, students also softened sexist and racist acts when developing hypotheses to address the nature of inequities and injustices. For instance, when speaking to the fact girls at Party City had only three career-oriented costumes to choose from as opposed to seventeen such selections for boys, Silas chose not to offer an explanation, instead stating “I think [the girl in the article] should just choose one of the three costumes and then hope she got lucky next year.” In electing not to address the issue, Silas implied this was largely a non-issue and that girls would do best to accept what was and hope for better outcomes in the future. He then went on to imply too much was being made of this, telling the class “Well…it could be worse. The girls could of had none at all.” Silas perspective regarding the inequality of Halloween costume choices positioning both boys and girls as professionals demonstrated the ways in which members of the culturally dominant group (boys when discussing gender and Whites when discussing race) were often dismissive of claims made to challenge male and White privilege.

There were times where students from the culturally dominant group did more than simply soften an oppressive act, outright denying its existence. For example, when Kylie started Morning Meeting with the question “Why do people say mostly all Black people are bad and not that much White people?” Emily and Ronald refuted her claim, immediately and aggressively asserting “No one thinks that!” Neither believed there was a need to entertain Kylie’s question because it was, from the perspective of their own lived experiences, not at all true. Though Kylie’s perspective as a Black child had
allowed her to take notice of and question the overrepresentation of Black crime on the news, Emily and Ronald, as White children, had either not paid attention to this or had not questioned it as being anything but a representation of the true nature of race and crime. Their response of negating the notion Black people were unfairly represented by a media that is largely White fell within the construct of “faulty reasoning” put forward by Linker (2015) in regards to the struggle many people have when engaging in discussions of highly personal topics where self-identity, social identity, and social relations comes into play.

The intersection of self-identity, social identity, and social relations played heavily upon the discussions that took place in our classroom. For instance, in the following vignette, Kumail, and Indian-American child, felt some of us were overstating or perhaps even fabricating stories of racist acts in current times. Kumail understood and accepted past stories of slavery and segregation as racist but had not observed present-day racism within his own community. Here, Kumail is responding to a story I had told the class about racist things my Black middle school child regularly heard at school by introducing his own experiences as an Indian-American to challenge the fact we spent, in his estimation, too much time addressing present-day issues of the Black community.

Kumail: When I first came to this school they, people would call my food, they thought it was poop. But then other people, Black people in this class, they never said anything bad about them, but about me. But I’m from a different country. They’re Black people.

Chris: Right.
Kumail: And you’re saying that and some people say that it’s Black people getting treated badly. I don’t think that’s true. In this class no Black person is treated badly but I was once treated badly.

Derrick: It’s like when Kumail first came we, some people, thought he couldn’t do things the way we could.

Jayda Yeah, when we first came to kindergarten people thought his food was weird.

(Morning Meeting, 5-13-16)

Kumail’s claim that Black people were not treated badly, so far as he had observed, not only denied the validity of other’s claims but challenged our classroom’s admitted tendency to frame race and race-related issues as a dichotomy of Whiteness and Blackness, to the exclusion of his own lived experiences. When engaged in these discussions of race, Kumail identified as neither Black nor White. However, he did position himself as part of a group that did not face the same struggles or stereotypes as those being shared by Kylie and James about the Black community. Many class discussions addressing Kumail’s frustrations with others, to this point, had centered on his religious beliefs as a Hindu and the unwillingness of some Christians in class to accept and respect his religious beliefs. However, in Kumail’s opposition to our discussions of current day racism he revealed the fact it was more than his religious identity that positioned him as different. His personal experiences with being teased, while observing no experiences of race-related conflict for Black students within the classroom or school, led him to dismiss these other stories and attempt to redirect the work we were doing to address the issues that did occur within our immediate classroom.
community. In doing so, Kumail rightly pushed for broader discussions of race while, conversely, denying the need to continue to discuss the experiences of Black students, their families, and their communities. These examples—Silas’ softening of sexist costume choices, Emily and Ronald’s refusal to accept Kylie’s observation of the ways society views Black people, and Kumail’s claim we were addressing the wrong issues—illustrate the importance of who spoke, how they were positioned in regards to the issue-at-hand, and the effects their own constructed meanings could have on collaborative meaning-making if left unchecked.

Within discussions of gender and race, students were almost twice as likely to frame a racial injustice as exaggerated or untrue as they were a similar gender-related claim (see Table 5.6). This hyper-critique of race-related claims was consistent with the ways in which students were far more likely to rationalize race-related injustices as explainable when applying certain logic.

**Table 5.6**

*Instances of Students Framing Gender and Race-Related Injustices as Exaggerated or Untrue*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male Speaker</td>
<td>Female Speaker</td>
<td>Non-Black Speaker</td>
<td>Black Speaker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exaggerated or Untrue</td>
<td>Times in which someone softens an act of injustice, denies it is an issue, or denies it is even true</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Justified.** Other times when students resisted to accept an act or belief as being inaccurate, unfair, or oppressive, they did so by claiming social constructs (such as
gender and race) were real as were some of the myths and stereotypes associated with them. For instance, when discussing why females have long been denied access to education and leadership opportunities in so many different cultures, Ayrica called into question the ability of females to be successful in these endeavors.

Ayrica: I was thinking that boys are better than girls -

Emily: Huh?

Ayrica: -because girls can’t do that many stuff like boys. But boys can do that stuff.

(Morning Meeting, 2-3-16)

Ayrica argued girls do not receive certain opportunities in life because they are, in some way, less capable than males. Thus, in Ayrica’s estimation it was not that females were being unjustly denied access to such opportunities but that some naturally occurring genetic factor prevented them from possessing the capabilities to be successful. In taking this perspective, Ayrica implied the stereotype of female inferiority as learners and leaders was not a stereotype at all, but a reality.

This was not the only time a girl in class suggested stereotypes used to belittle them were actually true. During a discussion of whether or not females could compete in the NFL Emily agreed with a few of the boys in the room who were arguing boys are built for physical activities that invite danger while girls are not.

Chris: Yeah, we don’t know [if females could compete in the NFL] because we haven’t seen it happen. I know this, there’s this woman mixed martial arts fighter named Rhonda Rousey or something and when you look at her I wonder if any man I know would want to mess with her because she is a big strong looking
woman. So maybe if women did play football you’d have more women who would build their bodies to play football. Emily?

Emily: Maybe we’re different. Maybe [boys are] like tougher and like all that stuff because they build more energy than we do.

Chris: It depends on what you mean by tougher.

Emily: No, I mean…take away tougher. I mean they build more energy. (Morning Meeting, 4-25-16)

Emily introduced the possibility women are not kept out of the NFL due to a stereotype but because there is a genetic difference, an inability to “build more energy,” preventing them from competing or staying healthy when engaged in a violent sport. Doing so, Emily reified the notion there are differences that inherently prevent women from successfully competing. This perspective of difference-as-deficient not only pushed back against claims of discrimination but provided opportunities for students to continually consider and reconsider what is real and what is socially constructed.

Similar forms of resistance occurred during discussions of race, as well. As topics of discussion were introduced in the Culture Journal, non-Black students worked at times to deny an act or belief as being wrongful or hurtful, instead stating the underlying ideology at play was rooted in truth. Many of these instances had to do with a correlation between the Black community and crime. In the following transcript, James had started a discussion about a shooting at a local mall over the weekend. The two suspects were Black and soon discussion turned to the policing of public spaces and how officers decide who is and who is not suspicious. I offered a personal connection from my childhood of
being closely monitored in a local store that limited the number of teenagers allowed inside at one time.

Chris: So being a teenager is definitely that way. I guarantee they watch teenagers more carefully than they watch forty-one year olds. Because assumptions are that teenagers might be more likely to do those things. And if you actually looked at numbers to see how often does it happen, does stealing happen more often with teenagers than it does with forty-one year olds? I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe.

Kumail: I think there’s more like-

Chris: But I know that if my daughter and her friend were walking through the store they wouldn’t appreciate people automatically assuming they’d steal.

Kumail: I don’t think it’s just White. I don’t think it’s just teenagers. Some White teenagers aren’t like, I think those two people [at the mall] were Black. Weren’t those two people Black?

Chase: I think they were mixed.

James: Well, I think that’s another topic. They were both Black and immediately they said it was not gang related. So I think that would be a whole other topic because they were black they “must be in a gang.”

Kumail: Well, I usually don’t think it’s just teenagers. I don’t think White teenagers do it more than Black teenagers. So those two people were probably Black teenagers and I think they made this thing up because Black people are more suspicious and more to steal because a lot of times it’s Black people [that] steal more than the White people. (Morning Meeting, 2-22-16)
Kumail claimed allegations that Black teenagers attract undue attention by security officers was false due to the fact, in his estimation, Black people commit more crimes. Kumail did not belittle or soften the injustice of racial profiling, nor did he deny the fact it occurs. Rather, he argued it was a just practice provided his belief in real differences between White and Black teenagers. Kumail’s willingness to accept racial profiling as just due to his perception of Blacks as unlawful reflected the findings of Picower (2012) when she discovered her undergraduate pre-service teachers held many preconceived assumptions about people and communities of Color that were rooted in a deficit model. Kumail was not alone in this reasoning. When Emily worked to defend Black people on the news who had committed crimes by stating they “never got a good start” or when Sarah explained Black people “went into stores and stole and stuff” because they had been servants and treated badly, each built their intended defense upon, and thus reified, the premise that Blacks are somehow broken as well as the premise Black crime is rampant as compared to White crime.

This theme, Explaining Issues of Inequity and Injustice around Gender and Race, showcased the ways students created meaning to explain inequities and injustices related to gender and race. This included times when student hypotheses presupposed the nature of injustices as factual as well as instances in which they resisted such claims. It is important to note, however, that when generating hypotheses to explain the nature or maintenance of an injustice it was incredibly common for members of the dominant group to soften, deny, or justify these claims. As Table 5.7 demonstrates, 71% (15 of 21) of hypotheses offered by male students worked to challenge claims of gender-based wrongdoing as opposed to just 33% (4 of 12) of hypotheses offered by females.
Table 5.7

*Comparison of Hypotheses Challenging and Supporting Reality of Gender-Related Injustices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Male Speaker</th>
<th>Female Speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denying</td>
<td>Times in which someone softens an act of injustice, denies it is an issue, or denies it is even true</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explainable</td>
<td>Stating an issue can be understood as a natural result that is unavoidable</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on Real Constructs</td>
<td>Students speak in a way that accepts a stereotype or other socially constructed norm or belief attributed by gender or race</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals for Injustices as Imagined</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Group Using Power</td>
<td>Claims an issue or injustice is the direct result of a dominant group exerting power on a marginalized group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Out of Habit</td>
<td>The continuation of the status quo; Things have been like this so long that they continue out of habit</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result of Stereotypes</td>
<td>An issue or injustice can be attributed to someone or some group believing in stereotypes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals for Injustices as Real</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differences between hypotheses offered from the dominant and marginalized groups, as defined in relation to the particular topic of discussion, were significant within discussions of race as well. As evidenced in Table 5.8, 60% (29 of 48) of hypotheses offered by non-Black speakers worked to challenge the validity of claims of inequity or injustice as opposed to just 17% (1 of 6) offered by Black students.
Table 5.8

*Comparison of Hypotheses Challenging and Supporting Reality of Race-Related Injustices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Non-Black Speakers</th>
<th>Black Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denying</td>
<td>Times in which someone softens an act of injustice, denies it is an issue, or denies it is even true</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explainable</td>
<td>Stating an issue can be understood as a natural result that is unavoidable</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on Real Constructs</td>
<td>Students speak in a way that accepts a stereotype or other socially constructed norm or belief attributed by gender or race</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals for Injustices as Imagined</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Group Using Power</td>
<td>Claims an issue or injustice is the direct result of a dominant group exerting power on a marginalized group</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Out of Habit</td>
<td>The continuation of the status quo; Things have been like this so long that they continue out of habit</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result of Stereotypes</td>
<td>An issue or injustice can be attributed to someone or some group believing in stereotypes</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals for Injustices as Real</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those speaking from the perspective of the privileged group, whether defined by gender or race, were far less likely to accept claims of wrong doing. Even more alarming in this data is the overrepresentation of voices from the very same dominant groups softening, denying, and justifying harmful beliefs and practices. Not only were members of the dominant group often defending, in some part, the presence of injustices but they
were controlling the discussions as well. As seen previously in Table 5, 64% (21 of 33) of hypotheses addressing gender-based beliefs and practices came from male speakers while an even more alarming 89% (48 of 54) of hypotheses addressing race-based beliefs and practices came from non-Black students. It is highly problematic that students who were the furthest removed from the experiences and effects of inequity and injustice were the same ones who most consistently played a vital role in the collaborative meaning-making that was intended to reflect the experiences and thoughts of all students.

**Tensions around Discussions of Gender and Race**

In the final theme, *Tensions around Discussions of Gender and Race*, I explore the concerns students expressed in regards to engaging in these discussions alongside their classmates. These tensions, though always present, went undetected by me until the class felt comfortable revealing them at the end of the study. One December morning during the second year of this research I used our Morning Meeting to share pieces of my analysis with the class in hopes of collecting their perspectives on the patterns I was beginning to identify in my initial analysis. As the class looked over a table listing how often each person spoke during the first thirteen discussions, one student who rarely, if ever, participated in class discussions explained that her silence was due in part to her discomfort talking about gender. Though she was unable to name a specific reason for this reluctance, her admission opened the floodgates for the rest of the class to share their feelings. Hearing Emi speak openly about her concerns created a safe space for others to reveal discomfort. One student, Sarah, even shared concerns she had heard from her mother at home.
Sarah: My mom says we’re not allowed to talk about this at school. My mom says we’re not allowed to talk about gender and race in school because what if the government heard about it?

Chris: What if they did hear about it?

Sarah: They would get mad at you. (Morning Meeting, 12-14-16)

So it came to be that my research took a new direction as, in addition to understanding the ways in which students created meaning around these topics and the role I played in this work, I sought to better understand student discomfort when engaged in critical discussions about inequity and injustice around gender and race. Student tensions fell within two broad categories: (1) their fear of conflict and (2) the potential for hurtful speech to emerge.

**Fear of Conflict**

Students feared conflict in relation to its potential to invite negative or uncomfortable interactions with peers. In instances where students perceived there was a right and wrong answer, some shared they were fearful of publically revealing to others they did not understand something. This fear was similar to those experienced by some students in math when confronted with a closed question, one requiring a single correct response, in that these questions can cause students who are unsure of their own understanding to avoid taking an active role in mathematical discussions for fear of being publically corrected by their peers or the teacher. The same was true of our discussions around gender and race. Some students feared the possibility of having their peers disagree with them as they thought aloud about a topic or issue that was often new to them. Some of these concerns stemmed from feeling self-conscious about one’s ability to
generate meaningful ideas such as when Chris shared he was afraid his classmates might “unagree” with him if his thoughts were “not as good” as theirs (T35 L10). Sarah felt less insecure about her ability to generate ideas but was still concerned she might invite conflict if her classmates were to “argue against” her (T35 L32). However, as demonstrated in the following discussion, Ronald’s concerns went further.

Chris: Ronald, why were you a little uncomfortable?

Ronald: Because I was afraid I might say the wrong thing. Yeah, because one, I don’t mean no offense Derrick but-

Derrick: -No offense bro.

Ronald: -one time Derrick accidentally said the wrong thing and everyone was like “Derrick!”

Derrick: Yeah!

Chris: (to Derrick) What was it? Do you remember?

Derrick: I’m not sure but every time, most of the time back in second grade or the beginning or third grade I think when the boys said something wrong the girls were like “Ahhhh!” (Interview, 3-1-17)

Ronald not only feared the possibility of being “wrong” but having the magnitude of the class’ displeasure with his developing understandings made public. There were, in fact, two instances where Derrick had been aggressively challenged by his classmates for having shared something they disagreed with or felt was offensive. The first occurred during a discussion of why people wear earrings.

Baja: (Reading her journal entry) Why do some boys and girls wear earrings sometimes?
Chris: Why do they what?

Jayda: Why do sometimes boys and girls wear earrings all the time. Sometimes.

Derrick: Boys cannot wear earrings.

Various Voices: (Explosion of voices around the circle - Yes they can! Yeah they do!)

Jayda: They can, Derrick.

Braden: I seen people, I seen boys wearing earrings.

Chase: Me too. (Morning Meeting, 9-18-15)

In this discussion, Derrick shared something many others in the class knew to be untrue and their response was to collectively let him know he was wrong, thus creating a situation in which he may have felt he was being attacked or judged. The other time Derrick was called out by a classmate he was sharing his understanding of the term tomboy as meaning a girl who “just acts like a boy. She plays Legos- the Avenger kind. But they have Barbie Legos out there” (Morning Meeting, 2-2-16) ) to which Sarah, presumably offended by Derrick’s implied meaning that girls should only play with Barbie Legos, quickly replied “Hey!”. Each response caused Derrick, a sensitive child who often shared his thoughts before fully thinking about them or even understanding the question that had been asked, to retreat and sit silently.

Silas suffered a similar rebuke early in the first year of the study when arguing there were fewer career-oriented Halloween costume choices for girls because “mostly the dads work and the girls rarely work” to which Emily sat up straight and assertively retorted “My mom works a very hard job” (Morning Meeting, 9-28-15). Others joined in immediately to support their mothers as well. Embarrassed, Silas became silent. The
public nature of these sometimes heated peer responses was absorbed by all in the circle whether they were the ones being challenged or not. As Ronald explained above, this became a factor causing some who had observed these interactions to be more hesitant in their willingness to publically share a response to sensitive topics. Just as Lusk and Weinberg (1994) argued students may enter the classroom with inhibitions preventing them from authentic and deep engagement with debatable issues, some students within the class seemingly pulled short of sharing the whole of their thinking in fear of the retribution that may await them for having done so.

**Potentially Hurtful Speech**

While students expressed unease over conflicts arising from general disagreements, far more common was a concern for the emergence of potentially hurtful speech. Students worried critical discussions about gender and race presented possibilities for (1) hearing hurtful things others in class had to say about them or their families, (2) hearing what the outside world sometimes had to say about them or their family, and (3) hearing ideas that not only challenged their world view but made them fear fearful. In this section I will discuss the specifics of student concerns as well as demonstrate how these concerns often developed from actual experiences within the classroom.

**Hearing hurtful things others in class have to say.** Engaging in discussions around sensitive topics is a challenge for those of any age. This was particularly true for the seven, eight, and nine year-olds within our classroom. When questions were posed in Morning Meeting students were tasked with first processing new information in relation to their previous knowledge, personal experiences, and world view and then speaking to
these in relation to the stated question. For instance, when I summarized a news article about the U.S. Women’s Soccer team threatening to strike unless they were paid the same as the men’s team I asked the circle “Why are [women and men] getting paid different amounts of money” (Morning Meeting, 4-11-16). Students knew little about this topic, not to mention how salaries work in the adult world. However, they did have personal experiences with gender being taken up differently as well as past classroom discussions about stereotypes and inequalities to draw upon; though, the personal meanings of these experiences were prone to mean different things to each child.

On most occasions, such as with my question about the pay disparity between men and women, a small group of hands would shoot into the air just as I finished my question – leaving little-to-no time to reflect on the question before offering a response. To combat this, I would incorporate some amount of “wait time” to ensure all students had an opportunity to think about the question before the discussion commenced. However, most of our discussions about gender and race were started, and thus facilitated, by students who would call on those who were first to put their hands up. This race to speak meant those sharing did not always give themselves an opportunity to carefully consider the relevance and worth of what they were about to share. This rush to speak, as well as the diversity of experiences, understandings, and perspectives within the classroom, sometimes led to instances in which the public remarks made others feel angry or sad.

Sarah felt this discomfort a number of times. When the class first began sharing their discomfort with these discussions she not only argued the government might be angry with me for letting the class discuss injustices and beliefs as related to gender and
race in today’s world but spoke to the fact she felt hurt at times when hearing boys in class openly negate her abilities as an athlete.

Chris: Sarah, what did you want to say?

Sarah: Well, a boy might, in this class, might say “boys are used to that.” Because I play soccer and I also play football with my older cousin and I think if somebody says [boys are more athletic] it’ll hurt my feelings because I do a lot of sports too. (Morning Meeting, 12-14-16)

Some students in class also took notice of Sarah’s displeasure with stereotypes and other statements belittling her capabilities. Seeing the way their ideas could make others in class uncomfortable caused these students to feel hesitant in sharing their developing understandings. For instance, in the following discussion, Silas discussed feeling concerned about the potential for making someone angry or sad if he were to share out honestly.

Silas: I thought it was a little uncomfortable because I don’t want to say the wrong thing or I don’t want to offend someone and they’re going to get mad. I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. And it’s like I would be really uncomfortable if I did say something wrong and I don’t want to do that again. So I’m just a little uncomfortable because in a few discussions I knew I’d say something that probably would offend someone so I decided not to say it. So I felt uncomfortable.

Kumail: From what I’ve seen, what Silas said about people, you saying bad things that hurt people’s feelings— that hasn’t actually happened.
Chris: So, do you have an example from the last year-and-a-half of someone saying something and someone’s getting their feelings hurt and people were mad at each other?

Silas: Um, no not really. But sometimes someone says something that offends someone but no one is getting really mad or anything. They might just get a little sad for a second.

Chris: So when’s a time in the last year-and-a-half when someone got really sad by something someone else said?

Silas: I think Sarah has been sad a couple of times. Not really, really sad-

Chris: About what?

Silas: I forgot but she’s like, she didn’t talk much the next couple of times and usually she’s the main girl talking,

Chris: Say more about that. What made her sad?

Silas: I forgot.

Kumail: I know. It’s not always about gender that makes her sad.

Chris: Well, I was just asking about these questions.

Chase: When people say like ‘Boys are stronger than girls.’ That hurts girls’ feelings. Because that’s kind of saying they don’t have the same ability [as] boys.

Silas: And so they feel like they should be able to prove them wrong. (Interview, 3-1-17)

Remembering the time he was aggressively challenged by many students for having stated men do most the work (in relation to jobs outside the home), Silas stated “And it’s like I would be really uncomfortable if I did say something wrong and I don’t
want to do that again.” But more than merely feeling uncomfortable with the potential of being challenged by his peers, Silas recognized his words affected others and he was reluctant to put himself or others in a situation where either would feel hurt.

Another aspect of our discussions that led some to feel hurt by what their peers had to say was when those born into gender and/or race-related privileges shared perspectives that failed to recognize how the issue-at-hand must feel for those who do not enjoy the same privileges. In the following example, Sophie, a Chinese-American child who had earlier explained to the class her difficulty in finding enough interesting books about characters and families she could personally relate to, expressed frustration with her classmates’ inability to recognize the problematic nature of racial and ethnic disparities in the representation of characters and families in children’s literature.

Chris: Sophie, was there anything uncomfortable for you?
Sophie: Well, sometimes like Derrick when there was, when we talked about the books there weren’t a lot of Asian American or just Asian books-
Chris: Mmm hmm.
Sophie: -and I kind of, just a little, I kind of felt a little uncomfortable that people said “Oh, it’s okay to, it doesn’t matter how many books about Asian Americans, Latino, Blacks or what.”

Chris: You got uncomfortable because people said that wasn’t important?
Sophie: Yeah.

Chris: Did you think it was important?
Sophie: I thought it was important because if one class just read about these things other people would just think, know about those kind of people instead of other kind of people like Ty. (Interview, 3-24-17)

For those students who were marginalized by society, discussions became all the more challenging when groups of their peers not only benefitted from but were actively dismissive of societal disparities as something worth critique. As much as I worked to make the classroom a space where people were free to critique any and all ideas, these disagreements caused discomfort when they left some students feeling as though their peers did not particularly care about them or their concerns.

From the perspective of students belonging to a dominant group, there were instances where they felt issues were being overblown or framed unfairly. As such, these students understood certain questions from their peers as attempts to target them as having wronged others. This concern never arose in relation to race despite many class discussions revealing the actions of Whites as oppressive to non-White populations. However, there were concerns from the boys that gender-related discussions were unfair and that girls in class were, at times, disingenuous when pointing fingers at the boys.

Chris: I think some girls – I’m not trying to be stereotyping – but I think some girls like to tell, to tell some people like what boys been doing. And it’s kind of getting to be a problem like a lot of times when girls have a journal they’re talking about boys and a lot of times when boys are trying to make a journal they’re kind of always talking about girls.

Chris: So you think the girls are trying to tell on the boys?
Chris: No, well I think everyone is trying to do things about people. But then Silas, when he was talking to me, we thought sometimes girls just want to make it a blame on boys or something.

Silas: Well, not always.

Chris: Yeah, not all the time but sometimes.

Chris: Okay. Before I go to another group do you want to add to that Silas?

Silas: Well, it’s not always just the girls because I feel like whenever someone has a journal in our class it’s like sometimes when it’s in the culture journal or something when a girl asks a question it’s kind of trying to put it onto boys. But when a boy asks a question they’re kind of trying to put it onto a girl. Sometimes, not always, but sometimes I feel like they’re trying to put it onto the other gender.

Chris: So if the girls were asking the question ‘Why is it when we go to play a game and we often times get picked last?’ they should put that on the girls? Or they say, ‘When the boys laugh at us because we win’ they should put that on girls?

Silas: No, but sometimes when a girl beats a boy it’s usually, it’s sometimes the girls laughing.

Chris: The girls are laughing? Okay.

Ronald: It’s not always just the boys who do it.

Various Voices: (Lots of stories about girls doing these things also)

Chris: So if the boys play the game of ‘Ha, ha a girl beat a boy’ you’re saying the girls play that same game?

Silas: Yeah.
Chase: But it’s not bad when boys beat girls. They’re never like-

Chris: Because it’s like that’s expected?

Chase: Yeah, the girls are never like “How could you let him beat you?” They’re never like that. (Interview, 3-1-17)

Silas, Chris, and Chase questioned whether the direction of these gender-related discussions had been fair in that their experiences told them the girls were often times just as much to blame for the maintenance of demeaning stereotypes as the boys. Though this concern was never introduced during any of the gender-related discussions spanning the sixteen months of this study, it was evident from the boy’s concerns during the small group interview there were meanings constructed within classroom discussions that were not made public. Their reluctance in naming the girls as significant players in reifying gendered stereotypes illustrates the ways in which a student’s concern for what may be construed as hurtful speech may limit what is said to only those ideas students feel comfortable making public.

Lastly, the final concern students had in relation to hurtful speech emerging from their peers in class regarded the potential for hearing or saying something that might be deemed sexist or racist. Their understanding of each of these terms was continually in process. In large part, students understood each as speaking to stereotypes because these were the experiences with which they were most familiar. While they could point to segregation as an act of racism or denying women the vote as an act of sexism, they viewed present-day racism and sexism as unfair generalizations shared in speech events. For this reason, a number of students feared saying something that might be understood as racist or sexist. Ronald spoke to this repeatedly. After sharing on multiple occasions
his fear of saying “the wrong thing,” Ronald used the small group interview to clarify what it meant to him to say the wrong thing. He explained this within the context of a question Kylie had once asked about the stereotyping of Black motorcycle riders.

Chris: Ronald, how about you? Was there anything that made you uncomfortable or were they just kind of…?

Ronald: Well, again the question that Kylie asked was kind of uncomfortable for me because I really didn’t like-

Chris: Which one?

Ronald: The one about motorcycle one.

Chris: Why was that uncomfortable?

Ronald: Because I didn’t want to like say the wrong thing.

Chris: What is the wrong thing, by the way?

Ronald: I didn’t want to stereotype.

Chris: You were afraid you might say something that was a stereotype.

Ronald: Yeah. (Interview, 3-24-17)

Many students echoed Ronald’s concern for saying something others would feel is hurtful toward a classmate or their family. Fears of offending someone, hurting their feelings, or positioning them as enemies weighed heavily upon the kids’ minds. However, as Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor (2014) state, if children are afraid to say things that may be biased there is no opportunity for the class to hear multiple perspectives and to learn to navigate these multiple, and sometimes hurtful, interpretations openly.
These same concerns played upon those who were most likely to be the target of stereotypical or critical speech. Here, after Chase had shared his hesitancy to say anything about Black people because as a bi-racial child he knew how some things that had been said could be taken as offensive, Hannah, who was also bi-racial and rarely spoke during these discussions, shared her concern over what others might have to say.

Chris: (to Chase) Yeah, we don’t want to hurt anybody. What were you thinking Hannah?

Hannah: I don’t want people to say that. Sort of like Chase, something [about] Black people and White people because my mom’s side is White and my dad’s side is Black. (Interview, 3-6-17)

As a child who was vulnerable to feeling attacked by potential misrepresentations, generalizations, or critiques of the beliefs and actions of both White and Black people, Hannah chose to disengage. However, this should not suggest that only those who remained silent felt similar concerns. As evidenced in the interview below, Kumail, who spoke far more than any other student, felt increasingly concerned his own identity might become a topic of discussion. In this excerpt, Silas begins by explaining a concern he had when engaged in our discussions of gender and race.

Silas: Well, kind of like my last one. I’m just really scared I’m going to offend someone. So it gets kind of scary to share my ideas because I don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings and make them feel bad about how they are or something.

Chris: You don’t want to be part of the problem we talk about?

Silas: Yeah.
Chris: We talk about what people say and do and you’re afraid you might say or do something. Kumail?

Kumail: I know Indian, because back in kindergarten and first grade people used to tease me about everything, so the first time we talked about this when we went in second grade and started talking about race I was afraid someone would say something about me. But now I’m getting used to it. But the reason I feel a little uncomfortable now because I’m just wondering if anyone will bring up about India.

Chris: That they might say something that would be hurtful?

Kumail: Yeah. (Morning Meeting, 12-14-16)

It was interesting Kumail was concerned that India may become a topic of discussion provided the fact he complained earlier that the class spent too much time discussing issues of race when, from his experiences in the school, there were no problems with race but he as an Indian-American had been subjected to many unkind words about his beliefs and the contents of his lunchbox. Though Kumail desired to have others better understand who he was and to learn to think more deliberately about the things they said he was also hesitant of such discussions because he understood this open dialogue had the potential to reveal the developing understandings of others that may sound and feel uncomfortable to him.

As this section has demonstrated, students felt a great deal of concern over what was or could be said within a discussion of gender or race. These speech events were uncomfortable for both those who were in danger of being targeted by potentially hurtful speech as well as those who were not. The next section will explore the ways in which
students felt uncomfortable hearing about the beliefs and actions of those beyond our classroom walls.

**Hearing what the outside world has to say.** Another student concern was the ways racial identities of marginalized groups – here, Black males - were being negatively portrayed when someone in class reported out stereotypical or racist beliefs they had identified as present within society. For instance, in the following discussion Kylie had asked why some people thought Black motorcycle riders were criminals. As the discussion evolved I worked to help students understand what it means to stereotype. In doing so, I spoke to the presence of specific stereotypes.

Chris: That's because there's all sorts of difference. Not all Black people or all White people are the same. But stereotypes work to make us think they are. So the stereotypes about people who ride motorcycles, for a long time, was that they break laws and are less trustworthy than other people. That's a stereotype.

Braden: It's not true.

Chris: No, it's not true. Stereotypes are never true. Are there *some* people who ride motorcycles who might break the law? Sure. Do most people who ride motorcycles break the law? Absolutely not. How about kids? Some people might say kids are lazy and want to spend all their time playing video games.

Sarah: I don't even like playing video games.

Various Voices: (Speaking against the notion they are lazy.)

Ayrica: I am.

Chris: But no, kids aren't all lazy and not all kids want to play video games all day. Some might be lazy and I'm sure some would love to play video games but
we can't say this is true of all kids today. It's a stereotype. When I was a kid there was a store near my house that would only allow two kids inside at a time because they assumed we would come in to steal candy. The stereotype was that kids are dishonest and they steal.

Various Voices: We don't steal!

Chris: Neither did I, but a few did. The owners of the store were understandably upset about this and they decided to keep all of us out, or at least only let a few of us in at a time so they could watch us more closely. Because we were kids, we weren't trusted. So in Kylie's question she was talking a little bit about stereotypes of motorcyclists, but she was also talking about stereotypes some people in our country have about race. There are people in our country who believe if you are Black you are more likely to be a criminal.

Chris: Why do they think that?

Joseph: Nuh uh. No way!

Chris: Well, we know [race] has nothing to do with it but there are people who believe that stereotype.

Mike: We're Black and we don't steal anything.

Chris: I know. We all know. But some don't. They believe the stereotypes they are taught about people who are Black or Muslim or rich or poor or gay or Christian or girls or boys and on and on and on. That's how stereotypes work. (Morning Meeting, 12-9-15)

While these sorts of examples were provided in an attempt to uncover and critique the dangers of such beliefs and actions, for two students in the class- Chase and James-
the airing of such accusations felt like a personal attack not only on them, but their fathers. In the following small group interview, Chase spoke to the discomfort he felt during class discussions involving stereotypes, the overrepresentation of Black crime in the news, and the policing of Black bodies.

Chris: Let’s let everyone take a turn because it’s going to be hard to hear everyone. Chase?

Chase: Well, this is kind of what I said. It’s usually the shootings are Black stuff like Black people and the gangs are Black. The hoodies are black. And so it’s usually the bad color is black. The police shooting the Black people. It’s usually that.

Chris: So does it feel kind of like an attack? It makes you feel bad to hear that?

Chase: Yeah, because some people have parents that are Black and like they are Black and so that’s like messing, making them feel uncomfortable.

Chris: Because they’re not sharing all those great stories about our parents, right? Only stories that we keep hearing. That way our bad stories give people the wrong idea.

Chase: Yeah, my dad is Black but he’s not like a shooter.

Chris: No, not at all, right?!

James: My dad is in the Army- (Interview, 3-24-17)

Building upon a point James made in a previous discussion about feeling uncomfortable when hearing some in our society “say that Black people are dangerous sometimes” (Morning Meeting, 12-14-16), Chase confirmed the fact such knowledge can weigh heavily upon those who are targeted by negative stereotypes. For students shielded
by privilege, the knowledge of demeaning and oppressive stereotypes provided an abstract problem to critique from a safe distance given they failed to recognize any personal stake in the outcome. However, Chase and James did not enjoy the safety provided by distancing oneself from such problems. This was due to the fact the hurtful assumptions were pointed directly at them. Though James and Chase were the only students to voice these concerns, others in class spoke to experiencing other tensions when learning about the hurtful and oppressive beliefs and actions at play in the world. In the next section I will discuss the ways in which girls in the class felt uncomfortable, and even frightened, by the realization the world is not as fair as they once believed.

**Hearing about realities that made students feel uncomfortable or frightened.**

There were also instances where students learned historical and present truths that challenged their perception of the world as a just place that provides equal opportunities and expectations of all. In these cases, students became uncomfortable with new information as it created a conflict between what they believed to be true about the world and what they were hearing from others. This was particularly true of gender discussions. For instance, in the following small group interview the girls were reflecting upon our discussions of gender when Sarah revealed the fact she hadn’t been aware of gender-related injustices until people brought examples to the circle for discussion.

Chris: What made you uncomfortable about the discussion?

Sarah: The part where people talk about what the boys do.

Chris: So when you heard what the boys do or what the boys think that’s what-

Sarah: I didn’t even know that happened. (Interview, 3-1-17)
Discussions uncovering gendered biases in hopes of inspiring students to disrupt the ideologies underpinning them may have been conceived, in part, to empower the girls but at the same time these revelations may have filled some with trepidation and fear as they began to wonder what these unfair beliefs and practices meant for them personally.

As the discussion continued Emily shared her own concerns.

Chris: So you’re surprised to hear people did that or thought that?
Emily: Yeah. It’s kind of scary.
Chris: Okay.
Emily: Like, what’s going to happen?
Chris: Does anyone else agree with that? That hearing it, what people do or hearing what people think – is that something that made you uncomfortable?
Emily: You don’t know about it then you hear “AHH!” and you get girls so bad and you’re-
Chris: - Because in some cases you were surprised to find out?
Emily: Yeah. And you’re like ‘Is this going to happen to you or something?’

(Interview, 3-1-17)

Emily’s concerns revealed that discovering gender-related inequalities and injustices present in the world today –insulting stereotypes, limited educational opportunities, unequal pay, underrepresentation in professional and leadership roles, etc. – can be a frightening experience when you are a member of the population being belittled, mistreated, undervalued, or denied access. Chris found this to be true, as well, when discussing issues of race. The concerns shared in the culture journal by his
classmates during Morning Meeting opened his eyes to issues, such as the lack of Black families on television, he had not considered before.

Chris: Well, the thing it kind of hurt my feelings because a lot of times it kind of doesn’t feel right when we see a lot of White people in TV shows. I just didn’t know. I barely have any TV shows where it’s about Black people. I only have like four, no two, and I just don’t, it doesn’t feel right that a lot of White people are in more things.

Chris: So maybe, that sounds like the discussion didn’t make you feel uncomfortable. It was just the truth of what we were talking about -

Chris: -yeah. (Interview, 3-6-17)

Chris’s statement “I just didn’t know,” like Sarah and Emily’s previous revelations show that while some students became aware of inequalities and injustices through their own observations or discussions at home and in their communities, others lived parallel lives within these same communities but remained seemingly unaware of such issues. This is where learning to observe carefully, question freely, and engage in collaborative meaning-making through dialogue with peers promotes an ability to be more fully aware of the workings, just and unjust, of the social world. However, negotiating the space between diverse perspectives and varying levels of understanding can be precarious in that conflicts are likely to emerge.

Conclusion

In classroom discussions about gender and racial inequities and injustices, students interrogated a variety of societal beliefs and practices while socially constructing new knowledge alongside their peers. This construction of knowledge drew upon the
diversity of the classroom. However, the meanings developed within these discussions were not universal across the whole of the room. Each student drew from their own cultural and personal resources to situate and understand these issues while also developing inferences, heavily influenced by their own lived experiences and worldviews, to explain the nature of these issues. As such, those students who identified as part of the dominant group within the topic of discussion found it more difficult to relate to and accept as real the concerns of those who were being marginalized by unjust beliefs and practices within our society. These students identifying as part of the dominant group also monopolized large portions of class discussion and, even more-so, the hypotheses developed and shared publically to contextualize and explain the nature of unjust practices. Due to the multiplicity of perspectives and identities in the classroom, many students felt some level of discomfort during these discussions for fear they would hear or say something hurtful. In the next chapter, Implications, I will share my own insights into what these findings mean for my own classroom teaching as well as other classroom teachers dedicated to developing critical thinkers who are willing and able to tackle issues of inequity and injustice within their communities.
CHAPTER 6: Implications

The purpose of this study was to better understand how my students constructed meaning during critical discussions of inequity and injustice as related to gender and race as well as to identify tensions they experienced during these discussions. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do my students construct meaning during class discussions regarding issues of inequity and injustice around gender and race?
2. What role do I play in constructing, shaping, and maintaining opportunities for students to create meaning during these discussions?
3. What tensions do my students encounter when engaging in critical discussions about gender and race?

To investigate these questions I used a teacher research model (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Herr & Anderson 2005; Hubbard & Power 2012) rooted in qualitative research methods (Erickson, 1986; Holly, Arhar, & Kashten, 2005). My methodological procedures included a reflective teaching journal, photographs, audio recordings, video recordings, lesson plans, curriculum artifacts, student work, classroom newsletters, and email correspondence with families. While the whole of these artifacts provided me an opportunity to conduct a rudimentary thematic analysis of the data (Glesne, 2011), in which I identified patterns as well as narrowed the focus of my study, it was the forty recordings of class discussions and small group reflections that allowed me to directly address my research questions.
In regards to my findings, I found students drew upon three resources to construct meaning – personal and cultural connections, previous classroom engagements, and teacher input. However, while previous classroom engagements and teacher input were accessed in a similar fashion during discussions of both gender and race, there were significant differences when it came to the students’ ability or willingness to share personal connections during discussions of race as compared to discussions of gender. As discussed in Chapter 5, students were far less likely to share personal observations, anecdotes, or experiences during race-related discussions. Furthermore, I argued that of the few personal connections that were offered within discussions of race half failed to provide any sort of context from which others in the class could better understand the topic at hand with only three of the eight personal connections coming from students of Color.

When analyzing the ways students constructed hypotheses to explain the construction and maintenance of injustices and inequalities, I argued students internalized these issues as real when speaking to the roles of power, stereotypes, and the status quo and as imaginary when viewing injustices as explainable, exaggerated, or justified. In both types of discussion, hypotheses positioning injustices as imaginary were more prominent than those working from the presupposition such issues were in fact real. For instance, 58% of all gender-related hypotheses positioned injustices as disputable with 79% of these challenges coming from male students (see Table 6.1). Meanwhile, 55% of race-related hypotheses positioned injustices as disputable with 97% of these challenges coming from non-Black students (see Table 6.2). These numbers reflected a similar pattern in regards to who spoke most often during class discussions. Within gender-
related discussions, males accounted for 58% of all speaking events while non-Black students accounted for 76% of all speaking events during race-related discussions. In each case the dominant social group (or those identifying as part of the dominant social group in relation to the topic-at-hand) largely controlled the discussions while also positioning themselves as the primary meaning-makers for the class.

**Table 6.1**

*Participation in Gender-Related Discussions (12 girls, 11 boys total)*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Total Speaking Events</th>
<th>Total Hypotheses Offered</th>
<th>Hypotheses Situating Issues as Disputable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.2**

*Participation in Race-Related Discussions (11 Black, 12 non-Black total)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Speaking Events</th>
<th>Total Hypotheses Offered</th>
<th>Hypotheses Situating Issues as Disputable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Black</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participation was also analyzed in regards to the discomfort students experienced during these discussions. Students shared they were concerned about the possibility of conflicts as well as potentially hurtful speech that could conceivably cause harm to others in class, position the speaker as racist or sexist, or create a sense of fear for what the larger world holds. In response to these findings, in this chapter I first provide my personal reflections on the work I engaged in over the sixteen months of this study to
help students become increasingly critical thinkers who were able and willing to explore issues of injustice. Secondly, I will provide explicit implications I feel are of importance to other classroom teachers dedicated to teaching for social justice. Lastly, I will discuss implications for future research before offering concluding remarks.

**Personal Reflections on My Teaching**

**Defining Social Justice Work in My Classroom**

Does teaching for social justice lead one to help students think critically or does learning to think critically lead students to social justice work? This was a critical question I wrestled with throughout the duration of this teacher research. My concern was that to label what I was doing in my classroom as teaching for social justice would be to imply our shared focus as identifying and disrupting the injustices I introduced into the classroom curriculum. But to do this runs the risk of potentially creating a curriculum in which students are guided by my concerns and desires as informed by my personal understanding of what constitutes reality for me and for others. This is problematic in that it creates the potential to treat students as passive receivers of knowledge (Friere, 1970) while ignoring their own questions, concerns, and perspectives. Worse, teaching for social justice in such a way lends itself to further conditioning students to be indoctrinated by those in positions of authority rather than supporting them into generative practices they can carry beyond their schooling experiences to continue exploring, critiquing, and disrupting the unjust social beliefs and practices of their communities.

By the conclusion of this study I came to feel more comfortable stating my goal as supporting students to think critically about the world, allowing issues of social justice
to naturally emerge when engaged in the work of identifying and critiquing relationships of power and the outcomes they produce when disparities in power occur. But this is not to suggest I left the inclusion of social justice work to chance. Early in our first year together I modeled the use of classroom journals and current news articles to critique social norms and practices. One of the earliest examples of this was when I shared a news article about gender inequalities present in Halloween costumes at Party City and supported students to consider what these costume disparities communicated about the way our society views gender. Soon after, one student, Kylie, welcomed opportunities to challenge social practices as related to age, gender, and race. Her almost daily entries into the culture journal supported her peers to take on similar work and in doing so allowed us to situate this important part of our social studies curriculum as both issues-based (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000) and culturally relevant (Howard, 2010).

Recognizing there continues to be incongruencies in the field of education with regards to how social justice work is defined and put into action (Picower, 2012) as well as competing ideologies as to what the purposes of education should be (Apple, 2013; Counts, 1932; Dewey, 1903; Friere, 1970, Giroux, 1988; Macedo, 2006), engaging in teacher research allowed me to consistently use my teaching journal as a tool to reflect upon, interrogate, and revise my growing beliefs in regards to teaching for social justice. As such, I continually saw my teaching with new eyes, allowing me to responsively create conditions under which my students were supported into critical thinking and, by extension, social justice work. Throughout this process I identified new goals for my teaching and for my students. In doing so, I named as my goal efforts to support students to begin
• observing the world more carefully
• questioning those things they did not understand
• coming to see that knowledge is socially constructed
• understanding that knowledge can unfairly and inaccurately position one group of people as superior to another while affording them unearned privileges
• reading texts with a critical eye
• engaging in critical discourse with the expectation to hear and consider the thoughts and perspectives of others
• identifying primary resources such as the personal experiences of others as holding valuable information
• accessing frames such as power to better understand and explain social inequities and injustices
• viewing meaning-making as an on-going process

The curriculum my students and I constructed together was rooted in tenets of critical theory as we critiqued the social beliefs and practices of the larger society (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010) while working to disrupt the social order in hopes of one day constructing “a new status quo through the ideological and political tools that are available” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 119). As such, my teaching, as all teaching, constituted an inherently political act (Banks, 2008; Friere, 1970; hooks, 1994; Nieto, 2002) in which language acted as a political instrument (Baldwin, 1997) to reshape society by product of the class’ efforts to collaboratively construct new knowledge drawing on the diversity of perspectives present in our classroom. My role was to help facilitate these discussions.
alongside those students who framed the questions we explored. In doing so, I drew upon Schreiber and Moss’ (2002) notion of belief irritators in which the students and I often constructed arguments and stories to elicit new questions, challenge underlying assumptions, and offer new perspectives in hopes of complicating the existing beliefs of others. Such work provided opportunities for each of us to experience how knowledge is socially constructed.

By the conclusion of this study I felt as though my students certainly exemplified what a future critical citizenry looks like at ages 7-9. Students asked critical questions, challenged the presence, meaning, and effects of social norms, drew upon multiple resources to make sense of inequities and injustices, engaged others in critical discourse, drew upon multiple perspectives, and demonstrated a willingness to respectfully challenge the ideas of others – even when these competing ideas came from me. These successes support my position that social justice work in the classroom needs to be rooted in the lives of our students, position children as knowledge-producers, and offer generative practices and frames students can access after leaving the confines of our classroom walls (Fifer & Palos, 2011; Friere, 1970; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015; Michie, 2009). As such, this work offers students not a set of prescribed beliefs but a stance from which to interact with the world around them.

Having situated our classroom work within the literature that framed this study, the following sections of this personal reflection will reveal some of the challenges I met in my teaching as well as suggest implications for future teaching.
Challenges I Faced

The nature of whole-class discussion. Of great concern to me, when analyzing the data, was the fact discussions were often monopolized by children representing the dominant social group in relation to the topic-at-hand. As sometimes happens in teaching, I did not recognize the occurrence of this phenomenon when engaged in the midst of these discussions. I did, however, note the fact that of the twenty-three students in my classroom over the sixteen months of this study our discussions were in large part dominated by the same eight or nine speakers (see Table 6.3). This was a source of constant struggle for me as I worked to find ways to support more students to participate.

Table 6.3

Student Participation during 33 Discussions of Gender and Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Discussions of Gender</th>
<th>Discussions of Race</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Discussions Participated in</td>
<td>Speaking Events</td>
<td>Number of Discussions Participated in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumail</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braden</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrick</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silas</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margo</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayrica</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initially, children read their questions from the classroom journals then I called on students with their hands up to share out. I was careful in these instances to institute a healthy amount of wait time to ensure as many students as possible received an opportunity to think about the question and offer a response. When a question seemed especially interesting or there were many hands in the air I would ask the students to turn and talk with a neighbor before reconvening with the whole group. I felt this turn-and-talk structure provided more reluctant students an opportunity to engage with the questions and ideas being presented, rehearse what they might say to the whole group within the safety of a smaller grouping, and gain access to another person’s thoughts as an additional resource for what might be shared out to the class. However, when asked “Who wants to share out something you and your partner discussed?” I would often be confronted with the same hands waving in the air. While there were times I called upon those who did not have their hands in the air, this was not the norm. A few months into our first year together those asking the questions took on the role of facilitating these discussions, becoming the ones to call on their peers to respond. More than ever, those who were quickest to raise their hands or had already established themselves as regular participants were called on. For this reason, I instituted a number of different strategies in hopes of leveling the playing field.
The first strategy we adopted was to speak into the silence, a practice adopted from Rick Duval (Mills & Donnelly, 2001). Similar to a discussion around the dinner table, speaking into the silence called on students to no longer raise hands but naturally respond to the ideas of others as they would during any discussion outside the context of schooling. The primary reason for implementing this new structure was to promote greater a back-and-forth between students either engaged in building upon or challenging one another’s ideas. I found that hand-raising too often led students to speak directly to me and then await some sort of response in which they wanted me to acknowledge or evaluate their contribution. I also found that hand-raising led students to take turns making isolated statements rather than building upon the ideas of others to collaboratively construct new meanings. Each of these spoke to the fact students had learned to “do school” in a way that moved them further from the natural discourse they engage in during their personal lives to construct knowledge. These were patterns, in addition to making discussions more equitable in regards to who spoke, I wanted to disrupt. As was expected, our first attempts at speaking into the silence were very awkward and quickly devolved into a competition to get one’s voice heard by speaking quickly and speaking loudly. Despite the challenge of incorporating a new structure, we continued to work at speaking into the silence throughout the course of this study though it never became the primary mode of discourse within the classroom.

Another strategy we adopted came from my student teacher, James. Wanting to give preference to those students who were working to listen deeply and build on the ideas of others, he taught the class to give a visual signal in which they linked their two index fingers to signify to the facilitator they wanted to connect their idea to something
someone else had already said. The students took quickly to this, learning that to make a connection to the ideas of others offered them an increased likelihood of being called upon. There was hope, too, this strategy would filter out some of the student comments from those who quickly raised their hand without spending much time thinking about what others had offered. This strategy remained in practice for three months. I eventually phased it out as connections between thoughts became commonplace. Though this supported students into constructing more collaborative discussions, it did not address the inequity that remained in regards to class discussions being dominated by less than half of the students.

The final discursive strategy we adopted was for students to use their fist and fingers to signify how many times they had spoken during the course of that day’s Morning Meeting. A fist represented zero verbal contributions while their fingers signified one, two, three, etc. This strategy was very successful in creating space for other voices in that the most frequent speakers were no longer being called on again and again within the same Morning Meeting or discussion. Those students who had often been silent in the past still did not engage but there was a small collection of students, perhaps those who had been previously overwhelmed by their more assertive peers, who greatly benefited from this new structure. While this strategy did create much needed space for a more diverse group of speakers it also resulted in increasingly stilted discussions in which the focus was on equity as related to turn-taking rather than on the natural flow of discourse that finds participants speaking back to one another in real time. Though hand-raising had long been an aspect of our discussions, there were always instances of students speaking out of turn when feeling especially compelled by something they had
just heard. The structure of fist and fingers refocused their attention to the policing of equitable turn-taking which negatively affected the quality of our discussions.

As I move forward in my teaching and think about how to structure discussions amongst twenty-plus speakers I plan to draw on each of these structures while providing students increased opportunities to discuss in partnerships, small groups, and at home with their families before engaging in whole-class discussions. These supports will offer them opportunities to engage within settings that may be more comfortable to them as well as provide me an opportunity to offer prompts such as “Tell us about something your partner/group/family was thinking” before following up with the question “What do you have to say about that?” For some students, having the opportunity to share other’s ideas may alleviate the pressure of having to think quickly to articulate their own thoughts while still having an opportunity to speak back to these from their own perspective. Another implication, to be discussed again later, is the need for non-verbal opportunities to share thinking with the class.

Developing comfort with critical discourse. As evidenced in the findings, there were instances of students feeling uncomfortable in response to things others had to say or in anticipation of the ways in which their own words might be construed by classmates. This student discomfort confirmed portions of Lusk and Weinberg’s (1994) findings in regards to students feeling concerned how discussions may affect peer relationships as well as the politics of voice (or, how one’s words position and define them in relation to others). For instance, Ronald was concerned how saying “the wrong thing” could both cause his classroom friends to become upset with him as well as position him as an oppressor for sharing personal experiences and beliefs viewed by
others to support negative stereotypes. Each of these fears kept him and others, such as Silas, from fully participating in our discussions. However, my findings diverged from Lusk and Weingberg’s work in that my data introduced an additional source framing the challenges students experience within the interactional context of critical classroom discourse – a fear of hurting others. While the sources identified by Lusk and Weinberg name ways in which speakers experience tension in relation to repercussions they might face for something they say, a number of students in this study communicated concern for the effect their words could have on others. From Silas’ worries about hurting someone else’s feelings to Hannah and Chase’s acknowledgement that speaking about the Black community has the potential to hurt those in the classroom who identify as and have family members who are part of that community, students recognized the danger inherent in creating a “safe” space to share and engage with diverse ideas. They knew there was always someone who might be paying a price for the work we were doing, no matter how noble its intentions.

As mentioned earlier, these developments were surprising to me. I had long argued my students were too young to worry about the messiness of such discussions. I operated from the belief they simply spoke about what they saw and heard while assessing these issues from their own perspectives of right and wrong. However, when Emi opened the door for others to share their discomfort the falsehood of my belief became very evident. I realized I had allowed myself to operate from false assumptions based, most likely, on what I desired to be the truth rather than what was occurring right in front of me. I was then confronted with the realization there was a part of our curriculum that made some students feel uncomfortable. While my first response was to
avoid these discussions for a time, I knew the real solution was in working to more deliberately support students into engaging in critical discourse. While studies such as that from Evans, Avery, and Pederson (2000) demonstrate there are taboo topics most teachers steer away from for fear of disrupting the notion of a safe classroom, Vetter and Hugerford-Kressor (2014) argue that without opportunity to hear multiple perspectives made public and to openly critique these ideas we are doing our students a disservice. The implications of this are to urge teachers to not throw the baby out with the bathwater when tensions arise but to become increasingly intentional in helping students learn to value the role of conflict and come to understand we are all on the same journey but traveling different paths. For that reason, we must allow one another the room and support required for continued growth.

**Positioning myself within these discussions.** Near the end of the study a colleague confronted me, after hearing me speak about the work I was doing in my classroom, to suggest I was misguided in declaring my own beliefs and positions during classroom discussions of sensitive topics. Her concern was that students were impressionable and would take on the beliefs of those in positions of power. She spoke as though I should adopt a neutral impartiality (Kelly, 1986) in which students openly contested ideas while I remained on the sideline, seemingly neutral, nudging them along as needed. To acquiesce to such an ideal would mean, first of all, that I believed to be silent was to be neutral. This is not true since teaching is an inherently political act. For example, one morning James invited the class to speak to why Donald Trump was racist. Asked why he was interested in this particular question, James explained that both he and his Nana felt Trump, the Republican candidate for president, was racist because he
wanted to build a wall to keep undocumented Mexicans from entering the country. Hearing this, Ronald argued Trump was not racist at all but merely working to keep us safe. The implication in Ronald’s statement was that Mexicans were dangerous and we should, thus, be protected from them. The discussion soon devolved into a series of student concerns about Mexico portraying its people as poor, lazy, unlawful, and dangerous. In that moment I knew there was a difference between providing balance in the classroom where all perspectives could be shared and passively allowing untruths to be told. I chose to speak up against these false representations and claims because to remain silent would constitute a political choice to not only provide space for misguided and hateful stereotypes in the classroom but to allow others in the class to access these misrepresentations when constructing their own meanings. Furthermore, to remain silent would have implied, as discussed in the literature review, “that being a spectator is an ethical response to injustice” (Bigelow, 1997, p.14).

Rather than diluting myself into believing in the possibility of teacher neutrality, the stance I chose to take within classroom discussions was that of an inclusive and situated engagement (Kelly & Brandes, 2001) in which traditional relationships of power were restructured as all members of the classroom moved in and out of teacher and learner roles and all perspectives, whether coming from a student or from me, were openly critiqued. As thus, I worked at times to provide historical and cultural context but at other times I shared my own truths. Most times these were in line with many of the ideas being discussed by the students. Other times my truths, as well as my concerns, were not taken up as true, or even significant, by some in the class. It took time to scaffold students into challenging my ideas rather than freely accepting them as the final
word in a discussion, such as the time Braden, blinded by White privilege, questioned why he should feel bad about inequities in regards to representation in children’s literature despite my position this was a significant problem. Yet the act of challenging even the teacher’s ideas provided students another generative skill as they were positioned as critical consumers of information capable of resisting the fixation of belief from authority figures. This act of supporting students to question and inquire fit within my definition of our work as becoming critical thinkers who, by an extension of questioning relationships of power, were prepared to critique and disrupt inequities and injustices.

Providing needed historical and cultural context. A significant finding of this study was the manner in which those students identifying as members of the dominant social group controlled the discourse around inequities and injustices. Within discussions of race, this meant an overrepresentation of perspectives and hypotheses from students who were either White or Indian-American. The fact these students were controlling the discussion was interesting provided they were not the ones posing the original questions that launched such inquiries. In fact, of the sixteen discussions of race in my data set, nine emerged from questions students had written in the classroom culture journal with seven of these coming from Black students concerned about a lack of representation on television, the stereotyping of Black males as criminal, the overrepresentation of Black crime in the news, and the use of the color black to represent evil (see Appendix C for a full list of discussions).

I realized in the midst of these discussions that within gender-related topics there were a wide variety of personal and cultural connections being made by both the boys
and the girls to contextualize the issue-at-hand. Yet within discussions of race, in the absence of such personal and cultural connections, White and Indian-American students not only dominated the discussions but repeatedly negated or belittled claims of inequity or injustice because they seemingly lacked much, if not all, historical and cultural context. When considering the concerns shared by their peers – few Black families on television, only one Black president, racial profiling by mall security – White and Indian-American students viewed these issues as singular incidents isolated from other widely enacted beliefs and practices in our society. As such, I came to see my role as providing students the context they would need to better understand the lived realities of those experiencing the world differently. To accomplish this I read a wide variety of picture books demonstrating the historic and current struggles forced upon Black Americans, introduced news articles about the policing of Black bodies, and shared stories about the presence of Black stereotypes and their effects. However, in doing so I failed to represent the Black community, and by extension my own students and their families, in a healthy manner. Contrary to the aims of decolonization, I inadvertently supported the notion of “victimage” (Wilson, 2005). My representations were intended to speak to the injustices suffered by a marginalized community which, in turn, objectified their very being as a means to an end rather than revealing and celebrating the richness and complexity of their lives. While unintentional, this consequential miscue on my part reflected the shallowness of liberal attitudes dating back to the 1950s and 1960s which has been described by James Baldwin as dealing with “the Negro as a symbol or a victim but [having] no sense of him as a man” (1963, p.58).
The effects of the narrative I constructed in the classroom about the nature of Blackness positioned students such as James, Chase, and Hannah to feel uncomfortable when hearing what others had to say about them or their families. Though there were many times I accessed literature to represent the diversity within our classroom and our community, I did not attend to this often enough to counterbalance the stories representing the Black community from an issue-based perspective rather than a human one. Because I was not diligent to present a wider variety of representations of the Black community I may have inadvertently reified the deficient-based stereotype I had hoped to disrupt. The implications of this on my future teaching is to not only continue accessing an increasingly diverse collection of literature representing the wholeness of our society but to resist the desire to turn every text about a character of Color into a critical reading. To do so is to dehumanize these characters and, by extension, the people they represent.

**Implications for Teaching**

Though many of my students stated critical discussions of gender and race made them feel uncomfortable at times, students also declared these types of discussions were important and should constitute part of the classroom curriculum. For instance, Sarah felt our discussions of gender allowed boys to be more aware of how the girls felt about gendered stereotypes and injustices. Emily, reflecting on what these discussions meant to her personally, felt empowered by this work - arguing she better understood how to disrupt harmful beliefs and practices. Jayda, saying “And we can fix it. And keep it like changed” (Interview, 3-1-17), felt dedicated to confronting injustices and other issues related to social justice. The implications presented in the following sections assume teachers, like these girls, are similarly dedicated to developing a sense of agency calling
on them to step outside the established norms surrounding them and address issues of social justice in the classroom. Implications have been organized into two sections. The first section addresses the role of resources within the classroom while the second section focuses on the role of a negotiated curriculum in supporting students to question the world.

**Resources**

Selection and use of resources to support critical thinking around issues of social justice requires a clear vision of one’s intended educational goals. As resources pertain to the specific findings of this study, I will offer implications that address the lack of personal connections students made in response to certain topics as well as the overrepresentation of voices from dominant social groups who often voiced opinions minimizing or all-together negating oppressive practices. For the purpose of clarity, implications as related to classroom resources are categorized as: (1) the selection and use of diverse literature in the classroom and (2) the use of classroom guests as primary resources.

**The selection and use of diverse literature in the classroom.** To engage in critiques of social beliefs and practices related to gender and race, students must have access to a diversity of literature providing opportunities to confront, consider, and discuss the complexities of lived experiences different from their own. This is of particular importance when students possess little-to-no personal connections or knowledge related to these topics. In such cases, teachers must carefully select a multitude of texts that allow students to gain insights into a variety of experiences and perspectives representing, but not limited to, those communities under study. In engaging
with these texts, students are afforded opportunities through thoughtful questioning and
discussion to better understand various perspectives as well as become increasingly
aware of the fact each of us lives at the intersection of multiple groups. Furthermore, such
engagements provide a shared experiences and resources students can draw upon when
working to collaboratively construct meaning around issues of social justice.

It is important to note, however, that when selecting literature to reflect the
diversity present within our communities and world, teachers need to make certain they
are not representing any social group as being one dimensional. That is to say, the texts
selected should not universally represent any social group as burdened. To do so would
be to select texts only for their ability to represent an issue rather than real people. For
instance, if all books about people who are female, Black, Muslim, gay, or differently-
abled focused primarily on the obstacles they face in their lives students may come away
from these texts feeling pity while maintaining stereotypes of these groups as supposedly
broken in some manner. For this reason, while a portion of the books teachers select to
fill their classroom shelves and read alouds must address social injustices there should be
a wider variety of stories providing students an opportunity to see people of all sorts
living happy and successful lives.

Another aspect of selection is the inclusion of texts that provide historical context
students can access when constructing meaning around current issues. As demonstrated
in my findings, many of the students in this study who vocalized skepticism in regards to
racial injustices did so based on their own experiences, or lack thereof, with buses, racial
stereotyping, and mistreatment of racial minorities. However, because their personal
experiences were limited the meanings they created worked to whitewash oppressive acts
as overreactions or misrepresentations of the truth. For this reason, texts must be selected to provide students historical context from which to better understand the events of today as rooted in the continuation of beliefs and practices of the past.

Lastly, text selection should introduce students to broad concepts, or frames, which may be utilized in the analysis of social inequities and injustices. During this study the concept of power was an important frame that was repeatedly accessed by students to explain the oppression of a given group. In such cases, students identified the dominance of one group over another and the ways in which they maintained this power through limiting access to education, legislative representation, and civil rights. There is, of course, great potential for other frames to emerge from consistent and thoughtful engagement with a wide variety of texts depicting diverse lives and people.

The use of classroom guests as primary resources. While diverse texts provide an opportunity to introduce students to the lives of others, it is of great importance to invite guests into the classroom who can share personal experiences and perspectives that contextualize the topics being explored. Though books are wonderful resources from which to imagine lives both similar to and different from our own, hearing first-hand accounts from classroom guests provides students the potential for three unique opportunities. The first addresses the fact that for students who identify as members of a dominant social group these issues can sometimes appear abstract or removed from their daily lives. I posit that it is often this disconnect that allows students to so easily dispute claims of injustice others have experienced. However, when guests come in to the classroom to share their personal experiences students can begin to make a human connection between these issues and the lives of real people. Secondly, for those who
share these experiences but struggle to make their voices heard, such guests offer the opportunity to have their own feelings and thoughts both validated and articulated by someone with which they connect. Lastly, classroom guests allow teachers to model the power and potential of accessing primary sources within their ongoing inquiries into issues of social justice. These first-hand accounts provide much needed counter-narratives that work to disrupt the misconceptions and misrepresentations that may emerge from student talk—especially in those cases where those from dominant social groups speak on behalf those who have been marginalized.

**A Negotiated Curriculum**

If declaring our goal as the desire to provide students with generative practices they can access in their daily lives to identify, problematize, and address social injustices, we must scaffold students into the work of more closely observing and critiquing the world around them. Doing so allows students to co-construct curriculum alongside us as their observations, questions, and hypotheses become the spark that ignites class discussions and, at times, further exploration. Thereby, the curriculum becomes more than just the topics posed by students but the very act of living in a way that allows one to begin first identifying and then problematizing the presence of injustices and inequalities. This is a critical component of a liberating education consisting of what Friere (1970) terms an act of cognition in which the content of the learning as well as the ensuing process of exploring these topics through collaborative discourse demands critical reflection on the part of both students and teacher. Within such discussions, it is critical that teachers work as often as possible to disrupt relationships of power in which students look to them for the final word or to resolve conflicts emerging from the presence of
diverse perspectives. Rather, the role of the teacher is to assist in facilitating these discussions as they pay careful attention to equitable opportunities to share as well as the safety and well-being of all students in relation to what is shared, how it is shared, and what becomes of these ideas.

Within our classroom this questioning of the world was supported by two means. The first was the institution of a Morning Meeting as a predictable daily structure. Morning Meeting, as described in an earlier chapter, was a time in which students could pose questions or offer observations they wanted the class to discuss. The second component was the role of classroom journals in providing students a place to document their thoughts before later making them public. While this study primarily focused on student entries in the class culture journal the other journals – science, language, math, and classroom community journals – proved to be just as important in helping students continue to question things they had learned to mindlessly accept. For instance, opportunities to access the science journal to ask how weather can change over time or if fish ever get thirsty supported students into interacting with the world differently. The workings of the world were no longer taken for granted but something to be considered, studied, and explained. It was these questions about linguistic practices, mathematical patterns, the natural world, and issues within the classroom that allowed students to eventually begin inquiring into social beliefs and practices related not only to gender and race but religion, ethnicity, and age as well.

As revealed in my findings, not all students felt comfortable with or capable of engaging in open discussions about topics they perceived as sensitive. It is safe to assume students across many classrooms feel similar concerns. The outcome of such student
trepidation could create, as was the case in this study, situations in which there is not an equitable opportunity for all perspectives to be heard when identifying, discussing, and hypothesizing about social beliefs and practices. For this reason, it is crucial that other means of participation be made available to students to ensure everyone has an opportunity to be heard as well as an opportunity to have their own thinking challenged by those who see or experience the world differently. Resources and methods to achieve more equitable participation may include blogging (Allen, 2014), written conversations, discussions within small groups and partnerships, and family communication journals in which students talk about these issues at home, summarize key ideas, and then report back to the class. Diversifying the means by which students can engage in this work not only promotes greater participation but also supports rigorous critique while providing greater opportunity to model and scaffold students into respectfully engaging in conflicts emerging from a difference in perspective. As such, the art of discourse becomes one more layer of the curriculum within this structure.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study emerged from a desire to better understand how my students were making sense of the social justice curriculum I was working to co-construct alongside them. As teachers it can sometimes become all too easy to generalize the responses of a handful of students to the entire class and come away with the misconception they all “get this.” I worried about falling into this same trap. Each year it seemed about a third of my class would engage in these discussions on a rather consistent basis. Many others sat quietly, offering only an occasional remark or question, while a small handful remained dedicatedly steadfast in their complete silence unless otherwise urged to respond.
This study, providing insights into the ways my students came to construct meaning from these discussions about gender and race as well as revealing the obstacles they faced in entering public discourse about sensitive topics, reveals a need for future studies examining those students who either actively or passively disengage from this work or are excluded by others from entering into these discussions. In my study there was a marked overrepresentation of voices coming from those who were members, or identified as members, of dominant social groups in relation to the topic of discussion. Most significant was the fact Black students were the ones bringing questions to the class to launch discussions of race and racial inequity yet were largely absent from the actual discussions. Further studies are needed to examine the particulars of why such disparities may occur.

Of course, such a study presupposes the same phenomena would occur in other classes as it did in mine. While this may be the case in some classrooms it would not necessarily emerge in others. This is but one reason there is a need for similar studies being conducted with a variety of participants ranging from classrooms that are homogenous in regards to gender or race to classrooms with a great amount of diversity. While my results speak to the particulars of the children in my classroom, additional studies would provide a greater depth in regards to the ways in which elementary students engage with and construct meaning around issues of gender and race. That said, there is also a need for further study into the construction of meaning around other issues – such as religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and immigration status – as well as ways in which the hidden curriculum of schooling (Nieto, 2002) works to colonize students identifying within and across these and other marginalized social groups. I chose to focus this study
on gender and race because these were the two topics my students were most interested in pursuing based on the volume of questions they recorded in our culture journal. It is likely other classes may demonstrate an interest in other topics reflecting their own curiosities and concerns.

**Concluding Remarks**

Our nation remains mired in struggles to not only address the multitude of injustices and inequities that are bestowed upon marginalized communities but to even acknowledge that such injustices and inequities exist. We continue to be plagued by ideologies and practices rooted in both fear and hatred for those who fall outside the norms established and maintained by the dominant culture. Such divisive speech bombard our nation’s children from many directions. These include the ideologies they confront within their many communities, the media, and the government.

For this reason, educators must commit themselves to preparing our youth to become critical consumers of information who resist allowing those with the greatest power to drown out the lived experiences of those being marginalized while continually seeking out information from a variety of perspectives in an effort to not only understand the complexities of a given problem but to take civic action based on their desires for our nation. To do this we must redefine our mission as educators. We must engage in classroom work that explicitly dedicates itself to building a more just society for all. Without doing so, we allow ourselves to become one more piece of the apparatus working to maintain systems of injustice and oppression. For my part in the classroom as a teacher, a learner, and a researcher, I am forever grateful to my students and their families for taking the leap of faith in allowing us to explore these issues together.
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Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt:


APPENDIX A: Student Consent Form

I am a researcher from the University of South Carolina. For my PhD dissertation research I am working to study the ways in which our classroom broaches topics related to social constructs such as (but not limited to) gender, race, and religion. I would like the help of your child. I am interested in learning more about how knowledge is created and the role language plays in this process. I need your permission to collect artifacts in the classroom as well as videos and audiotapes of classroom discussions.

If your child wants to be in the study, s/he will be asked to do the following:

Participate in regular classroom engagements, assignments, and discussions as well as be interviewed at the end of this study to reflect on the work we did together.

Your child does not have to help with this study. Content of the study is related to your child’s regular class work but won’t help or hurt his/her assessment data. Your child can also drop out of the study at any time, for any reason. Please feel free to ask any questions you would like to. You can contact me at chass@richland2.org.

Signing your name below means you have read the information about the study, that any questions you may have had have been answered, and you have decided for yourself and your child to be in the study. You and your child can stop being in the study any time.

____________________________________________________________  ____________________________
Signature of Minor Age

_________________________________________
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian

_________________________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian Date
APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

1. What do you remember about our discussions about gender/race? What stands out to you as memorable or important?

2. Were you surprised by anything you heard? Were there things you didn’t already know? What did you think about this?

3. Did these discussions ever make you uncomfortable? Why?

4. Do you think these discussions are important for classrooms to explore?
### APPENDIX C: List of Classroom Discussions Transcribed for Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Speakers (Speech Topics, Questions, or Affirmations/Challenges)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>9/18/15</td>
<td>4m 48s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Boys and Girls Earrings</td>
<td>At Morning Meeting, Baja asks why some boys and girls wear earrings.</td>
<td>Derrick (2), Kylie (1), Kumail (1): 3 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>9/28/15</td>
<td>14m 29s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Party City Written Conversations from Home</td>
<td>At Morning Meeting, the kids are discussing gendered Halloween costumes after having a written conversation about it at home.</td>
<td>Emily (8), Braden (7), Sarah (3), Silas (2) (1), James (2), Ronald (2), Kumail (2), Kylie (1), Derrick (1), Baja (1), Silas (1); 11 speakers total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>9/29/15</td>
<td>11m 53s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Boys Girls Target Aisles</td>
<td>Following Emily’s story about the man at her summer camp in regards to gendered toys, I introduced an article about Target getting rid of gendered aisles in the toy and bedding departments.</td>
<td>Braden (4), Ronald (3), Silas (3), Emily (2), Kumail (2), Chris (1), Kylie (1), Taylor (1), James (1), Sophie (1): 10 total speakers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 4. Gender Girls in Military

At Morning Meeting, I’ve asked the kids why they think we say the Pledge each day at school. Many ideas emerge about a connection between the Pledge and our military. A number of the kids use the term “Army men” throughout the discussion and I work to reframe this, somewhat, by interjecting the word women into the discussion or to shorten it to “the Army” rather than attaching a gender tag at the end.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Girls in Military</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/21/15</td>
<td>0m 43s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braden (1), Margo (1); 2 total speakers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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### 5. Race Race on TV Shows

At Morning Meeting, Kylie has posed a question about the lack of representation of Black characters on the TV shows she watches. Before this recording begins, the kids have turned to discuss this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Race on TV Shows</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/26/15</td>
<td>4m 47s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braden (2), Chase (2), Silas (2), Kylie (1), Emily (1), Sarah (1), Silas (1), Ronald (1), Kumail (1); 9 total speakers</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>12/9/15</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black Motorcycle Riders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Boy Girl Partners and Lunch</td>
<td>At Morning Meeting someone asks why people laugh when boys and girls are paired together. This leads to a discussion about sitting with friends at lunch and how we wind up with a table of girls and a table of boys.</td>
<td>Kumail (4), Derrick (4), Emily (3), Sarah (3), Kylie (1), James (1), Ronald (1), Silas (1): 8 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Tomboys</td>
<td>Baja asks, in the culture journal, why some people say they are tomboys and some don’t. Mr. Smith is taking the lead on Morning Meeting, for</td>
<td>Kumail (11), Kylie (4), Emily (4), Sarah (4), Ronald (3), Taylor (2), Silas (2), Braden (1), James (1), Sophie (1), Joseph (1), Baja (1), Silas (1): 13 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>2/2/16 11m 35s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Normal Day 3 Princess Boy</td>
<td>On the third day of our normalcy study, I am reading <em>My Princess Boy</em> to the kids to begin discussing the ways in which we normalize certain practices as gender appropriate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>2/3/16 12m 35s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Girl’s Education and Leadership</td>
<td>In Morning Meeting, I referenced back to news articles from the kids speaking to the lack of education opportunities for girls in Ghana and the fact another country had just elected their first female president to ask the kids why they think cultures so often undervalue females.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A</td>
<td>2/5/16 4m 36s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Gender Competition</td>
<td>James asks a question at Morning Meeting about the fact people laugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Details</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 B</td>
<td>2/5/16 12m 30s</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black Bus Drivers</td>
<td>Emily notices all the bus drivers at bus evacuation are Black and asks the class about this the following day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>2/15/16 40m 0s (only recorded key discussion)</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>The Bus Ride</td>
<td>We read <em>The Bus Ride</em> as part of our study of normalcy. We are: naming what is made normal/abnormal, identifying who has the power to do this, determining the tension caused by this, and naming a character or action that works to disrupt this. The kids are jotting down their thinking on post-it notes along the way to hold their thinking and eventually build discussions around the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>2/22/16 about Mall Shooting</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td>James has shared a story</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

when girls beat boys but not when boys beat girls.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12m</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with the class about a shooting at the Columbiana Mall over the weekend. I was out of the classroom for the beginning of this discussion but began recording upon entering. At the point at which I begin transcribing, the kids have been talking about hoodies.</td>
<td>Braden (1), Kylie (1), Derrick (1), Emily (1), Sarah (1), Ronald (1), Silas (1); 11 total speakers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>2/29/16</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black as Evil</td>
<td>Seven days after a discussion about the shooting at the Columbiana Mall, Jayda references a statement Kumail had made, that black is an evil color, to question why people say this.</td>
<td>James (3), Chase (3), Jayda (2) (1), Ronald (2), Emily (2), Sarah (2), Braden (1), Derrick (1), Joseph (1), Baja (1), Silas (1); 11 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>3/15/16</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>School Pictures</td>
<td>Having overheard some of the kids complaining in line for school pictures about the gendered props being used, I bring this issue to the class at Morning.</td>
<td>Derrick (2), Emily (1), Braden (1), Kylie (1), James (1), Silas (1), Kumail (1); 7 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting to discuss.</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Speakers</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>15. 4/6/16 14m 35s</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black in News</td>
<td>Kylie shares a culture journal in which she asks why Black people are seen as being bad and on the news for crime when there are White people who do this too.</td>
<td>Kumail (11), Sarah (9), Emily (6), Braden (2), Kylie (2)(1), James (2), Ronald (1)</td>
<td>7 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. 4/11/16 18m 11s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Women’s Soccer</td>
<td>I share a news article with the kids about the US National Women’s Soccer team suing for equal pay.</td>
<td>Emily (5), Kumail (3), Taylor (2), Ronald (2), Braden (1), Derrick (1), Sarah (1), Joseph (1), Jayda (1), Margo (1);</td>
<td>10 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. 4/22/16 14m 25s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Men on Money</td>
<td>Jayda has a news share about Harriet Tubman being added to the $20 bill. I preface her story by questioning the kids in regards to how our country decides who is placed on our coins and dollar bills.</td>
<td>Emily (3), Margo (2), Braden (1), Chris (1), Chase (1), James (1), Sarah (1), Jayda (1), Baja (1);</td>
<td>9 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. 4/25/16</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Jayda Brings Up Gender before Read Aloud</td>
<td>Jayda and Sarah, still thinking about the performance goals set for them at PE for the Pacer Challenge, bring up</td>
<td>Sarah (10), Emily (6), James (6), Silas (5), Braden (4), Ronald (4), Taylor (3), Jayda (3), Derrick (2), Chris (1), Kylie (1), Chase (1);</td>
<td>12 total speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Race/Gender</td>
<td>President Race Gender</td>
<td>To Race:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>5/13/16</td>
<td>18m 22s</td>
<td>Race/Gender</td>
<td>Kylie asks, in Morning Meeting, why there have only been male presidents and only one has been non-White.</td>
<td>Jayda (3), Ronald (3), Emily (2), James (2), Sarah (2), Kylie (1), Chase (1), Silas (1), Silas (1), Margo (1), Braden (1), Kumail (1), Derrick (1); <strong>13 total speakers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>10/26/15</td>
<td>8m 29s</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>SVHS Student and SRO</td>
<td>With it being a national news story and just a few miles from our school, I discuss what happened at Spring Valley High School between a School Resource Officer and a student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>No Date</td>
<td>4m 38s</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Ghana Girl Schools</td>
<td>Ayrica shares a news article about a woman in Ghana who received an opportunity for an education, got a job, and made good money. She</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
then used part of that money to provide opportunities for other girls in her country.

<p>| 22. | No Date 3m 36s | Gender | Lines, Make-Up, and the Truth | Derrick asks, in a journal, why some girls like to wear lipstick when other do not. This turns, for a while, into a discussion of gender and lipstick. | Emily (3), Sarah (3), Braden (1), Derrick (1), Jayda (1), Silas (1), Kumail (2); 7 total speakers |
| 23. | 9/18/16 9m 30s | Race/Ethnicity | Language Differences and Trump | In Morning Meeting, James asks why people say Donald Trump is a racist. | Sarah (6), Ronald (3), Kumail (3), Braden (1), James (2), Silas (1); 6 total speakers |
| 24. | 9/16/16 13m 13s | Context (Discourse/ Meaning Making) | Use of Pronoun They Instead of We | Taylor uses the Class Community journal to challenge everyone to take ownership of their own “guilt” when selecting pronouns within a discussion of classroom issues. | No student speech events falling within the parameters of this study |
| 25. | 9/26/16 6m 47s | Race | Charlotte Riots and Protests | I make space of the kids to share what they know, what they’ve heard, and what they wonder in regards to the | Braden (2), Derrick (2), James (1) (1), Kumail (2), Sarah (1), Silas (1); 6 total speakers |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>10/11/16</td>
<td>11m 48s</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Diversity in Books</td>
<td>We are calculating the number of new picture books logged into the University of Wisconsin’s children’s library by race/ethnicity and discussing the large differences between groups.</td>
<td>Kumail (4), Silas (3), Braden (1), James (1), (Jayda (1), Margo (1), Silas (1), Gabby 1), Ronald (1); <strong>9 total speakers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>10/3/16</td>
<td>5m 07s</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Diversity Book Counts</td>
<td>In Morning Meeting, I ask the kids what they notice or think about the results of the book count in our classroom library with regard to representation for various groups.</td>
<td>Emily (1) (1), Kumail (1), Emi (1); <strong>3 total speakers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>10/10/16</td>
<td>29m 18s</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Diversity in Books Walter Dean Meyers</td>
<td>I ask the kids what they think of the data showing there are so few children’s books being published about characters of Color or by authors of Color.</td>
<td>Kumail (7), Emily (6), Braden (4), Derrick (3), James (3), Sarah (3), Silas (3), Chase (1), Sophie (1), Jayda (1), Silas (1), Gabby (1), Ronald (1); <strong>13 total speakers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>10/11/16</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Only Read</td>
<td>Alarmed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kumail (5), Derrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Context (Discourse/Meaning Making)</td>
<td>Speech Content</td>
<td>Total Speakers</td>
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<tr>
<td>18m 53s</td>
<td>(first half of discussion)</td>
<td>Girl Books for a Few Years</td>
<td>many of the kids felt it wasn’t a big deal there are so few books being published about characters of Color, I suggest we read books about girls since they constitute the majority within our country, school, and classroom.</td>
<td>10 total speakers</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Race (second half of discussion)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>11/10/16 3m 52s</td>
<td>Context (Discourse/Meaning Making)</td>
<td>In morning meeting, James asks why the phrase “what are those” is used so often while he and Chase admit to the fact they do this to. I use this as a teaching point about asking people who have first-hand experience with something to respond to such questions before.</td>
<td>No student speech events falling within the parameters of this study</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **launching into the “I think...”** Statements from others who do not have the same experiences. | **31.** 11/10/16 6m 09s | Race | Only One Black President  
Emily asks why there has only been one Black president. There is nothing of interest in this discussion and nothing new emerges. This reflects a saturation of data on these discussions.  
Kumail (5), Derrick (3), Emily (3), Sarah (1), Ronald (1); 5 total speakers |
| **32.** 11/14/16 3m 50s | Gender | Jayda Speaks from a Stereotype  
Ayrica has asked why girls have so many more fashion options than boys. From this, a claim based on stereotypes about gender and fashion is made and then deconstructed.  
Jayda (3), Derrick (1), Emi (1), Sarah (1), Margo (1), Silas (1), Ayrica (1); 7 total speakers |
| **33.** 11/18/16 11m 36s | Gender/Context | How Did You Change Your Beliefs  
In the midst of a discussion Emily started  
No student speech events falling within the parameters of this study |
| 34. | 11/21/16 | Context | Ask the People Who Experience It | Ayrica’s question about why people race to the line brings about an opportunity to share the importance of asking those who actually do this rather than making guesses. My big idea from this discussion is to ask those who experience something to better understand something. | No student speech events falling within the parameters of this study |
| 35. | 12/14/16 | Context | Kids Share Discomfort with These | I am sharing my first round of formative | No student speech events falling within the parameters of |
## Discussions

Data with the kids to see what they think of the participation across the class and to speak to the fact boys tend to dominate discussions about gender and non-Black students tend to dominate discussions of race. They don’t feel this is an issue at all. Later, as captured in this transcription, I ask if anyone is ever uncomfortable during our discussions or gender and race.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>36.</th>
<th>12/15/16 10m 48s</th>
<th>Context (Discourse) Why Don’t People Share in MM</th>
<th>Building on a discussion we had the day before in which some kids had shared they were uncomfortable with discussions of gender and/or race,</th>
<th><em>this study</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>258</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>