HOW STUDENTS' CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH TEXT AND SELF-PERCEPTIONS AS LITERATE LEARNERS CAN EXPLAIN LITERACY PERFORMANCE AND INFORM CLASSROOM LITERACY PRACTICE

by

Michelle M. Hasty

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Middle Tennessee State University
2014

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Cyrille Magne, Chair

Dr. Jean Gilliam Fain

Dr. Aleka Blackwell

ABSTRACT

In this study, the author analyzed the self-perceptions of middle grade students as literate learners and the relationship between critical engagement with text and writing performance through narrative inquiry, grounded theory, constant comparative method and Discourse analysis. Multiple data sources converged to show how these eighth graders viewed their own past and present literacy experiences, their in and out of school literacy practices, their strengths and areas for growth in reading and writing skills, and their understandings of the elements or skills necessary for good reading and writing including Literate Learner profiles, paired student interviews, focus group follow-up questions, and transcribed classroom conversations. The author employed sociocultural and critical literacy theories and engagement and motivation research to develop from the findings a model of how students' beliefs about themselves as literate learners as well as their insights about what counts as literacy practices could connect with classroom reading and writing events. Data patterns revealed that students' self-perceptions were heavily influenced by external measures, and that students universally wished to improve literacy skills, but lack of clarity existed about how to achieve these goals. The author contended that consideration of students' self-perceptions and reading interests, connections between in and out of school literacy practices, and collaboration between students and teachers to clarify steps necessary for progress are significant implications for classroom literacy instruction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my dissertation committee for their support and encouragement throughout this process. I gratefully thank Dr. Fain for countless hours of wise counsel from beginning to end; her expertise in qualitative methods, sociocultural work, and dedication to research relevant to teachers and students were invaluable. Dr. Magne offered thoughtful feedback and aided in the affective component of this study. Dr. Blackwell pushed my thinking and offered insights into linguistic and discourse analysis that strengthened my work and helped me to view the study from a different perspective.

Dr. Kim offered encouragement and confident assurance that I could finish this spring. Dr. Elleman gave thoughtful and thorough feedback on numerous versions of a Design paper that helped shape the idea for this study and promised me that I would survive statistics.

Katie Schrodt helped enormously with the interviews for this project, and even more so by keeping me from quitting when all went awry on the first day of work in the chaos of a middle school library.

I was able to do this work because of a vast village of support. My husband, Michael, became head cook and bottle-washer in addition to his real job of saving lives and his other real job of PTO president. My sons, Jackson, Bennett, Mason, and Baker gave me humor, hope, faith in persistence, and math skills by osmosis. My parents, Ron and Brenda Medlin, have shown me the joy of a life filled by the love of children and stories and teaching, and the essential lessons of showing up and working hard. They and my parents-in-law, Don and Kathryn Hasty, came to the

rescue many, many times with meals and grandson entertainment. Marta Parsons ran our tight ship with the tough love and amazing expertise that only a former Catholic school teacher-turned probation officer could.

I want to acknowledge the administration at the middle school where this project took place. The executive and assistant principal welcomed me into the school, supported and encouraged my work with the students, and made me wish every school could have the kind of brilliant and caring leadership they bring to their middle school.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the twelve students I worked with this semester. They are bright, thoughtful, creative young men and women, and their curiosity, challenging questions, and engagement in the stories we read together and wrote about made every moment of work worthwhile.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

American literacy instruction does not adequately prepare many of our middle or high school students for the reading and writing skills demanded by college or the workforce. Results from the Nation's Report Card in 2011 show that fourth and eighth grade reading scores have remained nearly stagnant since 2009, with only a one point gain in the eighth grade scores and no gain at the fourth grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The Report Card also shows that 73 percent of students in eighth and twelfth grades are not proficient in writing (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). One-fifth of college freshmen need remedial reading courses, and one-third of college freshmen are not ready for college composition courses (Southern Regional Education Board, 2006; ACT, 2005).

This dissertation is a qualitative, narrative analysis telling the story of a group of middle school students engaged in critical literacy practices. Narrative inquiry can employ a three-dimensional framework, including a temporal space termed *continuity* (Clandindin & Connelly, 2000). This space explores the past, present, and future experiences or events or contexts that help tell the participants' story more fully. This introduction examines the historical context of response to text in order to provide a multi-faceted lens through which the story can be more holistically viewed.

More than a decade has passed since the National Reading Panel (NRP) issued its findings on evidence-based methods, and yet in spite of a demand for research-based practices in teaching reading, the picture of American reading

achievement remains rather dismal. As Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky (2009) contended, education is not supporting adolescents adequately because, among other reasons, a gap exists "in what we know and what we do" (p. 13).

Even prior to the NRP, much research attention was paid to reading instruction: Adams's (1990) model for learning to read and the emphasis on systematic phonics has been considered essential, and four waves of reading comprehension strategy instruction have provided information on best practice reading instruction for older students (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). Why then, when a plethora of work on reading and writing exists, are schools unable to produce better results? Some experts argue that the focus on standardized testing is to blame, as it has systematically narrowed the curriculum (Hillocks, 2002; Au, 2007). Other experts cite comparisons between America's top students and those in other countries and claim that we are actually more competitive than is often touted by politicians, that the discrepancies in achievement are a combination of sampling error, inappropriate comparisons between and among tests, and ignoring the socioeconomic circumstances of American students which do not exist in other countries due to tracking policies (Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013). Certainly policy-makers have determined that teachers are largely responsible for the problem and believe, therefore, that higher standards and tougher accountability measures will help student achievement (US Department of Education, 2010).

Lack of literacy gains.

A comprehensive answer to the difficult question of why students are not making better gains in reading and writing across the country is complex and multi-

faceted: 1) students are not writing enough in English Language Arts (ELA) classes, especially the kinds of writing that require higher level thinking, such as critical response to text, 2) reading and writing historically have been separated and taught as two sets of discrete skills rather than reciprocally related, and 3) the affective dimension of learning has been separated from cognition, so student engagement in literacy practices has not been fully explored.

Graham and Hebert's meta-analysis, *Writing to Read*, (2010) reports that personal written response to text is effective for both reading comprehension and improving quality of writing. Particularly for older students, written expression can provide a representation of learning that other forms of assessment may not. A more thorough understanding of text can occur when the reader forms his own ideas, analyzing, evaluating, or elaborating on what he has read through a writing task (Fish, 1980; Langer, 1990). Additionally, when a student constructs his or her own understanding of information through an analytical or critical writing process, the creation of the composition leaves an enduring understanding of the material (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Marshall, 1987, Newell, Susynski, & Weingart, 1989).

In spite of this evidence, critical written response to text is not a common instructional tool in secondary English Language Arts courses today. When Applebee & Langer (2011) recently studied 260 classrooms in 20 secondary schools in 5 states for the National Study of Writing Instruction, they focused on changes in writing instruction and the amount and types of writing done in the classroom over the past thirty years, since Applebee, Lehr, and Auten's 1981 study, *Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas.* In 2011, the researchers observed

some positive changes from 30 years ago; for example, teachers' response to students' writing had shifted from teacher-centered assessment to a more collaborative dialogue, yet students spent little time on written expression or using writing as a tool for critical thinking (Applebee & Langer, 2011).

Absence of critical response.

Why is writing as critical response to text so conspicuously absent in classrooms today? One part of the answer lies in where we are now—in the current political climate of our education system. Recent focus on accountability and teacher evaluations discourage teachers from classroom writing, a time-consuming activity, because standardized tests contain scant writing, and state writing assessments only occur at certain grade levels (Applebee, 2011). High-stakes testing has created an atmosphere where little critical or analytical writing takes place in the classroom, even as recent research shows extended written response to text can enhance students' understanding of text, and writing more in the classroom can help students become stronger readers and writers (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Applebee, 2011).

Separation of reading and writing.

Another part of the answer to why more critical writing is not required in secondary schools lies in the historical roots of literacy instruction. By its very nature, critical written response requires an integration of reading and writing. Historically, these two components of English Language Arts have been separated. Written response to text as a tool to enhance reading comprehension is a fairly new concept in the secondary American classroom. While writing instruction has existed

as part of education since our country's inception, the definition and implications of writing instruction, and even the word *composition*, have shifted and evolved across the centuries. In early America, writing instruction focused on penmanship for younger students (Monaghan, 2007), and for older students, learning to imitate a model provided by Latin or Greek scholars, such as Virgil or Ovid, for the purpose of oration (Wright & Halloran, 2001). Writing was connected with reading only in the sense that the composition would be read aloud as a performance. Additionally, writing instruction served an economic purpose: writing schools existed to teach young men bookkeeping skills or to prepare students for college or a ministerial career (Monaghan, 1991).

As literacy widened among the newly independent American population, English literature courses began to replace Latin, and writing in the vernacular became more widely accepted (Russell, 2006). During the period following the Civil War, college English departments developed, eclipsing the influence of Latin curricula, but the departments separated literature study from rhetorical composition, so reading and writing were divided, with writing taking a position of lesser importance and esteem (Russell, 2006). Ironically, as access to writing widened through education and access to writing materials, the teaching of writing became less significant, less prestigious, and was relegated to a marginal position in the curriculum. Several interpretations of the reasons behind this separation exist: Berlin (1987) saw the late 19th century split as an echo of the ancient conflict between rhetoric and poetic, whereas Miller (1991) viewed the relationship in terms of a social hierarchy, with literature in a top-rung position and composition a

lower-rung. Russell (1992) believed the divide was a result of institutional policy as the first-year composition courses were as means of filtering out students who were not academically competent to progress forward into the literature courses.

Constructivism versus new criticism.

Whereas in 1840 English was a minor subject, with a basic skills crisis following the Civil War and complaints from colleges that secondary schools were not adequately preparing young people for college, by 1900, English was the most important part of the high school curriculum, and composition was the subject's most important element (Judy, 1979). In the early part of the 20th century, John Dewey and other Progressives believed that students would be best prepared for citizenship if they were active agents of their own learning, by constructing knowledge for themselves through a transactional process of inquiry (Tracey and Morrow 2006). The theory of knowledge as transaction laid the groundwork for Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reader response, which will be discussed at length later in this paper (Connell, 1996). Rosenblatt (1978) believed that the reader's engagement with the text was central to the reading experience, as opposed to the centrality of the text posited by the New Criticism, the literary theory developed by the Fugitive poets at Vanderbilt University led by John Crowe Ransom, in an attempt to combat scientific positivism that had overshadowed literature as a form of knowledge in and of itself (Jancovich, 1993).

Personal response and writing as inquiry.

It was New Criticism and not the transactional theory that dominated reading instruction through the late 1960s when the Dartmouth Conference ushered

in a reformation of the English curriculum (Hickman & McIntyre, 2012). For those present at the Dartmouth Conference—representatives from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom—the English curriculum had been long focused on teacher and text to the exclusion of the student (Smagorinsky, 2002). The conference yielded two notable results, the publication of John Dixon's *Growth Through English*, and the birth of the National Writing Project; both entities moved the field away from skills-based writing based on a behaviorist model favoring a constructivist approach of natural, individual development based on inquiry and exploration (Lieberman and Wood, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2002). *Growth Through English* advocated the discovery aspect of writing, assignments that drew on the students' personal experiences as well as on knowledge outside their academic realms rather than the reporting of facts or accurate interpretations (Smagorinsky, 2002). The National Writing Project began as a way for teachers of writing to come together to learn from one another, to ask questions and to create solutions themselves, rather than conforming to expectations set by standards or others outside the classroom (Lieberman & Wood, 2002).

The pendulum did not swing entirely to the side or personal or critical response writing, however. In 1983, the National Commission on Education issued the scathing report of America's kindergarten through twelfth grade educational status in *A Nation at Risk* (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). A basic skills crisis ensued, and writing again became disassociated with reading as the basic skill grammar effectively diminished written response. Teaching grammar in isolation has been shown by a substantial research to have negative effects on writing, yet often these

discrete skills are included in English Language Arts curricula (Weaver 1996; Graham & Perin, 2007). Although *A Nation at Risk*'s claim that American students are not academically competitive with global peers was debated and disputed, this document steered a laser focus on accountability in the education field through empirical assessment. In addition to the difficulty in assessing writing objectively, personal writing was also judged by some writing experts to offer "little more than self-centered writing" (Stotsky, 1996, p. 773). The issue of how much of the writer's voice should be heard relates to the earlier dichotomy between reader and text: which is more powerful, the reader's or the text's, and which voice should be heard?

Current Focus in Literacy Instruction

The reader's voice has largely been ignored even while, at the simplest level, school literacy events must involve three essential components: the teacher, the task, and the student. Rigorous evaluation systems have been implemented for teachers looking at every aspect of teaching from daily lesson plans to individual gains students make over the course of the school year through the Value-Added Model. Research has provided ample evidence for the second part of the equation, what works in reading and writing instruction (e.g., NRP, 2000; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham and Hebert, 2010, Wilkinson & Son, 2011). What has received far less attention is the third component in the literacy equation—the student. What role does the student play in his or her own learning?

Although some substantial research has been done on the importance of student motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Rueda, 2006), these elements are difficult to

quantify or measure, and consequently have not shared the limelight in educational policy or practice in the way that teacher accountability or evidence-based practices have of late. That motivation is positively correlated with how much and how often students read is well established (Miller & Meece, 1997) as is the fact that the strong predictor of reading, intrinsic motivation, frequently declines as students progress through elementary school (Harter, 1981; Wigfield et al. 1987). Also related to motivation is an emotional aspect, self-efficacy, or how capable a student believes herself to be of performing a particular task. Schunk and Rice (1997) found self-efficacy to predict whether student would attempt more challenging work, persist in the attempt or give up more challenging work, and whether or not a student would perform better on different types of work. It is evident that more than cognition or discrete academic skills are involved in learning.

Findings from neuroscience regarding affective aspects of thinking, such as engagement, attention, and motivation can be integrated with existing theories of learning to create a more holistic framework for reading pedagogy, one that addresses this third, often-ignored component of the literacy equation, the student himself. Utilizing recent neuroscientific research linking emotion, motivation, and attention to cognition will provide a richer and more complete heuristic for helping students become stronger and more engaged readers.

Integration of reading and writing.

Educational reform has gained momentum since the 1980s becoming an ever-increasing political tool at local and federal levels, and writing instruction, especially writing in response to text, has been caught between opposing forces of

moving forward and reaching back. Ironically, the current educational-political movement toward the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Program for the Assessment of College and Career Readiness (PARCC) assessments simultaneously emphasizes more classroom writing, particularly writing in analytical and critical ways, and also harkens back to the early 20th century with a New Criticism approach insisting that only the text's voice should be heard (Beers & Probst, 2013). One way for classroom literacy practices to reconcile these two opposing sides is through critical literacy instruction. Critical literacy, discussed more fully in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, is the act of examining texts through a lens that explores the social, political, and economic features of the piece, the issues of power, justice, voices heard and voices silenced or missing (Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, Harste, & Tate, 2013).

With the recent adoption of the CCSS, more writing will inevitably occur in classrooms, even at the earliest grades, since as the note concluding the Anchor Standards for Writing asserts, "students must devote significant time and effort to writing, producing numerous pieces over short and extended time frames throughout the year" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Many states are shifting their own state writing assessments to align more precisely with the CCSS and PARCC, the assessment framework accompanying the standards. Additionally, reading and writing will likely be reunited into a single course, a recommendation by educational leaders transitioning to the CCSS. For example, From Tennessee's Response to Intervention Handbook from the Tennessee State Board of Education:

> It is strongly recommend that all schools move away from the practice of separating ELA instruction into Reading and Language Arts classes and instead move toward a single, coherent, integrated ELA course model. The integrated nature of the CCSS, as reflected in the modules in the PARCC Model Content Frameworks, requires students to work across multiple strands at once. Separating reading from the work students do in writing and language violates the spirit and intent of the CCSS. (p.19)

Many states have recently reformed their standardized writing assessments to align more closely with the CCSS. In Tennessee, for example, brief prompts heavily reliant on personal connections and prior knowledge have been replaced by lengthy prompts requiring a great deal in the way of reading comprehension skills before the student even begins the writing process. The integration of reading and writing instruction into a single classroom as recommended by the RTI Handbook should be optimal as substantial research backs the positive effects of writing on reading comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Further, it is likely that as 46 states plus the District of Columbia have adopted the standards, that this kind of integration will become fairly commonplace. A rich opportunity then may emerge by reimagining literacy courses at the secondary level where reading and writing are much more closely tied than ever before. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010), governing body of the CCSS, claims its purpose is to promote true critical thinking, higher-level inquiry and analysis:

> Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews.

In fact, the recently reformed standardized writing tests, such Tennessee's new writing assessment, require a greater depth of thinking than previously required. A significant opportunity arises here as the CCSS, the RTI recommendations, and a substantial body of research supports the benefits of combining reading and writing instruction (Graham & Hebert, 2010). This recent emphasis on literacy, and particularly on written response to text, provides an important opportunity for classroom teachers. After more than a decade of research-based recommendations for reading and writing instruction (e.g., Graham & Perin, 2007, Graham & Hebert, 2010, Biancarosa & Snow, etc.), teachers can help students grow and progress as literate learners with the "deep, wide, and thoughtful engagement" the creators of the Standards intend by using critical literacy practices in the classroom (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). As these critical literacy practices occur, it is necessary for literacy researchers to explore what is happening in the classroom, how the practices affect students' literacy performance, and how the students' beliefs about themselves as readers and writers affect their literacy experiences.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to create a community of practice where students experience the kind of deep and thoughtful literacy engagement required by the CCSS through 1) sociocultural ideals of learner agency, collaboration among students and instructor, and attention to students' *funds of knowledge*, 2) the tenets of critical literacy, especially written response to text from a critical perspective, and 3) evidence-based reading and writing strategies to improve both reading comprehension and writing skills with narrative and informational texts.

Further, this study specifically attends to an aspect often ignored in education reform: student engagement. Recent findings from affective neuroscience assert that the long-held view in the education field of cognition and emotion as separate functions of the mind represents a false dichotomy (Immordino-Yang, 2011). By carefully examining student perceptions of themselves as literate learners through two Literate Learner Profiles—one created at the study's start, the other at the end—a better understanding of how students' self-efficacy, attention, and motivation for reading and writing practices explain their performances in these areas may emerge.

Research Questions

This narrative study addresses the following research questions: 1) What is the relationship between critical engagement with text and the writing performance of middle school students? 2) How can students' perceptions of themselves as critically literate learners inform classroom literacy instruction?

Relevance and Rationale for the Study

This study is especially relevant with the recent adoption of the CCSS, which call for close reading, deep and thoughtful engagement with texts, critical written response to texts, and the use of both narrative and informational texts. Also timely is the study's focus on critical written response in light of recent concern expressed by literacy scholars over implications of the CCSS. In a recent webinar presentation, Pearson (2012) suggests that the Publishers Criteria for the CCSS materials to ask only literal comprehension questions is problematic. If teachers use questions that only rely on information given in a passage or text, prior knowledge is entirely discounted as well as adopting a critical stance.

Additionally, the CCSS's focus on expository texts has been misinterpreted, in Short's (2013) view, and she further suggests the idea that texts must be either singularly narrative or expository is a false dichotomy. This study pairs narrative and expository texts for maximal understanding of concepts as well as inter-textual connections, and attention to critical literacy. Simon (2013) posits that the CCSS focus on writing may lead to a writing instruction becoming a deficit-based editing endeavor rather than an interactive inquiry where teachers ask students thoughtful and complex questions about their writing. This study examines through qualitative analysis an interactive inquiry between students and teacher as well as the writing that results from complex questions from a critical literacy framework that students will responds to in writing.

Finally, Scherff, Rush, Olsen, & Nemeth (2013) express concern that the CCSS's emphasis on the traditional literary canon may ignore student diversity and

students will not see themselves in the literature. The texts offered to the students for selection in this study were based on a deliberate attempt on the part of the researcher to allow the students to see themselves in the literature they read. The students are nearly all African American, and the fiction texts from which they selected were written by African American authors, and the characters are African American as well. The novels included *Out of My Mind,* by Sharon Draper; *Tears of a Tiger*, by Sharon Draper; *Elijah of Buxton,* by Christopher Paul Curtis; *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963,* by Christopher Paul Curtis, and *No Crystal Stair,* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson. All groups began with *Locomotion,* by Jacqueline Woodson. Reading expert Richard Allington (2011) asserted that what struggling readers need most is good books, and each of these novels has earned multiple awards, including the prestigious Newbery Honor and Coretta Scott King Awards.

These texts offer themes that typically appeal to adolescent readers: being misunderstood by parents and peers, being labeled and ostracized for differences, having to make difficult choices in the face of danger, and issues of power and justice. Each novel was paired with an informational text as well. *Living with Cerebral Palsy* by Susan H. Gray accompanied *Out of My Mind,* whose main character has cerebral palsy. Students learned that as Short (2013) contended, the categories of fiction and non-fiction may merge at times: facts and information appear in many of the fiction selections, just as the informational texts offer stories about people and events. For example, while *Living with Cerebral Palsy* (Gray, 2003) is an informational text, the book includes an inset section briefly narrating the lifestory of Christy Brown, a man who wrote about his own experience with cerebral palsy.

Learning how to distinguish between narrative and informational sections and how monitor and regulate their own reading of different types of texts was an important focus for both the reading and writing components of the Literacy Lab.

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

While quantitative measures can provide excellent information regarding student performance on literacy tasks, these assessments and studies do not *explain* that performance. The fact that students are not reading and writing as well as they should be is supported by substantial quantitative evidence. What is much less clear, however, is *why* this failure is happening. The instructional strategies utilized in this study were evidence-based practices to facilitate optimal reading and writing achievement.

Previous research has looked at specific aspects of self-concept & self-efficacy; I wanted to hear from students, from the "ground up," by asking broad, open questions to investigate how students would respond (Wigfield & Karpathathian, 1991; Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Employing qualitative methods such as grounded theory and narrative analysis allowed focused attention on the students' engagement and self-constructed identities of themselves as literate learners, their feelings and opinions regarding the texts and associated literacy instruction, and an understanding of how learning occurs socially within the community of practice. By integrating close attention to what students care about and understand while they practice evidence-based reading comprehension strategies and research-based writing strategies, this study provides a rich, thick description of not only students' performance on reading and writing tasks, but of

the affective dimension—their thoughts and feelings—while performing those tasks as well. Multiple data points, such as individual interviews, class discussions, the Literate Learner Profiles, writing assessments, and written responses to texts were analyzed for patterns, themes, and an overall narrative arc.

Finally, the design of this study, a fine, critical analysis of the text of the students' literacy experiences in the Literacy Lab reflects the critical literacy stance students learned about within the community of practice the researcher and students co-created. As the students learned to read and write about texts from a critical stance, attending to issues of power, missing voices, and justice, the researcher analyzed the verbal and written texts of the students' experience attending to these same issues. The overall structure of the analysis is a narrative inquiry, a story explaining what occurred in this Literacy Lab as the students were engaged in the texts they selected and as the students wrote critically about the texts. The narrative structure includes a temporal frame because the students' past literacy experiences, their present experiences in the Lab, and their goals for future literacy practices as well as the trajectory of their learning and reading/writing performance were explored in terms of the connections between and among these temporal elements.

For example, the students' past literacy experiences affect their present performance. Part of the narrative analysis structure, however, includes epiphanies or shifts in the story. As the students engaged in the reading and writing tasks, shifts or turning points occurred and their perceptions and performance grew and

changed. By carefully examining multiple data sources, rich, informative description of the students' experience emerged to address the research questions.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction, information on the background and history of the problem, research questions, the relevance and rationale for the study, and the rationale for qualitative methods. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature of the foundational sociocultural and New Literacies theories of learning in general and writing in particular, and of studies related to critical response to text, affective dimensions of cognition, and the reading and writing strategies employed in the Literacy Lab. The third chapter outlines the methods used in the study, the procedures for gathering the data, and a description of the materials used. This chapter also offers a description of the research context, the participants and the setting from which the Literacy Lab will operate. Chapter 4 shows the findings, what the data has revealed. Chapter 5 offers conclusions based on the findings, the limitations of the study, and implications for education and future research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Sociocultural Framework for Writing

Written response from a critical perspective is based on a sociocultural theoretical framework. The sociocultural pedagogy is primarily based on Dewey's (1916) theories of constructivism and Vygotsky's (1978) theories of learning as a social interaction. Constructivism posits that students are not blank slates to be filled with knowledge from the teacher, but rather that through inquiry, the student can construct his or her own meaning. This view fits well with Vygotsky's (1978) belief that learning comes from interaction, and according to the zone of proximal development, what a student is able to accomplish with help, is actually a truer test of her abilities than what she might do independently.

Rogoff's (1990) sociocultural model of a three-part learning framework is based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning as social interaction and the zone of proximal development as well as Dewey's (1916) theory of learning as a participatory and mutually mediating activity between the individual and the societal context in which he or she participated. The model is comprised of 1) apprenticeship, 2) guided participation, and 3) participatory appropriation. In the apprenticeship phase, the student learns the specific craft; the next phase, guided participation, allows the student to practice the craft, and in the third phase, the student is able to "appropriate the purpose," the activity, having participated in it, and most importantly, having experienced change through the activity (Dewey, 1916, p. 26). This model is different from other models of learning in that Rogoff (1994) emphasized the "transformation of participation itself" through shared

sociocultural endeavors, with the emphasis on the aspect of the participation being shared, as opposed to one group—usually the adult or the students—holding the power (p. 209). The ubiquitous terms "student-centered" or "teacher-centered," often employed to describe categories of classroom environments are myopic, according to Rogoff (1994). A third approach, Rogoff (1994) suggested, is that in a true community of practice, the interaction between and among social partners is active. Every member is actively engaged. The theory of active engagement as essential for learning is significant in both reading and writing practices, and will be examined more fully in connection with neuroscience later in this chapter.

Writing to learn.

In "A Sociocultural Theory of Writing," Prior (2008) asserted "writing involves dialogic processes of invention. Texts, as artifacts-in-activity, and the inscription of linguistic signs in some medium are parts of streams mediated, distributed, and multimodal activity" (p. 58). Written response to text, therefore, from a sociocultural perspective, can be viewed as an artifact, as a constructed or invented dialogue with the text to which the writer is responding. From an instructional framework where learning is viewed as a social interaction, the dialogic process may begin with classroom discussion about the text and then move to written response to that text, which might include collaborative writing as well as peer and instructor feedback. Clearly, the sociocultural writing process is iterative, and a writing workshop model that balances a commitment to the writing process—prewriting, writing, editing, and revising—fits well with the sociocultural ideals of

learning as social interaction and the zone of proximal development, where the teacher serves in a dialogic role rather than an authoritative one.

Early writing research, such as Emig's (1977) seminal work examining the "unique correspondence between learning and writing," was based on Bruner's (1971) three categories of modes of learning: 1) enactive—that we learn by doing, 2) iconic—that we learn by creating an image, and 3) representational—that we learn by restating in words (p. 124). Writing encompasses all three of these categories, bolstering Emig's (1977) claim that a special relationship between writing and learning exists.

Though some writing-to-learn activities do occur in classrooms, the process approach to writing often becomes devoid of the "discovery" aspect of writing; students are not constructing new ideas as they write because the formulaic process method has robbed them of the opportunity to critically think as they write (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1982; Applebee, 1984; Applebee & Langer, 2011; Langer, 2011). Britton et al. (1982) saw the discovery aspect as essential, believing that if children are asked to plan so precisely what they will say before they do say it, deeper learning will be precluded by the rigid planning process. For Britton et al. (1982), the teacher-learner dialogue, based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development and on learning as a social interaction, was essential.

An especially significant aspect of learning as social interaction includes the teacher's response to a student's writing. The teacher's response in written format has been the extensive work of Nancie Atwell (1988, 2007). In *The Reading Zone,* Atwell (2007) suggests a written correspondence between teacher and student can

help students become critical readers and writers. Teacher-student correspondence, a written version of Britton's (1975) teacher-learner dialogue, has been used by qualitative and quantitative researchers to examine the effects of this kind of interaction as students respond to the text through journals (Mucahy-Ernt & Rhyshewitch, 1994; Wong et al., 2002; VanManen, 2007).

New literacies and funds of knowledge.

Journal or letter writing may be particularly effective formats for students as these practices might be part of students' writing habits outside a school setting, activities students might choose to engage in on their own. The New Literacies approach examines the ways in which students' in and out of school literacies connect or disconnect (Street, 1995). For traditionally marginalized populations, the dominant forms of literacy practice and assessment may not reflect student' home literacy events, and even further, dominant forms may discount these out of school practices (Street, 1995). Pardoe (2000) suggests that this discounting inherently creates a deficit model where students' failings, according to dominant literacy ideologies are the focus for "fixing," rather than examining what strengths do exist and building from those strengths. Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales' (1992) theory of the *funds of knowledge* and Heath's (1982) work examining the rich literacy practices in impoverished communities have highlighted the fact that students do not come into classrooms without any knowledge or literacy practices, but rather that it is the dominant power structures of traditional education systems and traditional literacy ideology that do not value the students' and their families' home literacy activities.

Moll et al (1992) have shown that when a student's funds of knowledge are integrated into the classroom by a teacher who is aware of and interested in the out of school literacies the student and his family participate in, an engaging classroom literacy practice or curriculum can be designed. Similarly, Rogers (2009) showed a redesigned community of practice where students read literature relevant to their own lives; the knowledge students brought into the classroom was valued and used to frame discussions, empowering students whose history with school had been neither positive nor successful. Rogers (2009) referred to *co-constructing* a new story for these students where they were the active agents in their own learning, rather than passive vessels receiving the traditional or "correct" knowledge transmitted by the teacher holding the position of power. When the position of power shifts to the students, whether it is as simple as book choice, or as complex as creating a model similar to Freire's (1970), where marginalized populations are encouraged to explore the sources of their oppression, students' learning can transform from passive reception to active engagement.

Critical literacy.

It is this active engagement, as well as the exploration of text from a sociopolitical frame, Lewis (2000) envisions for students as she suggests a reconsideration of Rosenblatt's (1993) reader response theory. Lewis (2000) contends Rosenblatt's (1993) aesthetic stance, traditionally viewed as the as the "personal" or "experiential" aspect of reading could be better defined, more closely aligned to the original intent, as supported by Rosenblatt (1993) herself, to include critical and analytical aspects of reading. Still personal, response to text can be

expanded to include issues of power or missing voices, diverse perspectives, or reflection on how the "other" is treated (Lewis, 2000). McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) echo this refinement of reader response to include a critical stance where students are empowered to critique the text, much like Freire (1970) suggested, so they are not manipulated by it. This kind of critical, personal response can include the creation of new ideas, and the discovery process the student makes as he or she responds to the text in writing.

When students engage in analytic writing tasks, are they constructing their own meanings or simply reporting back to the teacher her own interpretation of the text? Quantitative measures can show whether or not students have written solid essays with high-level inferences, strong textual support, and grammatically correct language but a quantitative assessment cannot distinguish the student's thoughts from his or her teacher's. Scaffolding, teacher modeling, and guided practice are essential to optimal student learning, but the ultimate goal of education is to teach students to think independently (Rosenshine, 2012). The Common Core standards require this kind of independent and critical thinking, particularly in writing for secondary students (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010).

Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) argue that texts are not neutral, and the essence of critical literacy is helping students to develop an understanding of what biases exist in the text, that certain characters' voices are missing while others' are heard, the power structure within the text, and issues of justice (McLaughlin and deVgood, 2006). Teaching students to be Text Critics as opposed to blind consumers

is the fourth and arguably most complex level of the four resources for comprehending texts (Freebody, 1992; Luke & Freebody, 1997). By making transparent the fact that certain perspectives have traditionally been privileged, while others have been marginalized, students can approach texts with a critical lens (Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013).

Vasquez et al. (2013) cite three aspects of critical literacy: 1) self-reflexivity, the idea that teachers and researchers must evaluate their own assumptions and beliefs as they work with students, 2) theoretical knowledge, or the underlying principles guide teachers' and researchers' work, and 3) examining the personal to outgrow our current selves, which means exploring personal histories in order to understand what decisions we make (p. 36). The first component of critical literacy, the self-reflexivity, is a significant part of qualitative research in general and will be discussed more fully in the Methods section of this paper. The second component, the theoretical knowledge, will, for this study, be primarily comprised of the sociocultural and constructivist theories mentioned in the first section of the literature review.

Neuroscience's Connection to Literacy Practices

Critical literacy requires a high level of engagement with and attention to the text, and therefore, an exploration of the neuroscientific aspects contributes to the understanding of what happens when students engage in critical literacy practices. As suggested in the previous section of this paper, if students are to become text critics (Freebody & Luke, 1990), they must think well beyond the literal or surface information provided in a text and they must explore the deeper features of the text,

such as the social, cultural, political, and economic aspects. Immordino-Yang (2011) argues that the view held in the educational field dividing cognition from emotion is a false dichotomy. This belief, originating from Rene Decartes, claims that rational thought is a more sophisticated process of the mind, whereas, feeling or instinct generates from a more fundamental, lower process of the mind (Damasio, 2005). New discoveries connecting physiology, learning, and feeling have called into question the conventionally separate categories of nature and nurture (Casebeer & Churchland, 2003; Immordino-Yang & Fischer, 2010). These recent findings from affective neuroscience show that thinking and feeling actually work in tandem, and both processes involve the body and the brain (Immordino-Yang, 2011). From studies with patients who have suffered from frontal lobe lesions, it has been shown that even when there is no IQ or knowledge loss, these patients often have trouble making decisions or behaving in socially acceptable ways (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). It seems, then, that in order for a person to function optimally, he or she must be able to access both knowledge and emotion.

Posner and Rothbart (2005) echo this idea by their claim that emotion makes it possible to access the brain networks that support developing skills by regulating attention, motivation, and judging possible social and cognitive effects. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) use a ship's rudder as a helpful image in understanding the way in which emotion steers thinking; it is the emotional knowledge, they claim, that helps guide what would be typically considered rational thinking. Part of why this interdependency between thinking and feeling works, is that the human brain has evolved by surviving various pressures and continues to

evaluate environmental cues and to respond accordingly, sometimes sending signals through the body, such as a racing heart or shortness of breath in a dangerous situation, for example (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Similarly, the ability to cognitively and emotionally evaluate other people's thinking and feeling, such as what occurs when students connect with a character in a novel, for example, comes from the human ability to empathize. Originally developed as a survival mechanism, this ability now allows for compassion, altruism, and possibility of making decisions from a more complex framework than simply the need to preserve one's own life.

The brain's involvement in affective and cognitive processes.

Not only is it difficult to separate the affective aspects of learning from cognition, it is also complicated to parse out the individual affective aspects themselves, as emotion, motivation, and attention are highly related to one another. Looking at the parts of the brain involved in affective and cognitive processes can help explain why there is such interconnectivity. Attention's relationship to emotion and cognition can be a starting point in understanding these relationships. The ability to attend to text, for example, in literacy practices is essential. Even if a student possesses a thorough mastery of reading strategies or writing skills, if he does not attend to the text or the sentence he is constructing, the final result will not be successful. The brain's involvement in attention, according to Sarter, Gehring, and Kozak (2005) occurs to some extent through a "top-down" mechanism that is able to process cortical cholinergic input and then adjust attention as a response to that input. Sarter et al. (2005) posit a model of neural circuitry between the prefrontal/anterior cingulate and the mesolimbic region that receives information

and then modifies or suppresses that information depending on cognitive incentive. In other words, the part of the brain historically associated with cognition and decision-making, the prefrontal region, works in tandem with the limbic system, the part of the brain associated with emotion (Sarter et al., 2005).

Wagner, Jonides, and Reading (2005) demonstrated in a meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies on attention that the medial, superior, and ventral prefrontal, medial, premotor, and posterior parietal circuits of the brain were involved in the adjusting necessary to attend to different aspects of a task and to ignore or process stimuli. This adjusting, or attentional effort, is viewed by Sarter et al. (2005) as a function of the neural circuitry and depends heavily on motivation. Motivation seems to be dependent on perceived rewards or loss, and these perceptions are associated with the anterior cingulate cortex (Botvinick, Cohen, & Carter, 2004). The anterior cingulate cortex is also involved in error detection, especially when the brain thinks that errors carry a heavy consequence (Falkenstein, Hohnsbein, & Hoorman, 1995). The level of cognitive attention that a student might allot to a particular task may depend on his motivation, which in turn is dependent on perceived consequences for possible errors.

Also significant to reading and writing practices is the work of Volkow, Wang, Newcorn, Kollins, Wigal, Telang, Goldstein, Klein, Logan, Wong, & Swanson (2011), who demonstrated that the lower functioning in the dopaminergic system's reward pathway in adults diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was partly responsible for low motivation in these participants. Acting as a neurotransmitter, the chemical dopamine sends signals along the mesoaccumbens

dopamine (DA) pathway. The DA pathway is connected to the midbrain ventral tegmental area (VTA), connecting to the nucleus accumbens (NAcc) in the ventral striatum (Volkow et al., 2011). These dopamine signals are responsible for pleasurable feelings associated with rewards. PET scans have shown less activity in the DA pathway in adults diagnosed with ADHD (see Haenlein, 1987; Johansen, Killeen, Russell, Tripp, Wickens, & Tannock, 2009) and therefore when Volkow et al. (2011) analyzed PET scans as well as personality and motivation questionnaires given to participants, the researchers concluded that the lack of dopamine being transmitted, and its accompanying good feelings, was responsible for the decrease in motivation among participants.

Volkow and colleagues (2011) contended that the results of their study could have important implications for the educational field since lack of dopamine transmission in children diagnosed with ADHD could be responsible for these children often finding school task uninteresting. Further, Volkow et al. posited that because one of the common characteristics of children diagnosed with ADHD is the ability to focus on tasks of interest, in an educational setting, using tasks students are interested in could be highly beneficial. If the students were given tasks based on an area of interest, their intrinsic motivation might be sufficient to compensate for the lowered dopamine release, and their attention therefore, would be greater on these types of high-interest tasks.

The role of emotion.

Intrinsic motivation is also related to emotion and plays a role in learning that is connected to the brain's attentional effort in several important ways. What a person is motivated to pay attention to relates to the perceived reward or loss associated with the result of the decision or choice being made in a particular task or activity. Biologically, the human brain has evolved to protect itself against threats to its survival. The limbic system and primitive cortex are the basis of emotion, and have developed as a circuitry that begins with the eye as it receives visual cues, as Lang and Bradley (2010) found in a study showing positive, negative and neutral images shown to participants. Automatic responses, such as pupil dilation or heart rate can be measured and are the manifestations of the motivational cue being processed in the brain (Lang & Bradley, 2010). This process starts in the visual cortex, activates the basolateral and central nucleus of the amygdala, projects to the lateral hypothalamus, and activates "broad engagement along the sympathetic chain," which in turn can activate the automatic physiological responses, such as the pupil dilation (Lang & Bradley, 2010, p. 446).

As both the dopaminergic system and the amygdala are associated with memory and with reward and loss, from an educational standpoint, the implications here are rather significant. If a student experiences pleasure at correctly predicting a character's next action, for example, and devotes more attention to the remainder of the chapter anticipating another pleasant event at a second correct prediction, he may be much more likely to use this emotional rudder (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007) to guide his decisions in thinking about this text. He may be motivated to

activate strategies he has been taught, to activate prior knowledge about the subject, or make connections between this character and one from a previously read text, for example, all tasks related to memory.

The view of cognition and emotion as separate systems of the mind has held sway in education for centuries. Two specific neuroscientific perspectives on attention and motivation can further explain how this dichotomy sustained status until fairly recently. Attentional effort was previously viewed as a function of task difficulty, unrelated to any emotional factors, such as motivation, engagement, or interest (Sarter, Gehring, & Kozak, 2006). This older idea allows for a more of a fixed, or permanent notion of attentional effort: if the task is difficult and a person can attend to the task or has the ability to switch tasks, then the result will be successful. What this historical view does not admit is any possibility for variance depending on the person, again, ignoring the third component of the learning equation, the student and his motivation for learning.

Motivation is a complicated idea, however, and has endured some conflicting views over time. John Hughlings-Jackson, a British neurologist, originated theories of neural hierarchy in the later part of the 19th century by studying stroke patients or accident victims with brain lesions (Berridge, 2004). These patients were able to spontaneously smile from both corners of the mouth when told a joke, but were unable to smile normally on command; this discrepancy, Hughlings-Jackson posited, was due to damage to the motor cortex, but that the emotion involved in the spontaneous response to the joke was under the cortex and left undamaged (Berridge, 2004). The idea then developed that hierarchies of brain functions

existed, and higher levels controlled lower levels, and this certainly echoes the long-held notion that cognition is a higher function of the brain and can control emotion.

Traditionally held views regarding literacy also divorce cognition from emotion or its related aspects, engagement and attention. Both Adams' (1990) and Chall's (1996) models of reading have been highly influential in reading instruction. Adams' (1990) Cognitive Model describes a four-part reciprocal processor: the context, meaning, and orthographic processors communicate with one another so that the reader engages with meaning and spelling of words. Chall's (1996) model describes the stages of reading from *Emergent Literacy*, in which children begin to understand functions of written language and develop phonemic awareness, to *A World View*, in which late college or graduate level students develop a view of the world from their reading. Neither of the models includes any reference to affective aspects of reading, such as motivation or attention, and neither addresses any sociocultural context, such as the child's school climate or community experiences. Bell and McCallum (2008) have developed an Inclusive Model of Reading, however, including an affective and context component, attending to a child's motivation, self-efficacy, school, home, school, and community environments. The Inclusive Model highlights the affective components as well as a few others, such as Sight Word Knowledge and Cognitive Correlates of Reading, which were missing from the NRP's identification of the five most important areas of reading (Bell and McCallum, 2008).

Similar to the narrow focus on the "Big 5" of reading instruction—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—classroom writing instruction has not always attended to sociocultural and

constructivist theories in policy or practice, even as these theories are well established by writing research. One practice, writing personal response to text, is substantially supported by writing research as more effective for both reading comprehension and writing quality that writing that is purely analytical or interpretive (Marshall, 1987; Mulcahy-Ernt & Rhyshewitch, 1994; Newell, 1996; Wong et al. 2002). Personal response has been the subject of controversy in the field as some scholars believe it is not a rigorous or necessary format (Stotsky, 1996), and the recently reconfigured state writing assessment explains the changes to the format by stating that the students will no longer be able to write from personal experience or prior knowledge (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council or Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Eliminating the element of prior knowledge from reading and writing activities may be a well-intentioned idea by policy-makers: all students do not share the same prior knowledge, so discounting prior knowledge offers a more equitable opportunity for all students. Unfortunately, this intention may have grave consequences, as Pearson (2013) asserted as he expressed concern over the Publishers' Criteria for Common Core State Standard textbooks requiring teachers to teach students only from what is written in the text. Students will not learn to be Text Critics (Freebody & Luke, 1990), a sophisticated level of reading comprehension questioning the author's purpose for writing, examining biases, exploring missing voices, and other issues of power and justice. When students are asked to read or write in this way, the student's voice is effectively erased from the literacy equation by focusing solely on the text and the instruction. These "new"

requirements from the state writing assessments and the new Common Core State Standards seem to harken back to the historical view separating cognition from emotion. Response connotes emotion, and when we ask a student to respond to text, a personal connection seems almost inevitable, especially if the instructional goal is for the student to be engaged in that text. Ignored too, are constructivist and sociocultural aspects of learning as a social interaction, the possibility of collaborative learning, the zone of proximal development, and the process of moving from scaffolding by the teacher or other students to independence.

The most current research on reading comprehension strategy instruction does offer a hopeful possibility for progress. Wilkinson and Son (2011) describe the most recent wave of strategy instruction as dialogic, a term suggested by its root, *dialogue,* an interaction between the reader and the text. This latest wave was necessary, Wilkinson and Son (2011) contend, because the strategies of the previous waves—single strategy instruction, multiple strategies instruction, and transactional strategies instruction—were trying for teachers to use consistently in the classroom, and these strategies became too formulaic. Dialogic strategies echo many of the constructivist and sociocultural theories and practices, such as students co-constructing knowledge and attending to various voices and perspectives in conversations around the text (Wells, 2007; Nystrand, 2006).

These recent findings from neuroscience linking the cognitive and emotive parts of the mind lend excellent support to both existing educational theories and to instructional practices, particularly sociocultural theories and practices regarding literacy.

Prior Studies on Written Response to Text

Five mixed-methods studies that demonstrate the effects of critical written response to text reviewed here (Langer & Applebee, 1997; Marshall, 1987; Mulcahy-Ernt & Rhyshewitch, 1994; Newell, 1996; Wong, Kuperis, Jamieson, Keller, & Cull-Hewitt, 2002). These studies were selected according to the following criteria: 1) to ensure quality work, all articles were peer-reviewed, published journals with the exception of one research report, which is considered seminal work in the writing-to-learn field 2) all studies used a form of extended analytic writing task and similar text comprehension measures 3) all studies' participants were secondary students, and 4) all studies employed a mixed methods design.

Personal response versus text or teacher-based response.

Independent thinking may not actually occur when students write analytic responses to text as shown by patterns qualitative analysis of interview and think-aloud activities during the writing process (Marshall, 1989; Newell, 1996). Allowing students to respond personally, yet critically, integrates analysis with a personal reaction or authentic interaction with the text (Lewis, 2000). Personal response to text has been criticized for its failure to generate deep thinking, and there are few studies empirically measuring the effects of personal written response on reading comprehension (Stotsky, 1986). However, studies measuring the effects of personal response have shown positive effects on the comprehension of the text read (Marshall, 1987; Mulcahy-Ernt & Rhyshewitch, 1994; Newell, 1996; Wong et al. 2002).

Two studies exploring the effects in personal or reader-based responses and formal, analytic, or text-based responses on comprehension showed little difference in the two conditions as measured quantitatively (Marshall, 1987; Newell, 1996). Qualitative measures found that students interviewed preferred the personal response to the analytic because the personal response allowed them to use their own voices in writing (Marshall, 1987; Newell, 1996). The ownership component of the personal response is significant, and has been shown as an essential characteristic for successful writing (Applebee, 1984). Additionally, the discovery aspect of writing can occur more readily when students are able to use their own experiences and reactions to text.

Revision and tentativeness.

Another significant aspect of the writing process, revision, was not a major focus on any of the studies reviewed here. If students were able to revise their work would their newly composed thoughts further enhance class discussion, or would class discussion provide fresh ideas for revision? Wong et al. (2002) note that allowing students to revise their writing following class discussions might have provided some valuable information on how much socially constructed meaning contributes to writing. Three of the five studies reviewed here, from student interview and think-aloud activities, found *tentativeness* present as the students worked out their ideas during the personal response writing tasks (Marshall, 1987; Mulcahy-Ernt, 1994; Newell, 1996). Tentativeness refers to a student's initial or developing thoughts as he or she begins to write; the writing process seems to serve as a mechanism for working out or constructing meaning. For example, Newell's

(1996) case study interview revealed a student's thoughts as she worked out her response: "…it's not clear to me yet…I want to begin with what I said there and see where I end up" (p. 162). Although Langer & Applebee (1987) did not specifically refer to this idea, they noted that when understanding of the concepts is already fairly high, writing may not be necessary or beneficial, implying that it is the construction of thought provided by writing that makes the task a valuable instructional choice by allowing the writer the space to work out his or her thoughts as he or she writes.

Whereas writing tasks in all studies yielded higher effects than the no writing conditions, the personal response tasks in Marshall's (1987) and Newell's (1996) studies required a construction of meaning that the strictly analytical tasks did not. Critical thinking was more evident in the personal writing tasks because the student had to write from his or her own experience (Marshall, 1987; Newell, 1996). The formal analytic tasks yielded high effects for reading comprehension, but the think-alouds and interviews revealed that students often used the teacher's interpretation (Marshall, 1987; Newell, 1996). None of the studies explore how the tentativeness or "working out" of ideas generates successful writing or deeper response.

Systematic tracking of interview data could also help teachers differentiate writing instruction for students at various ability levels. Though some of the studies in this review stratified samples into low, mid, and high-level ability groups, none followed these students as systematically as could have been helpful. For example, Mulcahy-Ernt and Rhyshkewitch (1994) used standardized tests, the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test and the California Reading test, to differentiate among low,

average, and high readers. The researchers found the text-based (analytic) writing condition did not yield as deep a text understanding, at least as shown by the writing tasks, as the reader-based (personal) condition for the high level readers. However, the high level readers did not make the highest levels of cognitively complex responses in either condition based on Fulwiler's (1989) list for scoring journal entries. Lowest on the list is the *observations* category, requiring the least critical thinking; highest on the list is the *problem posing and solving* category asking students to engage most thoughtfully and critically with the text. The interview data showed the high level group believed writing their thoughts was not as valuable a use of their time as was the class discussion, where they were able to move into a role similar to that typically held by the teacher as she became a facilitator. Here, the qualitative data could have informed the instruction, and an additional quantitative measure might have been administered to determine whether a shift in instruction based on the interview information had occurred. Even if the researchers had not wanted to add another measure to their study, a retrospective interview with the teacher might have revealed her plans to alter instruction for the high ability students. Mulcahy-Ernt and Rhyshewitch (1994) report that the intervention benefitted the middle and lower level groups more than the higher level groups, and claim this finding is important because teachers often believe lower level readers cannot make the kinds of cognitively complex decisions the lower group in this study made.

Marshall (1987) also differentiated participants into ability groups, low and high according to the classroom teacher's assessment. The case study interviews

and think-aloud activities showed what students at different levels thought about as they composed responses to the text. Direct quotes from these interactions provide vivid examples of students' strategies as they write, offering valuable insight for the way the students in the formal analytic group planned to give back to the teacher her own interpretation, a guaranteed way to earn a high grade, in their views. Students in this study also expressed frustration at not being able to write with their own voices: "..she says…no first person…But I'm writing the paper," one student commented (Marshall, 1987, p. 41). This study did not compare the quantitative measures with the interview data, however, so no report of how these particular students scored on the posttests is given.

Whereas Marshall (1987) explored varying student ability levels, Newell (1996) examined the cognitive processes of four students deemed successful by the classroom teacher, two students from the reader-based (personal) and two students from the text-based (formal analytical) group. Important patterns emerged from these interviews: the reader-based group constructed their own meanings, developed authentic ideas, while the text-based group tried to reconstruct the teacher's interpretation or analysis of the text, but these are from the perspective of the higher achievers. Apparently, the lower performing students benefited from the personal writing task as well, but we do not see the same kind of analysis of those students' thought patterns as they write.

A study examining the cognitive processes of students at various ability levels, exploring the reciprocal relationship between socially constructed learning through class discussion and the writing revision process, and systematically

tracking and comparing qualitative interview data with quantitative comprehension measures would require more time than any of the studies reviewed here allowed. Wong et al. (2002) refer to brevity as a limitation in their study in two ways. First, the journal writing assignments were only half a page to one page generally, and lengthier writing, such as an essay might have provided better information. Second, the length of the study, though not specifically described, precluded the possibility of revision. Mulcahy-Ernt & Ryshkewitch's (1994) intervention comprised 10 forty-minute sessions over five weeks, and writing assignments were suggested to take only 30-45 minutes. A significant finding showed journal entries were helpful for students in developing independent interpretations; the writing acted as an extension of initial thinking about the text. A longer study, allowing for revision might have given even more support for the way writing helps students understand what they have read.

Marshall's (1987) study was the lengthiest of all the studies reviewed here, taking place over three and a half months and over 18 visits. The writing posttests were essays written over a ninety-minute class period, but no revision was included. Newell's (1996) study took place over eight days, and though prewriting was a treatment component, revision was not. The writing treatment length was an essay, written during a 50-minute class period, but the posttests were three paragraph length responses, certainly shorter than the writing treatment tasks.

Although the total length of Langer and Applebee's (1987) study reviewed here was the final part of a three-year project, the writing intervention took only six days. The researchers revised procedures for this last study because earlier findings

had shown the type of measure they used—a multiple choice comprehension test—yielded very poor results. The students in the extended writing group did not perform well on the comprehension measure because, the authors determined, they looked deeply at certain aspects of the text, those they needed for their writing purposes, but they had not attended globally to the text. In the revised study, the comprehension measure for the final study became a recall task, and students' performances improved. A multiple-choice test requiring broader content mastery yet shallower inferences might be inappropriate for measuring the deeper reading comprehension gains the writing tasks elicit.

Summary of mixed-methods literature.

While the quantitative aspects of the studies showed solid evidence that personal or critical written response yielded significant effects on text comprehension, the qualitative sections missed opportunities to explore several pertinent components of the writing task, such as revision, student voice, or the role of student engagement with the text and how that engagement affected writing about the text. Part of the reason that these studies may not have delved more deeply through interviews or observations is that the length of study was generally fairly brief and the time that is needed for a well-developed qualitative analysis was not given. The proposed study will occur over a fifteen-week period, giving ample time to examine revision, student voice, and especially the role of student engagement in text and how that engagement affects writing performance and students' perceptions of themselves as literate learners. The interview protocols will allow for a more thorough exploration into the students' past literacy

experiences and follow-up questions in focus group sessions can be asked to further clarify interview data.

Chapter 3: Methods

Creating a Multi-faceted Narrative

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) spoke of her culture's story told by the voice of the dominant power structure and called this experience "the danger of the single story." The population that I worked with in the Literacy Lab has been characterized by single story from a deficit perspective. The students' story has been told on their behalf by standardized test scores, reading levels, and report card grades. The middle school has been labeled "Focus" by its district because the achievement gaps are so wide between the African American and white populations and the students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and those of higher SES. The narrative I wanted to create is not about the deficits these students have, but rather the strengths. I wanted to tell a story of what their lived experience is in a situation where they are given choices about text selection, when their voices are heard in literature discussion and in written response to text.

As an adult and as the instructor of the Literacy Lab, I must acknowledge my position as an authority figure for the students, and therefore, part of the power structure. While I was not assigning homework, giving grades, or administering any assessments that counted in the students' school records, I did create the curriculum and make many decisions about the way our community of literacy practice would run. However overtly I state that I want to tell a story from a different perspective, I too am vulnerable to the danger of telling a single story as the teacher-researcher. As I will further explain in the Researcher Positioning

section, I tried to maintain a watchful awareness of this possibility and used feedback from colleagues and the participants to keep my own biases in check.

Additionally, the story of our community of practice in the Literacy Lab is multi-faceted because I used multiple data sources. First, I looked at how these students view themselves as literate learners and connected their rich out-of-school funds of knowledge to their in-school literacy practices as the work of Heath (1982) and Moll et al. (2001) has shown to be effective. I explored how these students responded when they were able to see themselves in the literature they read, and when they learn to read and write from a critical stance. Stories are at the very heart of literacy, so a narrative framework fits well with this study about reading and writing in response to stories. Writing about the personal and social, the past, present, and future, and the place makes sense in terms of a way to view this experience these children engaged in.

Context and Participants

This study occurred at a middle school in a southern city in the United States. The school is located in one of the city's most expensive zip codes, but the entire school zone includes students from both urban and suburban areas. The school's population is 61.9% Caucasian, 31.1 % African American, 3.7 % Latino, and 3.1% Asian students. Thirty-five percent of the students receive free or reduced lunches, a percentage falling short of the fifty percent required for Title 1 funding. I worked with the principal and Academic Dean of the school to create a community of literacy practices called the Literacy Lab (see Appendix A for Literacy Lab Logic Model) to help students who have been labeled "struggling" readers based on a

convergence of teacher/administrator observations, standardized test scores, and report card grades. Twelve eighth grade students participated. All of the names used here are pseudonyms.

The Literacy Lab met two days a week in one-hour sessions; I worked with two groups of six students over the course of a 15-week semester. The students selected novels from a group of five novels I had chosen. These texts are award winning, high interest books featuring adolescent characters, and were written by nationally acclaimed authors: *Locomotion*, by Jacqueline Woodson (2003), *Elijah of Buxton*, by Christopher Paul Curtis (2007), *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963,* by Christopher Paul Curtis (1995), *Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon Draper (1994), *Out of My Mind,* by Sharon Draper (2010), and *No Crystal Stair,* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson (2012). When I first discussed the study with the principal, I was told that all the students would be African American, but when the students were chosen, three Caucasian students and one Latina student were selected. All of the authors of the books I selected are African Americans, as are the characters in all of the books, except *Out of My Mind,* where the main character's race is not identified. I offered two Sharon Draper books because I knew through conversations with the school librarian that the author had committed to a school visit in the spring. She would speak to the students as a large group and then work with a small group in a writing workshop format.

Both groups read *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003) first so I could have some time to get to know the students better and so I could order and plan engagements

for the books they selected. After *Locomotion,* (Woodson, 2003), the first group chose *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2003), paired with *Living With Cerebral Palsy* (Gray, 2003), and the second group chose *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012), a documentary novel. Because Nelson's (2012) text contained informational text and primary source materials, such as FBI memos, census data, birth and death certificates, and newspaper articles, I did not pair that selection with an additional non-fiction book.

The Literacy Lab sessions began with reading the text aloud together for thirty minutes. I used a dialogic comprehension strategy method, stopping at significant junctures in the text, checking for students' understanding, and asking the students to respond or generate questions about what we had read (Kintch & Kintch, 2005; Raphael & Au, 2005; Wilkinson & Son, 2011). The next thirty minutes of each session was devoted to a writing workshop, typically beginning with a Power Write (2011), a one to two minute response to a prompt, such as "What are you an expert at doing?" When time was called, students counted their words and recorded the number in a chart at the front of their writing response journals. Following the Power Write engagement, we worked on a longer writing task, often collaboratively. Specific examples of students' writing appear in later sections of this paper.

Students read the books and learned to respond critically to the texts they selected. Each of the texts selected contains significant critical literacy features: issues of justices, power structures, and missing voices. Reading expert Richard Allington (2011) argued that struggling readers need access to good books more than anything else, and these texts have been proven excellent by their many

awards, accolades, and success of their authors. I developed questions accompanying each text asking students to make inferences, to explore challenging vocabulary words, and most importantly, to make claims about the books using evidence from the text.

Data Collection

As shown in Figure 1, multiple data sources were used: pre and post-study interviews of student pairs exploring past experiences with reading and writing, (see Appendix B for interview protocol), pre and post-study Literate Learner profiles (see Appendix C) to examine students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers, and all classroom discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were collected over the course of fifteen weeks; the students read two narrative texts and one informational text during that time period.

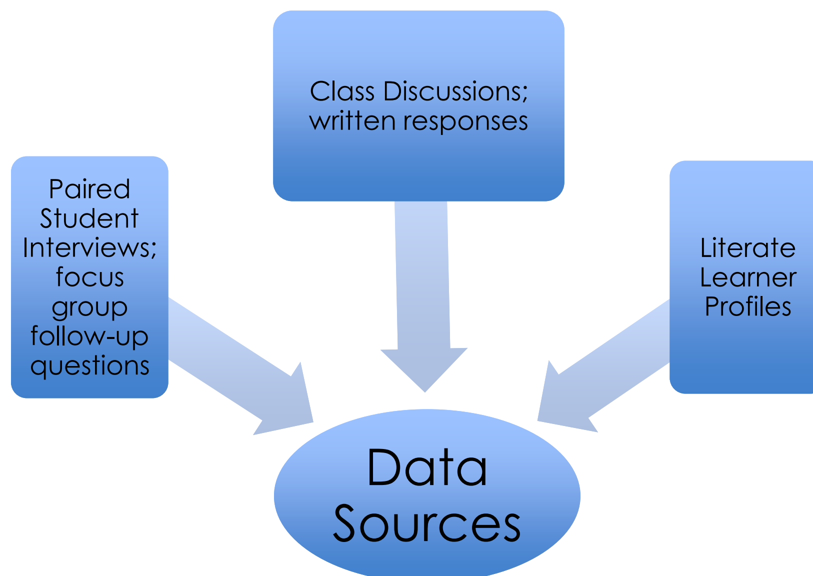

Figure 1. *Multiple Data Sources*

Data Analysis

As Creswell (2013) suggested, qualitative analysis methods are varied in form and should be employed pragmatically to fit the research questions. The interviews and Literate Learner profiles specifically addressed the first research question: How do students' perceptions of themselves as literate learners explain writing performance? The daily discussions and written responses and assessments answered the second research question: How can critical engagement with text inform classroom literacy practices? As the data were triangulated, however, findings from a source associated with one question penetrated into an explanation or description associated with the other question. For example, a finding from the Literate Learner Profiles was integrated with findings from the written assessments to contribute to an explanation of how students' critical engagement with text hinged on a particular aspect of literacy practice, such as text selection or the ability of a reader to identify with the main character of a text.

In addition to providing explanations for the research questions, the Literate Learner profiles also contributed to the development of the study's narrative arc, particularly the first and second dimensions of the narrative inquiry space, the interactional and the continuity dimensions. The interactional dimension examined the personal and social aspects of the story; the Profile's inquiries regarding literacy interests addressed some of the personal aspects of the students' story. The continuity dimension explored the temporal aspects of the story—the past, present, and future. By asking students to list reading and writing interests, strengths, and goals, the answers helped to create an understanding of how time periods connect

to the overall story. For example, the students' present awareness of literacy strengths and goals for reading or writing in the future were important components shaping the narrative frame. The interviews explored these first two dimensions even more deeply, looking at past literacy experiences and perceptions of abilities. The discussions and written response data provided information for the third dimension of the narrative inquiry space, the context. By analyzing verbal and written data produced during the context or situation—in this study, the community of literacy practice—the context itself was richly and thoroughly described. For example, the critical written responses to text showed multiple levels of cognition and comprehension, according to the adaptation of Fulwiler's (1989) scale, so the connection between critical engagement in the verbal text discussion that occurred and the written responses that followed contributed an important piece of the story.

An overall goal of qualitative writing is to provide *verisimilitude* for the reader so that as in well-written literature, the reader feels as if he or she is experiencing the story, the explanation or description of the phenomenon being studied (Richardson, 1994). Within an overarching framework of narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008), this study employed several qualitative research analysis methods: constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011). I used Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional framework for narrative analysis. The three dimensions are the 1) interactional, or personal and social, 2) continuity, or the past, present and future, and 3) situation, or place. The story of the community of literacy practice was told

through this three-dimensional framework and also highlighted turning points, epiphanies (Denzin, 1989), and shifts in the students' stories. I analyzed the students' experiences from temporal framework, looking at the episodic ordering of information (Riessman, 2008) as well as the overall chronology of the experiences that formed the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). See Table 1 for an outline of Data Collection and Analysis.

Table 1

Data Sources and Data Analysis Tools

Data Source	Data Analysis Tools
Literate Learner Profiles	Grounded theory
Interviews	Grounded theory; Discourse Analysis
Focus Group Follow-Ups	Grounded theory; Discourse Analysis
Field Notes	Grounded theory
Discussions	Grounded theory; Discourse Analysis
Written Reponses	Grounded theory; Fulwiler's Scale

Data Source 1: Literate Learner Profiles

The Literate Learner Profile was an eight-sectioned graphic organizer asking students to list strengths, goals, and interests related to reading and writing they do in and out of school to addressing the research question, "How do students' self-perceptions as literate learners explain writing performance. These profiles were created based on New Literacies theories of attending to students' in and out of school literacy practices (Street, 1995; New London Group, 2000), neuroscientific evidence of adolescent self-awareness as it relates to text comprehension (Garner, 1987; Blakemore & Choudary, 2006) and cognitive monitoring (Baker, 2002; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Students' responses were analyzed using the

grounded theory method of open-coding and developing categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) at both the initial and final stages of the study.

Researcher positioning.

Grounded theory is the idea of entering a research context with as few preconceived notions as possible, allowing the data to shape the theory that eventually emerges. Although the qualitative researcher acknowledges his or her own positioning or stance, the researcher's goal is to maintain an awareness of those biases and beliefs as the data and to offer transparency to the reader, so the reader understands the lens through which the researcher writes. Further, as Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) suggest, reflexivity is an essential practice for a researcher exploring critical literacy. While I fully acknowledge my own bias toward the basic tenets of critical literacy--teaching students to become Text Critics--as best instructional practice, I was committed nonetheless to an open view of what I might find in the data as the students read and write under the framework of critical engagement. My goal to teach the students to read and write from a critical perspective should be clear and overt. What I found while the students are engaged in these critical responses, both written and verbal, are as free from any particular bias as possible.

In order answer the research questions with a grounded theory approach, I maintained an awareness of my positioning as a teacher/researcher. For example, having spent several years in secondary classrooms, I have found that students are often unaware of their own strengths and weaknesses as writers. Grounded theory requires me to acknowledge and maintain awareness of that positioning, but to look

carefully at what actually emerges from the data itself. Using a systematic analysis process of 1) open coding, 2) axial coding, and 3) selective coding helped ensure that a researcher's stance does not interfere with findings or cloud data unnecessarily. Open codes were the first level of codes assigned to findings. As data sources were compared with one another, axial codes or initial categories were developed. Finally, as the axial and open codes connected or intersected, these became the last level of coding, selective codes, which eventually made up the final categories of findings.

Coding process.

The grounded theory aspect of open-coding means that as the data were read repeatedly, patterns in the students' responses emerged, and words and phrases for focus became apparent. Across the Literate Learner Profiles, the interviews and follow-up questions, and Response Journal entries, 66 open codes developed, 25 axial codes, and finally, 12 selective codes. Appendix D provides a complete list of open, axial, and selective codes. To illustrate the coding process further with an example, in the interviews, several students responded that mystery books were a favored form of outside school reading, so *mystery books* became an open category. Then in the Reading Interests section of the Literate Learner Profile, mystery books surfaced again, so this finding was added through the process of axial coding. Details were added to the emerging categories, and these results together eventually contributed, through the final process of selective coding, to the assertion that *mystery and suspense* were of significant interest to the students.

Because these profiles were given to students at both the beginning and end of the study, shifts in students' thinking occurred. In addition to coding and categorizing the responses, the activity of creating the profiles themselves was analyzed and described in detail in my field notes, observing the length of time students spent on their responses, whether or not answering seemed difficult for the students, and whether students asked questions about the profiles. A comparison between the initial and final profile was developed looking at not only the responses, but also at the process of responding. For example, the initial profile was difficult for the students to answer in much detail; they had not considered their strengths as writers before. At the end of a semester spent discussing specific strengths and goals for improvement, the students were better equipped to respond in detail about their writing abilities.

Constant comparative method.

The constant comparative method associated with grounded theory is the process of constantly comparing pieces of data from various sources so that the converging evidence for developing a theory is solid (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, the Literate Learner Profiles were compared in pre and post-study forms noting shifts or turning points, but the data were also compared to data produced from analyses of class discussions, interviews, written assessments and written responses to texts. The eventual story that emerged was created from examining repeatedly multiple forms of data, written and oral, casual and more formal types of assessment and responses, and the data were compared across a fifteen-week semester.

Data Source 2: Interviews

Students were interviewed in pairs, based on my assumption from my own teaching experience and previous research with students, that particularly for adolescents, hearing another's opinion or experience may spark a thought more effectively than if a single student were interviewed at a time. The interview questions delved into the students' past experiences with literacy practices, and while an interview protocol was systematically used, interview questions were dynamic and changed when responses needed clarification or expansion (Creswell, 2013).

The interviews were analyzed using the grounded theory methods of coding, categorization, and theme development as described in the Literate Learner Profile section. Using the same analysis tools, I also asked some follow-up questions to the interviews in focus group sessions. The students are already grouped in two sections of six students, so the focus group format worked well with these small numbers of students.

Discourse analysis.

A second method of analysis for the interview data was the linguistic and social analysis, Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011). According to Gee (2011), and building on Bahktin's (1981, 1986) work on situated meanings, Discourses are the sign systems or languages people use to navigate historical, intertextual, and social contexts. As people engage in dialogue, all words uttered are situated in these contexts and cannot be separated from them. Examining the patterns in discourses can provide valuable information about the connections

between the speaker or writer and the context or situation from which he or she operates. For this analysis, the transcribed interviews were finely examined for specific patterns, such as word choice or subject-verb sequences. Similar to grounded theory, as patterns in the data emerged, these patterns were coded and categorized and eventually integrated into the development of an overarching theory and story. For example, if the students repeated referred to literacy practices they "had to" to do, these sequences were coded, "lack of choice." If an evident pattern emerged, and if multiple sources of the data supported the finding, then a theory about students' lack of choice contributing to their engagement in literacy practices might emerge based on both the social aspect—here, the power structure of the classroom—and the linguistic component—repetition of "had to."

Data Source 3: Discussions and Written Responses

Daily discussions around the texts and the written responses to those texts also served as data points contributing to the overall story of the community of literacy practice. Critical questions, such as *whose voices are heard*, or *who holds the power in this situation*, were asked during the read-alouds, and the students' discussions around these issues were recorded and transcribed. The analysis of the discussions proceeded using the methods described in earlier sections, constant comparative analysis, grounded theory, and Discourse Analysis. Particular attention was paid to the connections between the reading strategies employed and the students' critical engagement with the text.

Written discourse was analyzed in multiple ways as well. Students were given an initial narrative writing task which will be assessed under a five section

rubric based on the new Tennessee State Writing Assessment narrative writing rubric including the following categories: story structure, sentence structure, word choice, student voice, and grammatical conventions. Because these elements were emphasized for classroom writing instruction, the findings yielded from the narrative tasks contributed to an understanding of the research question connecting students' perception to performance. For example, if a student believed one of his writing strengths is using strong words, did that bear out in the assessment?

Additionally, all written responses to the text were coded for patterns and categories of comprehension and cognition based on Fulwiler's (1989) scale for journal writing. This scale, or a similar adaptation was used in all the response to text studies reviewed in Chapter 2 (see Marshall, 1987; Mulcahy-Ernt & Rhyshewitch, 1994; Newell, 1996; Wong et al. 2002), and ranges from lower level inferences to categories requiring higher levels of cognition. Lowest on the list is the *observations* category, requiring the least critical thinking; highest on the list is the *problem posing and solving* category asking students to engage most thoughtfully and critically with the text. Connections between verbal and written data were constantly compared and may yield valuable information about the relationship between critical discussion and critical written response.

By employing multiple methods of analysis on multiple data points, an overall narrative analysis told the story of this community of literacy practice: how these students' engagement with text can explain writing performance, and how these students' self-perceptions can inform classroom literacy practice. Finally, the analysis of these three dimensions of narrative inquiry space allowed a restorying of

the students' lived experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Restorying means organizing all of the data into a coherent whole, told through the multi-faceted faceted lens afforded by varied data sources and methods of analysis. Maintaining continual awareness of the "danger of a single story" helped to ensure that the coherent whole attends to the variations and contradictions inherent in lived human experience.

Validation

Narrative analysis is a recognized qualitative method that seeks to capture the lived experiences of individuals or groups of individuals (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Multiple data sources were used to establish a triangulation of data (Creswell, 2013). Codes, categories, and themes were checked by a colleague, and the overall story that emerged, as well as many of the themes that developed throughout the semester, was checked with the participants themselves. See Table 2 for a timeline of the data collection and analysis process.

Table 2

Timeline for Collection and Analysis of Data

Data Source	Collection Date	Analysis Date
Literate Learner Profiles	September	September
Interviews	August	September
Follow Up Focus Groups	September	October
Text Discussions	September-December	September-January
Written Responses	September-December	September-January
Literate Learner Profiles	December	December-January

Chapter 4: Findings

Preface: In the Midst (Clandin & Connelly, 2000)

"To be honest, I'm not really smart."
" -Jacinta

In their text on narrative research, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative researchers as entering a field of inquiry "in the midst," explaining that participants arrive at the research site in the middle of their own stories, in the middle of the lives they are living (p. 63). I arranged the narrative created from the findings chronologically, using the three dimensional space for narrative inquiry model (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The dimensions--continuity, situation, and interaction--refer to three sub-frames that shape the overall narrative structure. The continuity dimension refers to the temporal arc of the students' stories, the way that events from their past, present, and goals or hopes for the future connect with one another. The situation dimension examines the way in which the location or place relates to the story, in this study how the small group community of literacy practice figured into the students' lives as literate learners. The interaction dimension explores the impact of relationships to the students' literacy experiences, how students' interactions with family, teachers, past and present, with peers, and with me as the teacher/researcher connect with their self-perceptions, their perceptions of literacy practices, and their literacy performances.

I began with the continuity or temporal dimension, illustrating students' past literacy experiences, moving to their present experience in the literacy lab, and finally comparing pre and post study literacy goals, writing performances, and any other shifts that might influence future literacy endeavors. The remaining

dimensions, situation and interaction, were woven into the continuity dimension as this arrangement made most sense for the overall narrative movement. The situation, or place, figures most prominently into the Present section, focusing on how the community of practice as a space for literacy learning mattered to the story. The interaction, or social and personal relationships, appears in all sections--Past, Present, and Future--because the students' relationships with parents, teachers, with one another, and with me, is essential to each of these time periods.

Continuity Dimension: Past

The twelve students I worked with over the fall semester came to the Literacy Lab with nearly a decade of literacy experiences at home and school. In order to answer the research questions, how their self-perceptions as literate learners could inform classroom practices, and the relationship between students' critical engagement with text and their writing performances, I needed to understand where these students had been as readers and writers. Three primary data sources served to answer the question about the students' past reading and writing experiences: the Literate Learner profile, the interviews, and the narrative writing assessment, which asked students to recount a story of a good or bad writing experience. Secondary data sources were class discussions or written responses in which students mentioned a past literacy event.

Earliest literacy memories.

"I started reading the road signs. I was the first out of my whole Head Start class."- Charise

The interview data revealed vivid memories of early reading and writing experiences. Nearly all students remembered parents and grandparents reading

books, and Dr. Suess' (1957) *The Cat in the Hat*, H. A. and Margaret Rey's (1973) *Curious George*, *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin, Jr. & Archambault, 2012) were mentioned frequently, as well as some common fairy tales or folk stories, such as "The Three Bears" or "The Little Red Hen." A few of the students recalled family stories being told, such as how a grandfather came to be without a finger on one hand, and other students remembered parents or grandparents retelling stories, such as those from the Bible or J.R.R. Tolkien's (2012) *The Hobbit.* Only one student, Garon, had no early reading memories: "I was told to go to bed," he reported, matter-of-factly. Sam recollected his parents reading books to him, leaving blanks in the story for him to fill with the correct words. "When I learned to read words," Nakida remarked, "they were longer than I thought they would be." Brianna, in both the initial interview and later in the focus group follow-up session, commented that she had wanted to read the dictionary as a child, a book that was in her home, but was discouraged by her family members. "They wouldn't let me," she stated.

Memories of early writing were nearly all learning to form letters of the alphabet or remembering being taught to write in cursive. Students were much more eager and able to talk about reading experiences than writing experiences, but as with reading, most students recalled parents and grandparents helping at home. Nakida remembered working on cursive worksheets at home; Barrett's parents taught him to write by choosing a word from books for him to copy.

Feelings about previous literacy experiences.

"I used to like to read."-Jacinta

The interview data, narrative assessment, focus group follow-up sessions, and class discussions converged to show some common patterns in the groups' experiences. One category I labeled *Engaged in a Story*, which referred to positive reading experiences students recounted when they "could not put the book down," as Ava recalled, telling me about *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Charise proudly declared *Hugo Cabret* (Selznick, 2007) an excellent book, "even though it was 1000 pages." Nakida talked about a "teen drama" she had read, as well as her opinions on *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2002) in both book and film versions. Throughout the semester, I attempted to establish the criteria that determined the quality of books for these participants. Students had difficulty specifying why they would characterize a book as good or what qualities a book needed to be liked. "The way it was written?" Barrett said, uncertainly, when asked to explain why *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper, 1997) was a positive reading experience for him.

Some patterns emerged within the *Engaged in a Story* category: suspense, and the related pattern of caring about a main character. Mystery and sports were the two most frequently preferred reading genres; waiting to see what happens figures heavily in both categories. At first I was concerned because I had not selected any texts in these genres, although *Elijah of Buxton* (Curtis, 2007) is full of action and excitement. What I came to understand, however, was that what the students meant by mystery would be more accurately termed suspense, or not knowing what would happen next to a character. I will provide more detail about

our reading of *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003) in the Present section, but one of the reasons students cited enjoying this book was that little was revealed about Lonnie's past at the beginning of the story, and each poem disclosed bits of information or hints about the tragedy that took his parents' lives. "It has a lot of mysteries in it," Brianna wrote, responding to why she might recommend this book to a friend.

The idea of suspense and a storyline that could keep the students' interest related also to views of what constituted a good writing experience. Asked to recall a good literacy experience, Sam remembered a short writing assignment in second grade: "We were only supposed to write a short story, but I made it interesting, so I kept writing." This example was the single writing task recalled by students as a positive literacy experience.

While the groups were able to recall some distinct and detailed positive memories, the negative experiences were even more distinctly remembered. Nakida related a story of reading a book in third grade that used the "n" word, and running home to her mother, crying and telling her mother about the book. "I will always remember that," Nakida stated evenly. Sam spoke passionately about a summer reading book he detested because it was "confusing." Confusion as a reason for disliking a book was a dominant theme in the students' discourse. Asked for more specificity on what made the story hard to understand, the students reported that the "story bounced around" or "the setting kept changing." These themes were repeated throughout the data sources; two books from the previous year's 7th grade

English Language Arts curriculum were mentioned consistently as confusing because the setting shifted frequently making the story difficult to follow.

Confusion was the not the only issue causing the shift that had obviously occurred somewhere between the earliest literacy experiences and the more recent ones. The interview data from questions about students' past showed that students had almost universally enjoyed reading as young children, but most of them answered that they did not currently consider themselves readers, even as they could list books they had enjoyed and nearly all talked about reading from their phones or the internet, a topic that will be addressed in a further section. In focus group follow-up questions, I attempted to elicit students' explanations as to this shift in enjoying reading. Garon declared that other activities had eclipsed reading. When they were younger, he reasoned, there was less to do, and reading could take a more primary place among activities, but now "new things have come," such as sports and video games. Several other students mentioned reading being replaced by other activities as students grew older. LaRae explained that when she was learning to read it was fun because everyone wanted "to hear you read" but when the initial learning phase was over, it was not exciting anymore. Brianna compared reading to an activity she loves--listening to music. "Reading doesn't have the same feeling as music," she said, although she did say she could relate to the way Melody in *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2010) saw colors when she listened to music. The shift then, seemed to be a result of a combination of factors. Students did not consider reading as an engaging pursuit now that they were older, and many of the recent books read in school were considered confusing by the students.

Missing voices in reading practices.

Related to the issue of interest and engagement is the critical literacy tenet of examining missing voices in a text (Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). As a critical literacy researcher, I found it impossible not to notice that one of the factors affecting students' engagement with or interest in the text was that in classroom settings, their voices were largely missing from the selection of the literature as well as the responses to it. "They be picking books that they like and sometimes we don't like them. They need to ask us how we feel about what we do," Nakida commented. Her sentiments were echoed often. "They should pick something interesting with kids our age in it," Jacinta suggested. "They never ask us how we felt about what we did in class," she added. "I think teachers should let us write about what we like, and then I think they should assign us what would go along with what we want to read," Charise asserted. "Language was the lowest (on standardized tests), and they really want that good this year," Sam said, explaining that a literacy focus had been emphasized this year due to a drop in last year's standardized test literacy scores.

Discourse analysis.

Because students' lexical choices followed a consistent pattern here, I applied Discourse analysis to explore more deeply how these sequences of words would help answer the research question of how students' perceptions of themselves as literate learners could inform classroom literacy practices. Figure 2 shows the how repeated lexical choices, a third person plural pronoun plus a verb, such as "They never ask," analyzed through the building task of significance and identities

developed into a Discourse, Missing Voices.

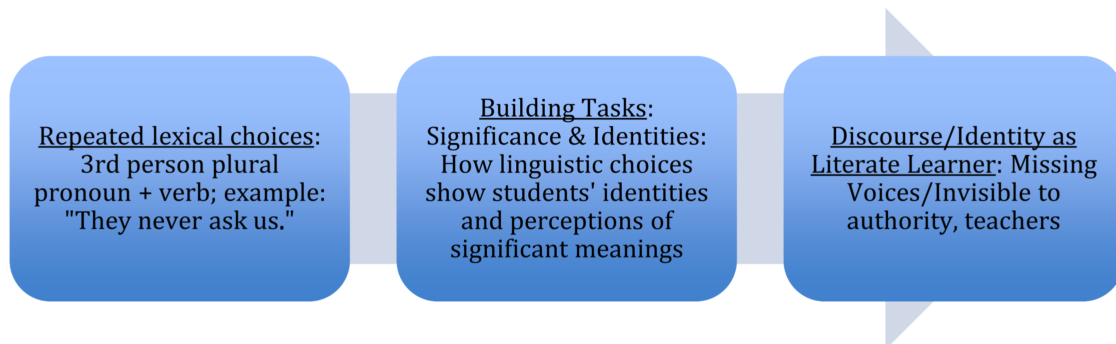

Figure 2. *Analysis of Missing Voices Discourse*

Repeated lexical choices.

The third person plural, as opposed to naming specific teachers, as seen in each of these examples, "They be picking" and "They need to ask us," showed students' tendencies to group teachers as "they," connoting a somewhat adversarial, or "us" versus "them" mentality. Students referred to teachers at various schools and grade levels from their past, but here merged their roles into a single category. The cohesion, or way the students connected words in these examples was also important. By consistently employing the "they + verb," construction, students showed that it was "they" who were able to perform the actions. "They" held the position of power, "they" selected the literature, chose the activities, and "they" rarely asked how students felt. Further, as seen in Sam's comment, "they really want" literacy scores to rise, students saw external forces as having power to determine the students' literacy goals for them.

Building tasks.

The students have built an identity for the literacy curriculum as place where little attention has been paid to the students' feelings or interests as readers.

Interestingly, while some of the students felt the teachers selected books randomly, others believed the teachers were not in control of the choices themselves, claiming that some of the books they disliked were on a "list that all of (the district) had to read." The students' views of themselves as literate learners indicated they believe they are worthy of being asked, deserving of some choice in what they are required to read, and capable of naming specific elements they would like to see present in the literature they read, such as characters close to the students' age. Some evidence, however, such as Sam's remarks regarding the district's goals for improving literacy, suggested that students felt as if their goals are predetermined for them.

Discourse of missing voices.

I labeled this Discourse Valid Voices Missing because the students believed their voices should be counted but were not counted in the classroom setting. I did investigate whether any choice of reading was ever offered in their English Language Arts classes. Overall, the answer was consistently "no." Some students did point out that they could go to the library and choose their own books, but only on their own time. There was no space or time allotted in the day or in the ELA curriculum to select books of their own choosing. The grades and scores, the numbers that "count," were all based on reading selected by someone else for these students.

***Missing voices in writing*.**

Students did not believe their voices were heard in their assigned writing, but reported mixed feelings on this absence. Some students, such as Brianna

believed writing about what she chose would be optimal, "It's better for us to write about what we want because then the teacher can know what you are going through, and then you can just express yourself." Others, however, claimed that a prompt was necessary for them to write successfully. "I gotta have a topic," Barrett stated, and Sam agreed in his answer to whether or not he considered himself a good writer or not, saying, "Good writer depends on the topic. When it's a good topic, yes." In contrast, Ava wrote, "I can stick to a topic my teacher gives me…can keep writing on any topic."

Isolation versus collaboration.

Unlike the ambivalence regarding writing choices, feelings about lack of collaborative reading and writing activities were clear: students did not like consistently working alone. Scant opportunities to work together also contributed to the students' feelings that their voices were not heard in classrooms. "She never lets us do anything together," Charise stated about her teacher. Frequent use of the lexical choice, "we," to indicate students, especially in conversations about choices showed a broad, egalitarian view of students as a unit, similar to the teacher unit indicated by the "they," analyzed in the previous section. Students consistently used the second person plural when talking about classroom practices, which seemed logical: classrooms comprised many students. This linguistic choice also showed thoughtfulness about the group's needs as a whole. Nakida illustrated this democratic thinking by outlining an optimal plan for choosing books. "Choose books about sports and drama," she explained. "That way everybody, girls and boys, be happy."

Students never suggested that their personal or specific preferences in reading should dictate the reading selections, though they certainly showed through the interview data that these preferences existed. What they claimed to want was a system that allowed their voices in a comprehensive way, with only certain characteristics, such as suspense or characters close in age to themselves, as criteria. "We don't get to choose," LaRae declared, elaborating, "Everybody not going to agree on the same thing, but they could at least pick a book that everybody's kinda interested in. They just randomly pick a book."

Peer editing was a collaborative practice reported to occasionally occur, but planning, brainstorming, or writing were not done collaboratively in these students' experiences. Two stories the students told about collaborative experiences were particularly poignant. LaRae and Ava shared a story in the interview about another student who helped them with a test-taking strategy. The student is a girl with cerebral palsy who talks through a machine just as Melody, the main character in *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2012) talks through a medi-talker. Ava and LaRae explained that the student helped them to look back in the text for the answers to the questions that follow in a reading comprehension test. The conversation below began when my research assistant, Katie Schrodt, asked the student about goals, and both LaRae and Ava expressed a desire to raise their standardized test scores in reading. Katie was trying to gather specifics about what the students found most challenging in the reading section of the standardized test.

Katie: What's the hardest part?

Ava: You have to read and go back in the story and look. I don't like doing that part.

LaRae: You know Claudia? Claudia, the girl in the chair. I never really thought she was smart/

Ava: (interrupting) She's actually really smart/

LaRae: (interrupting) Yeah, she really smart. She typed on her little computer, if you look on (the standardized test), if you read on one question, it'll say something about what you just read last, just go back in the book read it, and I did that and I got proficient.

The girls' conversation demonstrated that they learned both a strategy to help them find the answers to the comprehension questions and that their previous assumptions about Claudia had been proven wrong.

A second example from Nakida also related to learning something new from peers. This example was the only one I heard about any type of collaborative classroom writing. She had been paired with two boys to research a topic, and the boys wanted to choose football. Agreeing to the topic, Nakida reported that she actually enjoyed this activity because she learned about tackling and fumbling, aspects of football she had not previously understood well. She learned something new through the collaboration with the boys and reported enjoying the opportunity: "When you already know it, it's boring sometimes."

Out of School Literacy Practices

The students initially reported very little reading and writing outside the classroom other than homework. When I clarified that texting, using the internet to read about items of interest, or reading video game manuals or cheat codes counted, I learned that the twelve students do frequently engage in these literacy events outside school. Texting was universal, nearly all twelve students reported searching and reading on the internet, and three of the girls told us about keeping journals or writing to express feelings. Nakida stated she read about people she admires, such as Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey; Jacinta read about new artists whose music she has recently heard. Barrett searched for information about Brazilian soccer players, and Brianna listened to music and writes down the lyrics. These students were engaging in literacy practices out of school, but they were not aware that these practices would be considered reading and writing by any authority associated with school. Surprise was evident on nearly every face when I declared that texting and reading about zombies on the internet were "real" reading and writing events. Salient patterns of writing for the purpose of learning information, and for the purpose of communication emerged from the interview data as every student reported reading to find out more about subjects of interest to them, writing texts to communicate with friends and family members, and reading texts sent back to the students in response.

Writing for therapeutic purposes emerged as a category reflecting an authentic purpose for writing outside school, and a gap in school literacy practices. Students said, "Choices (in writing) would allow the teacher to relate more,"

"...better for us to write about what we want because then the teacher can know what you are going through," and "I love to write because it makes me unplug from everything else around me."

LaRae wrote in a Power Write response,

> It's (writing) the only way I can get out how I feel or what's really going on in my life. I never talk to anyone about how I feel so writing is my way out, writing is how I escape, and writing is my way from reality.

Narrative Assessment Analysis

When the students had finished the Literate Learner profiles and paired interviews, I gave them a narrative writing assessment that held dual purposes: to help me gauge students' writing abilities and to help me learn about previous reading and writing experiences. The assessment was created to mirror the newly reconfigured standardized state writing assessment given in February of the fifth and eighth grades with lengthy prompts to read and respond to in a writing format randomly selected as narrative, expository, or persuasive. The prompt for the narrative assessment was to read an example of a bad experience with reading and to write about their positive or negative literacy experiences. Students wrote much less than I had expected, and some of the reason was that reading my page-long example took many of the students considerable time to read.

The rubric I created for the narrative assessment was based on the state writing assessment's rubric and is shown in Table 3. I did not award points but counted number of sentences or numbers of students using sensory details and noted examples of findings from each category and subcategory.

Table 3

Narrative Writing Assessment Patterns and Examples

Story Structure	Sentence Structure	Word Choice	Student Voice	Grammatical Conventions
Clear beginning: nearly all students began by identifying grade in school when literacy experience occurred	Number of total sentences ranged from 1-16; average number was 8	Sensory details: 3 students used sensory details, such as "blonde hair," "wide hips," and "stinky green spinach"	Evidence of student's voice: nearly all students' voices in evidence	Spelling: 8 errors; Examples: "Sence" for sense, "everynight" used as one word, "narritive" for narrative, "use" for us.
Transitions: nearly nonexistent because most wrote only one paragraph	Simple sentences: 16 Compound, Complex Sentences: 34	Sophisticated words: nearly all students used 1-2 multi-syllabic words. Examples: annoying, confusing, exactly, scientific method.	Pattern 1: Strong, negative emotion. Examples: "I will always hate that book." " I couldn't read that book cause I hated that book."	Subject-verb agreement: zero errors
Strong Conclusions: none	Fragments, Run-ons: 19	Dialogue: 3 examples. "Where is the setting?" "Okay, let's start." "Yes."	Pattern 2: Confusion. Examples: "I tried my best to answer, but I couldn't." "I feel dumb."	Pronoun usage: no errors
Overall cohesion: difficult to judge with such short pieces	Overall variation: most students did balance out the simple and complex fairly well	Vivid verbs: none	Pattern 3: Getting lost, distracted Examples: "(book) would jump all over the place--you would be lost." "I get distracted."	Punctuation: comma and period errors, ellipses, quotation marks correctly used

The table shows 19 examples of fragments or run-on sentences, which means that across all the students' assessments, there were 19 such sentence errors. I judged students' vocabulary choices on number of syllables, the same criteria the Test of Written Language (TOWL-4) standardized writing assessment uses (Hammill & Larsen, 2009). A three-syllable word was deemed *sophisticated*. The label *vivid verb* is a common term in our writing workshop meaning a specific verb, as opposed to a more general one. For example, "sauntered" would be considered a vivid verb, whereas, "walk" would be considered general. The word "saunter" carries a specific connotation of walking in a slow way.

Besides students writing less, another unexpected finding was that students were able to use some sophisticated punctuation elements, such as ellipses, and commas or periods inside quotation marks correctly, but these same students did not use periods to end sentences. Lack of commas where they were needed was the most prominent punctuation error. Clear beginnings were universal; every student began with the grade in school where the positive or negative experience had occurred. No students made attempts at concluding statements, although this may have been because students felt rushed under time constraints. Students read the prompt and example, and wrote for a total of forty-five minutes, fifteen minutes less than the state standardized assessment allows, but because this was so early in the study, I wanted to use at least fifteen minutes of our hour reading.

The data from the narrative assessment also supported patterns found in interview data of confusion and negative feelings about books whose settings and characters continually shift leaving the reader feeling "lost." Barrett wrote, "I didn't

understand it at all…you thought that the characters were gone then they are back and it was just so confusing to me." Also reinforcing interview data was the pattern of being distracted during reading. These three patterns related to one another in that the confusion seems to result in distraction and then negative feelings toward the book and reading in general. Keenan wrote:

> A bad experience in 5th grade because I was stuck on a word & my teachers didn't want anyone but me to read. So a kid told me what was the word. So every time I read I get suck (sic) on a word. It hard to because I have ADHD. I feel dumb because I have a lot going on sometimes. Read is dumb.

Continuity Dimension, Past: Summary of Findings

Multiple data sources--Literate Learner profiles, paired student interviews, focus-group follow-ups, and written responses--indicated that students' perceptions of themselves as literate learners were complex and multi-faceted. Nearly all of the twelve students had enjoyed early literacy experiences supported and encouraged by family members. Discourse analysis revealed that students perceived classroom reading and writing practices as mostly isolated and solitary activities with little opportunity for collaboration, where their voices were missing and where they had little power of choice.

Continuity Dimension: Present

"I have trouble, but I don't know why."-Sam

While most of the students could cite positive literacy experiences from earlier in their educational career, a shift in interest and understanding emerged when we began to explore the present state of their self-perceptions as literate

learners. To understand students' current perceptions of their reading and writing abilities, I asked them first to define good reading and writing. Analysis of the question, "What makes a good reader/writer?" and "Are you a good reader/writer?" revealed several patterns: students employed the language of external measures, such as standardized test categories and scores, Accelerated Reader sticker colors, and grade levels to define their reading skills. Additionally, patterns emerged showing that students identified good reading with three of the Big 5 components of reading: fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. These elements became axial codes in the data emerging from patterns analyzed in multiple sources: the Literate Learner profiles, the interviews, and a timed Power Write (Anderson, 2011) prompt.

Much of what students classified as good reading was revealed through the students' explanations of why they are not good readers, and distraction was the consistent culprit of inability to understand the text. Table 4 provides examples from the interview and Literate Learner profile data, in the students' voices, of their perceptions of necessary literacy skills. I found these categories in the data by developing open codes for repeated patterns. Multiple open codes, such as Accelerated Reader level, state standardized test measure, or numbers, such as those using in the state writing assessment, were collapsed into a single axial code of External Measures. Similarly, Oral Fluency developed from various patterns including reading aloud, reading fast, or reading without making mistakes. If three or more of the twelve students referred to a particular aspect of literacy, I considered that aspect a pattern.

Table 4

Students' Initial Perceptions of Literacy Skills

Aspect of Literacy	Category Description	Data Exemplar
External Measures	Ability measured, labeled by standardized tests, Accelerated Reader level	"I am on a 5 grade level." "Like pink sticker books, if that's your level, then you have to pick all pink sticker books." "On the writing assessment, I usually score a 2 or a 2.5."
Oral fluency	Ability to read aloud; early semester related to speed	"I am not a good reader because sometimes I stutter words." "I don't like to read out loud because when I get something wrong." "A good reader is someone who can read faster." "Feels frustrating, can't pronounce the words."
Vocabulary	Ability to understand words students encounter in the text	"Context clues, finding the meanings of words" (listed as reading strength) "Higher level books have harder words that we don't know, so it'd be hard."
Comprehension	Ability to understand what has been read and to follow story as it progresses	"When the teacher reads, I understand, when I read I don't understand." "When I finish I have no idea what I have read."
Writing Mechanics	Ability to use correct grammar, punctuation, spelling	"I am bad at writing because I can't spell." "I am not as good as other writers because I have bad grammar."

The groups were less able to identify specific aspects of good writing. The most salient pattern for defining good writing was a description of mechanical skills. Several students mentioned good or fast handwriting. Two students did cite some more substantial aspects of writing, such as using "vivid words," "emotion," and "descriptive words," but these were isolated instances and did not constitute a pattern.

External measures.

Using Discourse analysis to examine the repeated lexical choices students used when discussing their reading and writing strengths revealed a consistent use of the first person singular pronoun, I, and a present tense verb, such as "am," or "get" indicating that the students see their reading and writing scores or levels as current individual indicators of their literacy abilities. Students defined themselves in terms of levels and numerical scores, even when these were not asked for or mentioned in the questions. "I want to get to the next level," "I want to get proficient or advanced," and "I want to get above my grade level," exemplified this first person plus present tense verb sequence.

All inquiries in the Literate Learner profiles, the interviews, and any focus group follow-ups were worded by asking students to describe "strengths" or "goals" in reading and writing, rather than asking students to report their levels or scores. Charise, for example, said, "I usually get a 2 or 2.5" on the standardized writing assessment, scaled 1-6, but in her Literate Learner profile, she gave herself an 7.5 on a 1-10 scale. This discrepancy between external measures and the students' own beliefs about their reading and writing strengths occurred frequently. Nakida's

"they say I can't read, but I can read," indicates the same kind of conflict between students' beliefs and the score indicated by the outside measure. Ava echoed this contradiction in her written answer to whether or not she is a good writer. "I can write on any topic," she wrote, but she readily admitted needing to improve her score on the standardized writing assessment.

Using the significance and identity building tasks with these repeated lexical sequences showed that students see their literacy strengths as individual, not corporate, as they saw the choices they would like to have in their classes, or the reading interests that could inform literature selection. In contrast to the plural pronouns students used when speaking or writing about classroom practices, the students' consistent use of the singular first person pronoun illustrated a clear belief that their strengths were solitary even while the development of these strengths was corporate through classroom literacy tasks. The students could have answered these questions with very different lexical sequences. For example, "the test says I am basic," or "My sticker color was purple," would answer the questions with the same content, but the situated meanings and identities suggested would be different with the shift in person of pronoun and verb tense.

A central tenet of Discourse analysis is that pronouns act as cohesion of text, or the way that the words and phrases are held together (Gee, 2011, Rogers & Wetzel, 2014). Here, the use of the singular "I" demonstrates the students' awareness that their levels, their scores, their academic standing are individual endeavors. The singular pronouns hold the text together in a way that supports the solitary nature of these assessments, while the plural "we" adheres the collective

work done in the classroom. It is interesting to note, however, that while the classroom practices were described by the plural "we," the pronoun was collective, not interactive, as students reported rarely working together. "We" referred only to the way students accomplished their literacy tasks as a class, side by side, not collaboratively.

The identity as a literate learner was partly informed by the sticker color, the level, or the score. The difference in the outside measure and the students' self-perceptions was important to explore. Students did not allow the external measures to entirely inform their identities as literate learners. Similar to the previous analysis of discourse, where students believed their voices should be heard in literature choice and classroom practices, the students through their discourse about literacy strengths showed that they were able to maintain some identity as a literate learner even as the external measures showed they needed improvement. The significance of the tests did not entirely eclipse the students' own self-perceptions. While finding that the students did not allow their own beliefs to be dictated by tests seems positive, it also showed that students were unclear about why they were not scoring better on these external measures.

Oral fluency.

Students' beliefs about oral fluency shifted as the semester progressed. The initial data showed that students believed reading aloud with speed was highly correlated with being a good reader. "Read faster," Nakida answered definitively when asked what good readers do. Others echoed this belief in the beginning of the study through multiple data sources, but the idea changed with time. By the time I

asked the focus group follow-up questions, students were less convinced that speed meant good reading. "Not necessarily," Jacinta, answered to the follow-up question regarding speed's connection to good reading, adding that sometimes reading fast actually hinders comprehension. What accounted for this shift? I attributed the students' original answers about speed to saying what was foremost on their minds about reading based on past experiences. Many of the students mentioned detesting being called on to read, worrying about mispronouncing words or stuttering over them, as seen in the Table 3. Their immediate answer about what made good reading came from their experiences in classes when they heard other students read well out loud. A change in the students' interest in reading aloud occurred as well. At the start of the study, students did not want to read to the group, preferring for me to read. Over time, however, students began to ask if they could read, and I was able to hear every student read multiple times.

In spite of difficulty reading aloud being salient pattern in answers to why students did not like reading and why they believed they were not strong readers, they could all read aloud with reasonably good fluency. I listened carefully to their reading, and there were no problems with phonemic awareness; challenges to correct pronunciation only happened with multisyllabic, unfamiliar words, such as indoctrination, or cerebral, for example.

Vocabulary.

Vocabulary emerged from the data as an element students viewed as essential to successful literacy skills--both to reading and to writing. Understanding the meaning of words was the most cited example of a reading strength from the

Literate Learner profiles. Each student used a composition notebook throughout the semester that was divided into 4 sections: Notes/Quick Writes, Words, Style, and Responses. I encouraged them to keep their composition books open to the Words section as we read each session so that when they encountered unfamiliar words or words they might want to use in their own writing, the could write them down. I noticed a shift three weeks into our sessions when Shantel began writing down words frequently on her own. Some of her words included "Easter clean" and blasphemous, coax, and diagnosis. Other words were unfamiliar people, such as Bach and Mozart, or places she did not recognize, such as Daytona.

In their everyday speech, the students used rich and descriptive language, and often the words they selected with ease surprised me. When she explained how difficult it was for her to follow a lecture-only lesson, LaRae, said, "they just expect us to visualize it." The groups commonly pointed out academic terms. The students used and demonstrated understanding of appositive, onomatopoeia, simile, metaphor, and haiku, including the line-by-line syllabic requirements of this brief poem. In contrast, however, more simple words, such as sermon, or gnome, were unknown to nearly every student. In our reading that occurred the first half hour of each session, students frequently stopped the reading to ask the meaning of a word.

Two vocabulary strategies I used with the groups were context clues and morphology. Charise inquired about the meaning of hospitality meant one day, and I asked her to make a guess based on the context clues. "Knowledge," she said confidently, supporting her prediction by showing the context clues from the book, "Lewis offered customers hospitality." She knew that Lewis provided information

about Black history unavailable in any other venue, so she guessed that what he offered was knowledge. Her reasoning was excellent, just unfortunately incorrect in that instance. We learned the roots omni, ambi/amphi, eu, mnem, chron, and syn/sym. The students reported no previous work in examining the roots of words.

Comprehension.

As seen in Table 3 and from the Narrative Assessment analysis, lack of comprehension was a prominent pattern in students' previous literacy experiences. Two consistent culprits for students' inability to comprehend what they read emerged: distraction and the confusion because the story "jumped all over the place." Students consistently told me that they read a sentence or a page and then could explain, retell, or remember anything they had just read. I employed multiple strategies to aid in comprehension and metacognition, such as Think-Alouds, where I stopped at significant junctures in the text to check for understanding and to gauge students' responses to what they had read. I especially emphasized making inferences as a way to strengthen comprehension, and I will address this in a further section. It is important to note here that students were well aware that they often were not reading with understanding; they knew they regularly made no meaning from the text whatsoever.

Writing mechanics.

From the initial data, the noticeable pattern found in students' self-perceptions of writing ability related to mechanical aspects. Students mentioned spelling, punctuation, and grammar primarily as reasons they were not strong writers, and these aspects were the second most frequent category found from the

Literate Learner profiles. As seen from the Narrative Analysis, grammar issues were not prevalent: students misspelled few words, and the punctuation errors seemed more careless than substantive because students were able to use more difficult forms, such as ellipses and quotation marks correctly. Missing periods indicated lack of attention; missing commas probably did show reveal of understanding about dependent introductory clauses.

Only one student mentioned the deeper level aspects of writing in the initial data. In a written response, Jacinta lamented her inability to write well, stating, "I don't think I am as good as other writers in my class…keep it simple and don't have emotion or descriptive words in my writing." Jacinta's reference to "emotion" and "descriptive words" showed an understanding of voice and vocabulary in a way that no other student seemed to grasp at this early point in the study. As a student new to the middle school, Jacinta's background in English Language Arts is different from the other students in the group. She may not have experienced the kind of focused grammar instruction in preparation for the spring standardized test in the way that all of the other students had, and therefore, writing mechanics were not at the forefront of her thinking about writing as they were with other students.

Literacy Goals: Lack of Clarity

Ample data reflecting their literacy skills is shared with students throughout the school year: an annual state standardized test in the spring, several predictor tests prior to the major spring assessment, and at the beginning of the year they earn an Accelerated Reader (AR) level that may govern their library book choice depending on their English Language Arts teacher's affinity for the AR program.

When the students arrived for the literacy program, they universally reported a desire to improve literacy skills as well as the belief that literacy is essential to their future in college and career. Far less clear was an understanding specific ways to improve these skills. Five of the twelve replied "get better" as a reading goal in the Literate Learner profiles, and seven out of the twelve students wrote "getting better" as a writing goal. As seen earlier in the "what is good writing/good writer" question, the students primarily focused on writing mechanics rather than more substantive skills, such as using text evidence, sentence structure, or organization. Even in the state writing assessment, which the students will take in February, the mechanical aspects they mentioned, such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, are emphasized less on the rubric than higher-level skills, such as using supporting details or sophistication of word choice. The data illustrated that while students were aware they needed to improve literacy skills, they had little understanding of how to make progress toward this goal.

This lack of clarity was also apparent in students' understanding of how to improve reading skills. Students answered "practice" again and again as a way to become a better reader, but no specifics other than "a good reader is someone who enjoys reading" could be elicited. "I'm a kinda good reader to myself, but not aloud. I have trouble, but I don't know why. I find it very weird that I read this way," Sam wrote in his response journal, showing that while he was aware of his difficulties in reading, he could not understand what exactly was happening to prevent him from being a good oral reader. Reading aloud well was a vague and mysterious accomplishment for many of the students who mentioned this issue repeatedly in

interview, Literate Learner profile, and written response data.

Interest and suspense

As explained in the Past section, students' positive reading experiences nearly all related to some element of suspense. The students consistently described our first text selection, *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003), as suspenseful, which I had not expected. "We didn't know a lot about his (Lonnie's) life at first," Santianna remarked, explaining why she would highly recommend the book to another student. This sentiment was echoed repeatedly by nearly all of the students in the group. They cared about Lonnie, and the reasons for his being placed in a group home and later foster care were mysterious and interesting to them, prompting them to read further. Additionally, many of the students could identify with Lonnie's circumstances. LaRae wrote:

> I like this story a lot. I can relate to a lot of the things like the father being dead. My father was never around for me he's in and out of jail… and I wouldn't know whether he was alive or dead.

Summary of Students' Self-perceptions as Literate Learners

Perceived reading strengths mostly related to external measures, vocabulary, and initially, to oral fluency. Perceived writing strengths were nearly nonexistent, and what I learned from students' beliefs about writing came primarily from absences in the data: students named superficial or mechanical aspects, with only one exception where a student talked about wanting to use more vivid and descriptive words and emotion.

Although every student wanted to improve his or her reading and writing

skills, especially as measured externally by standardized test scores, how to improve skills, or even what specifically needed to "get better" as so many wrote, was unclear. Further, some students believed they were better at reading and writing than external measures demonstrated. Suspense was the most cited pattern for a reason students felt they could stay engaged in a book, and the story frequently moving from character to character or shifting settings were most common reasons for becoming confused and then abandoning a book. Figure 3 shows the summary of findings for students' perceptions of themselves as literate learners. I collapsed the categories developed from the axial codes from paired student interviews, focus group follow-up questions, class discussions, and written responses converged into four main categories that affected students' self-perceptions: past literacy experiences, reading and writing strengths, literacy goals, and outside school literacy practices.

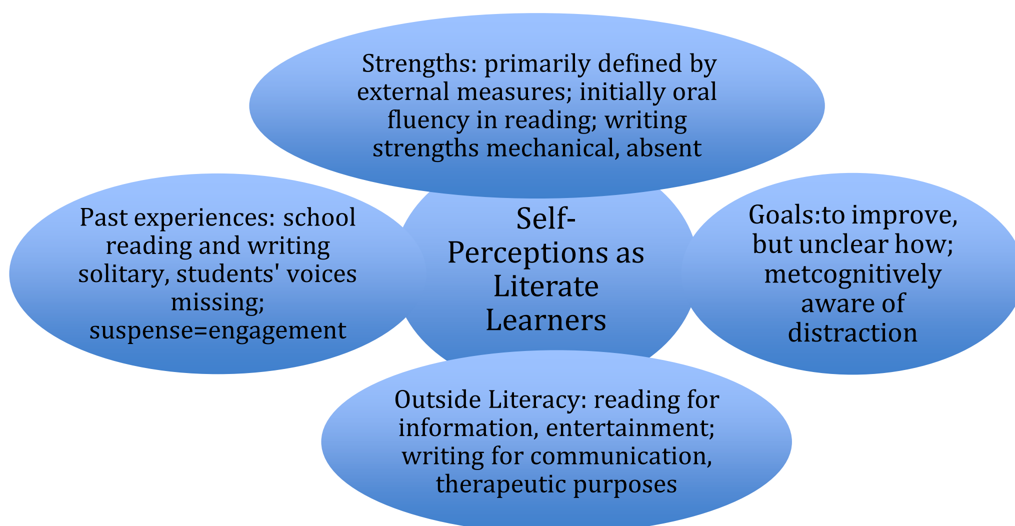

Figure 3. *Students' Initial Self-Perceptions as Literate Learners*

Revision in Pre-writing

"Writing in school is hard."-Charise

As we worked in the writing workshop on our second critical response to text, I noticed that students were tentative in their claims and revised their arguments as they talked through their pre-writing webs with me. Shantel's response to *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2012) discussed how the main character, Melody's, medi-talker empowered her. Shantel had created a pre-writing web with one point claiming that that the machine allowed Melody to "feel normal." I pressed Shantel to provide a more specific explanation of what feeling normal entailed:

MH: Okay, so you need to talk about a specific way that the Medi-talker helps her to feel normal.

Shantel: Talk with her friends, interact with her friends.

MH: See, that is excellent. You said interact with her friends, which is fantastic.

Shantel: I don't know how to spell it (the word interact).

(I spelled the word for her and she wrote it down.)

Shantel: She ain't got no friends.

Keenan: Melody do got friends.

Shantel: Rose is her only friend, everybody else gonna be mean to her.

Garon: Kathleen, Catherine (remembering Melody's aide).

(Shantel erased "friends" deciding that was the wrong term.)

MH: I like that, Shantel. You really thought carefully about that.

Shantel: Kathleen is the lady who helps her. Rose is her only friend.

Keenan: No, her only friend is not Rose.

MH: Catherine is her aid.

Garon: Isn't she a friend?

Shantel: Rose is her only friend, everybody else tryin' to be mean to her.

From that point the group debated briefly over whether or not Catherine counted as a friend to Melody. Garon believed that whether or not Catherine was paid for her work with Melody had no bearing on her status as Melody's friend. To him, a friend is someone who is kind or likes to be around another person, but for Shantel, Catherine's position as an employee paid to help Melody changed her positioning in Melody's social structure. I let this discussion run for a few moments because the students were engaged and arguing their points well. My original intent was for students to see the way Shantel had talked through her ideas in a tentative way and had revised them when she found her term friend was not as accurate as she needed for her argument.

A second, similar event occurred in the afternoon group as Nakida talked through her pre-writing web points with me. Her group read *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012), and she was writing about issues of unfairness in the documentary novel. She was struggling with more than one example of unfairness:

MH: What else has not been fair in the novel?

Nakida: The white people. (pauses) I mean, I didn't mean to say that.

MH: No, that's okay. You just have to be specific.

Nakida: The people that don't want him running the store. Sometimes it was black people and sometimes it was white people.

Nakida was correct; we had just discussed the fact that early in the story, Lewis Michaux is denied a loan by a Harlem banker who tells Michaux that black people will never buy books, but later on, white government officials, such as J. Edgar Hoover, became suspicious of the bookstore for selling Black Nationalist literature. When Nakida quickly retracted her denunciation of "white people," by saying, "I didn't mean to say that," she was simultaneously revising for factual accuracy and withdrawing a comment she thought I might find offensive as a white person. Like Shantel's reaction and subsequent revision of the word "friends," Nakida's correction to include both black and white persons treating Lewis Michaux unfairly followed her thinking aloud with me about her pre-writing.

In these examples, the situation and interaction dimensions figure heavily into the students' learning. The Literacy Lab setting allowed time and space for the kind of thinking-aloud with the instructor and peers that Shantel and Nakida needed to clarify in their minds the facts of the story as well as the broader social implications of these facts.

From Fulwiler's (1989) list for cognition and comprehension in writing, these examples would encompass several categories: doubt, questions, and self-awareness. Both students expressed doubts about their original claims, asked questions of the text, and possessed the self-awareness necessary to think through the claim, the evidence from the text that showed their original ideas might not be accurate, and then they each revised their statements for their pre-writing points. Critical engagement with the text clearly corresponded to stronger writing in these two instances. Because Shantel and Nakida were engaged in their texts, they were

able to metacognitively evaluate the initial arguments they had constructed in their pre-writing; they were able to reconstruct what they considered to be more appropriate statements having considered what actually happened in the text.

Shifts and Epiphanies

Narrative analysis looks for shifts and epiphanies as the storyline progresses. One significant shift occurred as students became critically engaged in the *Locomotion* (Draper, 2003) and their self-perceptions about their reading abilities began to change. "Before I came here I couldn't read, but I can now" LaRae declared. Pressed to explain why she believed this was true, LaRae elaborated: "'Cause before I started this program, I would forget what I read, I would have to go back and read it again and again, but now I can comprehend better, I know the words better." Charise expressed a similar thought, saying, "Before when I was reading, I read too fast and never understood what I was reading." This statement echoed another shift, the change in students' views of speed as connected to good reading. The initial data revealed oral fluency and particularly speed as a salient pattern in what students perceived defined good reading. In the focus group follow-ups and later class discussions, however, students made it clear that reading quickly should not necessarily be equated with good reading. Charise, for example, had previously cited her oral fluency as indicative of good reading, but as the semester progressed, she realized that she had been reading so quickly that perhaps she was not understanding what she read.

While Keenan did not specifically address a shift in his perceptions of his own abilities, his attitude toward reading changed dramatically by the time we

finished our first text. He had written earlier in the study that reading made him feel "dumb," but at this point he was so interested in the new books I brought in for the students to select after we finished *Locomotion* (Draper, 2003) that he asked, "Can I vote for three?" By late November, Keenan had told his group that he wanted to stay for the next semester because he knew he was learning.

Changes in students' writing occurred as the semester progressed as well. I used Anderson's (2011) Power Write strategy to help students gain confidence and stamina in writing. The writing workshop half of our literacy sessions typically began with a Power Write, where students wrote for one or two minutes on a particular topic, such as an "Expert List" or "What Bugs Me." Students kept track of the number of words they were able to write on a chart in the inside cover of their composition books. The students universally enthused over this task; it was short, seemed manageable, and drew on competitive natures nearly all students claimed to possess. Most students made great gains in the numbers of words they were able to write in the one or two minute time frame. Charise, for example, began at the start of the study with a total of 8 words in a one minute exercise, then progressed to as many as 40 by the end of the semester. Sam's first Power Writes yielded 4 and 5 words, and by the end, he too was writing as many as 40. Nearly every student made the same kind of advances. Often, even when I gave students two minutes, they asked for more time to write and to finish their thoughts. The figure below shows an example of the Power Write chart students kept in the front of their response journals. This chart is Charise's, showing her progress from eight words in August to seventy in October.

Power Writing Chart

# of words	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
121 +			
111-120			
101-110			
91-100			
81-90			
71-80			
61-70			
51-60			
41-50			
31-40			
21-30			
11-20			
0-10			

(Anderson, 2013; Fearn and Farnan, 2001)

Figure 4*. Student Example of Power Writing Chart*

An epiphany occurred early in the study when Sam connected the inferences we were discussing to educational guesses made across academic disciplines. "I just realized," he began, "Sorry to interrupt, but I just realized that making an educated guess is a different term in every subject. Like math is… what's it called, estimate, and science is hypothesis, and then this is inference." His peers were impressed and enthusiastic about the connection. "Wow," many responded. Nearly all of the students in the group claimed to feel more confident and to perform better in

science and math than in reading. Inferences were a central part of our reading comprehension plan, and as suggested by the pattern of confusion as the reason for poor comprehension, part of reading that is difficult for these students. By comparing this prediction or guess to an estimation or hypothesis, Sam was not only making linking academic vocabulary from various content areas, but also helping the group to see that reading requires guessing in way similar to math or science, he helped the group by using an explicit comparison that I would not have thought to make. As the students learned how to infer answers to what was not immediately obvious in the text by using clues, by learning to stop and figure out how to find an answer, they were able to grow as readers and as writers.

Response to confusion about the text.

The epiphany about making inferences in reading transferred to writing gains because students were able to continue reading where before they would simply stop, and subsequently, they were able to write in response to the text much more strongly because they understood what they read. Critical response required the students to think much more deeply than just about the information readily available to them from literal details in the text. They needed to look past the traditional elements of plot, character, and setting to the complex issues of power and justice, and missing voices.

Sam announced one afternoon in the Literacy Lab that *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012) confused him. Echoing the ubiquitous complaint of the "story jumps all over the place," he stated that he could not understand what was going on and that he did not like this book. Others joined him in agreeing that the story was hard

to follow, and so I asked what we had learned to do when the story confused us. "Go back in the text," Sam answered mechanically, with a bit of an eye-roll indicating how many times I had reiterated to "go back into the text" to clear up confusion. I pointed out that the book does proceed in chronological order, that the years are labeled at the beginning of each major section, but that the story is told through multiple perspectives. I had noticed that the students were without exception inclined to skip the section headings when reading aloud, and I had to ask them to be sure to include that information as it was helpful in understanding who was telling that part of Lewis Michaux's story. Additionally, I used a strategy, the character x-ray (Short, 2012), to aid students' comprehension, and I will address this engagement in a further section.

Wanting to learn more about why returning to the text seemed so onerous and foreign to the students, I asked them what they usually did when a story did not make sense to them. "Throw it down and walk out of the room," Nakida reported. Every other student agreed. "I just put it down," Ava said, "when it makes no sense." Abandoning the book in frustration was supported by multiple data sources. Barrett wrote in in his narrative assessment, "I couldn't read that book cause' I hated that book…I didn't understand it at all. Also the characters were gone and then they were back, and it was just so confusing to me."

Critical Engagement

A clear progression emerged from confusion to frustration to abandoning the book and remembering the reading event as a negative experience. While I had not seen the writing the students did in response to these previously read texts that

confused them, it is reasonable to surmise, based on the research showing a reciprocal relationship between reading and writing (Graham & Hebert, 2010), that if students did not understand the story and had such negative feelings about the book, written response could not be very strong. However, when students understood the text, they were able to make inferences about the characters and events and they could respond in a meaningful way. Metacognitive awareness became evident when students were able to articulate more clearly than in the interviews or earlier discussions why they enjoyed a book. Referring to *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2013), LaRae said, "I like it because it goes back in time and starts telling a story so I can learn new things." LaRae's recognition of her own learning connects to the suspense students cited at the beginning of the study as a key factor in enjoying a book. I adapted Fulwiler's (1989) List of Cognitive Activities to track the kinds of thinking the students were engaged in as they read the texts and wrote about them. Table 5 illustrates these categories.

Table 5

Adaptation of Fulwiler's (1989) List of Cognitive Activities

Cognitive Activities	Text Engagement Exemplar	Writing Response Connection/Exemplar
Observation: details, facts, descriptions about text	"His mother and father died December 9th." Shantel recalled date of Lonnie's parents' deaths.	Supporting arguments with detailed evidence from the text: "The FBI thought "Lewis was selling 75% of the antiwhite material which is distributed in Harlem.'"- Barrett's critical response to *No Crystal Stair*

Adaptation of Fulwiler's (1989) List of Cognitive Activities, cont.

Cognitive Activities	Text Engagement Exemplar	Writing Response Connection/Exemplar
Speculation: guesses about text	"Wait, hold up. I don't think she got any of those wrong, I think he probably marked them wrong or changed them." (student suspects main character's teacher of dishonesty.)	Engaging in discovery process during writing events: "Elvira helps because she won't have to keep everything in her mind anymore."-Santianna's critical response to *Out of My Mind.* "Maybe so your relatives can welcome you with open hands." LaRae, referring to why Lewis married a woman he did not truly love.
Confirmation: guesses supported by peers, teacher, or self through additional learning	"It's just like what LaRae told us about."-Sam, discussion about meaning of "indoctrinated," connecting to story LaRae told earlier about boy brainwashed by his mother.	Using strong, specific vocabulary in writing; Brianna used "vaporize," word learned in *Locomotion* in her critical response to *Out of My Mind.*
Doubt: uncertainty about responses to or claims about text	"I didn't think they (blacks) knew how to read in this time."-Charise "How is it *world* history?"-Nakida	Shantel changed "interact with friends," to a more specific "interact with Rose," because she realized the plural "friends" was inaccurate.
Questions: curiosity, desire for further information	"If slavery was over, how come, why didn't the blacks get their rights, if slavery was over?" -LaRae "Is that a black man with all those white people?"	"I wonder why he didn't want to tell them?"-Santianna, asking why Lonnie did not tell his friends about his parents.

Adaptation of Fulwiler's (1989) List of Cognitive Activities, cont.

Cognitive Activities	Text Engagement Exemplar	Writing Response Connection/Exemplar
Self-Awareness: cognizant of comprehension, connections with text	"It's a kid's point of view, not a grown-up's."-LaRae, explaining why she liked *Locomotion*	"I never know what to write about."-Jacinta, response journal
Connections: to self, to the world, to other texts	"I just realized that making an educated guess is a different term in every subject. Like math is, what's it called, estimate, and science is hypothesis, and then this is inference."-Sam "I can connect to that *Out of My Mind Story* because I did something with a girl who didn't have an arm." -Brianna	Brianna connected her own musical funds of knowledge and understanding of onomatopoeia to Melody's synesthesia in *Out of My Mind;* "My mind is getting carried away with these crazy colorful music notes…Boom, Boom…my mom walks in, 'Melody? Let's get you in bed…and I'm back again..shhhh…cerebral palsy."
Revision: amending original ideas after encountering further information, rereading, or rethinking	"She ain't got no friends. Rose is her only friend." -Shantel, revising her claim that Melody's medi-talker could help her interact with friends.	Shantel changed "interact with friends," to a more specific "interact with Rose," because she realized the plural "friends" was inaccurate.
Posing/Solving Problems: articulation of issue elicited by text and plausible solution	"I was wondering what they talking about, those African kids? Why don't the government send them money?" LaRae, asking about impoverished children mentioned in *Locomotion*	"The policeman didn't even receive a little bit of jail time, and Lewis didn't get a little bit of justice." -LaRae, in a critical response referring to a Lewis's losing an eye to a policeman in a raid.

Adaptation of Fulwiler's (1989) List of Cognitive Activities, cont.

Cognitive Activities	Text Engagement Exemplar	Writing Response Connection/Exemplar
	"Can't she have an operation that will help her be able to talk?" - Garon, asking about Melody's inability to speak.	"It's not fair to assume that people with conditions like Melody can't be helped."-Jacinta
Showing empathy/emergent action: feeling with the characters or motivated by text to act	"I would snap on her!" - Garon's reaction to classmate's derisive comments about Melody in *Out of My Mind*	"How would you feel if you can't talk, walk, feed yourself, but you had a photographic memory?" - Keenan.

Santianna's written response to *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003) showed a deep level of engagement:

> I think this book is really good. The part that jumped out at me was when Lonnie said "In my head I see a fire. I see black windows…I hear myself screaming, but I never seen nothing." I really liked that part, because Lonnie didn't want to tell them what happened but he was really there. It was interesting, because I wonder why he didn't want to tell them. He is going through a lot.

Santianna enacted several of the cognitive activities on Fulwiler's (1989) list, including giving information, posing a question, and making an empathic statement. *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003) was a book nearly every student in the Literacy Lab claimed to enjoy, some remarking it was one of the best books they had ever read. The book is not difficult to understand, but there were several spots where students

had to make inferences and clear up confusion; the setting of the Literacy Lab allowed us to take the time and space needed to comprehend difficult aspects of the story.

Inferences had to be made about *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003) from the first pages where the reader is introduced to Miss Edna and Ms. Marcus without any direct indication of the roles these women play in Lonnie's life. I asked the students to predict who these characters might be after the first two pages. We looked at clues in the text, such as Ms. Marcus's saying, "Good, Lonnie, write that" or Miss Edna's saying, "Be quiet!" (Woodson, 2003, p. 1). Students quickly guessed correctly that Ms. Marcus was a teacher, but we needed more clues to understand Miss Edna's place in Lonnie's life. When the next few pages revealed clues, such as Miss Edna's directives, "You'll sleep in here," or Lonnie's comment, "I used to fill up Miss Edna's house with noise," students deducted that Miss Edna was Lonnie's foster mother (Woodson, 2003, p. 10). *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003) is entirely comprised of poems, ranging in form from haiku to sonnet to free verse. Woodson (2003) wove a single narrative thread throughout the collection--the story of Lonnie's parents dying in a fire and his life afterward, separated from his sister, Lili, living with Miss Edna, and interacting with friends in Ms. Marcus's class. The story of how his parents died, of the group home he lived in, why Lili's new mother regards him with suspicion, is told through flashbacks inserted into the present as an event triggers Lonnie's memory. Ironically, this method of telling the story, in bits revealed slowly, was labeled "suspense" by the Literacy Lab students and what they credited for "keeping their interest." However, the way the story unfolded fit precisely the

students' definition of a story that "jumps all over the place" moves from character to character, and returned to the past suddenly, all reasons previously cited for confusion, inability to comprehend, and to abandon the story altogether.

Rather than abandoning the story, the students responded to *Locomotion* (2003) with enthusiasm, interest, and most significantly, with critical engagement. This engagement allowed them to respond verbally to the text in sophisticated ways, such as Sam's comments in a class discussion following a poem about Lonnie's separation from his younger sister. "This is a sad book," Sam said and added, "I'm an only child, I don't even have brothers or sisters, and this makes me sad." The engagement also allowed students to respond critically with high levels of cognition and comprehension, such as the previous example shown through Santianna's writing, or Sam's written response:

> …it was hard for him to express that (Lonnie's separation from Lili). I know this because he was upset and talking about. It got me thinking what if my parents were taken. I have no idea what I would do I would be hearbrokein to feel like that.

Here, not only did Sam use empathic statements by identifying how Lonnie feels, but he also used confirmation in asserting, "I know this because" and offering the textual evidence to support his claim, as well as self-awareness, wondering how he would feel if he faced similar situation.

Table 5 demonstrates the connections between the critical engagement in the text as exemplified through class discussions and the written responses students made in their Power Writes and critical responses to the text. While a one-to-one

correspondence would be impossible to show, the same kinds of cognitive activities can be seen in both verbal and written engagements. For example, the students remembered many specific details from the texts, such as the fact that December 9th was the anniversary of Lonnie's parents' deaths in a fire. The ability to recall facts such as these helped the students to use good supporting evidence from the text in their critical responses.

From Critically Engaged Reading to Critical Responses in Writing

Noticing the author's linguistic choices was a crucial part of teaching students to read with a critical lens. Students found Woodson's (2003) use of incorrect grammar and slang through Lonnie's voice realistic and authentic. "It's a person telling his own story," LaRae commented. Jacinta's remark, "The way Lonnie talked" was a common answer to why the students found the book engaging, in addition to the suspense students felt in wanting to learn what would happen next to this character whom they had grown to care about.

Because she tells the story through a series of poems, Woodson's (2003) details and descriptive language were easy for students to identify. I taught the term imagery, and we looked at the way Lonnie describes his town in winter in "Just Nothing Poem," "city so grey you would think we live in a big old grey box" (Woodson, 2003, p. 49). Several of the students had written this phrase or parts of it in their composition books as we read because it struck them as particularly strong writing. We discussed the way that the author did not choose "big" words, as the students often labeled multisyllabic words, but ordinary words, in Lonnie's voice, to tell Lonnie's story.

This examination of the author's linguistic choices helped students explore the text from a critical perspective by thinking about how Lonnie's views might not be shared by others in the text, such as his sister, Lili, who was not sad and lonely in her foster care situation. Further, Lonnie's voice empowered him because he was able to express his feelings through his writing in a way that he could not do in verbal conversations. We discussed the way that Lonnie's point-of-view changes from thinking his city was grey and ugly, feeling closed in when his mood was sad and lonely in winter to seeing through different eyes in the spring. "It's raining out. But the rain is light and warm./And the sky's not all close to us like it gets/sometimes," Lonnie wrote in "Almost Summer Sky" (Woodson, 2003, p. 87).

Looking at another example of Woodson's (2003) imagery in "Epistle Poem," I assigned students to write a paragraph expanding a Power Write warm-up on a room they either loved or hated. I wanted students to gain three skills here: 1) the critical literacy skill of analyzing texts according to whose perspective or voice tells the story, and 2) the writing skill of using imagery to describe a place using their own voices the way Woodson tells the story through Lonnie's voice and details, and 3) practice in creating a good hook or lead to open their piece.

I offered an example, a mentor text, of a room I detest, the dentist's office. As I expected, some students loved visiting the dentist while others shared my aversion. We discussed how the reclining chair is relaxing from one person's perspective, another step along a torturous process for others. Focusing on the sensory details, we discussed the way certain smells or sounds repel or attract people depending on their perspectives.

Collaboration.

Each student had described in a one-minute power write a room that they loved or hated. Then we used a pre-writing web to brainstorm additional ideas, with a bubble for each of the five senses. One student had trouble describing the gym from any sense other than sight. LaRae suggested "the smack of the volleyball," and "people yelling 'Got it!'" or the coach's shouting. Sam wrote about the circus, a place he detested. "What things at the circus could you touch?" he asked. "People around you, you are touching other people," Ava proposed. Students were open to helping and being helped by others. When Ava had trouble thinking of a good "hook" or lead for her paragraph describing her bedroom, I stopped the group so we could help her:

MH: What's missing in the first sentence?

LaRae: It's a frag.

MH: Barrett, what's it missing?

Barrett: Well, there is a verb, walk…

MH: Yes, but/

LaRae: I knew there was a but.

MH: If we don't have anything else after "When I walk in my room the sound of the fan," it does create a fragment. But is this the way you want to hook your reader?

Ava: No, this was a quick write. I need to take my time and think about it.

LaRae: If I pick up a book and "the sound of my fan" is on the first page, I am going to put the book back.

Ava and LaRae were close friends, and this comment from LaRae was typical of the way she and Ava interacted. Ava agreed with LaRae and worked hard to create a stronger way to hook the reader into her descriptive paragraph. The dynamic of this group was supportive. Two important findings emerged here: the students listened to one another's comments and took them seriously, and also they were able to see that writing is a process, that none of them wrote a flawless sentence or paragraph with the first attempt. Ava's understanding that she should take her time and think about it signaled that she had become aware of the time needed for writing. Revision here was not editing, but reworking the content, which was not something that these students had previously done. The mechanical aspects they mentioned early in the study, the grammar, punctuation, and spelling were the errors they were accustomed to looking for in any kind of revising or editing process.

Creating a suspenseful hook.

Students collaborated with one another and with me to write the strongest possible wording for their hooks. I taught them several strategies for ways to create good hooks based on Anderson's (2011) *Ten Things Every Writer Should Know*: 1) begin with a quote, 2) open with a thought-provoking question 3) use sensory details, 4) start with a list, and 5) use suspense or set up a contradiction that will make the reader curious. The students had been nearly unanimous in their comments that suspense about what would happen next in Lonnie's life or what would be further revealed about his past kept them interested in the story. They had also named suspense as a key component of a good book. Connecting their

inclination toward suspense with writing a hook to interest the reader, I was not surprised when many of the students chose this strategy for their own hook. They were able to see that what interested them as readers could translate to their own writing. When LaRae told Ava, however bluntly, that she would put the book down if it began the Ava's first sentence had, LaRae indicated that she understood the connection between good writing and an interested reader.

***Student examples*.**

Charise's growth from her first attempt at writing about a room she loved to the final version illustrated the result of some collaboration between the teacher and student. Understanding that she needed to use sensory details, her first draft read:

> The room I like is the Chinese Restaurant. I like that room because of all the smells of different types of food.

I prompted her to show specific items that would appeal to the senses, rather than just telling the reader that the room smelled like different types of food. "What food?" I asked. "What else do you see, hear, feel in this room?" Charise understood what I was trying to convey to her, and her the final version of a room she loved read:

> A small red bell chimes above your head when you first walk in. You smell all kinds of different flavors of food: orange chicken, rice, egg rolls, etc. When you take a seat in those soft, comfy booths and enjoy your meal, it feels like Heaven.

Charise wanted to create a strong hook that would spark her reader's interest from the first sentence. She was determined to create suspense, one of the elements I had taught students, of good hooks or leads. I was not sure how she would use suspense in a description of a Chinese restaurant, but she proposed that describing the bells chiming overhead was a way to make the reader curious about what would come next. The students connected with the idea of using suspense to keep a reader's interest because they liked the feeling of being curious, of being held in suspense, wondering what would occur next.

By talking through this method of creating a hook, the students were able to understand the relationship between strong writing and engaged reading. I shared an example from my own description of the dentist's office with the students for them to use as a mentor text. My sentence was, "The sound of the bright light buzzing was not the worst part." An excerpt from our conversation about the hook I had written shows how the students were beginning to connect reading with writing:

MH: What am I doing?

Brianna: Describing, using adjectives, making a mental movie.

Keenan: Hooking the reader.

MH: Keenan says I am hooking the reader. What does that mean?

Keenan: Making a connection with the reader.

Brianna: Fishing with the reader (grins).

MH: Yes, when I say, "it was not the worst part," I am creating an interest in the reader's mind. I want to "hook" the reader into wanting to know what is the worst part.

Another example of growth from first draft to final draft can be seen in Keenan's description of his favorite room, Pizza Hut. His first draft lacked specifics:

> My room is so cool. It's filled with pizza. I love it so much. The smell is cheese and hot; it burns my nose with fire. The taste is so amazing. It's just so good I can't put it into words.

Keenan's final version showed his attention to the kind of sensory details that Lonnie used in his descriptions of the grey city and in "Epistle Poem." Starting with "Order up!" heard from the kitchen and ending with "They look very odd-shaped, when I see them I think of math class. It sounds like a party with zero dancing, but more food," Keenan revised his work to use his own voice in the same way Lonnie used his voice to tell his stories.

Written response to *Locomotion:* Shift in Perceptions, Engagement

When the groups, originally three then merged into two, finished reading *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003) we wrote a shared critical response. Working collaboratively through the entire writing process, we brainstormed and organized with prewriting webs, composed sentences, revised them, and then edited the piece. Students expressed surprise at the messiness of the writing process. I had brought in white boards, and we composed together, marking out, erasing until we agreed that the sentence was worded in the best way possible. "This is a mess," Ava

commented, and it was, but the final drafts, polished and typed, pleased the students and made them see the messy process was worth the end result.

The written critical response question was "How does Lonnie's voice empower him?" We began with pre-writing webs, brainstorming ideas about how Lonnie's voice empowered him. When students completed the brainstorming, they voted on which points to argue in the response. Often the determining factor was the strength of the direct quote from the book that would support the point. Students had very little experience, if any, in returning to the text to find evidence for an argument they were making in writing. They frequently used a strategy of connecting events chronologically to find the quote they were looking for. For example, Sam wanted to use a quote from a day that Lonnie and his foster brother Rodney are walking in the park. Sam knew that this was a later event in the story, and that Lonnie had used the progression of weather to show passage of time in the novel. If the page Sam looked on described the day as cold and gray, he was looking too early in the text. I was surprised at the details the students remembered, such as "December 9," as the date Lonnie's parents were killed in the fire, or the posters Miss Edna's sons had put on her walls. Students seemed to have a good sense from these details that the quote they were looking for was "past this part," or "before this happened."

Once the students decided on the major points and had selected evidence from the text, we began to write. Each group's sentences were not perfectly worded, as I wanted to use the students' constructions as much as possible. When I thought a suggested sentence was unclear or did not fit well with what we had already agreed

upon, I did steer the students in a direction that I thought would lead to clearer writing. For example, Jacinta contributed the sentence, "Even though she is gone in the present day, the smell reminds him of her as if she were still there." Although this arrangement was fairly wordy, I did not want to alter the sentence because Jacinta worked very hard on it, and I felt that the confidence she was gaining from seeing herself as a writer should not be jeopardized by a correction. If a suggestion contained an egregious error, I did address the error. Often one student would propose a sentence or idea and another would offer a revision. The groups' final versions show the results of this collaborative effort.

Group 1: Lonnie's voice empowers him by helping him through his grief, by keeping his parents' memory alive, and by letting him tell the truth about adults. Writing poems helps him through his grief by distracting him from the separation from his family. For example, Lonnie writes the poem, "Parents Poem," and argues at the end of this poem that the fire could not "take all of them." Finally, Lonnie's voice empowers him by telling the truth about adults: in the poem, "Commercial Break," Ms. Marcus asks for details, but Lonnie talks about race, and Ms. Marcus questions Lonnie's decision. Although Lonnie followed her instructions to use details, Ms. Marcus still misunderstood him.

Group 2: Lonnie's voice empowers him by allowing him to use his own grammar and language, by keeping his parents' memory alive, and by telling the truth in situations where he was misunderstood. When Lonnie brags, "We don't do none of that in 5th grade," he does not worry about using correct grammar. Lonnie uses his own language without thinking about being judged, to tell how he feels

about the Halloween decorations. In the poem, "Mama," Lonnie remembers that his mother always smelled like honeysuckle talcum powder. Even though she is gone in the present day, the smell reminds him of her as if she were still there. Finally, Lonnie's voice gives him power by allowing him to tell the truth when he is misunderstood. In "Commercial Break," Ms. Marcus misunderstood and asked, "What does race have to do with it?" Ms. Marcus got mad when Lonnie was more descriptive, but she was the one who demanded description. Through this poem, Lonnie can tell what actually happened.

Group 3: Lonnie's voice empowers him by keeping his parents' memory alive, giving him an identity as a poet, and allowing him to show when adults are wrong. Lonnie keeps his parents' memory alive by cherishing a memory about holding his sister in the poem, "Memory." "I felt safe then," Lonnie writes. Additionally, Lonnie comes to believe in his ability to write poetry, and this gift becomes a part of his identity. "You don't get to write a poem once," he claims, with the authority of an experienced writer. Being a poet gives Lonnie the confidence that he can do something well. Finally, Lonnie's voice proves that what Lili's new mama thought he was, a bad boy with no religion. When the church ladies approve of Lonnie, Lili's new mama has a new perspective.

When students finished the responses, I typed group's work and distributed copies to students with each group member's name listed at the top. Publishing and celebrating is the last phase of the writing workshop process, one often left out in the hectic schedule of classroom activities. The Literacy Lab students were proud of their work and several asked if they could take home the page to show to their

parents. "This is really good," Ava remarked. "We are smart. I remember saying that," LaRae declared, recognizing one of her own sentences in the final typed version of the collaborative response. "We all came together and shared our ideas," Keenan explained, answering my question of why they thought this piece of writing was strong.

Critical Engagement Strategies

After completing *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003), the groups voted on a new book. The first group chose *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2010) and its accompanying informational text, *Living With Cerebral Palsy* (Gray, 2003). The second group chose a single book, *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012), a documentary novel encompassing both informational and narrative material. *No Crystal Stair* and *Living with Cerebral Palsy* both contained pictures and captions and section headings, as well as narrative accounts that relate to the facts presented.

By the time we began the second texts, students were enthusiastic about reading aloud, and nearly every student wanted to read during each session. I noticed, as mentioned previously regarding the *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012) group, that students in both groups were consistently not reading the chapter or section headings, and I had to remind them to read these nearly every time. The group reading *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012) complained some that the story confused them, and so I used a reading comprehension engagement, a character x-ray (Short, 2012), to help students understand the characters. This strategy is often used with fictional texts, but here, it was certainly applicable. The image in Figure 5 shows an example of a student's x-ray. Instructions were to draw an outline of a

character from the story, and at the hands, head, heart, feet, and mouth connect thought bubbles explaining what a character would do, think, feel, go, and say, respectively. Students chose a variety of characters from each story, and when they finished, each student shared his or her x-ray. This critical engagement helped students to summarize the most salient points about the characters they selected.

Sharing the x-rays offered an opportunity to see various facets of other characters as well, so the critical literacy tenet of looking at the text from multiple perspectives emerged here. For example, Santianna chose Melody for her character x-ray, and labeled her heart, "feels like no one understands her." Jacinta selected Melody's caretaker, Mrs. V for her x-ray and wrote at Mrs. V's feet, "goes away when Melody struggles so she can be stronger and do it for herself." Santianna and Jacinta had chosen two different aspects of the story: Melody's perspective was that no one understood her, but Mrs. V viewed Melody's struggles as obstacles she could overcome if she was given time and space to do so. Figure 5 shows another character x-ray example, from the *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012) group, providing LaRae's interpretation of Lewis Michaux.

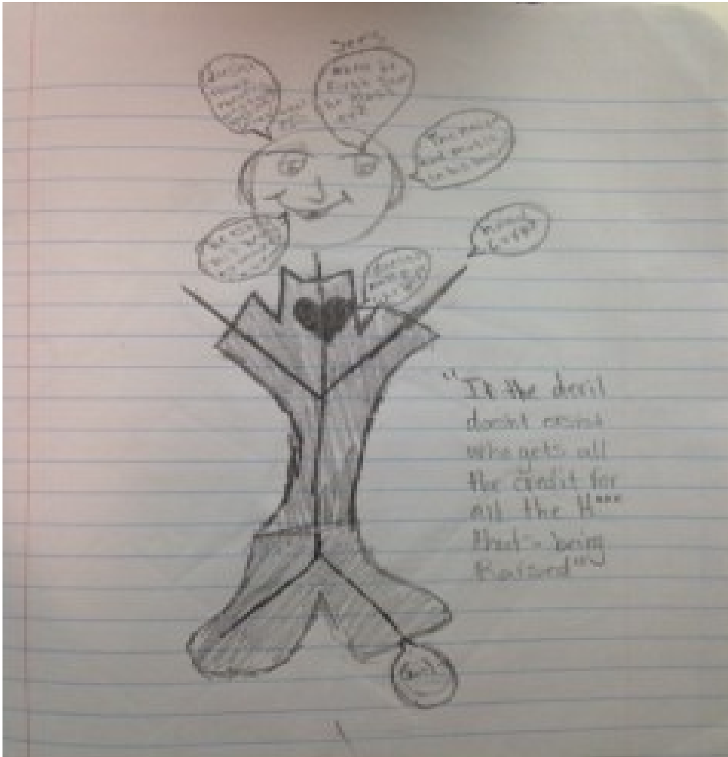

Figure 5. *LaRae's Character X-ray of Lewis Michaux*

Another critical engagement strategy we used was a text rendering, in which students selected a direct quote from the text and read it aloud with no talking in between. The strategy's purpose is twofold: first, students return to the text, rereading until they find a passage or quote they connect with, and then secondly, listening as the group reads selected quotes lets students hear the text again, and allows them to hear what others deemed significant. Following this activity, the students had to explain in a Power Write why they selected the particular quote.

Like the character x-ray, this task offered multiple perspectives of the stories to the students. For example, Nakida chose a quote about a minor character, Blanche Michaux, Lewis, Lightfoot, and Norris Michaux's mother. Blanche Michaux entered the documentary novel briefly at the beginning, was hospitalized for "nervous

exhaustion," and only reappeared in the story at her death. Nakida selected the quote, "Mother finally got some peace," (Nelson, 2012, p. 49). At first I thought Nakida had randomly selected this quote because this character had played such a minor role in the story, but her Power Write explanation illustrated that Nakida connected deeply with Blanche Michaux because Nakida's own mother had five children and "needs a vacation because we get on her nerves and don't do what we supposed to...when she gets back we will listen more."

Nakida's quote regarding Blanche was also significant to the critical engagement because Blanche was partly responsible for the power structure that existed in the Michaux family. When Lightfoot was born with a caul, the birth membrane over his face, his mother declared this signified a "high mission," and she favored him over her other children (Nelson, 2012, p. 5). This part of the story fascinated the students because they had never heard of this phenomenon, but they understood how this one event at Lightfoot's birth helped to set in place his position as leader in the Michaux family. In their second critical responses, several of the students referred to Lightfoot's caul, and the way that, as Ava wrote, "his family believed that he had a lot of power, so he became powerful."

Connecting Narrative and Informational Texts

The group that read *Living With Cerebral Palsy* (Gray, 2003) was able to determine which of the three types of the disease Melody probably had, according to the descriptions of each. They were curious about treatments and technology used to help children with cerebral palsy, and Garon was particularly concerned that Melody could not be helped more by a surgery or medical intervention. His thought

process, having read how cerebral palsy occurs at in-utero or at birth, was significant. If cerebral palsy happens because oxygen is restricted, he reasoned, could doctors not give oxygen to the babies, in the same way athletes who need more oxygen are given a mask to help them recover? Garon was an athlete, and his funds of knowledge regarding sports were vast. He was applying these funds of knowledge to the new information he had acquired about cerebral palsy to pose a solution to Melody's condition.

Garon's group also was especially interested in a part of the non-fiction text called "A Determined Boy," about Christy Brown, a man born with cerebral palsy in the 1930s. Although doctors told Brown's family that the child would never be able to do anything, his mother taught him to write with his feet, and Brown went on to paint and author the book, *My Left Foot* (Brown, 1991). "I want to read that, Mrs. Hasty!" Keenan said, and others chimed in. I could not get from the students exactly what was so attractive about this blue section of text with a small, black and white picture of Christy Brown except that it was a story within this informational text. "It's just interesting," they told me, or "We just want to read about this guy." I discussed with the students that nonfiction often contains stories, such as these, that follow a narrative structure with beginning, middle, and end, a climax, and significant characters.

The students immediately compared Christy Brown with Melody, and they asked many questions about why Melody could not write with her foot as Brown did. We then looked back in the informational text to reread the section describing the varying degrees of cerebral palsy. Melody's particular condition, we decided,

was too severe to be helped by many of the advancements in technology or physical therapy that could help other persons with the disease. Her medi-talker, Elvira, was the single development that Melody could use, and this helped students to understand why the machine was such a powerful tool for Melody. The students consistently commented that the non-fiction text's facts helped them to understand the fictional story in a deeper way.

The group reading *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012) shared a similar experience in that the facts presented in the story helped them to understand the characters' actions and motivations more thoroughly. In the interest of time one day, I had intended to skip a section of the text--a prayer written by Lewis Michaux's first wife, Willie Ann, for their their impending nuptials. The students were fascinated and indignant at this part of Michaux's life. He had been recently rescued from a possible prison term by his brother Lightfoot, a highly regarded preacher. Lightfoot arranged a marriage for Lewis with a woman in the church who would, Lightfoot believed, set his wayward brother on a straighter path. Willie Ann was actually in love with another man at the time of the wedding, and the story made it clear that she and Lewis cared for one another only in a platonic way.

"That's sad that Lewis and Willie marry but don't really love one another," Ava remarked. Seizing the chance to help the students approach this part of the story from a critical perspective, I asked about the power structure. The students were able to see that Lightfoot's powerful position as a preacher who could talk to the judge in charge of Lewis' sentence also allowed Lightfoot to demand that his brother marry a woman of the church. Less understandable to the students were

Willie Ann's reasons for marrying a man she did not truly love. We reread the prayer and the section above a picture of Willie and Lewis, who look somber in their wedding clothes. Willie said, "Elder Michaux (Lightfoot) desires this, and he surely knows better than I. Sister Michaux (Lightfoot's wife) seems uncertain about our union, but I have prayed on it…Perhaps I am part of a plan greater than myself" (Nelson, 2012, p. 26). I discussed with the group various power structures at work here: the hierarchies in the church and between men and women. "Uh uh," LaRae proclaimed. "I wouldn't dare get married if it was like that. It's weird. I am a person."

Critical Response to Second Text

After the groups finished *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003), they voted on a new text. The first group selected *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2010), to be accompanied by the informational text, *Living With Cerebral Palsy* (Gray, 2003). The second group chose *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012), a documentary novel comprised of both narrative and informational elements. I assigned students a critical response to the texts, with the ability to select a question from several choices, delineated in the next sections of this paper. Whereas with the first critical response, we wrote collaboratively, I wanted this writing task to be done primarily by the students independently. As we worked on this written response, I noticed a significant shift in several of the students, as described in the sections that follow.

Shift in attitudes.

LaRae's critical, emotional engagement in *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012) framed her written response to the text, as will be illustrated in a further section. At this point in the semester, LaRae had been suspended for fighting and upon her

return was resistant to fully participating in the Literacy Lab. I alternately gave her some space and encouraged her, pointing to her growth and progress as a reader and writer, and after a few days, she seemed to abandon her resistance.

I noticed a shift during this period, which occurred just after the two-week fall break, in many of the students' attitudes. The assistant principal, listening to my concerns at this time, commented that often the students who receive free and reduced lunch have a difficult time during the lengthy breaks from school because they do not always have adequate food. Nearly all of the students, she added, have trouble readjusting to the structure of the school day after the two weeks away. Like LaRae, following the break, the almost all of the students in both groups were more resistant to participating, complained about the work, and were in general, less cooperative than they had been. I believed that the increased difficulty of our work, especially the critical written response, was a significant factor in the students' resistance. Whereas with the first response the students collaborated, this response was to be completed independently. I did, however, allow the students to ask one another for suggestions on word choice or help finding appropriate quotes from the text to support their arguments, and I helped students as well, though I tried to make certain they were thinking and working as hard as they could alone first. After a few days, everyone seemed to settle in and enthusiasm returned.

Another shift that occurred at this time was a change in my expectations for the students' writing. I offered some options for each group. For the *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2003) group, options included:

1) How did Elvira empower Melody?

2) How is Melody able to use her voice by the end of the novel?

3) Discuss issues of fairness in the novel.

Choices for the *No Crystal Stair Group* (Nelson, 2012) included:

1) How did Vaunda Micheaux Nelson give her uncle, the Harlem Bookseller, a voice?

2) How did power structures affect Lewis's life, and where did he fit into the power structure that existed in America during that time period?

3) Discuss issues of fairness in the documentary novel.

Students followed the same writing workshop process they had done with the first critical response, beginning with prewriting, brainstorming, writing a hook, collecting quotes to support points, and then writing, revising, and editing. I circled the table, moving from one student to the next, as they all wanted me to read their work and offer comments as soon as they had written a sentence or two. We created rubrics together with three shared goals, based on writing skills we had worked on together, and then each student selected a personal goal based on something he or she had struggled with over the semester. When we began to discuss what three goals to select for the rubric, the discourse in both groups involved punctuation. Had we focused on punctuation very much in the Literacy Lab, I asked. No, they were able to say quickly, except for the comma and semi-colon when combining sentences. Clearly, however, as their earlier Literate Learner profiles and interview data showed, punctuation was still at the forefront of their minds when thinking about what mattered to good writing. Finally, we settled on some deeper-level goals, such as a solid hook, good transitions, and varied sentence structure.

Here, I noticed a pattern very similar to the students' inclination to abandon a book when reading became confusing or difficult: when students encountered an obstacle to writing, they were likely to simply stop writing. At this point, I helped them with strategies, such as using Microsoft Word's thesaurus tool for alternatives to overused words. They also had lists of strong words in their writing journals that they could select. Some students were resistant to the revision process especially; I asked them to circle all of their verbs to be sure they were the most vivid choices, a skill we had worked on earlier in the semester.

Another shift occurred during this second critical response that I had not expected. Three students, Charise, LaRae, and Brianna, without talking with one another about their work, created a narrative response rather than the argument I had intended. LaRae and Brianna had told me at the start of the semester that they wrote stories and songs, but that they did not care for "school" writing. LaRae began her critical response in the midst of the period when she returned from out-of-school suspension, and she was very angry. "I write stories," she told me. "I don't write school stuff." Write this response as if it were a story, I told her, and she did. This excerpt from her work below demonstrates the way LaRae used her story writing funds of knowledge and her emotional connection to the injustice of Lewis's forced, loveless marriage:

> Moping into a church about to be married to a lady you rarely notice, barely recognize, and not even close to being in love with. Think about it as if it were you. Finally walking down the aisle cause someone else thinks it's the right

> thing to do, cause your brother thinks it will change your life, or maybe so you can just be welcomed with open hands for once.

LaRae's work was not grammatically perfect; two of the three sentences were fragments. However, the lyrical quality of her phrasing, "rarely notice, barely recognize," was remarkable, as was the strength of her voice in this piece. When LaRae finished her critical response, she asked me to email a copy to the school's principal who had been dropping by our group regularly to encourage LaRae. I complied with LaRae's request and also printed a copy for her mother attached to a brief note describing LaRae's excellent progress over the course of the semester. LaRae's interest and effort levels continued to be high for the remainder of the study.

As with LaRae, I tried to encourage Brianna to think of her response in the same way she would write the songs she talked about frequently writing. She began by writing lyrical hook, but she had trouble continuing. "This is enough," she kept saying to me, but I encouraged her to finish. On the day that she was having trouble, Claudia, the student with cerebral palsy, came into the cafeteria where we were working that day. When Brianna finally broke through her block and wrote past her hook, she attributed her ability to write to seeing Claudia. "That helped me, Mrs. Hasty, to see Claudia," Brianna said to me. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Seeing her and remembering what she goes through, that helped me write all this," she explained. When she finished her piece, she was so proud that she printed it off immediately and showed her teachers.

Both girls were far more receptive to revision than most of the other students in the groups. Brianna kept making small changes to her work, carefully selecting the words she felt sounded best, and using my laptop to change write certain words in all capital letters for emphasis. At first, I was concerned about allowing these students to write in this way because part of what I wanted to teach them was how to respond to text in a critical way. They all did respond critically, however, and with more voice and ownership of their writing than many of the other students. Further, responding to some type of text in a narrative format is one of the possibilities for the state standardized writing prompt they will encounter later this year.

Charise's written response demonstrated her use of storytelling and the tenets of critical literacy she had learned throughout the semester. Like LaRae's and Brianna's story writing funds of knowledge, Charise had often referred to her parents' deep belief in teaching their children about African American history. Charise's response can be directly connected to a conversation the group had following an especially poignant section of *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012), "The black man is asleep. No he's not asleep. He's awake. He's sitting at the edge of the bed scratching," (p. 39). The students and I discussed how Lewis believed that African Americans were afraid in many cases to act because consequences to standing up to the power structure during this pre-Civil Rights Era were often dire. This image Nelson (2012) created, of the black man poised on the edge of his bed, awake, but not quite ready to act, helped the students understand the period of American history, the time between the end of slavery and the Civil Rights

Movement. They had studied the Depression, but not anything related to racial issues during this era. "Could African Americans read then?" Charise asked, and LaRae had a similar question, "If slavery was over, why did blacks not have any rights?" We discussed the issue of fear, and how intimidation of African Americans by the power structure, such as the FBI, who watched Lewis Michaux carefully, worked to keep blacks from demanding equal rights sooner.

After we discussed the image and the quote thoroughly, I asked students to explore through a Power Write task what they would do if they were not afraid of anything. When the students shared their answers, most were humorous, such as Sam's description of his fear of the circus and clowns. Charise, however, took the question seriously, and said, "I would speak my mind." I asked Charise to say more about what she meant, and she replied, "I try to hold back because you don't know how people will react." We discussed that writing is a way for people to let their voices be heard, that Lewis Michaux wanted to focus solely on African American voices in his bookstore, so they would not be lost to history. "Nobody wants to talk about race," LaRae commented during this conversation. Charise told the group that her parents had told her as African Americans, they needed to understand their history, "that things were unfair, that white people had more power."

The excerpt from Charise's critical response below shows her engagement in the text and funds of knowledge and interest in multiple areas: storytelling, black history, sensory details, and issues of power and justice.

In Lewis's store I smell the old, crispy scent of the books all around the store.

Seeing books from bottom to top, front to back, all about African Americans

by African Americans. I strolled around and see thousands of books. Down every aisle I feel hard back-books, paperback books, even books with 3D faces. As soon as I enter, Lewis gives me a warm cup of coffee. My taste buds zoom around my mouth and heat my mouth up quickly. It was really cold outside.

I started to talk to Lewis and he said, "These people hope to get to Heaven where they can get something for nothing while everything they want is here on Earth. The African Americans are always looking for a job and never ask what it pays." The difference between Lewis's store and Blumstein's, the store where Martin Luther King Jr. signed books, is that Lewis's store hires African American and Blumstein's doesn't. "All he wants is a job." I say back, "Yeah this life is unfair, if God wants me to be satisfied then we should be able to get paid the same as white people."

Summary of Continuity Dimension: Present

Initial data, including paired student interviews, focus group follow-up questions, Literate Learner profiles, and the first narrative analysis converged to show students' understanding of "good reading," as three of the Big 5 categories as defined by the National Reading Panel (2000). Students' responses consistently identified fluency, especially speed, though this would change over the course of the semester, comprehension, and vocabulary as important components of good reading. These initial data also revealed that the participants' self-perceptions as readers and writers were largely informed by external measures, such as standardized test scores, reading levels, and writing assessment rankings.

In spite of the specificity of the numbers and levels the students described, they were unable to explain what these assignations actually meant or how to improve their scores. They universally proclaimed goals of "getting better" at reading and writing, but could not articulate how to go about this progress. Further, exactly why the trouble existed in reading and writing seemed mysterious and confusing to the students. Students were able to say that distraction and lack of interest was a significant hindrance, but they did not have any solutions for the problem of focusing.

While the students could not describe what it was that held their interest precisely, their responses showed a pattern of suspense and a related category of caring about the character accurately defined interest in a book or story for them. Suspense was not dramatic "who done it?" kind of suspense, but rather caring about a character enough to learn more about his or her past in order to understand present motivations for actions or beliefs. The participants also named learning something new, either about the characters, subjects, or events, in the story as essential for keeping their interest.

As the students began writing in response to the texts, the revision step in the writing process revealed a tentativeness in their thinking that collaboration with peers and with me helped to clarify. Through their writing, I was able to understand even more clearly how well the participants were comprehending the text, and the revisions they made helped me to see how their thoughts were shifting and changing about the characters and the story in general. Many shifts occurred as students wrote the first critical response: their writing stamina had increased with

the Power Writes, their confidence as readers and writers was improving, and the issue of speed as connected with good reading became less important to their definition of good reading.

An epiphany occurred allowing me to see that previously students would simply abandon a book when it became too confusing, the ubiquitous "jumping around," students described. Reading aloud and discussing the story together provided the time and space to preclude the confusion that students had often experienced. As the participants became immersed in the texts we read, they were able to articulate more specifically what they liked about the books, such as the character close in age to their own, the language, which seemed natural and authentic.

The adaptation of Fulwiler's (1989) scale demonstrated that students were using many levels of cognition and comprehension as they wrote in response to the texts including observation, speculation, doubt/confirmation, questions, self-awareness, connections, revision, posing and solving problems, and showing empathy. Further, we analyzed the author's linguistic choices, the use of non-standard grammar and slang and discussed how the language was used in a powerful and intentional way by the main character, and how this feature was one of the most attractive and interesting parts of the novel to the students who felt that the character talked in a way similar to their own language.

As the students began their second critical response, one that was to be done more independently, the revision component of the writing process was again important to the overall story. Whereas in past writing experiences, students had

viewed revision as primarily an editing endeavor, in the Literacy Lab their perceptions shifted to a content-centered revision process, where what they said mattered as much or more how they said it. At this time, a major shift in attitudes occurred as well. My strongest guess is that the two-week fall break, already described as difficult for many of the students by an administrator, combined with the increased level of challenge this independent writing project produced a situation ripe for negativity toward work.

The negative attitudes did not persist, however, with the exception of one student, Jacinta, who never fully participated with the enthusiasm with which she began at the start of the semester. As students worked through their second critical response piece, I allowed them as much choice and creativity as possible: Brianna wrote a beautiful, lyrical poem about Melody's struggle with cerebral palsy, and LaRae wrote a narrative based on Willie Mae and Lewis's arranged marriage in *No Crystal Stair* (2012). Although this response was to be written independently, I allowed students to ask one another questions and to advise one another on word choice or sentence structure. As students finished their pieces, their confidence in their writing abilities and their attitudes toward their work changed dramatically, and many eagerly shared their writing with the principals and classroom teachers. The way in which the space of the Literacy Lab functioned as a safe place for students to try things out, to share with peers, to ask me questions was essential to the overall narrative as a catalyst for student growth in both skills and perceptions.

Continuity Dimension: Future

I chose to describe the Future Continuity Dimension by examining the findings from the end of study literate learner profiles and second narrative assessments. My reasoning here was that these two analyses of data show most clearly where students seem to be headed in the future. Both pieces include goals students have for their future literacy learning, and both show any growth or progress students have made over the course of the semester in our literacy community, which may indicate their literacy learning trajectory for the future.

End of study literate learner profiles.

By the end of the semester, students had shifted in their self-perceptions as literate learners as exemplified in the end of study profiles. In the initial table outlining students' self-perceptions, I combined interview, focus-group follow-up conversations, narrative assessments, and literate learner profiles. For the final analysis, I wanted to examine the profiles and the final narrative assessment separately so each piece of data could be clearly compared with the corresponding piece from the beginning of the study. Table 6 outlines the end of study profiles as compared with those taken at the start of the semester.

Table 6

Students' End of Study Literate Learner Profiles

Aspect of literacy	Salient Patterns	Data Exemplar	Changes from Initial Profile
Reading Interests	Mystery and sports	"Books that make me think about what is going on in the book and between the characters."	No notable changes except metacognition example shown in data exemplar
Writing Interests	"None"	"Writing about favorite actress, celebs."	Three more "none" answers than in initial profiles
Outside School Reading	Texts (3)	"I read on my way to school every morning."	Texting was not mentioned in initial profiles
Outside School Writing	Writing for personal, authentic purposes: "writing about my favorite sports," "song writing," and "letters."	"If I had a choice to write stories, I would write drama stories because I like to think about why things happen and why people do what they do in books."	More variety and examples of lengthier writing tasks; 2 fewer "texting," 2 fewer "nones."
Reading Strengths	Improvement	"I am good at reading out loud and understanding the book."	No external measures listed; no vague answers
Writing Strengths	Improvement	"I'm really good at brainstorming my ideas before I write."	No mechanical writing aspects listed; no texting listed
Reading Goals	Better comprehension	"I want to understand more hard books."	No vague answers; only 3 external measures listed

Students' End of Study Literate Learner Profiles, cont.

Aspect of Literacy	Salient Patterns	Data Exemplar	Changes from Initial Profile
Writing Goals	Writing more often, out of school	"I want to be able to write as good as authors and actually make someone read a short story I wrote."	No vague answers; only 2 mechanical aspect of writing listed

Most of the shifts were positive changes, such as the depth of answers to the writing strengths and goals categories. In the initial profiles, more of the students answered "none" to outside reading than in the end of study profiles. This shift may simply reflect that students now see that reading texts, books on their phones, or information they look up on the internet counts as reading, which surprised them at first. Even if this is true, that students are not actually reading more outside school than they did originally, the fact that they see themselves as readers is a significant and positive shift. Students also referred much less often to external measures--reading levels and standardized test scores--in their strengths and goals categories for both reading and writing.

The greatest shift between initial and final profiles was change between vague answers, such as "get better," to more specific responses, such as "I want to have better understanding," or "I want to write a book that will change lives." Students' confidence in their literacy skills and ownership of reading and writing strengths and goals were evident in their answers to the final profiles. The ability to understand in a clearer and more precise way what "better" reading and writing

entail is significant because students cannot improve literacy skills without understanding what specifically needs to improve. Instead of a confusing and mysterious level or score on a standardized assessment, the students have internalized good reading and good writing as meaning-making engagements.

One shift was not as positive: three more students answered "none" in the writing interests category than before. My best conjecture about this change is that writing was difficult for the students. Nearly all of them claimed to enjoy the reading portion of our sessions more than the writing. The students had a difficult time with the second critical response, and they voiced their dislike for the task frequently. By the final profile, I think students were weary of writing. The five "none" answers to writing interests does not seem to fit accurately with their answers in outside school writing, which was a category they became much more specific in over the course of the semester. In outside school writing, students listed many and various authentic purposes for engaging in writing. Similarly, the "nones" in writing interest do not seem to align with the writing goals component of the profile in which students stated that they planned to do more writing, and lengthier writing tasks. Again, I believe that students were tired of writing at this point, and writing interests somehow carried a "school" connotation, whereas the other categories allowed them to think of other kinds of writing they enjoyed.

One of the "none" answers came from Jacinta, who had, by the end of the study, become unenthusiastic about being in our literacy community. I talked with her, but could only elicit an "I just don't like it," answer from her. She answered

"none" on nearly every category of her profile, but in her narrative assessment, which occurred the same day, she did elaborate on her lack of interest in our group. "It's just boring," she wrote. "At first I didn't care if I came, but now I don't like it." Jacinta did say that she learned a great deal from the cerebral palsy book and "enjoyed being a part of this." Class discussions and the Quick Writes helped her, she wrote, but she still doesn't like to read. Jacinta's change in attitude began at the same time I noted a shift in others' attitudes and behaviors, around the two-week fall break. Whereas the other students were able to settle back into our community, Jacinta did not. She was willing to finish the final profile and narrative assessment, and she was not hostile or angry, just entirely uninterested. I mentioned Jacinta's altered behavior to one of the school administrators, who has an excellent rapport with students, and asked her to keep an eye on Jacinta as I know she is new to the school and community.

Final narrative analysis.

For the final narrative analysis, I asked the students to tell the story of their experience in the literacy lab: how they felt when they first came, how they enjoyed our books, what they learned, what they believed helped them, what they felt did not help them, how they felt about the kinds of writing that we did, and anything else they wanted to tell me about their experience in our reading and writing groups. Table 7 mirrors the initial narrative assessment rubric.

Table 7.

End of Study Narrative Assessment

Story Structure	Sentence Structure	Word Choice	Student Voice	Grammatical Conventions
Clear beginning: nearly every student began with, "When I first came" or a similar construction.	Total Sentences ranged from 8-27, with an average of 12.7 sentences	Sensory details: very few Examples: "Stack of snacks," "stared at the clock, waiting on 12:45"	Evidence of students' voices: Pattern 1: emotion felt at beginning of semester, " When I first came, though I was stupid because of TCAP scores."	Spelling errors: ranged from 0-4, examples, "intresting" and incorrect use of "there" or "its"
Transitions: some, such as "When we started the book…"	Simple Sentences ranged from 2-17, with an average of 5.7 sentences	Sophisticated words-some Examples: "understanding" "experience" "cerebral palsy" "Non-fiction"	Pattern 2: students enjoyed class discussions and learned from them. Example: "really helped to listen to other people's thoughts."	Subject verb agreement errors: no errors
Strong Conclusion: most of the students did not conclude strongly	Compound, Complex: ranged from 5-15, with an average of 9.4 sentences.	Dialogue: only LaRae, who wrote in third person included dialogue. Example: "She thought, 'What a blessing.'"	Pattern 3: personal connection with the books. Example: "I liked *Locomotion* because I liked how he talked in the book." "(*Locomotion)*Came from a child's point of view." "Lonnie is like me because he doesn't live with his mom and dad."	Pronoun Usage: no errors

End of Study Narrative Assessment, cont.

Story Structure	Sentence Structure	Word Choice	Student Voice	Grammatical Conventions
Overall: writing seemed more like a report than a story for most students	Overall variation: good mixture of simple and compound or complex sentences	Vivid Verbs: few. Examples: "sprinted," "satisfy," "focused," "prepare"	Pattern 4: metacognitive awareness of progress in reading and writing skills. Examples: "I stop and think about what I just read." "comprehension has improved a lot and it showed on my DEA (Discovery Education Assessment)."	Punctuation: commas needed following dependent clauses Correct use of "However, I still don't like reading, but …"

The most notable change from the first narrative assessment was that in the end of study task, students wrote much lengthier pieces. Whereas in the initial assessment students wrote an average of eight sentences, in the final sample, students composed an average of over twelve sentences. Most notable improvements in number of sentences written were Keenan, who wrote six sentences in the original and thirteen in the final, Ava, who had written sixteen in the original, and twenty-seven in the final, and Jacinta who had written three sentences in the original and seventeen in the final. Only one student wrote fewer sentences: Brianna had written eleven originally, and composed only eight in the final. Field notes showed that I had to prompt students to continue writing much less in the final assessment than I had originally; their writing stamina had increased.

Students varied sentence structure more often in the final assessment, an aspect of writing we had worked on throughout the semester, so not a surprising shift. Other elements, however, did not change significantly: students did not conclude their stories strongly in either assessment, and their sensory details were actually fewer in the second task. This piece, however, did not lend itself to sensory details; most students wrote the story in a report-like manner, and I could see that their focus was to include as many components of our literacy work together, rather than to describe or elaborate on any individual part. Commas were still the consistent punctuation error, and as in the first example, students used some of the more sophisticated elements of punctuation, such as commas included within quotation marks correctly.

Another important change from first to final assessment was in the students' voices that surfaced through the language and content in their writing. Stronger emotion was evident in the later pieces, which seemed natural as the students were more comfortable with me and with the environment, and therefore more likely to express feelings. Analyzing the content with the adaptation of Fulwiler's (1989) scale, several categories of cognition and comprehension were recognizable from the students' work. Students revised their original thinking, such as the belief that they were in the group because they were not smart or that the groups would be "boring." "I felt like I didn't belong in here," Keenan wrote, but also noted, "Writing has helped me become a better reader." Other students, such as Ava, posed questions, such as, "I wonder how it would be to be autistic?" an example too of an empathic statement. Many of the students mentioned personal connections, to the

way Melody related to music, to Melody's disabilities as similar to students in their school whom they know and now claim to understand more fully, and to the racial issues brought out in the story of Lewis Michaux's life.

Four patterns emerged from the content of the pieces: evidence of students' voices, enjoying and learning from peers through class discussion, personal connection with the texts and characters, and a metacognitive awareness of progress in reading and writing skills. Most significant for the students' future was their metacognitive awareness of what specific moves they need to make to improve their reading and writing skills, such as Ava's comment that she will stop and think about what she has read, or Sam's commitment to returning to the text to pinpoint what confused him.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications for Future Research

Connecting the Continuity Dimensions

This study's research questions, 1) what is the relationship between critical engagement with text and the writing performance of middle school students, and 2) how could students' perceptions of themselves as literate learners inform classroom literacy practice, were connected and answered through the data in several significant ways.

First, exploring the data in the three dimensional space for narrative inquiry allowed me to look at the students' writing performances in the literacy lab from a perspective different from their performances in other school settings. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) observed, the researcher, and here the teacher-researcher, enters a space *in medias res*, to use the literary term, arriving in the middle of things.

As both the instructor and the researcher, I was aware of constantly making decisions within the tension created by my commitment to both roles. As the researcher, I was continually aware of my guiding questions and the necessity of collecting the data to answer those questions. As the teacher, I found myself veering into areas dictated by students' needs. For example, I spent half a session helping Santianna and Jacinta think about how to study for a social studies test. Frequently students asked me to explain concepts they had been exposed to in their English Language Arts classes, but that they were still grappling with and for which they wanted my clarification. These digressions concerned me at first, but I realized that I was entering these students' lives *in medias res*, in the middle of their literate learning story, and understanding independent clauses or appositives mattered to

the students because those were the concepts they were tested on, part of the level, the label, the score students would receive. I came to see the questions students brought as more than tangential, but rather as opportunities to help empower students. When they proudly reported trying out a new vocabulary word in English class or using a good sentence starter in their homework assignment, I saw that students believed what we were doing in the Literacy Lab was connected not only to their outside school literacy interests, but to their in school interests as well.

The dual role of teacher-researcher helped me to see that part of the answer to how classroom practices can be informed by students' perceptions and by students' critical engagement with texts is that the teacher can benefit from acting also as researcher. By understanding through the research what these students' past literacy experiences, by hearing what kinds of reading and writing events they choose to do in and out of school, my ability to instruct these students in a way that connected to their lives was greatly enhanced.

Every literacy event, from a journal response to a standardized assessment, is not an isolated event, but rather part of a whole spectrum of a student's learning. When students receive their Accelerated Reader levels or scores from standardized tests each year, they internalized these numbers, as the first profiles and interview data showed. The numbers refer to one particular event on a single day, however, and the assessments do not explain why the students scored the numbers or levels. By seeking to understand what students' literacy learning had been like in the past, I was able to connect students' self-perceptions to their critical engagement with texts and their writing performances in response to those texts.

I learned, as Moll et al. (2001) asserted, that my students brought rich funds of knowledge from their lives outside the classroom. Nearly all of the students participated in sports, and their natural competitive spirit, something I would not have attempted to cultivate in our literacy community, worked as a motivation for them to write more in the Power Writes, an engagement most students cited as especially helpful to their writing. Indeed, the final narrative assessment showed growth as the average number of sentences rose from eight to thirteen. Further, students were able to connect knowledge from sports, such as Garon's understanding of oxygen's essential contribution to the body, to issues in our texts, such as lack of oxygen as a cause of cerebral palsy. Brianna, Charise, and LaRae, employed their storytelling and songwriting funds of knowledge to the critical responses in a way that echoed Ball's (1995) finding that African American youth may use patterns of repetition, musical elements, and expressive sounds that reflect the African American oral storytelling tradition (p. 30).

The Interaction Dimension: Social and Personal

The interaction dimension refers to the students' relationships with family, teachers, one another, with me and the way those relationships help explain the students' story. Just as characters' interactions with each other in any story contribute to the overall meaning of that narrative, so the students' interactions in the lab as well as those they reported from outside the lab helped to deepen and enrich their story. This dimension was especially important in providing another facet of the students' self-perceptions as literate learners. By the end of the semester, several students showed their writing to their English Language Arts

teachers, to the principal, and I wrote notes home to parents with the students' written work attached. Through their interactions with me and with fellow group members, the students came to view themselves not just as numbers and scores and levels, but also as contributing members of our reading and writing groups, as the shifts in their final narrative assessments citing collaboration and awareness of progress showed.

The findings, such as the students' desire to work collaboratively and the lack of this opportunity in their classes supported the sociocultural and constructivist theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1916). At the end of the study, a clear pattern in the students' stories of their experiences in the literacy lab showed that they believed listening to their peers' comments and questions in class discussions helped them understand and relate to the texts. Students believed that their voices counted in this literacy community, in class discussions and in the writing workshops. They often turned to one another for advice on finding a better word or a way to incorporate a direct quote to support an argument, and they also regularly asked me for assistance.

This collaboration reflects Rogoff's (1996) apprenticeship model, in which the participation is shared among social partners. I framed our writing workshops based on the three phases of this model: 1) apprenticeship, 2) guided participation, and 3) participatory appropriation. This model exemplifies a shared power, rather than a top-down authoritative role for the instructor. Applebee's (1981) theory regarding student ownership of writing became apparent here: students were

invested in what they wrote because they were allowed to choose what they wrote about and how they expressed themselves.

Patterns in the students' past literacy experiences helped me to understand how they viewed themselves as literate learners. Initially students saw their reading and writing abilities as numbers and levels shown on standardized tests. They wanted to "get better," but how make progress was vague and mysterious to them. Suspense, or learning something new about the characters in a story was the most salient pattern of a positive reading experience, and confusion, or the "text jumping all over the place," was the reason most commonly cited for a negative reading experience. By the end of the study, only two students referred to numbers or levels, as opposed to nine in the initial data, and students were able to provide more specifics about how they wanted to improve, or how they had grown in literacy skills over the course of the semester.

The patterns of interest or suspense and confusion found in students' past literacy experience stories were related to one another. Confusion and suspense were opposite sides of the same coin. If a question in the text that began as interesting or suspenseful to students was never answered because students could not follow the story, this question turned into confusion. The complaint of a story "jumping all over the place," helped me to see that if students were to engage in the texts we read, they had to be able to follow the plot as it moved from character to character or setting to setting. The finding that students simply abandoned the book when they no longer followed the story meant that I needed to teach students strategies for persisting: with informational text a smart strategy might be to look

again at text features, such as headings or captions, and with narrative texts, better understanding might result from taking another look at pronouns to see who was talking or who was the object of a confusing description.

The Situation Dimension: Location

The situation dimension refers to the location of the study and how that particular place uniquely contributes to the overall narrative. Just as the setting of any story supplies useful information for understanding the context of that story, so the situation dimension provides a "storied landscape" for the students' narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 24). The physical and cultural features of location allow for a better understanding of the context of the students' experience in our community of literacy practice. The Lab gathered in the school's spacious library, the active and noisy hub of the school. Our reading and writing workshop competed with classes touring Egypt projects displayed on nearby tables, class picture day, breakfast for visiting evaluation teams, and standardized tests administered in the computer area. Initially, the students repeatedly entreated me to find a better space, one that was quieter and less chaotic. There simply was no other available space in the building, and eventually we learned to tune out the noise. I came to see the challenges of the physical space as an additional teaching tool in that when some other event occurred in the library, our group needed to focus even more sharply on our reading and writing work. As distraction was a frequently stated reason by the students that they did not like reading and one of the culprits in their lack of understanding what they read, the continued practice of that heightened

engagement became a habit, and by the end of the study, I could see that students were able to ignore the chaos and concentrate on our work.

The culture we created in our community of practice is also an essential component of the overall story. The Literacy Lab was a "safe place" for the students. "I was nervous when I first came here," LaRae admitted to the group after three weeks together, but added that she felt much better about being in the Lab by then. The shift in the students' willingness to read aloud also points to an ease with one another and with me that developed over time. The students did not receive grades for their work in the Lab, and at first, some of the students complained that what we were doing "didn't count." By the end of the semester, however, eleven of the twelve students asked to return the next semester to work in the Lab again.

The one hour, twice a week, group of six format for our literacy community allowed time and space for inquiry and exploration into the texts we read in a way that a typical classroom setting does not. "They have like, over twenty kids in a class," LaRae explained, referring to the way she would not expect individual help in her classroom. "They can't be listening to each person," she stated. With a narrow focus on reading and writing about one text at a time, we enjoyed the luxury of delving into the books together, reading every word aloud, stopping to answer questions or to clear up confusion.

Viewing the data through the lens of the Situation Dimension helped me to see answers to the research question of how classroom practice could be informed by students' self-perceptions as critically literate learners. This dimension refers to the location, how the place of the study mattered to the findings. The small group

setting, students gathered around a table in the school's library, provided a space that was not quite classroom, but also not quite out of school. This connector space, where students' funds of knowledge and out of school literacy practices were recognized and valued, provided a bridge between home and school, and between students' past and present literacy learning (Street, 1995). When students learned that texting counted as writing, that looking up information on the computer about their favorite music artists or sports teams was a literacy event, they were able to see themselves as readers and writers. Further, because students came to see their self-selected literacy activities as deemed real, they came to see that they were already participating in authentic reading and writing events.

Critical engagement: investment and ownership.

The ownership and investment that students were willing to make in this connector space was significant. As Pardoe (2000) argued, many of the traditional school literacy assessments and practices discount students, especially those from linguistically diverse and marginalized populations, which included eight of our twelve Literacy Lab members. The Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011) findings support Pardoe's (2000) claim by showing the students' beliefs that their own voices were missing in text selection, writing assignments, and collaborative opportunities. The analysis of students' linguistic choices also showed that students had built identities for themselves as learners knowledgeable about their own needs. The tension between the students' understanding of what they needed as learners, such as a place to express their feelings or literature that included characters close to the students in age, and the authority of the curriculum or

assessments was striking. Learning something new emerged as a pattern across all the data sources; students were metacognitively aware that they wanted and needed to learn new things. They were also aware and able to articulate that some of what they learned needed to be their own choice.

Teaching critical engagement was a way to allow the students to position themselves as powerful and knowledgeable, as well as to express their feelings about what they read. The Literacy Lab students were able act as Text Critics for books they selected (Freebody & Luke, 1990). By focusing on power structures, missing voices, issues of justice, and multiple perspectives, students could connect emotionally with the texts in a way that reading from a literal lens does not permit (Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). Because the students felt their own voices were often missing in their literacy learning experiences, they could relate well to these components of critical literacy in the texts we read together. Even Jacinta, who became unenthusiastic about participating in our group wrote in her narrative assessment that she had learned to evaluate the way that Lonnie's voice empowered him in *Locomotion* (Draper, 2003).

A pattern that emerged from the final narrative assessment was that the students enjoyed the books we read because they could relate to the characters. Keenan and LaRae connected their own loss of parents to Lonnie's foster care situation, Jacinta and Santianna appreciated the way Lonnie used his own voice, his own language, even "bad grammar," because he "talks like a kid." Charise recognized Lewis Michaux's commitment to selling books by black authors to black customers because her parents had emphasized the importance of understanding African

American history. Sometimes the students simply related to witty comebacks one adolescent character made to another. "I would snap on her!" Brianna declared, having read a derisive comment to Melody from a classmate. In the end of *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2003), Melody shatters the trophy her team has won when they leave her behind, and the Literacy Lab students cheered gleefully. Not only should students read texts critically so they can understand oppression, as Freire (1970) suggested, but reading critically offers an emotional connection to adolescents who often see themselves in the stories, an essential aspect of adolescent literacy, according to Alvermann (2002).

The emotional connection.

The emotional connection is the part of the solution to persisting when reading and writing become difficult. This study qualitatively supported the findings of Posner and Rothbart (2005) and Immordino-Yang (2007), contending that emotion makes possible, guides even, the access to brain networks that reinforce developing skills. The positive rapport and trust that developed between most of the students and me was as essential a component of their learning as were the literacy strategies and practices. Many of the participants would come to visit me before school started or during breaks to share news of good grade or to show me some homework. I believe that my sending notes home to their parents with their excellent work attached and the principal complimenting them to the visiting principal of the local high school they will attend next year mattered greatly to these students. The middle school principal was so impressed with LaRae's story about Lewis Michaux that he showed the high school principal and had LaRae talk with

him about possibilities for her to take high school writing courses next year. LaRae came to me beaming about this interaction, obviously pleased with the attention and the potential writing course in high school.

More specifically, Immordino-Yang (2011) suggested that the educational field must work harder to integrate emotion and cognition because if students are emotionally invested in a literacy practice, they will be able to attend to it, to think through the task more thoroughly. Harter (1981) and Wigfield et al. (1987) found that after later elementary school, motivation to read begins to diminish, and my data supported these claims. Students had once enjoyed reading, but now many considered it a "boring" school activity. However, all of the students in the Literacy Lab were motivated to improve as their interview and initial profiles showed. This was a general or overall motivation, however, not a moment-to-moment motivation. I wanted to understand what students needed to move from one sentence to the next in both reading and writing events. Prior motivation research demonstrated that students' self-efficacy was the key to moving past hurdles in learning, in persisting in a challenging task (Schunk & Rice, 1997). My findings supported this claim, that self-efficacy would help students persevere through obstacles. As students in the Literacy Lab developed more confidence in their abilities, they were willing to spend more time in revision, a most difficult part of the writing process.

One of the important shifts students made was in reading aloud. At first the students did not want to read aloud in front of their peers, and many wrote about the dread they experienced in class when they might be called on to read. As the semester progressed, students became more comfortable with each other and more

confident reading aloud. The students came to see themselves as readers and writers; as their self-efficacies as literate learners improved, so did their performances in reading and writing.

Prior to self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy resulted from success, however. What I wanted to better understand was what happened in between the learning hurdle and the success that first time or times, before the self-efficacy was built and internalized. The findings from my study suggest that the emotional connection to the characters or to the story, is an important factor in students' willingness to persist when difficulties arise. Then it seems, that the next component prompting students to stay engaged with a text, is the element of suspense, of caring about what happens next in the story. LaRae was deeply interested in Lewis's loveless marriage, and she wanted to read further to learn whether or not the marriage lasted or dissolved. Shantel's group cared about Melody's quiz bowl performance on national television, and they begged me to extend the reading portion of the Literacy Lab to find out whether the Spaulding Street team won or lost.

In writing tasks, motivation to maintain engagement followed a similar pattern. If students were to continue writing past the hard parts, they had to care about what they were writing. Shantel was able to think though her original claim that Elvira, the medi-talker allowed Melody to interact with her friends because Shantel was emotionally connected to Melody and her story. Keenan was particularly moved by the way Melody was able to tell her parents that she loved

them for the very first time. His critical written response endured two careful revisions that he made without complaint because he cared about what he wrote.

Collaboration.

In addition to self-efficacy and emotional investment, students often used collaboration to persist through learning hurdles. The importance of the sociocultural tenet of learning as a social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) was clearly demonstrated in the findings from this study, specifically in the way that it helped students move through challenging parts of a literacy practice. The dialogic nature of feedback I gave both in reading and writing events provided students with an opportunity to think carefully and critically about their responses to texts. This tentativeness, as seen in the work of Marshall (1987), Mulcahy-Ernt (1994), and Newell (1996), occurred in the Literacy Lab as students worked through their ideas and claims about the texts. The small group setting permitted students to make a tentative proposition with time and space for peers or for me to ask clarifying questions, probe for more information, or offer counter arguments. With writing tasks, the element of tentativeness was especially important because students were "discovering," as Applebee (1981) deemed the writing to learn process. Rather than an isolated literacy event, as nearly all of those in the students' experiences had been, our literacy community thrived on shared practices.

Summary of Dimensions' Contributions

This study's first research question, what is the relationship between critical engagement with text and students' writing performance, was answered by the data showing that when students could emotionally connect with the texts, collaborate

with one another and with me in a dialogic manner, they could persist through the difficult aspects, view the text through a critical lens, and respond in writing in a way that showed solid writing skills, and that included their own voices. The second research question, how do students' self-perceptions as literate learners, was answered by the data showing that students perceptions shifted somewhat as the semester progressed. Initially, students identified their literacy abilities with standardized test scores and reading levels. They did not realize that they already engaged in many out of school literacy practices. By the study's conclusion, students were able to articulate specific literacy goals for themselves, such as reading more difficult books, or writing more often at home. Findings from this study suggest that classroom teachers might investigate students' past experiences and self-perceptions as literate learners. Connecting students' funds of knowledge, such as a competitiveness developed through athletics, or a storytelling ability nurtured through family members, to classroom practices, such as the Power Writes or responses written as narratives, might result in optimal learning for students. Additionally as the Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011) showed, students see themselves as capable of making good choices about the kind of books they read and the activities used to facilitate learning, but students believe few classroom practices value their voices.

Finally, teachers should be aware that regardless of ample data detailing students' literacy performances, beyond citing a level or score, these students did not understand what good reading or writing actually entailed. At first students in the Literacy Lab primarily mentioned surface or mechanical aspects of writing, at

odds with the authentic writing for communication or expression they claimed to do out of school. Authentic activities are those that have a purpose self-selected by the students, not in any way influenced by a teacher or school assignment. These practices are ones the students enact of their own volition, such as texting to communicate with friends or family members, or researching their favorite actors or music artists on the internet. These events require writing and reading for communication, for learning new information and making meaning out of that new information. Students saw purpose and meaning in these out of school literacy practices; these practices seemed "real" to the students because they enacted them in the part of their lives where their time was their own. Writing and reading in school, however, was associated with the surface, mechanical aspects of writing, and the levels assigned to reading.

Further Implications for Classroom Practice

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) data analysis often leads to the construction of a model. Figure 6 illustrates the summation of implications for classroom practices from the findings of this study. I found ten components of reading and writing from a critical stance, and this model shows the process of moving from critically engaged reading to critical response in writing. The process model shows how students' engagement begins with suspense or interest in the text, leading to emotional connections with characters or stories, strategies to persist through confusion, learning from peers through discussion, and exploring the issues of power, justice, and missing voices. From this critically engaged reading, students can then move to responding to the texts from a critical stance, again

collaborating with peers and the teacher, working through the five-step writing workshop process, strategies to persist through writing blocks or difficulties, and finally, feeling invested in the piece of writing, taking ownership of claims, arguments, opinions, and ideas. This process begins with reading, moves through the writing process, and ultimately concludes with a deeper level of cognition and comprehension of the text.

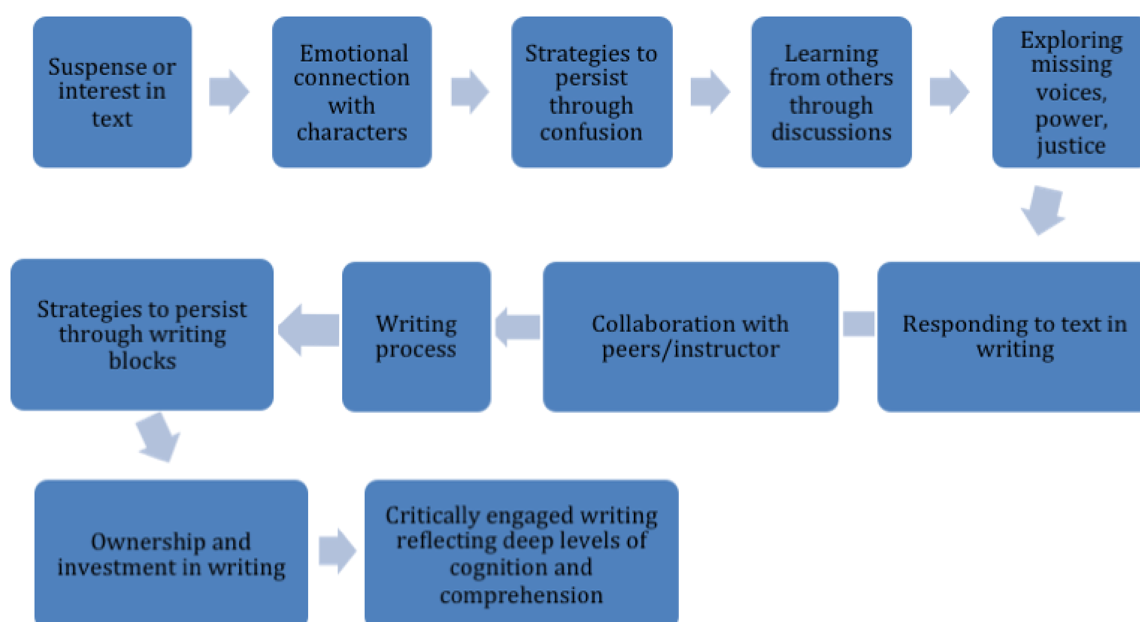

Figure 6. *Moving from Engaged Reading to Written Critical Response*

The model cannot address the emotional connection established in the Literacy Lab; indeed, no step-by-step process could adequately describe how such as connection can be formed. However, one implication for classroom practice might be made here. As evidenced through many comments about feeling more comfortable by the end of the semester, by the students' frequent visits to me, and by their enthusiasm in returning for a second semester, the participants felt safe and emotionally connected to me. Because I gave no grades or scores and required no homework, my role was quite different from a classroom teacher, and in many ways such a relationship would not be realistic in a classroom. In this era of accountability, teachers must give grades, require homework, and follow standards set by the district and school. The freedom from these measures and parameters did allow our literacy community to operate as a community of *practice*, in the literal sense of the word practice. Students were able to try new ways of learning, to make risk-free attempts at reading and writing with an adult who was not judging their performance in any permanent way. It seems that an implication of this study is that literacy teachers might consider finding some space for creativity and student choice, without grades or scores, in the curriculum and classroom.

Limitations

The present study was small, with only twelve participants, and brief, with only thirty hour-long sessions. A longer study would provide data from more writing samples, and more evidence of growth over time. This study was a connector space, between in and out of school, and so all findings should be viewed with the fact that this was not an actual classroom in mind. As the teacher-

researcher, I must acknowledge my position as a limiting factor in that this dual role created a sustained tension. While this qualitative analysis does not seek to assert any cause and effect relationships, my own biases and pedagogical beliefs cannot be entirely separated from the findings. As I wrote in the earlier Researcher Positioning statement, my own bias toward the tenets of critical literacy as a way to teach reading and writing influenced my decisions about what literacy practices to engage in with these students. My beliefs in teaching from a constructivist and sociocultural stance also affected the way I taught the students. However, I do believe I maintained a firm commitment to the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) tenet of remaining open to seeing what is happening as presented in the data.

Future Research

Future studies could further inform classroom practices by exploring students' classroom performances alongside their Literacy Lab performances. Questions regarding classroom behavior, engagement in teacher-selected texts, or shifts in writing performance would be helpful in understanding what relationship a literacy community, such as the Literacy Lab, might have with the regular classroom behavior and performance of participating students. A longitudinal study would be able to follow students through several iterations of persisting through difficulties and appropriating skills learned through the apprenticeship process (Rogoff, 1996).

A directionality issue emerged from the findings in that it was unclear from the data whether students' self-efficacy helped them to connect emotionally with the text or whether the emotional investment led to self-efficacy. Understanding the order in which students developed each element might help teachers to plan lessons

accordingly. If students need to be emotionally connected first, then teachers might begin with texts that students can identify themselves in, through characters close in age or culture. If the self-efficacy precedes emotional investment, then teachers might need to be certain that texts were more accessible in terms of content.

Finally, teachers need to understand how to track text engagement, so that the confusion can be ameliorated before students abandon the book. While classrooms might not be able to read every word aloud as we were able to do in the Literacy Lab, a study showing how much text read collaboratively in the classroom can alleviate confusion could be highly beneficial for classroom practice.

Epilogue

It is now February, two months after the present study ended. The Literacy Lab continues with eleven of the twelve original students, with an addition of three new students who asked to join our group, recruited by current members. The eighth graders registered for high school last week, and the Lab was abuzz with talk of schedules and classes. Nearly all of the students who had participated in this study had signed up for one or more honors courses with the encouragement and recommendations of their classroom teachers.

Shantel comes to see me every Tuesday and Thursday morning to show me her homework or to ask me a question. She recruited one of the new students to the Lab. Her science test predictor scores have increased from a below basic to proficient level, and the principal escorted her to me recently to share the good news. "She has never connected with anyone like this before," he told me later, adding that both her behavior and academic achievement have greatly improved.

Shantel is a bright girl, and she likes very much to position herself as a teacher. When she comes to see me, I am usually working with fifth grade students who need reading tutoring. One day a fifth grade boy was selecting a new book, and *Out of My Mind* (2003) was a possibility. "I can tell you about that book. Can I tell him, Mrs. Hasty?" Shantel asked eagerly. She provided an excellent overview of the story and then independently found an informational text on cerebral palsy from the library and brought it back to the fifth grader, explaining that this non-fiction book would help him understand Melody's condition more fully.

Schultz (2008) advised: "Look to youth to understand what they know, value, and seek to understand" (p. 369). The findings of this study support this assertion. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers would do well to spend time and space on adolescents, to explore their own beliefs about themselves, their preferences, and their interests. Educational experts also need to attend to the affective aspect of learning. Over half of the students in the Literacy Lab improved their literacy scores on the standardized predictor test they take three times before the actual test in the spring. Many of them stated that they believed their work in our community of practice helped them improve these scores. While I certainly wanted these students to succeed on any literacy assessment, these standardized measures were not a priority or the primary guiding factor in my curriculum.

As a qualitative analysis, this study can make no claims regarding causality, and further, literacy had been the school's focus this semester since last year's scores were low, so I cannot separate the Literacy Lab's contribution from that of the classroom teachers. I could not ignore, however, the students' confidence as

their scores improved or their reports of "going back into the text" when a reading passage's questions were challenging. These students have become emotionally invested in literacy.

I conclude with LaRae's voice. She had zealously entreated her group to select *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012). Recognizing the connection between the novel's title and Langton Hughes' "Mother to Son," poem, she read aloud to her classmates from the novel's inside jacket cover, "You can't walk straight on a crooked line. You try you'll break your leg. How can you walk straight in a crooked system?" LaRae's own response to this section of text reflects the empowerment and engagement possible through classroom critical literacy practices: It's like one of the most important things I've read. It means something to me.

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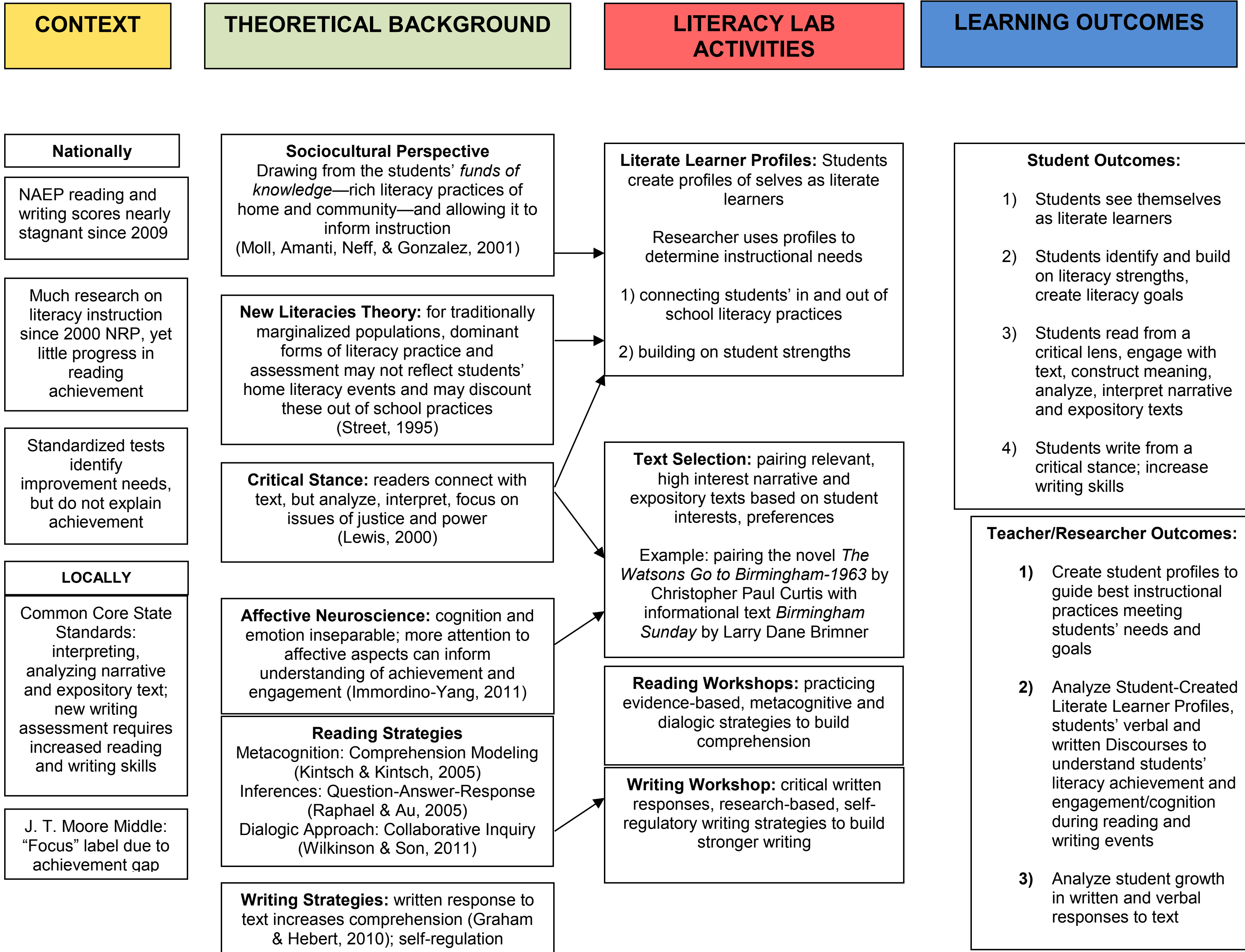
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Literacy Lab Logic Model



Appendix B: Interview Protocol

JT Moore Interview Questions

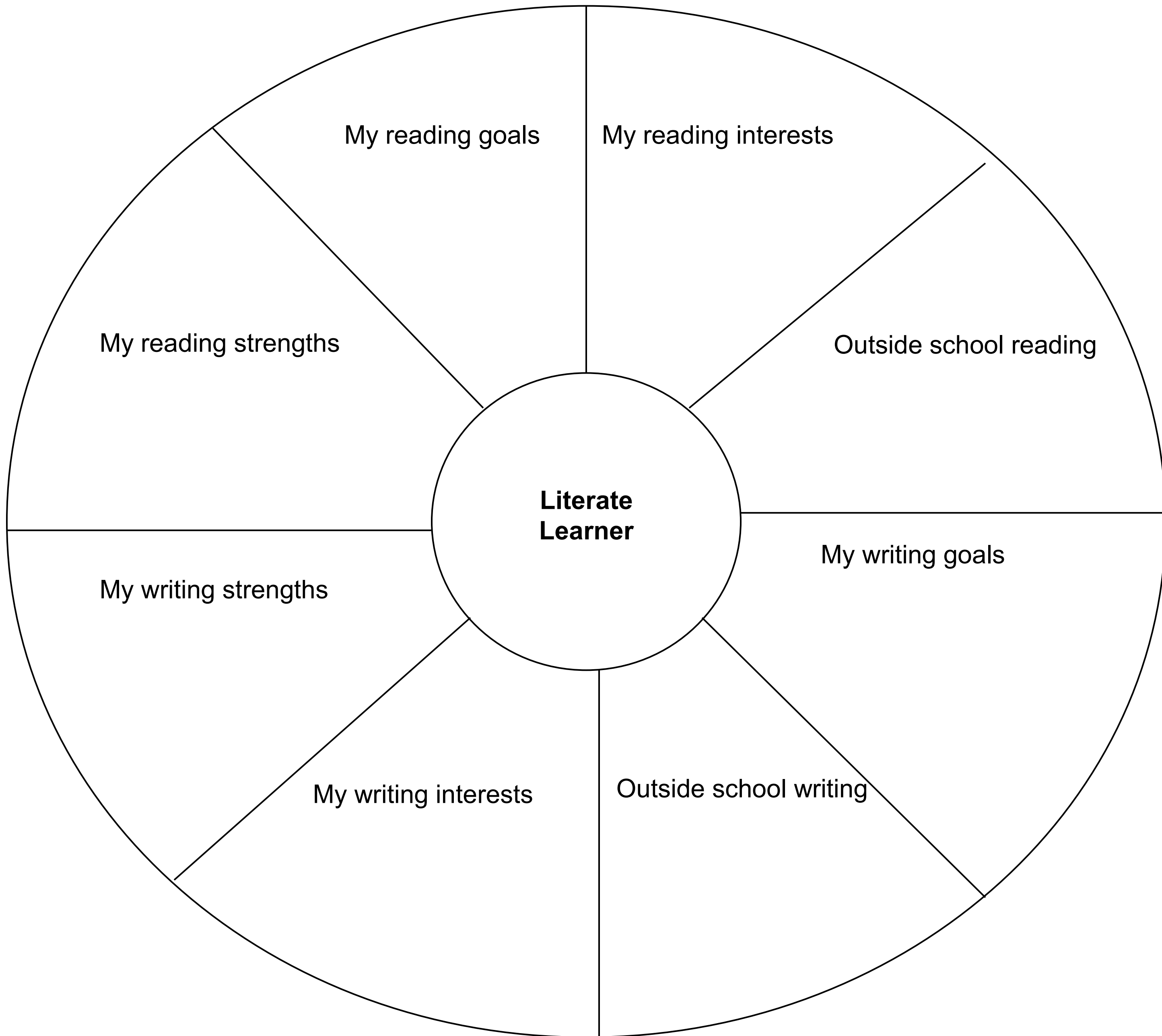
(adapted from Seidman, 2013)

1. Life history
   a. What are some of your earliest memories of reading? Of writing?
   b. Were you read to as a child? By whom? What do you remember about being read to?
   c. Did anyone tell you stories? Who? Do you remember any of these stories? Were any repeated? Do you remember reading as a pleasurable experience?
   d. Tell me about a good experience with reading a book. With writing. Have you ever read a book you couldn't put down? Bad experience?

2. Contemporary Experience
   a. Are you a reader now? Do you think you are a good reader? What makes you a good reader? Bad? Writer?
   b. Do you see people using reading and writing for useful purposes or enjoyment, such as lists, budgets, Bible studies, journals, poetry, songs?
   c. Do you read or write outside school? Comic books? Diaries? Make up game rules? Video game cheat codes? Texting, email, notes, facebook?
   d. What kinds of reading and writing are you doing in school? Do you enjoy it?
   e. What are you really good at? Not necessarily literacy-related. What are you interested in? If you were to read a book, what would you be interested in?

3. Reflection on Meaning
   a. Do your reading and writing abilities affect your feelings about yourself as a person?
   b. Do you believe reading and writing are important to your future? How? Why not?
   c. Do you have any specific goals for your reading and writing this semester? Is there anything you would especially like to read and write about?

Appendix C: Literate Learner Profile



Appendix D: Coding Lists

Codes Developed from Literate Learner Profiles, Interviews, Focus-Group Follow-Up Questions, Response Journal Entries

Open Codes Initial Level of Coding	Axial Codes Second Level of Coding	Selective Codes Final Level of Coding
Reading Strengths:	Texting as interest/strength	Interest/Suspense
Vocabulary	Reading interest relates to students' lives	Relating to/caring about characters
Word meanings	Fiction as reading interest	Lack of clarity about literacy strengths/goals for improvement
None	No writing interests	Influence of external measures
Don't know	Vague writing goals	Vocabulary
Silently	Mechanics as writing goal	Comprehension
Level	Not much outside reading	Oral Fluency
Ability to keep reading	Big words/vocabulary	Confusion: story bounces around
"Great reader"	External measures	Missing voices in literacy text selection/practices
Non-fiction	Stuttering, mispronouncing words	Metacognitive Awareness
Writing Strengths	Fast reading	Writing for therapeutic purposes, expression, communication
Texting	Confusion	Reading for entertainment, information
Spelling	Distraction	
Creative	Suspense	
Songs	Getting lost in story	
Poems	Story bounces around	
Assessment Scale	Abandon story	
Fast	Comprehension	
"Involving myself"	Metacognitive awareness	
Reading Interests:	Writing for therapeutic purpose	
Sports	Writing for expression	
Mystery	Writing for communication	
Teen Drama	Reading for information	
"Can't put down"	Reading for entertainment	

Book in text message form	Lack of choice/voice in literacy practices	
Comic books		
Fiction		
Writing Interests:		
Stories		
Sports		
Mysteries		
Fantasy		
Love & gospel		
"Bigger words"		
None		
Graffiti & art words		
Outside School Reading		
None		
Comics		
Phone		
Songs		
Drama		
Video Games		
30 minutes each day		
Fiction		
Outside School Writing		
None		
Texting		
Grocery		
Songs		
"Stories about myself"		
Reading Goals:		
"Get better"		
Understanding		
Reading level		
Report card grade		
Faster		
Better aloud		
Writing goals:		
"Get better"		
More vivid		
Grammar/mechanics		
Distraction		
Funds of knowledge		
Academic knowledge		
Story bounces around		

Appendix E: Glossary

1. Critical engagement (Luke & Freebody, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1994; Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin & De Voogd, 2004; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013): Students critically engaged attend to the text in a way that employs analysis of power structure, voices heard and voices missing, issues of justice, or multiple perspectives. Acting as Text Critics, students critically engaged look beyond low-level inferences or literal information to high-level inferences, judgments, analyses, syntheses, or generated questions about the text.

2. Constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990): method in qualitative analysis of repeatedly comparing various data points from multiple data sources. It is from this method that the coding of patterns occurs and allows for the development of categories.

3. Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011): method of examining language; a social and linguistic exploration paying special attention to grammatical details and the way they connect with broader social, political, cultural implications.

4. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): a qualitative design in which the researcher generates a theory or discovery based on patterns and categories found in the data collected from participants.

5. Identity building tool (Gee, 2011; Rogers & Wetzel, 2014): a Discourse analysis tool for examining the way that individuals use language to build roles for themselves. The identity building tools is used in conjunction with theoretical frames and linguistic resources to help explain how individuals view themselves in various contexts.

6. Narrative Analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008): a method of qualitative analysis concerned with the stories of one individual or a small group of individuals.

7. Researcher positioning and reflexivity (Creswell, 2013; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013): the stance from which a qualitative researcher analyzes and writes; reflexivity requires the researcher to engage in continual reflection of how her stance might influence the way she views the data, and the flexibility to change or alter previously held opinions or stances when the data demonstrates evidence that contradicts those previously held opinions or stances.

8. Three dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000): a structure for narrative analysis that focuses on three components of the story being told, 1) the interaction (personal and social), 2) the continuity (past, present, and future), and 3) the situation (place).