Critical Literacy and Self Efficacy Among Secondary Students Repeatedly Engaged in Literacy Intervention

Haley Rowles

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CRITICAL LITERACY AND SELF EFFICACY AMONG SECONDARY STUDENTS
REPEATEDLY ENGAGED IN LITERACY INTERVENTION

by

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all of the students I served during my ten years in the classroom. I hope it was evident that your joy and growth were of the utmost importance to me then. I am so grateful to have had the chance to learn and grow with you, and I deeply appreciate your patience and grace as I fumbled my way through new strategies and approaches. Without the knowledge, experience, and passion I gained from having taught you, I certainly would not be here today.
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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigated how critical literacy questioning impacted the self-efficacy of secondary students who had been repeatedly engaged in literacy intervention because of failed standardized assessments as well as the teacher experience in using critical literacy questioning. The study was conducted over four and a half weeks in a secondary literacy intervention classroom. Data was collected using surveys, observations, and interviews, which were analyzed through thematic coding. The results of the study indicate that critical literacy questioning, on average, increased student self-efficacy under certain conditions. It also illustrated that the use of critical literacy questioning, which sometimes leads to controversial student conversations, was complex, increasing both the teacher’s anxiety and overall job satisfaction.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CLD……………………………………………………Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
ELAR………………………………………………………………..English Language Arts and Reading
EOC…………………………………………………………………End of Course Exam
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During my career in English education, I have worked in a variety of educational settings. Among the most challenging and rewarding are those years spent working in what many districts affectionately refer to as “high needs” campuses. On these campuses, it is not uncommon for there to be a high concentration of students who do not meet the state’s standards for passing on their required standardized assessments, and, as a result, to be identified as struggling and in need of academic intervention.

Presently, I work at a growing, diversifying suburb outside of a large city in Texas. As in many cities and states across the nation, standardized assessment scores are at the center of many of our conversations because of their impact on both the district’s rating and the students’ educational experience. Students test annually in grades three and up, with the stakes becoming increasingly high as students enter high school where students are required to pass five standardized assessments in order to graduate. To align students’ opportunities to their perceived needs, district personnel use students’ standardized assessment to make a variety of decisions for each student, including their course schedules, eligibility for compensatory or accelerated educational opportunities, and more.

Also like many other campuses and districts across the nation, our district’s standardized achievement scores indicate that students from low-income and racially diverse households fail
to perform satisfactorily on their standardized assessments more frequently than our White students or our students who do not come from economically disadvantaged homes (Texas Education Agency, 2020). District data, for example, indicates that while only about 26% of White students earned a score of “Does Not Meet” on their English I standardized assessment, more than 38% of economically disadvantaged students, 36% of Black or African American students, and 31% of Hispanic or Latinx students earned a score of “Does Not Meet” on the same exam (About Round Rock ISD, n.d.). Moreover, our district’s student services system, eSchool, indicates that African American and Hispanic students account for more than 68% of the students currently enrolled in one of our district’s secondary reading intervention or practical writing courses. Together, our district data indicates that our students from economically marginalized and racially diverse homes fail their standardized assessments more frequently and spend more of their academic time engaged in intervention rather than grade-level content.

On a national level, there is also a clear trend in assessment data. The most recent NAEP Report Card for Reading indicates that Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native twelfth grade students have consistently scored lower than White students since the test’s first administration in 1992 (NAEP Report Card: Reading, 1992–2002). Specifically, according to the 2019 NAEP Report Card for Reading, White students earned an average score of 295, while the non-White student groups mentioned above earned scores between 263 (Black students) and 278 (Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander), illustrating that if failed standardized assessments are used to identify students for literacy intervention, these student populations will be far more likely to enrolled in intervention courses.
This issue becomes especially problematic because of its implications on students’ educational experience. Though intervention is intended to be a preventative support that helps students increase their achievement, response to intervention programs have historically done very little to impact outcomes for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students (Hartlep & Ellis, 2012). Moreover, enrollment in intervention courses limits the other courses that the students involved can enroll in. Because intervention takes up time in a student’s educational day, it reduces the amount of time students participating in intervention have available to enroll in other courses, including content area electives and coursework leading to certifications. Considered together, this information creates a clear issue in education: students who are enrolled in intervention courses as a result of failing a standardized assessment are disproportionately economically marginalized and non-White students who are doubly impacted by poor intervention outcomes and the loss of educational opportunities.

**Theoretical Framework**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) remind us that the theoretical framework, especially for a study employing qualitative data, is impactful because of how it affects the researcher’s choices throughout the study, including the creation and framing of the research questions, the design of the methodology, and the focus of and themes identified in the analysis of the data. For this study, these elements were situated primarily in social reconstruction. Social reconstruction suggests that society is threatened by a range of societal ills like poverty and sexism, and education should support learners in investigating and correcting these ills (Schiro, 2013). Additionally, it calls for learner involvement in “intense discussion” around engaging and affirming questions that
demonstrate value for students’ beliefs and experiences, which, when acknowledged, may help students better understand these societal ills and find ways to improve them (Schiro, 2013, p. 158).

The study is also situated within critical literacy. Considered more of a “family of approaches” than a single educational methodology, critical literacy practices center around a deep “commitment to the use of literacy for purposes of equity and social justice” (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 16). Like social reconstruction, critical literacy emphasizes the value of empowering learners through upending traditional or socially accepted roles, relationships, and beliefs and engaging learners in experiences that will, ultimately, help them become active members of society who participate in the development of more equitable societal outcomes (Schiro, 2013).

Finally, in alignment with social reconstruction and critical literacy’s focus on honoring the learner’s perspective, the study is also framed within culturally sustaining pedagogy. An evolution of Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy calls for more than consideration of learners’ culture, but rather, for intentional efforts to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Paris et al., 2017, p. 1). By creating opportunities for students to question implicit messaging in both texts and the world, educators themselves imply that they value students’ experiences, viewpoints, and opinions, which may not otherwise occur in the curriculum students experience in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
Purpose, Research Questions, and Rationale

On one of seven high school campuses in the district I serve, 200-300 students fail their English I and II end-of-course exams every spring. By state law, all of those students must receive accelerated instruction to support them in passing a similar test at their next opportunity, which is typically during the subsequent semester (TX HB 4545, 2021; TX HB 1416, 2023). Given that most of our upper-level English courses focus on other standardized tests, such as the ACT and SAT, students needing accelerated instruction are typically enrolled in an intervention course or pulled out of their advisory period or their scheduled English course to receive this intervention.

Ethically, educators grapple with this issue, which is further complicated when one considers the content often taught in literacy intervention courses once students are identified and enrolled. Though the only repeatedly identified intervention for increasing standardized assessment scores is access to higher level content (Green & Johnson, 2010), this is not the approach many teachers in our district have historically been encouraged to take when intervening with students who fail their standardizes assessments. Instead, historical guidance has been to use learning materials aligned to the standardized assessments students failed, which tend to be full of culturally biased texts that are irrelevant to the interests and experiences of the learners enrolled in the courses (Couch et al., 2021). Recent legislation in Texas also now requires that either 15 or 30 hours of intervention (depending on students’ historical scores or how far they are from passing) be provided to students who fail a state standardized exam and that the intervention cover academic content from the previous grade level rather than the current grade level (TX HB 4545, 2021; TX HB 1416, 2023).
This cycle continues every semester until the last semester of the student’s senior year. In this final semester of high school, the initial list of 200-300 non-passing students is whittled down to about 20-30 who still need to pass either their English I exam, English II exam, or both. Students who have still not passed their assessments at this point then face the daunting task of completing a lengthy graduation project which will determine, only a few short weeks before the end of the year, whether the student will be eligible for graduation.

This process can be exhausting and discouraging for students. Additionally, it threatens to damage students’ senses of self-efficacy in relation to their literacy abilities because self-efficacy in literacy is tied heavily to one’s ability to use their own literacy skills to *find success* (Walker, 2003). Further, repeated success leads to increased learner confidence, motivation, and perseverance, which ultimately yield even higher increases in achievement for those students (Walker, 2003). Thus, students’ repeated failures become not only grueling barriers on the path to graduation but also lost opportunities to find the success they need to create and maintain positive self-efficacy in relation to their literacy abilities.

**Research Questions**

This process of using standardized assessments to determine intervention placement and the subsequent use of curriculum aligned to those assessments keeps students who fail trapped in a recurring intervention cycle. In addition to keeping them from engaging in meaningful, grade-level learning experiences, research suggests that continued assessment failures and required intervention give students negative beliefs about their literacy abilities (Walker, 2003). Hence, the problem of practice for this study
is the negative impact of repeated intervention on secondary students’ academic self-efficacy. The purpose of the study is to explore whether critical literacy questioning, a curricular intervention, will impact students’ academic self-efficacy (simplified to self-efficacy throughout the remainder of the dissertation) after these repeated failures and interventions. Specifically, the study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of critical questioning on the academic self-efficacy of students who are repeatedly identified for literacy intervention because of failed standardized assessments?

2. How is the use of critical literacy questioning experienced by the teacher of a secondary intervention course serving these students?

Rationale

These questions are appropriate for the study because of their focus on student self-efficacy, the central issue in the study’s problem of practice, and because of the qualities of the intervention they investigate. Critical literacy questioning aligns with the study’s framing within critical literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy, which empower those who have been marginalized to question dominant perspectives and validate their own experiences and funds of knowledge (Paris & Alim, 2017). After validating students’ knowledge and experiences, the intervention empowers students to envision alternative perspectives. Thus, the study aims to explore whether critical literacy questioning can have a positive impact on students’ self-efficacy. Moreover, the success or failure of a curricular or pedagogical approach relies heavily on the classroom teacher utilizing it. Thus, question two focuses on the teacher’s experience when delivering the
intervention to students. Together, the research questions support a more holistic exploration of the effect of critical literacy questioning in secondary intervention classrooms.

**Positionality**

I am a White, cisgender, female who is currently a member of the middle class but grew up among the working poor in a middle-class suburb in the Midwest. My immediate family, headed by and comprised of mostly females, is also made up of predominately White, cisgender members who fall somewhere in the range of “middle class.” Early in my educational experience, a knack for reading, writing, and speaking emerged, and I tended to do well in school overall which was a confidence boost to me, a lower-income student surrounded by wealthier peers. I was, however, a slow reader. My decoding, prosody, and comprehension were strong, but reading speed remained slow through college when a Reading Workshop class pushed me to read for pleasure, rather than to be a dutiful and successful student, resulting in massive gains in my ability to consume texts, even challenging texts, much more quickly.

My positionality influences my research because in most senses, I am an “outsider.” My whiteness, history as a “strong” English student, and current socioeconomic status in the middle class sets me outside the parameters of many of the students I am studying. However, because of my history as a low-income student, and potentially even my history as a slow reader, I do have some connections that may impact my work. This will be important in several ways. It will be critical to establish relationships and trust with the participants in the study. There may be mistrust around
my intentions, especially as attention toward social justice issues has increased among White people over the last three years.

Formerly, I was a district employee who historically supported English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) teachers across the district. However, I did not work on the campus where the study occurred. Thus, my positionality in relation to the specific context of the study was insider-outsider researcher. The students with whom the research was conducted were not students in a course I had been serving; however, their success and the success of their teacher were personally and professionally important to me. Additionally, though I was not present for every lesson of the intervention unit, I did spend time collaborating with their teacher on the planning and implementation of the unit and was present during most of their classes. Moreover, I observed students’ conversations, work time, and responses throughout the process. I talked personally with students during interviews, analyzed their verbal responses for trends, and collaborated with their teacher to seek their opinions on the outcomes and themes we inferred about their experience during the study. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) explain, I was not separate from the participants involved. Instead, their stories and voices were “immediate and real” to me and their voices were “not be lost in a pool of numbers” (p. 61).

**Overall Research Design**

The study qualifies as action research because of the implementation of an intervention, critical literacy questioning, in a local context with the aim of examining its effect on student self-efficacy and the teacher’s experience (Efron & Ravid, 2013). On completion, I will be able to share the understandings gleaned with my professional community, leading to improved, more equitable, practice.
The study utilized a mixed methods design. Mixed methods designs prove valuable when only one kind of data, quantitative or qualitative, cannot capture all of the information needed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data was valuable and appropriate for research question one because it examined the effects of an intervention on a deeply personal topic, students’ self-efficacy. In order to gain a clear picture of if and how the intervention was affecting students’ self-efficacy, there was a need to get both clear and more objective measures of students’ self-efficacy before and after the intervention as well as more detailed, subjective data about students’ experience throughout the intervention. Moreover, the use of quantitative questions on the surveys allowed for some generalizations about the group’s self-efficacy to be made before and after the intervention, while the qualitative data provided descriptive information that could be used to glean useful and insightful trends or pick up on nuances in participants’ experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

When examining the teacher’s experience in alignment with research question two, the focus was solely on what it was like for the teacher to teach using the intervention. When studying a person’s experience, detailed and descriptive data, often collected best through open-ended means, is needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because of this, qualitative data, on its own, was the most appropriate data to collect.

The setting for the study was an intervention course called “practical writing” at a high school in my district. Students in the course were in grades ten through twelve, many of whom had repeated failures on their end of course exams, which is one of the criteria typically used to identify students for enrollment in the course. On the other hand, some students are enrolled in the course because of a need for an elective credit and do
not have a history of struggling in English courses or on their English end of course exams. To eliminate any feelings of exclusion, all twenty students in the course were invited to participate in the study. Of those twenty students, six students who had been repeatedly enrolled in intervention because of failed standardized assessments consented to participation. The teacher of record for the course, Mrs. Green, was also a participant. She was a returning, veteran teacher in our district who taught practical writing for several years.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Data Collection Tools**

As mentioned, the data collection tools for this study were varied, including a combination of surveys, interviews, and observations. Though a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources were used, all data collection methods included open-ended opportunities for participants to respond. This created the opportunity for participant voice, allowing them to express thoughts and information they deemed relevant and important about their experiences while also providing the descriptive data needed to glean thoughtful insights about their experiences.

First, pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys were administered before and after the unit created for the study. These surveys contained three Likert-scale questions that asked students to rate their levels of self-efficacy on a scale of one to five. These quantitative questions helped me see, more objectively, how the intervention had impacted students’ self-efficacy. Additionally, it allowed me to generalize the intervention’s impact on the participants in the group as a whole (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
The surveys also included five open-ended questions which asked about students’ experiences in previous literacy courses, their senses of self-efficacy when engaging in literacy-based tasks, and their senses of self-efficacy when taking literacy-based standardized assessments. These questions helped with the collection of more specific details and rich descriptions of students’ experiences and senses of self-efficacy. Survey questions are included in Appendix A.

To better understand participants’ stories and their impact on how they enter literacy classrooms, there was value in following up with students via live conversations in the form of semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their thoughts and allowed me to observe students’ tone and body language to understand their experience more deeply. A list of pre-established questions was created to learn more about students’ confidence levels before and after the intervention and their thoughts regarding their final critical literacy project. To provide a more responsive and personalized experience for the student, the semi-structured nature allowed me the flexibility to adjust questions and respond to student comments. As students responded, I transcribed their answers, sharing what I wrote with the student to ensure accuracy and clarity. At the end of each interview, I summarized my notes once more for students to see if there are any erroneous details or any information they would like to see added. This structure was consistent with the intention and definition of semi-structured interviews as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and humanizes the participants who, as young people being asked to enter into vulnerable conversations with a less-familiar adult, may benefit from these additional considerations.

Semi-structured interviews were also used when interviewing Mrs. Green in
regard to research question two, which focuses on the teacher’s experience in the classroom. Given that the focus of this question centers on personal experience, an open-ended, responsive data collection method like a semi-structured interview was appropriate. As we met to plan each week, I asked Mrs. Green about her experience and her perception regarding if and how the intervention was impacting students. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed me to ask follow-up questions for clarity or to elicit more detail as needed.

The final data tool was field notes taken during intervention observations which offered me insight into both the teacher’s and students’ experiences, relative to both research questions one and two. Because the work and conversations occurred in authentic contexts and revealed details, thoughts, or behaviors not otherwise captured in the surveys or interviews, this additional data collection method was critical for triangulating the data and providing a clearer and more thorough understanding of how the intervention was or was not affecting students and the teacher.

**Data Analysis**

As the data was collected from surveys, interviews, and observations, I engaged in ongoing coding to note emerging themes and ideas inductively. Similar ideas and statements collected from a variety of data sources were examined and grouped into categories which were continuously reviewed and revised as the study progressed. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest, this process was done as the data was collected so that subsequent interactions and data collections could be intentional and useful to the study. Additionally, coding data as it was collected provided built-in opportunities to break from the work, which was important for ongoing assessment of my own biases as a
researcher to ensure that what was being recorded was truly consistent with the data.

**Participant Validation**

The voices of the students in the course were of the utmost importance in this study. Thus, Mrs. Green and I shared emerging themes identified through the data analysis throughout the implementation of the interventions and facilitated conversations with participants. This inclusion of student voice in the research process provided an opportunity, as Caraballo and Lyiscott (2020) describe, to limit the distinctions in power between the youth participants and the adult researcher. Simultaneously, it built students’ understanding of the impact of the interventions, making the research mutually beneficial, and honoring their stories and viewpoints. After the first class, Mrs. Green and I took time at the beginning of several lessons to check in with students and get their feedback. Questions such as *While listening to your discussions, I am noticing that… What are your thoughts on that?* or *I have noticed that… Does that sound accurate to you?* created the opportunity for students to become an active part of the data analysis.

**Significance of the Study**

Each spring, Texas school districts administer required standardized achievement tests to their students. In the spring of 2022, over 1700 secondary students in our district (grades eight through twelve) did not pass the achievement test associated with English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR), requiring the district to provide them with 15 -30 hours of intervention. District data also indicates that when these students tested again in the spring of 2023, only around 39% of them passed their ELAR test the next year, meaning the majority of those students would again need to be provided with literacy intervention. Thus, 61% of students will be repeatedly enrolled in intervention courses
rather than an elective of choice or pulled from their advisory periods to engage in another year of literacy intervention.

Though the findings of the study are intended to inform local practices, they may also provide insights for other districts given that similar trends are occurring across the country, especially for economically and racially diverse students. Across the US, for example, African American or Black, Hispanic or Latinx, and other non-White students have earned scores lower than White students since the first NAEP Reading test in 1992 (NAEP Report Card, n.d.). Thus, although there is an identified need to better support students of color, the situation has not been remedied in nearly 30 years (NAEP Report Card: Reading, 1992-2019).

The major limitations of the study are its small sample size and its inclusion of only one campus. To ensure there was enough time and opportunity to collaborate well with the teacher of record and so that the unit was planned and implemented in a way that met both the needs of the classroom and the intentions of the study, one classroom on one high school campus was selected. This also provided the opportunity to collect a wide range of descriptive data from a small number of students for more rich information on each participant’s experience. Though useful in these ways, the findings will only represent the impact of the intervention on one small group of students. The findings may not be generalizable to the district as a whole because like in any district, each of our seven high school campuses and each classroom within that campus has its own unique culture.

Organization of the Dissertation
After the introduction to the study, the literature review in Chapter 2 will explore the relationship between standardized testing, bias, literacy achievement, and student self-efficacy as it more deeply describes the problem of practice central to the study. Historical information and literature about the efficacy and potential of critical literacy questioning is also described. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology used for the study, including the context and setting, selected participants, detailed descriptions of the interventions, and the data collection and analysis methods. Chapter 4 will outline a summary of findings from the study, followed by Chapter 5, which will summarize the study and describe its implications.

**Definition of Terms**

A. **Critical Literacy:** Critical literacy refers to a political approach to teaching and learning in which literacy is used to focus on issues of social justice for marginalized communities. The two major components of critical literacy include the redistribution of power in the classroom through increased student dialogue and “shifts in the ideological content and uses of literacy” (Luke, 2012).

B. **Critical Literacy Questioning:** For the purposes of this study, critical literacy questioning refers to the practice of asking students to create or respond to thought-provoking questions in which they analyze perspectives, beliefs, or issues presented in texts or in the world. For example, “What biases might the author of this text have? Whose interests might the messages in the text serve?”

C. **Equitable:** “The term ‘equity’ refers to fairness and justice and is distinguished from equality: Whereas equality means providing the same to all, equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge
and make adjustments to imbalances. The process is ongoing, requiring us to identify and overcome intentional and unintentional barriers arising from bias or systemic structures” (Equity, n.d.).

D. **Self-Efficacy:** Self efficacy refers to a person’s belief in his or her ability to successfully achieve specific performance goals and, likewise, reflects a belief in a person’s ability to manage his/her “motivation, behavior, and social environment” (American Psychological Association, 2009). Moreover, “these cognitive self-evaluations influence all manner of human experience, including the goals for which people strive, the amount of energy expended toward goal achievement, and likelihood of attaining particular levels of behavioral performance.”

E. **Literacy:** According to the International Literacy Association, literacy is, “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context” (International Literacy Association, n.d).

F. **Stereotype Threat:** A type of contingency threat in which a person has awareness of a social belief about some facet of his/her identity (race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) and, when engaging in an activity during which there is an opportunity to confirm an existing stereotype, the individual’s mental resources are affected by this awareness (Steele, 2011).
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malcolm X once stated, “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today” (X. M, 1964, para. 36). As an educator in the 21st Century, I might revise this statement to express that “education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those the educational system has prepared today.” As it is currently established, the educational system does not accurately and ethically identify students needing support or intervention in literacy nor does it provide students with learning experiences that are effective, engaging, and equitable once they are identified. This issue results in the problem of practice for this study: repeated enrollment in literacy intervention as a result of failed standardized assessments negatively impacts students’ self-efficacy.

The purpose of this action research study is to investigate whether critical literacy questioning can positively impact the self-efficacy of students who have been repeatedly enrolled in intervention because of failed ELAR standardized assessments. Thus, the study seeks to answer the questions:

1. What are the impacts of critical questioning on the self-efficacy students who are repeatedly identified for literacy intervention because of failed standardized assessments?
2. How is the use of critical literacy questioning experienced by the teacher of a secondary intervention course serving these students?

The review of literature in this chapter was conducted through a variety of methods. Professional publications, predominantly books pulled from my work as an educator and instructional coach in the K-12 setting, ignited my interest in the topic and were the pieces with which I started as I set out to investigate the selected interventions. From there, additional research was conducted using articles located mostly through ERIC, EBSCO, and JSTOR. Most articles come from professional journals or other professional publications and are peer reviewed. Though fewer in number, additional sources were found on university and professional organization websites (The University of South Carolina, Brown University, Columbia University, NCTE) or on the websites for government agencies (NAEP, NCES) through the use of the search engine Google.

Chapter 2 will begin with background on the problem of practice, outlining a history of racism in education and issues with equity in current systems and practices. Here, specific issues within ELAR assessment practices will be described. A description of the study’s theoretical framework will be included next, followed by details about the intervention selected, critical literacy questioning in accordance with the combination of theories in the framework. Critiques of the interventions are described as are the potential positive impacts they provide within the identified problem of practice. The chapter concludes with a summary of its major points.
Background on the Problem of Practice

At the root of the study’s problem of practice are educational practices that, though seemingly logical on the surface, result in negative outcomes and experiences for students, especially economically and racially diverse students. Specifically, it attempts to examine a curricular method that may counteract the negative impact of repeated standardized assessment failures and enrollment in intervention on student self-efficacy. In order to better understand these issues, one must first acknowledge and understand the oppressive history of American schools and understand how practices have evolved to become more implicitly, rather than explicitly, inequitable for students. Roses (2015) and Wise (2011) remind us that though current legislation and practice does not explicitly express this inequity, the legacy of this oppressive history is still very present in systems that serve students and the realities they experience on school campuses every day.

This background section will begin by outlining historically racist legislation and practice in education before transitioning into current practices that are inequitable, namely the inherently problematic nature of utilizing standardized assessment as a means of measuring student understanding. From there, I will provide a description of what the process of using standardized assessment as a measure implies: a lack of value for the literacies of underrepresented student populations, which also contributes to the reduced self-efficacy many of our students engaged in repeated intervention experience.

A History of Racism in Education

Though this study focuses on how the current educational system is not suited to meet the needs of today’s diverse learners, this issue is not new. In the early 1900s,
curriculum theorist Franklin Bobbitt (1918) noted that “a program never designed for present day has been inherited” (as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 9). Though a different time period, the sentiment is the same as a more contemporary generation of educators have, again, inherited a system with historical ties to racist and otherwise non-inclusive practices, making it unable to serve all students well.

Though some may claim that American public education provides an even playing ground for students, historical legislation has proven this to be untrue. Policies to segregate and diminish the value of and opportunities available to non-White students have existed for decades. Specifically, Mexican American, African American, Native American, and other non-White students, have often found it challenging or impossible to enroll in public schools with their White peers. A California education law enacted in 1863, for example, lumped together a variety of non-White racial groups and barred those students from attending school with their White peers (Wollenberg, 1976). Similarly, although Mexican American and Native American students tended to be more accepted by White Americans, “both groups were almost entirely relegated to segregated schools. [For example] American Indian pupils attended on-reservation schools or off-reservation boarding schools that were exclusively Indian in attendance” (p. 199). Mexican American citizens faced similar discrimination as only a very small number of “elite, light-skinned” Mexican American students were permitted to attend school with their White peers, especially as the country saw significant growth in this population during the early 1900s (p. 199).

Though the examples above may seem to have occurred in the distant past and some might feel tempted to claim that racism in education is, then, an issue of the past,
the impacts of these choices still exist in today’s public education policy and practice. Ladson-Billings (2018), points out that twelve of the South’s largest cities are presently “hyper-segregated” (p. 96) and, likewise, much of the terminology we use to describe low-income, poorly performing schools still conjures up images of buildings filled mostly with minority students in the minds of Americans, indicating that the issues we sought to repair nearly 60 years ago still exist, even today.

**Current Issue of Equity: Biased Standardized Assessments**

Though today’s legislation is arguably less explicitly racist and inequitable, our policies and practices still have problematic implications for non-White and economically disadvantaged students. The country’s increasing focus on standardized testing as a critical measure of student understanding is an example. Standardized assessments are often supported because they appear to objectively measure student achievement. Thus, they are used by states across the country to determine a student’s eligibility to be promoted to the next grade, to bypass academic intervention, and to graduate. Scholars, though, point out specific flaws within the use of standardized assessment to make these decisions. Knoester and Au (2017), for example, point out that the SAT, to which many state standardized assessments have clear parallels, is created using questions that high performing students tended to do well on in testing phases. With White, wealthy students historically tending to be the largest student group doing well on the SAT, the questions on the test, then, are aligned to the funds of knowledge belonging to those White, wealthy students.
The reconsideration of standardized testing is also recommended by social psychologists who study the concepts of identity contingencies and stereotype threat. Steele (2011) describes the ways in which society stereotypes humans and the impact these stereotypes have on human performance. “Socioeconomic disadvantage, segregating social practices, and restrictive cultural orientations have all dampened the educational opportunities of some groups more than others, historically, and in ongoing ways” (Steele, 2011, p. 47). Moreover, studies conducted by Steele and colleagues indicate that people belonging to racial and gender groups stereotyped as low performing in a particular area, for example women in math, show consistent and astoundingly negative impacts on stereotyped people’s performance on standardized assessments (Steele, 2011). Thus, simply the suggestion of a stereotypical belief increases the anxiety of the stereotyped person, even if the person does not necessarily sense the anxiety in the moment, and “induces rumination, which takes up mental capacity, distracting [people] from the task at hand” (Steel, 2010, p. 121). Further, stereotype and identity threats--these contingencies of identity--increase vigilance toward possible threat and bad consequences in the social environment, which diverts attention and mental capacity away from the task at hand, which worsens performance and general functioning, all of which further exacerbates anxiety, which further intensifies the vigilance for the thread and the diversion of attention. A full-scale vicious cycle ensues, with great cost to performance and general functioning. (Steel, 2007, pp. 125-126)

With students from underrepresented communities historically scoring lower on standardized assessments (NAEP Report Card: Reading, 1992–2002), creating a
stereotype, it is no wonder that the same cycle of failing assessments, and thus being identified for intervention, continues year after year.

Consequently, there are foundational issues with the use of standardized testing to determine student achievement. Though they are touted as objective, their White-centered content and impact on students who have historically not performed well on them demonstrate that they are unlikely to accurately show the knowledge and understanding of all students.

**Effect on Self-Efficacy**

Most notably studied by Bandura (1977), self-efficacy relates to a person’s belief in their ability to achieve a certain outcome. The value in having self-efficacy is wide-reaching, affecting a student’s motivation to engage in tasks, their persistence when tasks become challenging, their desire to seek and use multiple strategies to find success in a task, and more. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) explain that students who have positive self-efficacy are more likely than those with low self-efficacy to “work hard, persist, and seek help so they can complete a task” (as cited in Walker 2003). These skills are critical, pushing students to find success, or have what scholars in the field call “mastery experiences.” Mastery experiences are successful attempts at completing a challenging task, one of the most effective ways of building a learner’s self-efficacy (Selden & Gutierrez, 2022). The relationship, then, is reciprocal: success builds self-efficacy while self-efficacy helps a person achieve success.
One of the most harmful outcomes of standardized assessments’ use for identifying student success or failure is their negative impact on students’ self-efficacy. For non-White and economically marginalized students, the negative effects of standardized tests can be doubly harmful. With fewer instances of success on average than some of their peers, they have less evidence of success to bolster their confidence when testing. For learners of all backgrounds, engaging in tasks for which they feel especially low self-efficacy can result in displays of disengagement through avoidance or lack of persistence as a means of protecting one’s self-image (Walker, 2003). The additional mental and emotional load that students carry when they test intensifies the issue and increases the likelihood that students who failed will, again, not be successful on required standardized assessments (Steele, 2011).

Though the previous discussion makes the building of student self-efficacy seem nearly impossible, educational psychology scholars like Ortlieb and Schatz (2020) exclaim otherwise. Self-efficacy, they assert, can be built. ”Self-efficacy is one aspect of identity that can be influenced by classroom and school communities (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). If continuously lifted through empowerment, there isn’t much that students cannot achieve” (Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020, p. 736). Specifically, self-efficacy can be built by employing pedagogies and practices which focus on students’ assets rather than their perceived deficits (Flint & Jaggers, 2020), the opposite of what tends to be emphasized by standardized assessments for economically marginalized students and students of color.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical underpinning of this project is social reconstruction. This ideology suggests that “our society is threatened by many problems. These problems include, among others, racism, war, sexism, poverty, pollution, worker exploitation, climate change, corporate exploitation, crime, political corruption, population explosion, energy shortage, illiteracy, inadequate healthcare, and unemployment” (Schiro, 2013, p. 151).

Founded originally by Myles Horton in 1932, an example of an educational system operating under the social reconstruction ideology is the Highlander Folk School where the victims of exploitation following the Industrial Revolution were educated in such a way that they were empowered to analyze and critique the system in which they were living and working, envision a better system, and work to help that vision become a reality (Schiro, 2013). The ideology supports “intense discussion” around relevant and important questions like “Should wealth be distributed equally? . . . [and] What can be done about the unequal way wealth is distributed?” to achieve these aims (Schiro, 2013, p. 158).

Questions like these are also at the heart of critical literacy practices, which are utilized with the similar aim of empowering students and helping them learn ideas and skills that will, ultimately, help them move society forward (Luke and Woods, 2009). Built from Paolo Freire’s (1968) work, critical literacy is a more affirming approach that focuses on engaging students in literacy tasks that celebrate both their abilities and their lived experiences by providing opportunities for them to read texts and the experiences they have critically and to engage with thought-provoking questions about challenging and important social issues (Luke & Woods, 2009, Luke 2012).
Finally, the study is framed within culturally sustaining pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) set the groundwork for this work with her call for educators to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy, or pedagogy that acknowledges and speaks to students’ culture. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, though, takes this work farther. It urges educators to engage in practices that not only acknowledge students’ cultures, but actively supports and affirm students in maintaining their own cultures in the face of pressure to conform to the dominant culture (Paris, 2012). Moreover, it urges educators to help students, and all people, to hold all cultures in high regard and to actively resist practices that seek to make others forfeit their culture (Paris, 2012, Paris & Alim 2017).

**What is Critical Literacy?**

Advocates for critical literacy often find their passion for the work in the study of inequitable practices like those associated with the inequitable use of standardized assessment discussed earlier in this chapter. In short, the overarching goal of critical literacy includes, “working with learners to use language to name and ‘problematize’ the world—that is, to take every day ideological constructions of social relations . . . and to question them through reading, writing, and dialogue” (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 12). Further, critical literacy approaches insist on, “a dialogical approach to literacy based on principles of reciprocal and dialectical exchange. These would reconcile and ‘negate’ (following Hegel and Marx) binary relationships of oppressed and oppressor, teacher and learner, (p. 12). This approach creates strong and supportive partnerships between the teacher and learner, which educational scholars agree are absolutely critical for student success (Hammond, 2015; Steel 2011; Saphier, 2017).
The roots of critical literacy can be traced back to centuries-old ideas; however, Paolo Freire is credited with beginning the movement for critical literacy in education. As Luke and Woods (2009) explain:

Working with politically disenfranchised and economically marginalized rural communities in Brazil, he (Freire) observed that conventional schooling was based on a “banking model” of education, where learners were, quite literally, filled with skills and knowledges that served dominant class interests. Knowledge and skills were deposited into students, assuming that this would portably translate into convertible cultural capital. Traditional schooling, then, treated learners’ lives, cultures, and knowledge as tabula rasa, with only official school and teacher knowledge granted value and power (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 10).

It was from these observations that Freire began to rethink the structure and content of education to place more value on students’ funds of knowledge and experiences and to equip students with the tools to analyze text in terms of what purposes the text serves, whose voices and experiences are and are not expressed, whose interests are or are not being served, and more. The authors sum it up well when they state that “family” of critical literacy approaches “aim for nothing less than readers, writers, listeners, and viewers who have cogent, articulated, and relevant understandings of texts, their techniques, their investments, and their consequences, and who are able to use these understandings and capacities to act mindfully and justly to change their worlds” (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 16).
Resistance to Critical Literacy Practices

Though scholars support the use of critical literacy (McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004); Luke & Woods (2009); Luke (2012), some practitioners still express resistance. Concerns tend to arise around two issues in particular: unintentional revelations about one’s own biases and concerns around classroom management when engaging with the kinds of controversial topics that may arise through critical literacy questioning and conversation.

A fear for many educators is the risk of saying or doing something in the midst of critical literacy work that depict them as having racist thoughts or tendencies. Though formerly mentioned regarding frequently marginalized students and standardized testing, this, too, is an example of stereotype threat. Steele (2011) describes a related situation in which White passengers on Southwest Airlines, an airline that allows customers to select their own seat upon entry rather than assigning seats at the time of purchase, will often avoid selecting a seat that is directly next to a person of color (Steele, 2011). His explanation, though, is not what one might expect. White passengers’ hesitance to sit next to their Black travel-mates, he explains, is more of a subconscious desire to avoid situations that may result in implications that they are racist rather than a blatantly racist decision to sit only with other White travelers. He explains, “The identity threat explanation doesn’t require attributing prejudice to the White passengers. All one need assume… is that they have a worry…the risk of saying, doing or even thinking something that would make them feel racist or like they could be seen as racist in interacting with the black passenger” (Steele, 2011, p. 192).
Building on this notion, Ladson-Billings (2018) notes that members of White culture harbor fears of engaging in conversations about races. She explains,

Our tendency is to think about all things racial in dichotomous terms. Things are black or White, right or wrong, good or bad. When the subject is race and racism, we quickly default to the racists versus the nonracists. I am suggesting that because society so completely and consistently funds race it is difficult to see where one (racists) leaves off and the other (nonracists) begins. (Ladson-Billings, 2018, p. 95)

Here, she describes how the notions of good (nonracist) and bad (racist) are so ingrained in our culture, that people, in this study’s case teachers, fear, and therefore avoid, the opportunity to say something that may sound racist and, thus, create the perception that they are “bad” people in the eyes of their students, colleagues, administrators, community, and others.

Though seemingly detached from the topic of critical literacy at first glance, the work of Steele (2011) and Ladson-Billings (2018) provide keen insight into the minds of White educators, who make up the vast majority of educators across the country (Spiegelman, n.d.). Though many educators see the disparities in student achievement and want to take action in their classrooms to address those disparities, their own fears prevent them from doing so.

Educators also often express anxiety about issues regarding classroom management and classroom environment. Though there are means of supporting
educators and alleviating this anxiety, the issue has, historically, extended beyond teachers’ own locus of control. North (2009) explains that:

Because the legal framework undergirding U.S. society relies on the liberal belief in citizens as free persons who have equal opportunities to pursue their conceptions of the good life (Reich, 2002), equality frequently becomes synonymous with sameness. In other words, all individuals should experience the same treatment in public institutions, like schools, regard less of their membership in racial, religious, or other social groups. (North, 2009, p. 558)

This becomes problematic when entering into critical or other social-justice-focused conversations because although there is increased focus on better supporting non-White and other underrepresented students, “the lived experiences of cultural minority groups--in schools and elsewhere--belie these formal promises of liberty and equality” (p. 558). Thus, “teachers face the daunting task of creating classroom communities in which members recognize each other as equal agents and attend to the reality that group-based oppression and domination remain pervasive” (North, 2009, p. 558). Thus, there are systemic issues at-hand leading to the anxieties teachers face and making it difficult for even educators who are highly-motivated to engage in empowering practices like critical literacy questioning to do so.

**The Power of Critical Literacy despite Resistance**

Though, as mentioned, there is resistance to including critical literacy questioning in classrooms, the practice supports students’ success because of its potential implications on student self-efficacy, the issue central to this study. Wood and Jocius (2013) assert
that the problem with our system’s inability to increase reading achievement for our racially diverse and economically marginalized students is “embedded in social, cultural, economic, and historical dynamics” (p. 662). “Unfortunately,” they continue, “our academic institutions often fail to consider the whole child, and this creates a chasm between school and student” (Wood and Jocius, 2013, p. 662). Here, Wood & Jocius (2013) posit that our current system lacks appropriate structures to reach “the whole child,” or the parts relating to culture student identity, which impact students’ senses of self-efficacy (p. 662).

This is where critical literacy practices can disrupt the current system. Critical literacy questioning explicitly focuses on social, political, and historical factors within the messages students receive and encourages students to analyze how these influences are affecting their everyday lives (Wood & Jocius, 2013). Rogers (2002) explains that “In using this framework, students and teachers work to ‘reveal and disrupt such practices’ (as cited in Wood & Jocius, 2013, p. 663). Moreover, employing critical literacy practices builds an educational environment for underrepresented students that has not historically existed, one that values students’ experiences outside of school, gives them an opportunity to identify misconceptions about different cultures in text and in the world, and pushes them academically by giving them opportunities to engage in complex thinking and entertain alternative viewpoints and beliefs. These opportunities speak to student self-efficacy and motivation by undoing some of what Ladson-Billings (2021) describes as the feelings about race that are “deeply embedded in our psyches” and that members of our culture have done a “tremendous amount of work … to establish and maintain” (p. 100-101). In short, critical literacy strategies empower students belonging
to marginalized groups to “counter the assumptions often made” about them, increasing their belief in themselves and motivating them to engage in high-level academic conversations (Wood and Jocius, 2013, p. 663).

**Related Research**

One relevant and important study by Merga et al. (2020) examines English teachers’ perceived ability to support students identified as struggling readers. The authors collected both qualitative and quantitative data through a survey tool used to gather information from teachers across the country of Australia. Their results indicate that the majority of teachers (66%) either disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that teachers receive enough support in their preservice education or in ongoing professional development to adequately support their struggling readers. The study demonstrates the need for further research in secondary reading practices that support all readers, especially those that standardized testing labels as “struggling” (Merga et al., 2020, p. 269). One limitation of this study is its occurrence in a different country, though both Australia and the United States require either Bachelors-level or graduate-level training in order to work in education.

Though there is limited research on the impact of critical literacy practices on secondary students’ self-efficacy, more research is available about its impact on other grade levels or on other aspects of the student experience. Yoon (2020), for example, facilitated case study research at a diverse, Title I, New York City elementary. Here, she studied the actions, comments, and play of 15 children in a second-grade classroom, looking for information about how students engage in civic-minded conversations. Yoon
employed recorded conversations, images of student work, and other qualitative data which she compiled into over 300 pages of field notes that were then studied closely, categorized, and reflected upon to guide her findings. Yoon (2020) states that students engage authentically in civic-minded conversations like the importance of religion, the effects of protests, and the value of the Women’s March, in “every day, ordinary moments” (p.1). Even without prompting civic conversations, students as early as elementary school have a genuine interest in having such conversations and have thoughts and questions to share.

Alternatively, some researchers have focused on more explicit instruction techniques and their impact on “struggling” readers. Kim et al. (2016), for example, studied the impact of a program called STARI (Strategic Academic Reading Intervention) on 554 students from 9 middle schools in Massachusetts. The program is designed to provide students with explicit instruction on key areas of reading including, “decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension” (Kim et al., 2016, p. 1). Their study found that students participating in the STARI interventions scored an average of 5.69 scaled score points higher than students not receiving the intervention, illustrating the value of this multi-part, explicit-instruction model (p. 5). Though not the focus of this particular study, this information is valuable in considering the success of a different viewpoint, one that aligns more to a Scholar Academic approach to curriculum creation and values what Schiro (2013) calls “acculturating” students into the academic discipline (Schiro, 2013, p. 15).

Finally, Picower’s (2011) study regarding teachers’ experiences using social justice approaches is related to the study as well. Using a qualitative study design,
Picower (2011) followed the experience of a group of six pre-service and early-career teachers who had expressed interested in employing social justice methods in the classroom. Data were collected through transcribing participant cohort meetings, interviews, and written reflections. The study found that all participants experienced negative pushback, primarily from their fellow staff members and administrators, and feelings of discouragement and anxiety about their social justice work with students. The study also found that through camouflaging their methods in the required curriculum, engaging regularly in small group meetings and conversations with peers experiencing the same challenges, empowering students to become change agents, and, in some cases, speaking explicitly and publicly about unjust policies or practices, the teachers in the study were encouraged to continue using social justice practices and feel increased job satisfaction. Though this study focuses on preservice and early career teachers, the information is valuable in that it follows educators in real, current contexts to trace both their experiences and supports that helped them achieve their goal of implementing social justice work in their classrooms.

**Conclusion**

In summary, our educational system is presently set up to serve some students more than others. In response, critical literacy questioning, though sometimes avoided or challenged, shows promise in improving students’ self-efficacy in relation to literacy tasks. The implications of critical literacy on student confidence and motivation, especially for students belonging to marginalized racial and economic groups. As Ladson-Billings (2021) states, “the school’s advertised curriculum is another site for the social funding of (or investment in) race. What intellectual information and experiences
students have access to, what they are denied access to, and what distortions of information they encounter can serve as powerful funders of our racial ideology” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 97). As our current curriculum constructions “fund” beliefs and practices that are not serving all students, the inclusion of critical literacy practices in the English classroom holds the potential to “defund” that system and better serve all students in our schools by providing opportunities to rebuild the self-efficacy the current structure has damaged (p. 97).
CHAPTER 3

 METHODOLOGY

Overview of Study

The problem of practice for this study is the impact of repeated intervention as a result of failed standardized tests on the self-efficacy of secondary students. As illustrated by state and national data, this is especially problematic for our students of color and economically marginalized students. More specifically, it examines the negative effects of this practice on the self-efficacy of students who are repeatedly identified as underachieving and needing intervention when standardized assessments are used as the tool for identification.

The study is framed within a combination of social reconstruction, critical literacy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Though social reconstruction and critical literacy are both commonly known for their explicit focus on students’ ability to deconstruct the messages they receive in order to re-envision more equitable social practices, these ideas are also a central tenant of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Flint and Jaggers (2021) describe that culturally sustaining pedagogy “should work with students to critique regressive practices and discourses that marginalize people of color” (p. 256). Thus, all three create opportunities for learners to move from disempowerment to empowerment and create opportunities for students to imagine new futures for themselves in the world (Flint and Jaggers, 2021).
In response to this problem of practice, boldly contrary interventions are needed to interrupt and upend the accumulation of negative messaging students who have been repeatedly engaged in intervention have received. For this study, the intervention employed is critical literacy questioning. Through critical literacy questioning, students who have been repeatedly enrolled in intervention (thus repeatedly described as failing to meet normalized standards) are repositioned from a place of lacking knowledge to experts full of knowledge. This re-empowerment creates an opportunity for new understandings and beliefs about students’ abilities to surface. The following research questions align with the problem of practice and theoretical framework to guide the study:

1. What is the impact of critical questioning on the academic self-efficacy of students who are repeatedly identified for literacy intervention because of failed standardized assessments?

2. How is the use of critical literacy questioning experienced by the teacher of a secondary intervention course serving these students?

Chapter three will provide a detailed description of the research design and intervention. The context of the study, including the classroom hosting the research, will be described, as will the participants, an outline of the unit plans containing the intervention, the data sources, the collection and analysis of the data, my positionality as the action researcher, and the qualities of the study that align to high-quality action research.
Research Design and Intervention

Overview

Randall ISD (pseudonym) is an economically, racially, and linguistically diverse school district in Texas. The district serves more than 48,000 students in 56 schools and is split into five learning communities, each made up of a feeder pattern containing elementary, middle, and high schools. The study employed mixed-methods design to provide detailed insight into the students’ and teacher’s experience while employing the intervention in the classroom.

The study was conducted at Mission High School (pseudonym) within the district. District data systems reveal that the campus serves a slightly different population of students than our district’s overall demographic makeup. White students make up about 35% of the campus’s student population, mirroring the district’s data as a whole; however, only 25% of students identify as Hispanic or Latino, and 11% as Black or African American, as compared to 30% and 8% respectively at the district level.

The study took place over 4 ½ weeks at one high school campus in one section of practical writing, a literacy intervention course often used to provide additional support for students who have not passed their ELA standardized assessments in high school. The course that has historically served students identified as needing literacy intervention because of at least one failed attempt to pass their end of course exam. Students’ grades, particularly a pattern of low grades in their English courses, may also be a contributing factor in their practical writing enrollment. In some instances, students without failing exam scores or low English grades are enrolled in the course as well, especially in
instances when students need additional elective credits in order to graduate. A total of 20 students fitting both descriptions were enrolled in the course, which had followed a curriculum focused on developing students’ basic reading and writing skills for the three quarters leading up to the study.

Mrs. Green, the teacher participant, was a returning teacher who also taught courses in English I and Reading. As the graduate of a master’s program, she expressed interest in and enthusiasm about participating in research work with her students, and specifically this study because of its ties to social justice. The students with whom she implemented the intervention unit had been enrolled in her class for one three, nine-week marking periods prior to our study, giving them time to establish relationships and routines in the classroom.

**Intervention**

Critical literacy questions are questions that encourage students to be active readers of texts and the world who “look at a topic in different ways, analyzing it, and suggesting possibilities for change and improvement” (Vazquez et al., 2019, p. 300). Rather than being passive receivers of the messages and information, students are empowered to dig more deeply into meaning, decide if they agree with or support the messages they are receiving, and imagine new and better messages if they do not. Thus, the use of critical literacy questioning was the chosen intervention for the study because of its ability to affirm students’ knowledge and empower them to develop and share their own perspectives. In the study, critical literacy questions were used daily as students read texts and engaged with the unit, and the unit culminated in a final project that asked
students to use their own experience and expertise to design a unit of study for other students that they deemed to be full of valuable and important messages and information.

Table 3.1 below outlines the instructional unit utilizing critical literacy questioning that was used in class. Mrs. Green facilitated this unit, employing the selected intervention in the practical writing course mentioned above. As the researcher, I supported her in brainstorming for and revising the details of the unit to meet the needs of her classroom and collected student data through the data tools, which are also denoted in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1
Weekly Lesson Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK</th>
<th>GOALS</th>
<th>LEARNING ACTIVITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Collect pre-unit data and frame the unit for students. We were explicit with students about our methods and goals for the study.</td>
<td>Pre-Intervention Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal identity iceberg and sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What do others see about you on the surface? What lies underneath?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Word association activity and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Students voted on common words (family, competition, etc.) and then wrote about their meanings/connotations and drew pictures. This activity intended to illustrate that everyone has a unique perspective based on their own experiences and identities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2 Use critical literacy questions to analyze a literary text.

Analysis of and discussion about the author’s perspective in *The Hate U Give* using the questions:

- What lessons and messages (about writing and about life) is the author trying to teach you so far in the text?

- Do you agree with these messages? Do you think they are valuable for teens your age to learn? Why or why not?

Rewrite a chapter of the book *The Hate U Give* from a different character’s perspective (included brainstorming discussion and sharing).

### 3 Use critical literacy questions to analyze related non-fiction texts.

Related Non-Fiction Study:

- Students voted on a related non-fiction article to read, critically analyze, and discuss.

- Students learned about and discussed their opinions regarding Katy ISD’s decision to ban *The Hate U Give* in schools.

Literacy lineage timelines: What texts (written, visual, audio) did you LOVE as a child? What texts did you read in school?

- Were there more similarities or differences here?
| 4 | **Empower students to create texts that align to their perspectives.** | Introduce and begin work on final projects  
- Design a learning unit that you believe would be valuable for other students your age to experience in an English class.  
  - Choose the overall messages/lessons, texts, and a final assessment. |

| 5 | **Same as week 4. Collect end-of-unit data.** | Continue working on final projects  
- Post-unit surveys |

The primary focus of this study was students’ self-efficacy in relation to literacy tasks. Students self-reported their levels of self-efficacy in the pre-intervention survey before the intervention unit was administered and self-evaluated using a survey again at the end of the unit. Other data tools used to examine student self-efficacy included researcher observations during class and interviews. In these additional formats, students were able to share, through authentic conversation, their opinions about a variety of topics, including their opinions about how the

**Role of the Researcher**

During the intervention, I served in two primary roles. First, I served as a brainstorming and planning partner for Mrs. Green as we lesson planned for the intervention unit. Specifically, I assisted her in interpreting, revising, and preparing for
the lessons within the unit to ensure that they were appropriate for the students, teacher, and campus, while still staying aligned to the intentions of the study. Second, I also served as an unbiased researcher. Some data pieces, like Google Form responses to student surveys, were easily shared through digital sharing. Other data types, however, like observational notes and interviews were collected in-person during visits to the classroom using Google Documents and stored on a secure site that allowed sharing between Mrs. Green and me.

The study adhered to the qualities of high-quality action research because it addressed a local problem of practice and used a cycle of systematic inquiry to study research-supported interventions and their impact on the problem of practice (Herr and Anderson, 2015). Specifically, the issue of inequitable literacy intervention practices was addressed in the study using critical literacy questioning as the research-supported intervention. The intervention was delivered in an authentic context during a defined period with a variety of data collection methods, helping to ensure that the data is trustworthy and accurately represents the impact of the selected interventions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The students and teacher were made active participants in the study through explicit explanation of the interventions and study intentions and through participant validation of emerging themes during the qualitative data analysis. This intentional engagement of the practitioner and participants as collaborators on the study helped me ensure that the data collected and themes and trends deduced from the data accurately represented the participants’ experience.
Participants

The practical writing course used in this study served 20 students. The course contained both students who had multiple exam failures and were in need of intervention as well as students who had passed their exams and were simply in need of an elective credit. Students in the course also represented a variety of racial and linguistic backgrounds, including students who selected White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Multiple Races as their primary race in our district systems.

To foster inclusion and prevent study participants from feeling isolated from their peers, all students in the course were invited to participate in the study. However, in alignment with the research questions, only data from students who had been repeatedly identified for intervention because of failing scores on their standardized ELAR exams was analyzed for the study. Ten of the twenty students in the course assented to participation, with four of the students not needing intervention because of failed standardized assessments. Thus, there are six participants whose data will be analyzed in Chapter 3. Details about each of the focus participants are outlined in Table 3.2 below.

Testing history and demographic data for all students was collected from one of our district’s student information systems, Eduphoria. At the time of the study, all six study participants were in tenth grade or above and either 16 or 17 years old. Though the class as a whole contained more female students than male, there were more male students participating in the study than female. Four participants identified male as their gender, while two identified female. In terms of race or ethnicity, five study participants selected “Hispanic or Latino” as their primary race, and one participant selected “Black or African American.” Historical assessment data indicated that all participants had not
passed their reading and writing standardized assessments more than once, with
participants who had tested in the district in elementary and middle school not passing
those assessments multiple times in the early grades or high school. More details about
each participant are described in Table 3.2 below.

**Table 3.2**

*Student Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alan</th>
<th>In our district systems, Alan identifies “African American or Black” as his primary race. He passed his third grade reading standardized assessment but did not meet the passing score for his reading or writing standardized assessments in grades four through ten. In our conversations, he spoke about enjoying superheroes, especially superheroes who were physically intimidating to others. He said that these superheroes were sometimes misunderstood.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>Bree identified “Hispanic or Latino” as her primary race in district databases. Standardized assessment data for Bree was only available for the high school level. In ninth and tenth grade, she did not meet the passing standard for her ELAR assessments and has retaken them multiple times. During our conversations she spoke very fondly of her family, with whom she has very close relationships. She also spoke very kindly of the teacher hosting the study because of the teacher’s “happy” spirit, which made class more comfortable and enjoyable for her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilio</td>
<td>Cecilio selected “Hispanic or Latino” as his primary race in our district systems. Standardized assessment data for Cecilio was only available at the high school level. He did not meet the passing standard on his first attempt on the ninth or tenth grade ELAR tests and has since enrolled in intervention and retested multiple times. During one of our last Pear Decks, Cecilio stated that saving money, working hard, and never giving up were three of the most important lessons a student could learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>In district systems, David selected “Hispanic or Latino” as his primary race. David did not meet the passing score on his reading or writing standardized assessments in grades three through ten. He still needs to pass his ninth and tenth grade tests in order to graduate. David is also an Emergent Bilingual student who spoke very fondly of his experience on a dual language campus in elementary school. He noted how comfortable he felt being among others who shared the same language and culture as him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>Elena selected “Hispanic or Latino” as her primary race in our district systems. Although Elena did not pass her reading or writing standardized assessments in grades three through eight, she did pass her ninth grade assessment on the first attempt. After several attempts to pass her tenth grade exam, she has not yet met the passing standard and will need to continue trying to pass in order to graduate. In class, she shared that she</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
loved comedy and drama television shows and enjoyed listening to Selena Quintanilla, Melanie Martinez, and Alec Benjamin in her free time.

Fernando chose “Hispanic or Latino” as his primary race in the district database. He moved to the district in seventh grade, at which point he began taking reading and writing standardized assessments. Though he did not pass his seventh or eighth grade tests, he was able to pass his ninth grade test on the second attempt and his tenth grade test on the fourth attempt. Fernando is also an Emergent Bilingual student, which he said he thought might be impacting his English abilities. In our conversations, he explained that the book he enjoyed reading most in his high school English courses was *The Great Gatsby* because it illustrated how “money isn’t everything.”

**Data Collection, Instruments, and Tools**

**Tools Utilized and Rationale**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) remind us of the importance of including multiple data sources because it allows researchers to examine the evidence from several places and “build a coherent justification for themes” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). Thus, the study employed three major data collection tools: surveys, interviews, and observation. As supported by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), all three were designed to be open-ended in order to elicit thoughtful, personal responses from participants and provide rich data for the study.

**Surveys.** The study employed pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys to gather information about students’ experiences in literacy courses and self-evaluation of their sense of self-efficacy in relation to literacy. Surveys included a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions because the purpose of the survey was to gather information that clearly and easily illustrated if the intervention had had an impact (closed-ended) and to gather descriptive information about students’ feelings and
experiences (open-ended) (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Given that self-efficacy exists on a continuum, the survey included Likert-scale questions throughout; these questions provided the structure needed for students to rate themselves along that continuum and provided me with clear data for comparison between the beginning and end of the study (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Surveys also included opportunities for open-ended, more narrative-like responses. This created space for students to share detailed perceptions of their experiences and relationship to literacy before and after the intervention. As Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) explain, “Narrative analysis of students’ accounts could provide a robust picture of these students as people” (Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016, p. 3). Together, the inclusion of both structured and unstructured question types helped ensure that the data collected within the surveys was both clear and descriptive.

Both surveys were completed digitally in class, and we allowed students to select their seats and to play music through their headphones if they preferred. This allowed students to establish a comfortable, private environment for themselves to reflect and answer the questions; digital collection helped ensure that responses were securely protected within our district’s password-protected systems. All survey responses were collected using a Google Form, on which Mrs. Green and I shared access. The survey was shared with students through Schoology, our district’s trusted learning management system where all other digital daily work is shared. Because they were already familiar with the system, students could easily access the survey.

Observation. During-intervention observations of student and teacher interactions also offered strong insight. Because the work and conversations occurred in
authentic contexts and revealed details, thoughts, and behaviors not otherwise captured in the surveys or interviews, they provided additional opportunities for me to capture new information and confirm or challenge emerging themes and ideas. To do this, Mrs. Green delivered lessons we co-created for the unit, which allowed me to observe both teacher and student behavior and transcribe notes during class time. During class I also shared emerging findings with students to ensure accuracy and involve participants in the study. If an emerging trend was immediately visible, this was done at the end of a class. More often, emerging findings were discovered over the course of several classes and shared at the beginning of a subsequent class. To get participant validation from Mrs. Green and allow her to speak more freely, I shared emerging findings with her one-on-one in our weekly planning meetings.

Semi-structured Interviews. To better understand students’ stories and their impacts, there was value in following up with students via live conversations in the form of semi-structured interviews. These conversations allowed me to hear the tone and observe the body language with which students describe their responses, giving greater insight into how the experiences affected students. A general list of questions was created, but, as Merriam & Tisdell (2016) point out, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in both the order and content of questions asked. This supported me in the implementation of more ethical research practice by allowing space for me to adjust the course of the interview and follow up with relevant and responsive questions and commentary.

The interviews were conducted by circulating the room and sitting with students while they worked on their final projects. I asked each participant the predetermined
questions, attached in Appendix C, adding in scaffolding or clarifying questions like, “Why do you say that?” or “Were there other things we could have done during class to make you feel more confident?” as needed. As students spoke, I summarized their responses on a sheet of paper that was placed between us so they could see what was written and provide feedback. If important quotes were shared, I transcribed those verbatim. At the end of the interview, I read back what I had written for participant validation as well.

A final interview was also conducted with Mrs. Green to help collect more data around research question two. Throughout the unit, she expressed some anxiety about engaging in the study, primarily about having a visitor in the room. Thus, for her final interview, I opted to complete her interview virtually instead to reduce any additional anxiety or pressure she may have felt. To do this, I sent the interview questions in a digital format. She was able to respond in writing and send the responses back to me. The last question on the interview asked her to share any commentary that was not otherwise elicited in our conversations. The interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

**Description of Tool Development**

The surveys and interview questions above were co-created between Mrs. Green and me. Like our lesson plans, I created initial drafts for each tool that aligned to the research questions for the study. In our planning meetings, we reviewed all materials, including the data collection tools. Our conversations focused mostly on student friendliness in hopes of ensuring that the tools used would be approachable and easily completed by students. For example, to help quantify the impacts of critical literacy questioning on students’ self-efficacy, the pre- and post-unit surveys included Likert-
scale questions asking students to rate their confidence in literacy-related courses, work, and standardized assessments. Mrs. Green and I agreed that the use of the word “confidence” in place of “self-efficacy” was more appropriate to use when surveying or talking with students because it is a more common, student-friendly word and would reduce confusion and ensure more accurate student responses.

**Research Procedure** High schools in Round Rock ISD operate on block schedules wherein students attend four, eighty-to-ninety-minute courses each day, visiting eight total courses over two days. Thus, each week, students engage with a course either two or three times. The unit plans outlined in Table 3.1 (Weekly Lesson Plans) depict an overview of the proposed curricular interventions. A more detailed account of the suggested unit plans was provided to Mrs. Green prior to the study so that we could collaborate on revisions that may need to be made for her particular context.

Consideration of campus, teacher, and student needs were addressed in the unit plans for the study in several ways. First, weekly and daily lesson plans were co-created in weekly pre-unit and during-unit planning meetings in order to be responsive to the needs of the greater campus, the participating teacher, and the students in the course. For example, on weeks when standardized testing occurred, students did not participate in lessons associated with the study. If their teacher indicated that students were falling behind and needed additional time to complete assignments, we adjusted the calendar to be responsive to student needs.

I met with Mrs. Green before the study began and weekly during the study. During these meetings, I conducted semi-structured interviews with her to gather data about her experience for research question two before we transitioned into lesson
planning for the coming week. During lesson planning, Mrs. Green was given ownership of text selection for the unit and her voice was prioritized in the type and implementation of learning activities throughout the lesson, given that she knew the students from having worked with them for more than a semester.

Critical literacy broadly defines the word “text,” including pieces that are written, visual, spoken and, moreover, include not only “pieces,” but the world as a whole (McLaughlin & Devgood, 2004). As a result, classrooms utilizing critical literacy encourage students to examine what is seen and experienced in everyday life. In planning our daily lessons, Mrs. Green and I brought this idea into the classroom by including opportunities to engage in texts, discussion topics, and questions that related to events outside of the classroom, in the “real world.” This included the use of a young adult realistic fiction novel detailing a character’s experience with police brutality (*The Hate U Give*), opportunities to read nonfiction pieces pulled from current websites and news outlets, opportunities to consider which messages or “life lessons” they felt were most valuable for young people their age to learn, and more.

On the first day of the unit, students took the pre-unit self-efficacy survey. In addition to revising its word choice to make it more student friend, mentioned above, we also took additional measures to ensure the facilitation of the survey was student friendly as well. Specifically, we previewed the questions with students by reading them aloud and allowing time for students to ask questions. We also pointed out the labels on the form for the quantitative questions, showing them that a score of 1 represented “very low confidence,” and a score of 5 represented “very high confidence.” Students were provided with thirty minutes of class time to complete the survey. We encouraged them
to be very honest and assured them that their responses would not be shared with the class or other teachers, even anonymously. To further reduce stress or discomfort, we encouraged students to select a seat where they felt comfortable, permitted them to listen to music through their headphones while writing, and busied ourselves with other work while they completed the survey so they would not feel watched or monitored as they responded.

After the pre-unit survey, Mrs. Green delivered the lessons on which we collaborated to her class, sharing the agreed-upon data sets with me from participants when appropriate. I was able to attend eight of the ten lessons taught during the study. During each class, I observed the interaction between the teacher and students and recorded notes on Google documents. The documents were shared with Mrs. Green who viewed them and was able to provide her thoughts about what was written during our weekly planning meetings and check-ins. Periodically at the beginning or end of class, emerging themes were shared with the students in the class for participant validation using a combination of verbal check-ins and a student response program called Pear Deck that allowed them to provide feedback in writing and could be displayed anonymously.

Early in the unit, the lesson plans encouraged students to engage in daily conversation. As mentioned, data were collected through observation, noted on Google documents shared between Mrs. Green and me, and validated by verbal or digital participant response. Conversation structures for class activities included partner, small group, and whole-class sharing. To accommodate this, student desks were arranged in small groups and students encouraged to select a seat in which they felt most comfortable. In all conversations and voting structures, we assured students that their
opinions, even if they differed from ours or from others in the classroom, were not only valuable, but they were also desired as the unit was intended to develop and create space for their unique thoughts, experiences, and perspectives.

We also included opportunities for students to vote on different elements of the class, like which text to read or how we would read texts (together, independently) during class. An example of this occurred on the third day of the study. On this day, we asked students to vote on which non-fiction text to read, all of which were aligned to their class novel, *The Hate U Give*. The text options included articles about the benefits of private schooling, the value of post-secondary education, and the legislation passed in Jackson, Mississippi (the author’s hometown) in response to its identification as the city with the most gun-related deaths in the country. After describing all three articles, we put the decision to a class vote, asking students to raise their hands after we named one of the text options aloud.

The last week of the study was reserved for students to work on their final projects. In alignment with critical literacy’s focus on empowering students, the final project asked students to design a learning unit for an English course that *they* believed taught students important or valuable information. In preparation, students engaged in a Pear Deck on which they were presented with two life lessons and asked which one they believed they believed was more important for teens to learn. The life lessons in the Pear Deck are included below:

1. “Save your money,” or, “Spend your money while you are alive.”
2. “Hard work pays off,” or, “Good things come to those who wait.”
3. “Never give up,” or “There is freedom in letting things go.”
4. “Overthinking kills your happiness,” or, “Always, always have a plan.”

From there, students were asked to decide on major lessons or themes they believed students should learn, select texts that taught those lessons or themes, design an assessment that would help students show what they learned, and to engage in a personal reflection. During their work time, I sat with student participants to conduct their semi-structured interviews. Interview notes were transcribed on paper as students responded, and I kept the paper notes visible to students throughout the interview. After each question, I repeated back my notes to the student to allow for participant validation, marking adjustments according to their feedback. The questions for the interview included:

1. What theme have you chosen for your final project and why?
2. What texts have you selected to teach your theme and why?
3. During this unit, we prioritized asking questions that focused on your perspective, opinions, and beliefs. What was this like for you?
4. Do you think having this experience has increased your confidence in completing literacy-related work? Why or why not?

Research Question Two: Teacher’s Experience

Before we started planning or implementing the unit, Mrs. Green and I met together with the district’s secondary ELA Curriculum Coordinator and the Assistant Principal on her campus serving the English Department. We discussed the goals of the research, some specifics regarding what would need to happen for the research to be successful, devised a plan for participant and family assent, created a tentative schedule
for our researcher-teacher co-planning (including how those lessons would be shared with campus administration), and allowed opportunities for each person to share thoughts, questions, and concerns.

At the beginning of the study and in each subsequent week, I met with Mrs. Green to lesson plan, debrief, and to gain her perspective regarding how the unit was progressing and what the experience was like for her. To gather this data, I conducted semi-structured interviews during these meetings. Notes from our interviews were taken on shared Google documents so that we both had access to what was recorded. Additionally, as I typed, I repeated back what I was writing to allow for participant clarification and validation.

Each time I interviewed her, I started the interview with the same question, designed to be informal to reduce participant anxiety. Though the decision was made to use this structure prior to the study beginning, Mrs. Green admitted in our first few meetings that she felt anxious about the study, which reinforced that an informal and responsive structure, like semi-structured interviews, would be helpful because of how natural the conversation would feel, which counteracted some of the stress she admitted to feeling around participating in the study. At the start of each interview, I asked “So, how do you think it’s going?” Based on her response, I followed up with questions like, “How is that the same or different from what you saw or experienced before the unit?” or “What in our plans are you most excited or worried about in the coming weeks?”

Additionally, I observed Mrs. Green’s interactions with students during the teaching of the lessons we co-created. Here, I recorded summarized notes about her actions and scripted some of her questions and responses with students during class.
Again, all notes were taken on shared Google documents so that she had access to the information and could clarify or add as needed. We also revisited notes from the previous week when engaging in our weekly planning meetings. In these conversations, I read back what was written on our shared Google documents and ask, “Does that sound accurate to how you experienced or remember it to?” Based on her responses, I added notes or made adjustments as needed, reading back what I was writing for her to hear as well.

**Treatment, Processing, and Analysis of Data**

The data collected throughout the study often expressed deeply personal information about participants’ abilities, beliefs, and experiences. Thus, it was critical that the treatment, processing, and analysis of data be handled with sensitivity, which this chapter will discuss in more detail. Additionally, the nature of the data made data security especially important. The chapter will start with an explanation of what measures were taken to ensure participant data was kept secure.

To protect students’ responses, data were collected and stored using our district’s password-protected Google accounts. For students, specifically, Google Suite and Schoology were used to share materials. Mrs. Green then shared the study participants’ study-related work with me. Specifically, the use of Google Suite and Schoology was helpful in keeping data safe because access could only be granted by the participant completing the work or by Mrs. Green. These tools are also consistent with the way the work has been assigned and collected between teachers and students for the past several years, making them both trusted tools and easy for students to navigate.

Likewise, privacy and sensitivity were important during the collection of
participant interviews. To facilitate this, interviews were conducted quietly at the student’s desk during work time. During this time, many students worked with headphones in, music playing softly, or engaged in conversation with the groupmates at their tables, making it unlikely that others would hear participant responses while still attempting not to single out participants from others in their class. As I sat down with a student, I asked, “Is this okay time and place to ask you some questions about the study?” All students consented without hesitation. During interviews, I summarized, and occasionally transcribed verbatim, student responses, sharing what I wrote with students as I went to ensure I accurately captured their meaning.

As I collected qualitative data, I engaged in ongoing coding to note emerging themes and ideas. I looked for similar patterns in behavior or commentary and noted those trends in the digital study notes, which I continuously reviewed, revised, and shared with participants for validation as the study progressed. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that during-study thematic analysis of qualitative data, like observational notes, is appropriate because it can inform your future data collection and because studies are live and can morph over time. In this study, ongoing thematic analysis helped immensely because the overarching ideas that emerged early in the study informed how I took observational notes later. For example, we noticed low student participation early in the unit, so I knew to capture student participation rates and to transcribe student comments when they did participate later. To validate our data, Mrs. Green and I shared emerging themes identified during data analysis and facilitated participant validation conversations with the class. These happened both digitally through the use of Pear Deck software and verbally in informal conversations.
The analysis of quantitative data was handled differently. From the survey responses shared with me, I isolated the responses of only the students whose data would be analyzed for the study. Specifically, I copied over their self-efficacy ratings on the Likert-scale questions from each survey, with all of the pre-unit survey data in one table and all of the post-unit survey in another table. On both surveys, participants tended to rate themselves similarly on all three Likert-scale questions. Either the student’s scores were all low (below 3) or all high (above 3). After looking at each participant’s responses to get a general sense of each student’s self-efficacy, I calculated their average scores to make the comparison between the pre-unit and post-unit surveys more clear and to be able to objectively show a measure that would indicate if the intervention had had an impact on students’ self-efficacy as a whole (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Summary

The study lasted just over four weeks, with embedded time for the teacher and students to address other needs as they arose. A variety data tools (including surveys, observations, and interviews) were used to collect information about the impact of the intervention on students’ self-efficacy and the teacher’s experience as the class engaged in the lessons within the unit. Mrs. Green and the students participating in the investigation were also actively and explicitly engaged throughout the process to help ensure effective and ethical research practice, including increased data validity, participant agency, and mutual benefit (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020). Chapter Four will describe the responses on the data collection methods and analyze their findings. Chapter Five will present a discussion, conclusion, and future recommendations.
CHAPTER 4

DATA

The problem of practice for this study was the negative impact of repeated identification for intervention, because of failed standardized tests, on the self-efficacy of secondary students. In intervention courses serving these students, it is not uncommon to see reduced attendance, engagement, and work commitment, indicating that the students enrolled in those courses may not feel high levels of motivation and/or self-efficacy in relation to the course and course content. The major research questions for this study include:

1. What is the impact of critical questioning on the self-efficacy of students who are repeatedly identified for literacy intervention because of failed standardized assessments?

2. How is the use of critical literacy questioning experienced by the teacher of a secondary intervention course serving these students?

The study explored whether critical literacy questions affected students’ self-efficacy in relation to literacy work while they were enrolled in a literacy intervention course. It also explored how engaging in this work was experienced by the classroom teacher.
Merging elements of social reconstruction, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and critical literacy, the theoretical framework for this study impacts the kinds of data collected and the focus of the data analysis after collection. To provide students with the space and encouragement needed to identify and share their perspectives in their own words, a range of open-ended data collection methods were used throughout the study. These included open-ended questions on surveys, during classroom discussions, and within interviews. Mrs. Green and I were careful to remind students that there were no correct or incorrect answers, and that all perspectives were valuable and important. Daily, we reiterated that the best answer was the one that was true for the student.

The theoretical framework can also be seen through the study’s approach to validating data. Participant validation was conducted through an anonymous reporting platform that allowed students to provide feedback on emerging findings, through verbal whole-class discussions, and through one-on-one conversations conducted throughout the unit. Allowing participants to validate the data not only increased the accuracy of the findings, but also it further empowered students to use their voices in order to ensure that their perspectives and experiences were accurately represented.

The data were analyzed in chronological order. I started with an analysis of the pre-unit surveys, including looking at both the Likert-scale and open-ended responses. After, I analyzed classroom observation notes and student interview responses as they were collected. Finally, I analyzed the post-unit surveys, comparing responses to the pre-unit survey for students who were able to complete both. To identify emerging themes, I used thematic coding and tallying as the data was collected.
On both the pre-unit and post-unit surveys, common words or phrases or general ideas, like “does not enjoy” and “self-doubt,” were tallied for the participants who were present and responded. For the two who were absent on the day we took the pre-unit survey and late to subsequent classes, we asked them one overarching question to get a general sense of how confident they typically felt when engaging in literacy work. These conversations occurred during work time in class. The students’ responses were marked down with the other students’ survey data. Though they did not have responses for each question on the survey, their responses aligned with the themes and trends identified from other students’ responses. Because it was the end of both the unit and the quarter, we were not able to gather data for the students who were absent during the week we administered the post-unit survey in class.

Similar processes were used to analyze both the observational notes and the student responses to the semi-structured interviews. In alignment with Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) recommendations for analyzing qualitative data, the analysis was a multi-step process, starting with a general reread to get a sense of the themes and trends that may be emerging and then rereading, tallying, and adjusting as needed. Thus, I started the analysis by rereading the full documents once to get a general sense of what was being said and what themes might be emerging. (For the observational notes, which were taken during every class I attended, this took place after each class.) After reading through an entire document once, each note was coded. The most common themes and ideas coded throughout the notes were recorded and shared with participants verbally and through Pear Deck software, as mentioned above, to elicit participant feedback and ensure the themes gleaned from the data were accurate. Again at the end, themes were
compared between the two participant groups to find the similarities and differences
outlined in Chapter 4.

Chapter four will begin with summaries of the major data pieces collected in this
study in chronological order for each research question. The first section will also
describe my interpretations of each data piece, when interpreted within the theoretical
framework described above. Next, the general findings and results will be described and
tied back to the study’s research questions, followed by a summary of the information
presented.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

Research Question 1: Qualitative Data

Theme 1: Self-Efficacy and Attitudes toward Literacy Experiences

The pre-unit self-efficacy survey contained a combination of quantitative, Likert-
scale questions asking students to reflect on their levels of self-efficacy and open-ended
qualitative questions aimed at eliciting more detailed explanations of their experiences,
thoughts, and feelings. All six student responses to the open-ended questions indicated a
relationship between their self-efficacy in literacy-based courses and on standardized
assessments and the feelings they had toward literacy-based courses and exams.

Specifically, students reported feeling reduced self-efficacy and also reported
having mostly negative feelings toward literacy-based work, courses, and exams as well.
Bree described that she has always felt unsuccessful when doing ELA work. Specifically,
she stated, “I struggle a lot, especially when we have to take test [sic] I get a lot of testing anxiety,” indicating low confidence in her current and prior performance as well as anxiety toward the standardized test itself. Two other students responded with similar content. Notably, both of their written responses were very brief, three or four-word, responses. A fourth student in the course, who self-identifies as an Emergent Bilingual student, suggested that his experience in not being a native English speaker may have had a negative impact on his self-efficacy toward literacy tasks, courses, and exams. His survey response stated that when he first came to America, he was in ESL classes where “a lot of foreign students” were learning English. At the time of the study, though, he stated, “now i’ve [sic] been here for a long time and english [sic] is not my best.”

When asked about their thoughts and feelings while engaging in literacy-based experiences, students also unanimously reported negative feelings. Specifically, they reported increased anxiety, difficulty with focusing, and embarrassment. Elena stated that her feelings toward literacy tasks were, “negative because im [sic] not good at it.” Another student, Fernando, described not enjoying literacy work because he has trouble focusing. He then stated, “when somebody asks me about the book i [sic] don't what to answer because I be [sic] lost.”

**Theme 2: Preference for Non-Verbal, Anonymous Sharing**

A central tenet of critical literacy as a whole is the use of democratic classroom practices, such as increased student dialogue and decision making, within classroom lessons to empower students to share their thoughts, showing value for their perspective (McLaughlin & Devgood, 2004; Luke & Woods, 2009; Luke, 2012; Wood & Jocius,
2013). Without student discourse, we would not allow students to “hold up for examination” the thoughts they are having (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 13). Thus, in our study, the daily lesson plans intentionally incorporated multiple opportunities for students to reflect on their own perspectives and multiple formats for them to share their thoughts and ideas. This included verbal discussions, collaborating in small groups with others, and voting on different elements of classroom instruction.

During the first two classes in the study, voluntary participation in conversations and voting was nearly nonexistent. Specifically, during instances when we allowed students to vote on different elements of class, no students voluntarily voted on the first day of the study and only one study participant voted on the second day. Even with scaffolds like allowing students to discuss ideas beforehand with a partner or providing a moment to jot down thoughts ahead of time, the class remained quiet or silent for extended periods of time when the floor was opened up for conversation, commentary, or response. To remedy this, Mrs. Green and I agreed to start the subsequent classes with low-stakes opinion questions that students could engage with using Pear Deck, a technology tool that allows students to sign in and answer questions in a written format rather than verbal. Once responses are collected, the teacher can anonymously post and share students’ responses and open up an opportunity for conversation around what students have written. Questions for these Pear Decks were aligned to the topics of the day’s lesson, especially the content or ideas being viewed critically that day.

For written participation, the Pear Deck platform records students’ response. Thus, to gauge students’ response rates, we were able to go in tally student participation. There was a sizable increase in student participation when we began incorporating the
low-stakes Pear Deck questions in class, sometimes even seeing nearly every student participate by signing on, considering the questions, and typing in answers. On day six of the study, for example, the participation rate for the Pear Deck slides, which asked for a variety of students’ favorite things, participation was between 60% and 80% on each question. Likewise, on day seven of the study, participation rates were 100% on all slides. Throughout the unit, students also explicitly described feeling more confident sharing their responses when responses were elicited using Pear Deck and shared with the class anonymously. Toward the end of the unit, one student stated that she, “could see what others said and take ideas off what other people said. It was kind of like ping-ponging off of others’ ideas.”

Students also added that the use of Pear Deck to elicit their opinions on low-stakes topics at the beginning of class was helpful in making them feel more comfortable and feel mentally primed to participate in the day’s work. “Having time to think and prepare (for class) helps, especially if you are shy,” Bree shared. “I have a lot of anxiety about answering out loud and being wrong.” Another participant, David, explained that the low-stakes opportunities to share made him feel more comfortable. Specifically, he said they had a “medium” impact on his comfort participating in class. “I’m shy a little bit. Half shy, half not,” he explained. “I think it’s maybe because I’m bilingual and I have a stutter and am kind of a slow reader.”

**Trend 3: Student Preference for Engaging in Authentic, Compelling Work**

Students also showed interest in engaging with authentic, compelling, sometimes even controversial, topics like those that often arise in critical literacy classrooms. This
trend appeared throughout the unit in the form of student text selection, Pear Deck participation, and topic selection for students’ final projects.

Mrs. Green selected a central text around which to plan the rest of our unit. Thus, students read from the novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas during each class. The text, which is set in a contemporary time period, employs modern language and depicts characters, conflicts, and themes that align to current events. Regularly, students expressed interest and connection with this text in class. On the third day of the study, we focused our critical literacy questioning on nonfiction texts. Thus, we encouraged students to vote on a nonfiction text related to the novel that they preferred to read during class. After describing all three articles, we asked students to raise their hands in order to vote. On our first attempt with voting, only two students hesitantly raised their hands to vote. To encourage more participation, Mrs. Green reminded students that one of the primary intentions of the unit was to empower them to develop perspective and voice and that voting on how they would spend their time in a class was a strong way to start using their voices. From there, participation increased. Unanimously, all students selected the article about legislation in Jackson, Mississippi, in response to increased gun violence in the city. When asked what interested them about the article at the end of class, David stated, “It sounded the most real.” Other students in the class nodded their heads and suggested agreement by saying things like “yeah” or “same.”

We also saw evidence of interest in authentic, compelling topics in students’ participation in class Pear Decks. In looking through student response patterns in Pear Deck, including overall participation, our Pear Deck asking students which “life lessons” they believed were most valuable for young people to learn had the highest student
participation. Specifically, while some Pear Decks had average participant response rates ranging from 20% to 25% on each question, this set of Pear Deck questions averaged 100% participant participation on all slides. On all four slides asking students which life lesson they believed was most valuable for students their age to learn, all four students present for the activity logged in and responded to all questions. Additionally, Mrs. Green shared that, based on her experience, the students were more involved in participating and verbally discussing. “They got really into it, which doesn’t always happen,” she explained.

We also saw student preference for authentic, compelling material in the choices they made for their final projects. Throughout the unit, we encouraged students to decide what they felt was and was not valuable for students to engage with in classrooms as we read and experienced a variety of texts. Before starting their final projects, we encouraged students to think about if they believed more concrete lessons, like how to make a resume, were most valuable, if more abstract lessons, like the importance of having healthy relationships, were most valuable. Although two students were absent, all four students present during our two workdays selected personally relatable, abstract life lessons as the center of their units. Alan’s project was centered on the theme, “Don’t judge a book by its cover and stereotyping.” In his words, David’s project focused on “being yourself and living the life you want to live because people should live how they want to and not change who they are for others.” Bree’s project revolved around the theme of “making every moment count, even small moments, because sometimes people say things they will regret later.” And finally, Fernando’s project taught students that “money isn’t happiness… because money is not everything and people think it is.”
The central messages above were transcribed during semi-structured interviews at the end of the unit. None of the participants interviewed opted for concrete topics like how to build a resume or how to create an infographic -- all selected an abstract life lesson with which they had a personal connection. For example, Bree became very serious, a little sad even, as she explained that she was inspired to create a unit teaching students to “make every moment count, even small ones” because one of her younger cousins often said harsh things and did not think about their impact. She had talked to her cousin many times about this and wanted to make sure others learned this lesson so they would have better memories with their loved ones.

**Theme 4: Positive Feelings toward Class When Personal Perspectives Are Elicited and Valued**

When I conducted individual semi-structured interviews during the last week of the study while students worked on final projects, one student participant was absent. Responses to the questions *During this unit, we prioritized asking questions that focused on your perspective, opinions, and beliefs. What was this like for you?* indicated that students had generally positive feelings toward the unit as a whole. Specifically, all five students interviewed reported that they enjoyed sharing their thoughts and beliefs and described feeling more engaged, cared about, and respected as a result of being encouraged to and supported in sharing their personal perspectives about the topics and texts studied in class.

Question four asked *Do you think being encouraged to critique authors’ opinions and being encouraged to share your own thoughts has made you feel more confident in this class? Why or why not?* Regarding student self-efficacy, question four was the most
relevant. All but one student, Fernando, reported having increased confidence in relation to literacy experiences at the conclusion of the intervention unit. Specifically, Bree stated, “It’s always good to ask people their perspective. It’s respectful. Asking me what I thought made me feel respected and the fact that you all listened and were your happy smiley selves helped too.” When asked if the unit made him feel more comfortable, David said, “Not really.” He explained that he had a long-standing negative relationship with literacy work, which started when he transferred schools several times in elementary school. He stated that this was likely one of the primary reasons that he rarely felt confident in English classes growing up. As a follow-up question, I asked if there had ever been a time he had felt confident in an English course. He described attending a bilingual elementary school and feeling most confident in that environment because his peers and teachers were similar to him, and he had the freedom to choose which language he was most comfortable using in each situation.

Research Question One: Quantitative Data

Pre-Unit Self-Efficacy Survey

Though we were able to collect survey responses from four students in the study, two students were absent on the first day of the study and were either absent or late during subsequent classes as well. For these students, Alan and David, Mrs. Green and I decided that the class time that remained would be better spent engaging in the work within the unit rather than completing the missed survey. Instead, we relied on one-on-one conversations during work time to gather information from these students. Informally, we asked students how confident they felt when they were in English courses or doing any kind of work related to literacy. Both students responded briefly, indicating
that their confidence was not very high. Table 4.1, below, shows each student’s responses on a scale of one (very low confidence) to five (very high confidence) on the three Likert-scale questions on the survey. Question one asked students to rate their confidence in relation to literacy courses, question three asked about students’ confidence when completing literacy course work, and question six asked about their confidence when taking their literacy End Of Course (EOC) exams. Average ratings are calculated at the bottom as well.

**Table 4.1**

*Self-Efficacy Pre-Unit Self-Assessments by Student*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>EOC Ex.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Absent, but self-reported “not very confident” verbally later in the unit.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilio</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Absent, but self-reported “not very confident” verbally later in the unit.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg.</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, students reported an average self-efficacy score below three, indicating that their self-efficacy fell into the “low self-efficacy” range. In their qualitative responses, students indicated a variety of reasons for their lower senses of self-efficacy, including feeling anxiety (especially during tests), a lack of comfort because English was their second language, and feeling insecure because they read slowly or get distracted easily.
At the individual student level, the data reveals some notable exceptions to this general trend. Fernando indicated higher levels of self-efficacy than the other three students who completed the survey. Interestingly, this student’s qualitative responses did not appear to align with his scores on the quantitative questions. Specifically, although he rated his self-efficacy at 4 on the pre-unit survey, indicating relatively high confidence, Fernando explained that he came to the United States as a non-native English speaker when he was younger and at this point, “i've [sic] been here for a long time and english [sic] is not my best.” Similarly, in the question about his feelings related to literacy work, he further explained that he did not like literacy work “because when i [sic] start reading I never focus and i [sic] start to think about other things.” He also stated that when asked questions about the reading in class, he did not want to answer or know what to answer. Specifically, he stated, “i be [sic] lost.”

Based on a combination of both the quantitative and qualitative student responses, there does appear to be a consistent trend wherein students started our unit with low self-reported rates of confidence when engaging in literacy courses, work, and exams. Five of the six participants reported that their confidence was either in the middle of the continuum (Elena only) or on the lower end. Additionally, the one student who did report higher levels of confidence on the Likert-scale questions (Fernando) also suggested in his written responses that he did not feel English was not his best subject and that he struggled to maintain attention and comprehend during reading. When considering all of the data, then, all students either explicitly reported reduced self-efficacy or implied some lack of confidence in their written responses.

_Post-Unit Self-Efficacy Survey_
On final day of our unit, we asked students to take a post-unit self-efficacy survey. Though we had initially intended for the two surveys to be the same, we decided to make adjustments to the wording of the questions so that they better captured students’ responses as a result of the work we had done in the unit. Like the pre-unit survey, the post-unit survey also had three Likert-scale questions where students rated their self-efficacy in relation to literacy courses, classwork, and standardized assessments. It also contained open-ended question, but this time we added a sixth open-ended question where students could share anything that had not been asked of them during the study.

The full post-unit survey is available in Appendix C.

**Table 4.2**

*Self-Efficacy Post-Unit Survey Results by Student*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>ELAR Standardized Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student was absent this week.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student was absent this week.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the students saw a substantial increase in their average self-efficacy across the board. When looking at student-level data, two students, Bree and Elena both reported increases in all areas after engaging in our unit. Bree shared evidence of feeling
increased belief in herself during the unit and in her ability to be successful going forward. Though her self-efficacy ratings on the Likert-scales increased, Elena did not respond to the open-ended questions to provide more details. When asked if there was any work in the unit that made her feel particularly confident, Bree stated, “I felt confident with sharing my ideas on Pear Deck. I thought doing those really helped my anxiety be a little better.” Likewise, when asked if she felt that her English courses had prepared her to confidently read, write, and speak as an adult, she explained that while she still had room to grow in her English skills, her “classes have helped a little bit and now I can start working harder to get better.” Though her response indicates that her self-efficacy was not particularly high, she also showed evidence of optimism and belief in her ability to grow in literacy in the future.

Contrastingly, Fernando reported the same scores reported on the pre-unit survey. Similar to his pre-unit survey responses, there was some contradiction between his qualitative and quantitative responses. However, in this instance, the general overtone of the student’s responses on the post-unit survey were more positive than those he recorded in the pre-unit survey. Regarding his experience and confidence in previous English courses, the student stated, “I’m not the most confident … but. yes, I’ve done really good in all my English courses, and I have learned a lot … but it’s not my favorite subject.” Though the student states that his confidence is not high, he adds positive details about how much he has learned and grown as a result of the unit. Likewise, he expressed positivity when asked if there was any work in the unit that made him feel particularly confident. To this, Fernando replied, “I felt really confident in class because I was
sharing my own opinion without getting judged because everyone has different opinions.”

**Research Question 2: Qualitative Data about the Teacher’s Experience**

I analyzed the data from my observations and interviews with Mrs. Green through inductive coding. As Kiger and Varpio (2020) explain, an “inductive approach tends to provide a broader, more expansive analysis of the entire body of data,” which allowed me to use both the teacher’s verbal responses in our conversations and my own observations as an outsider to create a fuller picture of her experience. In all, three major themes emerged about Mrs. Green’s experience during the study.

**Theme 1: Anxiety about the Perceptions of Others, Including Participating in Research and Regarding Parent or Community Pushback**

During each week of the unit, I met with Mrs. Green to co-plan the upcoming week and to conduct her interviews for data collection. Throughout the unit, she indicated that the process of engaging in action research and engaging in classroom lessons that were controversial made her feel anxious. Sometimes, she stated this explicitly in conversations, and other times she suggested it in her actions.

An example occurred at the start of the study during a planning meeting with Mrs. Green, the district curriculum coordinator, and me. During the meeting, Mrs. Green admitted that she had always wanted to read a contemporary, young adult novel written by a culturally diverse author with her students, like *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. However, she avoided doing so because she had always been afraid that families or administration would push back about its contents and themes. Instead, she had historically chosen to teach books that she called “safer,” like *The Hunger Games*, to
avoid confrontation. After reminders about the district’s approved reading list and class novel policies from our Curriculum Coordinator, she decided that *The Hate U Give*, which does appear on our district’s approved reading list, would serve as the central text for our unit. After, she stated that she was both “very excited… and a little uneasy” about reading it in class.

During one of our early planning meetings, Mrs. Green began describing feeling anxious, mostly about the idea of participating in research as a whole and having a desire to “do it justice” as a teacher. To reduce her worry, I reminded her that “to do it justice” simply meant to let it play out and that everything that happened, whether it was what we would have personally predicted or not, was valuable data that would inform us as educators.

Likewise, during a later planning meeting in April, she explained that she had started worrying about the study again because the students were not participating much. “I think the kids are really enjoying the book and looking critically at characters and perspectives, but I’m worried because they just haven’t been talking very much. This time, though, our previous conversations helped ease her concerns. “I am remembering that it’s all part of the data collection process, and there is no ‘wrong’ way for the kids to respond. That’s reassuring.”

For her final interview, which was originally intended to be done in-person, I wanted Mrs. Green to feel safe to be fully honest. Thus, we conducted the interview digitally using open-ended questions. Here, she noted that being observed by me during the study caused some level of anxiety for her. As part of our partnership on this study, Mrs. Green and I agreed that we would co-plan weekly. The idea was to split the work
and to emphasize a sense of partnership to reduce any overwhelm or worry she might experience, while ensuring that the questions and tasks aligned to the research questions of the study. However, she also noted in her final interview that my participation in creating these materials and then being present while she taught them may have contributed to her anxiety around teaching the unit. “Teaching with the creator of the lessons in the room could be uncomfortable. That is my issue more than anything,” she wrote. In fact, she noted this idea twice within three questions.

**Theme 2: Occasional Difficulty Maintaining Objectivity during Critical Discourse**

For critical literacy questioning to be successful in a classroom, the structures of the classroom must begin to shift so that the conversation focuses on students’ perspectives, experiences, and beliefs (Luke, 2021). This sets the stage for honest and open student dialogue about the thoughts they are having. Mrs. Green demonstrated that, though she was sometimes able to maintain objectivity to meet this end, she did occasionally struggle to keep implications about her own perspectives on some issues out of the conversation.

Though we had discussed each week in our planning meetings that we were encouraging all students to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and had discussed how to objectively ask questions to make students feel safe, there were some instances in which Mrs. Green’s opinions were implied during class conversations. One example occurred during class on May 1, 2023 during a class discussion around banning books like *The Hate U Give* in schools. When a student said, “I haven’t really heard anything about book bans,” Mrs. Green decided to ask for a vote by a raise of hands: “In general, do you all think it’s fair to ban books?” Half of the students who responded raised their
hands for “yes” and half raised their hands for “no.” In response, Mrs. Green used a
disbelieving tone when she asked, “Let me ask you this: Do you think schools actually
(emphasis added) have books in their library that are inappropriate?” In response to this
question, the students were silent. No one responded. Though the original question was
objective and open to many viewpoints, Mrs. Green’s scaffolded questions, used to help
elicit more responses from students, created an opportunity for her own opinion to slip
into the conversation and may have, as noted by students’ quietness after the question,
impacted students’ willingness to respond and comfort in responding to honestly during
the discussion.

Though Mrs. Green did sometimes suggest her own views in conversations with
students, she was also able to remain objective. In these times, she was able to present
critical questions and material in such a way that implied all perspectives, even those
different from hers, were welcome in the conversation. As a result, students responded.
For example, during one of the early lessons in the unit, the class used critical literacy
questioning to examine the implicit messages in *The Hate U Give* and determine whether
they agreed with those messages and believed that they were valuable or important to
learn. When we asked students to share their responses verbally, very few students
volunteered. When we finally did have volunteers, responses were very brief and not
fully formed. Thus, we employed scaffolded questioning to elicit more thorough and
thoughtful responses. The following is a transcript of one of Mrs. Green’s exchanges with
a student participant in the study:

**Mrs. Green:** What message or messages is the author trying to teach us in the
book?
Student: She’s teaching us about conflicts with people.

Teacher: What kind of conflicts? What are some that we’ve seen in the book?

Student: Racism.

Mrs. Green: Do you agree with what the author in the text is saying about racism, and, do you think it’s important to learn about?

Student: It is important to learn about.

Mrs. Green: Why?

Student: It’s important to learn about other people’s feelings.

In this exchange, where it may have been easy to interject words or phrases implying her own perspective, Mrs. Green was able to stay neutral and help the student arrive at clarity around and clearly express his own thoughts about the text. Given that the purpose of the study was to study whether critical literacy questioning could empower students to develop and share their own perspectives, maintaining teacher objectivity reduced the pressure students might have felt to answer in a certain way that aligned with her beliefs.

Theme 3: Increased Teacher Fulfillment and Job Satisfaction Through the Use of Critical Literacy Practices

Prior to our unit, Mrs. Green shared that it was sometimes hard to employ controversial texts or conversation topics in her class, even when she knew they would engage students, because of the potential response from the community. Specifically, she was worried that parents would come forward with complaints about the use of politically controversial topics, like systemic racism or other civil rights, in class. However, through
the supported opportunity to use critical literacy questioning in her classroom during the study, she was able to find increased fulfillment and excitement.

When I first spoke with Mrs. Green about her interest in participating in my study about critical literacy, she exclaimed, “I LOVE THAT! That is right up my alley!” indicating both through her words and tone that the topic of the research aligned deeply with her beliefs about education and the vision she had for her classroom. Throughout our collaboration she shared similar sentiments. For example, she described feeling excited and relieved to see some students who often did not participate answering questions: “It wasn’t pulling teeth the whole time, which was great. It feels positive and it’s baby steps.” Similarly, when we debriefed after students completed a writing activity, Mrs. Green described feeling increased excitement and fulfillment as she read and graded students’ responses: “I had a lot of really good answers. The assignment was enjoyable for them, so I had really good participation. Quite a few filled up the page -- students who I wouldn’t have expected to, did.”

Other implications of critical literacy’s positive impact on Mrs. Green’s sense of fulfillment and job satisfaction come from her repeated commentary about expanding her use of these practices in future years and in other courses. During several of our one-on-one conversations, she warmly described the joy she felt in watching her students explore their own perspectives and exhibit thoughtfulness and respect as they engaged in class. “My ninth graders heard about the unit and have been begging me to do something similar. I’m excited to use similar ideas in my other classes next year,” she stated in one of our later interviews. She also reported in both our planning conversations and in her post-unit survey that she was excited to take these practices forward into subsequent
school years and use them for longer periods of time with students in more of her classes. When asked about how the unit may have impacted her own self-efficacy, she stated, “I think my self-efficacy was in realizing that teaching these ideas is acceptable and I will be able to take some of the ideas into my planning for future years. I look forward to showing more students that they do have the power to read texts with a critical lens.”

**General Findings**

In general, the data indicates that failing multiple state assessments and receiving multiple interventions reduced students’ sense of self-efficacy and increased negative feelings toward literacy tasks. However, engaging in critical literacy questioning did appear to be experienced positively by participants, increasing their average self-reported self-efficacy.

Regarding the teacher’s experience, the use of critical literacy questioning with the students in her course was experienced in a mostly positive way by Mrs. Green when focusing her responses on the students in her classroom. However, anxiety complicated her experience as she reflected on what others might think, including members of the community and the researcher observing the unit.

**Analysis of Data Based on Research Questions**

**Question 1: The Effect of Critical Literacy Questioning on Students’ Self-Efficacy**

The data indicated that, when supported with certain conditions, students repeatedly enrolled in intervention because of failed standardized assessments were positively impacted by engaging in critical literacy questioning. The conditions required for students benefit from critical literacy questioning include feelings of safety and comfort, which supported students in engaging, especially publicly. Successful strategies
used to build safety and comfort included employing low-stakes opportunities to share thoughts and the presence of a teacher who maintained objectivity while facilitating conversations.

**Question 2: The Teacher’s Experience with Critical Literacy Questioning**

Throughout the course of our study, Mrs. Green indicated a complex experience with the use of critical literacy questioning in her classroom. In multiple instances, she described increased excitement and a greater sense of fulfillment and job satisfaction as she used practices that were “right up her alley” with students. Feelings of anxiety began to arise, though, as the audience of her work moved beyond the students in her classroom. Mrs. Green reported ongoing feelings of increased anxiety regarding the content of the unit throughout the beginning of our study, but later expressed an increased belief in her ability to navigate these issues after a successful attempt at incorporating critical literacy questioning within the lesson of our research project. The data also indicate that participating in what is perceived as “formal” research, wherein an outside researcher observes the teacher, especially if that researcher had a hand in creating the day’s materials, increased Mrs. Green’s anxiety in the classroom throughout the study. Though seemingly unrelated to the initial research question, which focuses on critical literacy questioning, this additional theme brings to light a general fear of judgment that Mrs. Green experienced when engaging in work that may have been perceived as politically controversial.

**Summary**
For this study, I employed pre and post-unit surveys, observational notes, and semi-structured interviews to gather rich data about critical literacy questioning’s impact on students’ self-efficacy in relation to literacy-based experiences and how the use of these practices were experienced by the teacher hosting the study. Using thematic coding, the data indicated positive outcomes in students’ self-efficacy and a complex experience for the teacher hosting. Additionally, conditions that increased the effectiveness of critical literacy questioning for students’ self-efficacy and improved the experience of the classroom teacher were identified. For students, the ability to respond with some level of anonymity increased their senses of safety and, thus, their engagement with the questioning. For the teacher, developing a relationship, supporting her as she navigated fear around community pushback, and clearing the way for increased ownership over daily lessons would have improved her overall experience.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study focused on the negative impact of repeated intervention on the self-efficacy of students who were repeatedly identified for intervention based on standardized assessment scores. Standardized assessments have for years, disproportionately identified students of color and economically marginalized students as needing intervention because of failed assessments (Au, 2008). With repeated failures negatively impacting a learner’s self-efficacy towards literacy tasks (Walker, 2003), the students repeatedly identified are often trapped in a cycle of testing and intervention as they continue to lack the confidence needed to engage fully in learning activities and perform their best on assessments.

In response, the study investigated whether the use of critical literacy questioning would increase students’ self-efficacy when engaging in literacy tasks. It also examined how critical literacy questioning as an instructional tool was experienced by the teacher. Specifically, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the impact of critical questioning on the self-efficacy of students who are repeatedly identified for literacy intervention because of failed standardized assessments?

2. How is the use of critical literacy questioning experienced by the teacher of a secondary intervention course serving these students?
Study outcomes indicated that critical literacy questioning positively impacted students’ self-efficacy when classroom conditions make them feel safe to participate and engage. Specifically, students illustrated a need for teacher objectivity and a preference for responding anonymously. Mrs. Green, the teacher participant, reported a more complex experience, including not only increased job satisfaction but also increased anxiety.

The rest of this chapter will focus on how the findings of this study relate to the existing literature on self-efficacy and critical literacy questioning. It will provide recommendations for future practice and a plan for sharing this information with others in the district. A reminder of the study’s limitations will be provided before suggestions for future research are shared. And finally, Chapter 5 will end with a brief summary of all of this information.

**Results and the Literature Review**

The broader findings regarding students’ self-efficacy are consistent with the literature shared in Chapter 2. The pre-unit survey indicated that students who had repeatedly failed their standardized assessments, or in other words had not experienced “mastery experiences” on these assessments (Selden & Gutierrez, 2022), reported low self-efficacy on the Likert-scale and, as a result, negative feelings around a variety of literacy-based experiences in their open-ended responses. However, through the use of critical literacy questioning, which shows value for students’ thoughts and experiences (Luke & Woods, 2009; Luke 2012; McLaughlin & Devgood, 2009), students, on average, reported increased self-efficacy on their post-unit survey. Moreover, they described feeling respected and cared about in class and, further, described feeling more engaged in class during their end-of-unit interviews.
Findings in the study that are more related to the emotional experience and needs of students are also consistent with research, though maybe to degrees not originally anticipated. First, students in the study indicated their engagement increased because of critical literacy’s focus on authentic, compelling topics because of the texts they selected in class and the topics with which they engaged and selected for their final projects. This is consistent with scholars’ description of the approach and its appeal to students, especially students who have experienced marginalization (Luke & Woods, 2009; Luke, 2012; Fisher et al., 2021). Another trend consistent with the research was students’ need for safety in order to engage with critical literacy questioning. Scholars describe students’ need to feel safe and empowered (Luke & Woods, 2009; Luke 2012) in order to engage in critical literacy questioning well; however, students’ preference for anonymity and initial resistance to speaking aloud suggest that emotional safety was perhaps a greater need than we originally believed. This increased need for safety, including students’ preference for anonymity throughout the intervention, may be partially related to the current political climate. Given that news outlets, social media platforms, and other “texts” that students engage with daily portray contentious disagreements among those involved, there may be increased fear around sharing one’s opinions and making it open for others to critique.

Regarding research question two, the teacher’s experience, the trends were also consistent with existing literature. Specifically, Picower (2011) notes that early career teachers engaging in work aligned to social justice often feel increased anxiety as they experience pressure from a variety of campus and community stakeholders to discontinue or camouflage their work. However, she also notes that following through with the use of
social justice methods can result in increased job satisfaction for teachers. The findings of this study mimicked Picower’s (2011) findings, with Mrs. Green reporting in several instances that she was anxious about receiving pushback from parents or other staff members regarding the content of the unit, but, ultimately, demonstrating that engaging in unit with her students gave her more fulfillment at work.

Though Mrs. Green was not an early career teacher, her experience was very similar. Again, it is possible that this is because of the current political climate, especially the political climate around controversial novels and topics of discussion in the classroom. Given the increased attention and criticism toward classroom novels and topics over the last few years, it is understandable that she would experience increased anxiety around utilizing classroom curriculum that may cause issues for her at work.

**Practice Recommendations**

Based on study outcomes, there are recommendations for both teacher and student supports when using critical literacy questioning to increase self-efficacy among students who have repeatedly engaged in intervention. Given that the success of any curricular or instructional approach depends on the teacher delivering it, the recommendations will begin with recommendations supporting teacher success.

Support and collaboration are critical for teachers as they utilize critical literacy questioning with students. As Picower (2011) found, teachers engaging in work aligned to social justice who feel supported by peers engaging in similar work and experiencing similar challenges were more successful. Thus, in order to support classroom teachers who may want to utilize critical literacy questioning, the creation of a small cohort of teachers who meet regularly to brainstorm prior to instruction and problem solve along
the way would make the process less anxiety-inducing for teachers, supporting its overall success in the classroom. A small cohort of teachers could also help support teachers in terms of personal reflection and growth. In alignment with Picower’s (2011) findings, this time with peers engaged in similar work would create a space for teachers to talk through their challenges, reflect on their impact in the classroom, receive suggestions or insights from colleagues, and to have a trusted group of educators to provide critical feedback. The safety of a small group of trusted colleagues could reduce participants’ fear and set the stage for meaningful professional reflection and growth.

Additionally, there are recommendations for instructional moves teachers can make to create a more positive emotional experience for students as they engage with critical literacy questioning in class. First, especially for students who indicate anxiety around verbal participation, the inclusion of low-stakes opportunities to share thoughts and opinions using a student-friendly format, like Pear Deck, as a launching-off point is valuable for both building community and for building the sense of safety that is needed in the classroom in order for students to engage in the work. Another recommendation is the incorporation of engaging, relevant course content for students to choose from during class time. The combination of engaging, compelling content alongside handing over decision-making power to students creates both more positive feelings for students, like engagement and curiosity, and implies value and respect for students’ interests and perspectives. Both proved to be important in building a more positive experience for students and creating the conditions for students’ self-efficacy to grow.

In short, taking thoughtful steps to create the appropriate emotional environment for students and teachers is essential when employing critical literacy questioning to
increase student self-efficacy. Both teachers and students make themselves vulnerable in some way when using this strategy. Taking steps to create safe spaces for that vulnerability and utilizing content that sets the stage for positive learning experiences will support critical literacy questioning in having a positive impact in the classroom.

**Implementation Plan**

Presently, two major focus points in our district are early literacy skills and secondary literacy as part of college, career, and military readiness. Since the findings of the study are related to literacy, I will share them with my team, the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support team, and also with the Secondary Reading and Language Arts Curriculum Coordinator within our district. These stakeholders support our literacy intervention and English teachers through professional learning and curricular and instructional guidance. The outcomes of the study will be presented to these leaders in preparation for planning professional learning opportunities for our teachers. This learning typically occurs at the beginning and middle of the year during Job Alike, professional learning days wherein teachers of the same courses come together to reflect, collaborate, and learn about effective practices.

Also, though I no longer work as an instructional coach supporting English teachers, I do coordinate our district’s summer learning opportunities, which are used for intervention in several subject areas. In the fall, the Teaching and Learning Department meets to reflect on the previous year’s data and revise programming for the upcoming year. The findings of this study will also be presented to district leaders and stakeholders at this time. As we revise the curriculum for secondary English students who enroll in English summer courses, we may be able to use the themes from the study to help guide
some of our curricular revisions. Specifically, we can incorporate assessments of students’ self-efficacy early in the course to determine if the findings may be relevant for students enrolled, and, if so, we can employ critical literacy questions and assignments similar to those used in the study as well as the strategy of incorporating daily low-stakes opportunities for sharing.

As we prepare professional learning for teachers before summer learning, the findings regarding the teacher’s experience may also be relevant. An assessment of teachers’ familiarity and comfort with critical literacy questioning would be needed to determine what professional learning would need to take place. In general, though, practice with creating the appropriate classroom atmosphere (emotional safety, teacher objectivity) would likely be helpful. Additionally, the creation of a cohort of teachers who have scheduled times to meet, brainstorm, and reflect would likely support teacher success as well.

**Reflection on Action Research and Methodology**

The most evident piece of learning I experienced through this action research study relates to planning more intentionally for human elements in the study. Specifically, though the student’s engagement with the strategy and their preference for authentic learning opportunities aligned with what I expected prior to the study, I did not anticipate the depth of students’ hesitance to share aloud or the teacher’s anxiety around participating in action research and observation. Had I understood these factors more prior to the study, I would have approached my methodology differently.
Because of critical literacy’s focus on empowering students, lesson plans that use critical literacy questioning often incorporate frequent opportunities for student discussion. Thus, in our early planning meetings, Mrs. Green and I ensured there were lots of opportunities for students to talk in class. Knowing that safety and comfort would be needed, we agreed to allow students to choose their seats, believing that being among friends would help facilitate more conversation. After the first classes, though, she and I were both surprised at just how hesitant students were to talk aloud, both in small group and whole-class structures. We assumed teenagers, sitting among friends, would be eager to share their thoughts and opinions, but we were mistaken.

If I were to recreate the methodology for the study, I would include pre-intervention and post-intervention data collection around student comfort in class discussion. A strong approach would be to observe several classes prior to the study and tally student participation before any interventions, doing the same at the end of the study as well to see if there were any growth. Additionally, revising the pre-unit and post-unit surveys to include both a Likert-scale question and an open-ended question about students’ confidence in sharing their thoughts verbally during literacy courses would have strengthened the study as well, given that participation in discussion in a cornerstone of critical literacy and is likely indicative of students’ self-efficacy as well.

Another humanistic element I did not anticipate that would have changed my methodology was the anxiety the teacher reported around having an observer in the classroom. I wonder if my presence, especially given my history as an instructional coach in the district, impacted the delivery of the lessons or the climate of the classroom. In response, recording the lessons and using the recordings to generate observational notes
may have been more beneficial. Other benefits to this change in methodology include the ability to watch and refer to specific details of the lesson with the teacher in our weekly meetings and the ability to revisit participants’ responses and participation, ensuring more valid data in the end as well.

**Limitations**

Though this research provided valuable insights, it does also have limitations that should be considered. The major limitations center around its setting on only one campus in the district, in only one practical writing course, and with a small sample size of participants. Though these choices were necessary to ensure the intention of the study was maintained throughout the unit and to ensure we were able to gather detailed, accurate, and participant-validated data, they do not represent as wide of a range of experiences as a multi-campus or multi-course study could have offered. Other limitations include the implementation of the intervention over only one unit lasting four and a half weeks. A longer, more longitudinal study might have brought to light more insights and demonstrated if critical literacy questioning would be engaging and empowering for students long-term, or if part of its impact in the study was in its novelty during this short unit.

**Recommended Future Research**

In the future, there is a wide range of valuable additional research opportunities related to this study. Within the instructional plans for this unit, for example, we utilized a combination of contemporary, young adult fiction and current news stories and non-fiction pieces. It would be interesting to compare students’ responses when classical literature, literature from other genres (like poetry), or historical nonfiction were
questioned critically. Additionally, this course took place in a literacy intervention course. However, another interesting investigation might include using critical literacy questioning in other content-area courses, like social studies, world languages, career and technical courses, and more. Would expanded use of critical literacy questioning in other content areas increase students’ self-efficacy as they engage in texts and discussions in their other courses?

Finally, as mentioned in Chapter 3, the practical writing course is sometimes used as an elective for students who need additional credits for graduation but do not have a need to engage in literacy intervention because of a failed literacy assessment. It would be interesting and valuable to complete a comparative study looking at the impact on students in both situations to see if critical literacy questioning was experienced in similar or different ways among student groups. This information could inform teachers of these courses and help them make appropriate curricular and instructional choices based on their course’s student enrollment.

**Summary**

Ultimately, this study suggests that critical literacy questioning, on average, increased student self-efficacy among participants. Additionally, although it did appear to increase her anxiety, it also increased the teacher’s overall job satisfaction. For those who are interested in using critical literacy questioning with students who have been repeatedly enrolled in intervention, the creation of a small cohort of educators engaging in the work is recommended to better support the teacher in its implementation. Likewise, the inclusion of low-stakes opportunities for sharing, student choice, and engaging and
relevant course content also are also recommended because of their positive impact on students’ experience.
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APPENDIX A

PRE-INTERVENTION SELF-EFFICACY SURVEY

Questions were copied and pasted into a Google Form for efficient data collection consistent with resources the teacher already uses with students.

Name

In general, I would rate my confidence in ELA courses:

Very Low Confidence
1
2
3
4
5

Very High Confidence

Describe your experience with ELA courses. Have you done well in these classes in the past? Have you enjoyed these class? Have you felt confident in your ability to do well?

In general, how confident do you feel when you engage in work (at school or outside of school) that is related to literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening)?

Very Low Confidence
1
2
3
4
5

Very High Confidence
Describe the thoughts or feelings you have when you engage with work that is related to literacy. Are they positive or negative thoughts? Are there certain things about the work or how it is assigned that make you feel more or less confident as you complete it?

Describe a time when you were engaged with something related to literacy (reading, writing, speaking) and you felt proud of and confident in your abilities and/or work. (This does not need to have occurred in an ELA course.)

In general, I would rate my confidence on the STAAR End of Course exam:

1. Very Low Confidence
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. Very High Confidence

In high school, there are End of Course exams associated with your ELA courses. What has your experience with those tests been like? Have you felt confident taking those exams? How have the exams impacted your high school experience?

Do you feel that your education has prepared you to confidently read, write, speak, and listen in real-life situations after graduation? Why or why not? What thoughts or feelings do you have about your preparedness after graduation?
APPENDIX B

POST-UNIT SELF-EFFICACY SURVEY

Name

In general, I would rate my confidence in English courses:

Very Low Confidence

1
2
3
4
5

Very High Confidence

Describe your experience in English courses. Have you done well in these classes in the past? Have you enjoyed these class? Have you felt confident in your ability to do well?

In general, how confident do you feel when you do work in your English classes (reading, writing, speaking)?

Very Low Confidence

1
2
3
4
5

Very High Confidence

What kind of thoughts do you have when you do English work? Positive or negative? Are there any kinds of assignments in English courses that make you feel more or less confident?
Was there anything in this unit (The Hate U Give and stating your own perspective) that you felt confident while completing?

In general, I would rate my confidence on the English STAAR test as...

1. Very Low Confidence
2.  
3.  
4.  
5. Very High Confidence

In high school, you take STAAR tests for some of your classes. How have you felt about those tests in the past? How do you feel about them now?

Do you feel like your English classes have prepared you to confidently read, write, speak, and listen in real-life situations after graduation? Why or why not?

In this unit, we read The Hate U Give and focused on your perspective on a variety of issues, some big and some small issues.

Is there anything else you want to share with us about what you did or did not like during this unit? Is there anything you want to share about what made you feel more or less confident in yourself during this unit?
APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are you doing for your final project? What lesson and texts did you select for your unit so far?

2. Did you feel encouraged or empowered to critique others’ opinions in this unit and to develop and express your own perspective and opinions? Why or why not?

3. How confident did you feel about literacy-related work (reading, writing, listening, speaking) before this unit?

4. Do you think being encouraged to critique authors’ opinions and being encouraged to share your own thoughts has made you feel more confident in this class? Why or why not?
APPENDIX D

DESCRIPTION OF TEXT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*The Hate U Give* is a young adult fiction novel written by Angie Thomas. In the story, the main character, Star, is an African-American student at a predominantly-White, private high school. She describes grappling with multiple identities as she travels back and forth from her home neighborhood and culture to her private school, where she portrays a different personality. Early in the text, Star’s close friend is the victim of police violence, which appears to be racially-motivated. The rest of the text follows Star as she grapples with the emotional, ethical, cultural, and other conflicts that arise in the wake of her friend’s murder.

*The Hate U Give* depicts an African-American or Black perspective. The inclusion of multiple titles, depicting the experiences of a variety of cultures, for students to choose from is recommended. Lists of diverse young adult literature options can be found at the websites below.

- American Library Association:
  
  https://www.ala.org/advocacy/literacy/inclusive-booklists

- National Council of Teachers of English:
  
  https://ncte.org/blog/category/booklists/

- The Young Adult Library Services Association: https://www.ala.org/ysla/