

AN EXAMINATION OF FREIRE'S PROBLEM-POSING PEDAGOGY: THE EXPERIENCES  
OF THREE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

by

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(Under the Direction of P. Gayle Andrews and Sally J. Zepeda)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was an examination into Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy. The purpose of the study was to explore the perception of teachers implementing Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy into middle-level classrooms. Problem-posing pedagogy is Freire's theory of using community issues in order to provide students with an active learning environment. In his work with problem-posing pedagogy, Freire advocated for less rote memorization practice and a more integrated, relevant process for teaching and learning. The study provided an opportunity to study the implementation of the problem-posing theory into the practice of classroom teachers. Three research questions guided the design and methods of the study. What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice? What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom? What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?

Using collaborative action research, middle school teachers engaged in readings and group discussions over an 8-month period. In this study of pedagogy, teachers compared and

contrasted Freire's description of problem-posing pedagogy with the banking concept of education. Teachers were asked to interpret selected readings and implement their understanding of problem-posing pedagogy into their own classrooms. Participant group discussions, document creation, and individual interviews provided data to discover middle school teachers' perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy. Also, the barriers and opportunities that come with implementing problem-posing pedagogy were investigated.

The findings of the study were organized into categories based upon the research questions. The across-case findings interested the researcher more than the within-case findings. The first group of findings provided a look at participants' perceptions of implementing problem-posing pedagogy into the middle school classroom. The perceptions were grouped into initial or post-study feelings about problem-posing. The initial feelings centered on hesitancy and tension between changing theory into practice. The post-study findings showed an appreciation for the theory and the changes within the classroom. The other findings from the study were grouped under opportunities or barriers towards implementing problem-posing pedagogy. The opportunities included: an increased depth of student learning; a new role for students; and a chance to facilitate instruction rather than dictate. The barriers included: administration; curriculum; history of classrooms and teachers; time; standardized testing; and teacher professional development and pre-service teacher professional learning.

The findings have implications for teachers, administrators, and higher education professionals. More research focusing directly on classroom pedagogy is needed. It is imperative for teachers to continue to think and reflect about their pedagogy. Administrators must examine the barriers described by participants and look for ways to minimize barriers that may stop

teachers from innovating. Higher education professionals need to model classroom expectations and pedagogy within teacher education classes.

*Keywords:* problem-posing pedagogy, Freire, middle school teachers

**INDEX WORDS:** problem-posing pedagogy, Paulo Freire, middle school teachers

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## DEDICATION

To Dr. Katherine Backes Brown. What can I say? We started out on a journey a number of years ago, and we completed the mission (one of us just finished a little sooner than the other). I am so proud of the work that we have accomplished together. It is one thing for one person to finish this journey, but it is another thing for two individuals to complete it while also working full-time. I would have never dreamed that we could accomplish these things. It goes to show what team work, goal setting, and love can achieve. Thanks for being my best friend and love.

To Landon, Owen, and any of our future children, thanks for making me smile and laugh. Before you, I thought that education was important, but now, I know that it is essential. Do not ever forget how much your Mom and I love you and will always love you. On another note, please never relinquish the edge that we have in our family. Fight to the bitter end for everything that you believe in and never, ever, ever give up the good fight. Never forget how far hard work will take you.

To my unconditional loving parents, Barbara Brown and Melvin Brown. I guess that you only had one because he was such a handful. Thank you for believing in me. I am a lucky little boy and hope I make you proud.

To my grandfather, the late Cecil Jarrard. I wish you were here to see me finish this thing. Without your love and encouragement (meaning a swift quick kick in the butt), this accomplishment might have never come to fruition. Our legacy isn't always what we are able to accomplish while on this Earth, but sometimes our legacy is more about what we are able to do to help others reach their goals. It might just be me, but I think that you left one hell of a legacy.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century educators must strive to connect classroom instruction and curriculum to authentic real-world situations (Jacobs, 2010). Middle level educators realize the value of relevant curriculum and advocate for classroom teachers to use “challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant curriculum” (National Middle School Association ([NMSA], 2010, p. 17). By relevant, authors noted that the curriculum should be meaningful from the perspective of the students and the teacher (NMSA, 2010). The position of the National Middle School Association (2010) is that “making curriculum relevant, however, does not mean that topics and material to be studied should be limited to students’ preexisting interests. Relevant curriculum creates new interests, opening doors to new knowledge and opportunities for stretching students” (p. 22).

Curriculum should also be relevant to adolescents’ concerns (Jackson & Davis, 2000). In *Breaking Ranks: The Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement*, the authors (NASSP, 2011) revealed that students in U.S. classrooms have limited exposure to real-world problems within content compared to other nations. The lack of exposure to real-world problems is often associated with the organization of the curriculum (Beane, 1997a). Love (2011) argued against the teaching of random, unconnected facts. When students are taught facts and vocabulary in isolation, Love (2011) noted that students “construct a collective mindset through a conglomerate, postmodern mass of trivia, algorithms, and procedures that only make sense in the context of a formal assessment that checks for a bundle of facts and low-level skills” (p. 442).

Relevant teaching and learning breeds active, engaged classrooms (Beane, 2005a). Meier (1995) emphasized that learning is not a passive process for students. Teachers need to find ways to promote participation from students at both the classroom and school level (Beane, 2005a; Meier, 1995). Effective teachers find ways to engage and involve students in each and every phase of the learning process (Marzano, 2003). With that said, the most effective teachers are capable of having as much as six times the impact on student achievement when compared to the least effective teachers within a school (Haycock & Huang, 2001). If effective teachers have this level of impact, then what type of pedagogical practices can teachers learn to help develop the skills needed to connect relevant curriculum to students, as well as to create a classroom atmosphere that promotes active learning?

Dewey (1916) stated, “Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still entrenched in practice?” (p. 38). The same statement could be made today, and few people would argue against Dewey’s questioning of the implementation and sustained use of best practices. Fast forward from Dewey’s original statement to 1984, when Goodlad asserted that for the most part, students spend the majority of their time in school either working on worksheets or listening to a lecture. Even though Dewey and Goodlad condemned passive, rote-memorization classroom practices, could one argue that classroom practices in 2013 look drastically different than when Dewey or Goodlad asserted their beliefs about teaching and learning? The disconnect of marrying theory and practice continues to manifest itself in the pedagogy of classroom teachers as educators struggle to mesh what pedagogy *should* look like with the reality of what pedagogy *does* look like.

The ability of a teacher to engage students through effective pedagogy often determines the success of the teaching and learning process (Gadotti, 1996). Educators must have a strong grasp of the content of the curriculum coupled with a deep understanding of pedagogical practices to engage students (Dewey; 1916; Freire, 1970/2000; Kilpatrick, 1925). Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1970/2000) developed a theory called problem-posing pedagogy that advocated for less rote memorization practice and a more integrated, relevant process for teaching and learning. To put his theory into practice, Freire used community problems to engage Brazilian peasants and farmers in the learning process. Freire (1970/2000) believed the content should be relevant to the learner, and by using community problems, Freire advocated that students learn at higher levels when they are expected to participate and to contribute to the learning process.

### **Background of Paulo Freire**

Freire (1970, 2000) articulated the tension of what pedagogy *should* look like compared to the reality of what pedagogy *does* look like. His comparison of this tension resulted in the dichotomy of pedagogy as either banking concept or problem-posing. Freire (1970/2000) explained the banking concept as the, “act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 72). All knowledge in the banking concept lies with the teacher until transferred to the student through the act of the teacher providing the student with knowledge. Minimal responsibility lies with the student in the banking concept other than having to sit and acquire the knowledge of the teacher through deposits of information. Freire envisioned the banking concept as an educational method for the teacher to manage the students and to control the knowledge based on the amount that the teacher sees fit to transmit.



To the contrary, Freire (1970/2000) argued against using banking because it breeds passive learning. Freire instead offered problem-posing to replace the banking concept. Problem-posing pedagogy prepares the student-teacher to be cognitive at all times rather than being narrated to by the all-knowing teacher. Freire (1970/2000) noted that problem-posing education does away with the, “vertical patterns characteristic of banking education,” meaning that teachers and students work together to learn from each other (p. 80). The roles of the teacher and student change with a problem-posing education. Freire (1970/2000) stated, “The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (p. 81). Freire’s work provided a framework, not a step-by-step process for creating an effective student-centered classroom. Freire left educators with a discussion forum to interrogate and investigate the finest way to provide students with an education that prepares them to contribute to society. Table 1 provides a comparison of Freire’s view of the banking concept with problem-posing pedagogy.

Table 1.1

*Comparison of Banking Concept and Problem-Posing Pedagogy*

|                      | Banking Concept  | Problem-Posing Pedagogy   |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Role of the Teacher  | Narrating; Dispense knowledge to the students through “acts of depositing” knowledge through transfer of information | Expected to be a co-learner with students; lines are blurred between the teacher and students; continuously examining the community for problems to pose to students; reflecting and acting |
| Role of the Students | Limited to sit, listen, memorize, and recite   | Always “cognitive;” Be active in the learning process, question, think critically; should feel challenged and increasingly  |

---

|                   |   |  |
|-------------------|---|--|
|                   |   | responsible for effecting change on the community and society  |
| Curriculum        | Teacher-Proof, Expected to be taught by anyone. Developed by someone other than the teacher or students; not relevant to the students; imaginary problems or situations are used; stagnant; always the same | Developed in collaboration between the students and teacher; based on community problems or issues; relevant to the lives and situations of the students; changing; fluid based on student needs and community |
| Pedagogy          | Stagnant; Aimed at dispensing knowledge to students through lecture   | Aimed at helping students think about their situations and society   |
| Dialogue          | One-way from the teacher to the students, limited, suppressed   | Constant between the teacher and students,   |
| Goal of Education | Control, oppress, and dominate, maintain the status quo   | To liberate, Help students think critically about the world and different issues, question society, transform society  |

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Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy viewed pedagogy through a new lens by connecting pedagogy with oppression. Freire's use of the term, oppression, is noteworthy because other scholars, such as Dewey and Kilpatrick, had described a similar type of teaching, but Freire asserted that instruction could actually continue the cycle of oppression (Kirylo, 2011). Later in his writing, Freire (2007) argued that progressive educators have an ethical responsibility to expose oppression within society. By advocating for a progressive pedagogical approach using societal problems to teach curricular concepts, Freire's work has been categorized in the field as *critical pedagogy* (Shor, 1992). Giroux (1983) coined the term, critical pedagogy, as a way to describe the work of Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, Peter McLaren, Ira

Shor, and others. Critical pedagogy has been described as the practice of connecting “practices of schooling to democratic principles of society and transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 20).

Scholars theorizing and practicing critical pedagogy have noted a number of influential scholars in the field before Freire including Kilpatrick and Dewey (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; Kirylo, 2011). Dewey and Kilpatrick advocated for similar pedagogical practices as Freire; however, Freire’s work was unique due to the contextual argument that pedagogy had the power to oppress and to control (Dewey, 1916; Kilpatrick, 1925; Kirylo, 2011). Instead of locating the need for certain pedagogical practices in the belief that practices can either oppress or liberate, Dewey (1916) and Kilpatrick (1925) promoted similar pedagogical practices in the early 20th century using the argument that our practices must be democratic to promote the American way of living. The rationale behind the pedagogical practices might be different, but the type of pedagogy that Dewey, Kilpatrick, and Freire wanted to see in the classroom is similar.

Freire (1970/2000) understood that if the learner was not connected to the content or did not see the relevance, then the level of motivation and attention for the material decreased. Even more importantly, Freire advocated for complete collaboration between teacher and students. The current practice of high stakes testing has created a climate of teaching to the test and a more top-down approach toward teaching and learning (Noddings, 2007). Freire’s approach to teaching and learning provided push-back against the all-knowing teacher depositing information into the heads of students so that we can ask them to recall it on demand. Freire’s (1970/2000) approach was a method to help teachers see a different way to approach and to teach students.

## Statement of the Problem

Only 27% of American public school parents surveyed (n = 1002) strongly agree that their child's teacher makes schoolwork relevant by providing real-world examples (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012). In the same survey, 91% of parents strongly agreed that their child would graduate from high school (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012). In a survey conducted by Phi Delta Kappa (1979), 59% of public school parents (n = 1000) who participated in the survey believed that their child's school curriculum met their child's needs in preparation for entering the real world. America's public schools fail to provide classroom instruction that prepares students for the real-world in the eyes of parents (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012). In a study of 414,243 students within 569 schools in 32 states, only 38% of students felt their classes helped them understand what was happening in their everyday lives (Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, 2008). In a 2010 survey conducted, only 69% of students believed learning was fun (Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, 2010). Based on parent and student perceptions, schools struggle to make learning relevant and to help make connections between the curriculum and real-world.

This issue is two-fold, but at the same time, interwoven. The inability of students and parents to see relevance in the curriculum is a curricular issue along with a classroom instructional problem (Beane, 2005a). Jacobs (2010) posed a number of questions hinting that schools and teachers may not be preparing students for a changing world. She asked: "What year are you preparing your students for? 1973? 1995? Can you honestly say that your school's curriculum and the program you use are preparing your students for 2015 or 2020? Are you even preparing them for today?" (p. 1). Jacobs (2010) asserted that most curriculum and content, in its current state, is outdated and will not challenge students to be successful in the twenty-first century. Others, such as Pink (2006) and Wagner (2008), called for educators to focus on the

instruction of critical thinking skills instead of focusing on outdated content and curriculum.

Wagner (2008) asserted that the skills needed for student success after graduation continue to be redefined. He suggested that essential skills include: agility and adaptability; effective oral and written communication; curiosity and imagination; initiative; leadership; collaboration; problem-solving; and critical thinking (Wagner, 2008).

If our students and parents continue to provide feedback to public school educators that the curriculum and instruction are not preparing students for the real-world, then why does curriculum and instruction continue to look the same (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012)? Are public school educators connecting theory with practice? Can Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy help provide teachers with a framework for helping students believe the taught curriculum is relevant? Is it possible to work with a small group of middle school teachers and transform Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy into practice? If middle grades teachers implement the theory into practice, how will the teachers perceive the theory?

### **Background of the Study**

This tension of "what we *should* be doing" versus "the reality of the situation" plays out in discussions each and every day across the landscape of America's public schools (Nieto, 2008). The tension creates a quandary for classroom teachers between the theory of teaching and learning compared to the actual day-to-day limitations of the practice of being a teacher (Nieto, 2008). This quandary frequently revolves around topics such as accountability, student responsibility, influence of politicians, responsibility of parents, and the list continues. For example, educational leaders ask students to think deeply and critically about topics within their content classes, but knowledge-based questions that require rote memorization of facts comprise the majority of questions on a standardized assessment. It appears as if there is line drawn in the

sand between theory and practice or the difference between what “happens in the ivory tower” compared to the “trenches of the classroom.” Some questions that came to mind included: How do individual teachers define theory and practice? What are the similarities and differences between theory and practice?, and Why do teachers often seem to believe a divide between theory and practice exist? Freire (1970/2000) also reflected heavily on the balance between theory and practice, and he shared his perspectives about the balance needed:

Curiosity about the object of knowledge and the willingness and openness to engage theoretical readings and discussions is fundamental. However, I am not suggesting an over-celebration of theory. We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so would reduce theory to a pure verbalism or intellectualism. By the same token, to negate theory for the sake of practice, as in the use of dialogue or conversation, is to run the risk of losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice. It is for this reason that I never advocate either in a theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice. In order to achieve this unity, one must have an epistemological curiosity—a curiosity that is often missing to dialogue as conversation. (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 97)

This quote summarized well the heart of the discussions regarding the tensions between theory and practice.

Freire (1970/2000) illuminated this tension between the navigation of theory as “verbalism or intellectualism” and the “disconnectedness of practice” (p. 97). Freire’s notion of verbalism relies simply on the words of theorists without relating back to the implications of implementation of theory into practice. Intellectualism is isolated from reality: looking at any given situation as “black or white” without the presence of any grey area. Freire’s use of

“disconnectedness from practice” detailed the essential nature of relevance within teaching and learning. He defined relevance as a connection between the curriculum and the problems that exist within society.

American public school classroom teachers constantly walk the tightrope of connecting theory and practice (Noddings, 2007). Teachers face the push to meet the demands of the curriculum-pacing guide while also balancing theories about effective teaching and learning through thought-provoking lessons. This pressure is not unique to one specific teacher or school; many teachers feel this type of tension daily in their pedagogy (Dickinson, 2001; Greene, Caskey, Musser, Samek, Casbon, & Olson, 2008; Noddings, 2007). The constant questioning of the purpose and reasoning behind practice is precisely the tension described by Freire (1970/2000). To continue to perfect their practice using a theoretical basis, teachers need to explore this tension, along with developing an understanding of Freire’s beliefs (Shor, 1987). Nieto (2008) described the complexity of this struggle between theory and practice when she wrote:

Teachers, teacher educators, and other academics all struggle with striking the right balance between theory and practice... It can safely be said that the most persistent dilemma in teaching and learning is how to translate theory into action without minimizing the significance of either. (p. 53)

Nieto (2008) described the exact tension that Freire (1970/2000) articulated between the delicate balance between theory and practice.

The “epistemological curiosity,” as described by Freire (1970/2000), inherently remains in many of these discussions, even if not explicitly (p. 97). Freire’s quote from over 40 years ago still resonates today, even though he is not directly connecting theory and practice in a modern-

day classroom. The heart of these discussions always seems to get back to the aforementioned struggle between theory and practice, and a desire to examine that struggle represents an epistemological curiosity. Developing an understanding of what it means to connect theory and practice provides the foundation for this study.

Analyzing Freire's influence on current educators was critical in determining how his theory presently is used in practice. Along the same lines, researching early progressive scholars that pushed Freire's thoughts on teaching and learning provided an understanding of his personal slant with the development of problem-posing pedagogy.

In the early 20th century, one of the earliest progressive educators, Kilpatrick (1925) advocated for teachers to study teaching methods at the same time that teachers study content and curriculum (Lounsbury, 2005). The study of how to teach is equally as important as the study of what to teach (Kilpatrick, 1925). To make his point with a teacher, Kilpatrick pointed out the lack of student engagement within a teacher's classroom. Kilpatrick's advice to the teacher was "one reason why you find teaching dry and hard is exactly because you don't study it (1925, p. 19). Kilpatrick's advocacy for teacher education in both curriculum and content has been paramount for the field of education (Beineke, 1998).

Kilpatrick advocated for students to be involved in critical and higher-order thinking about topics of interest to the student and community (Beineke, 1998). Freire's philosophy closely aligned with Kilpatrick's because of the level of critical and high-level thinking involved in problem-posing pedagogy. Freire's descriptions of the banking concept sound eerily similar to Kilpatrick's rant, "the child is naturally active, especially along social lines. Heretofore a regime of coercion has only too often reduced our schools to aimless dawdling and our pupils to selfish individualists" (1918, p. 10).



The connection between Kilpatrick and Dewey originated in 1907 when Kilpatrick studied under Dewey as a doctoral student (Lounsbury, 2005). Dewey's (1916) beliefs about teaching and learning pushed educators to think about the importance of not only the curriculum but also the pedagogy used by the teacher. By pushing educational thought, Dewey's (1916) philosophy provided educators with a blueprint to turn passive classrooms into active, engaged classrooms. Dewey's (1916) belief in democratic values framed his argument for active teaching and learning. Freire (1970/2000) rooted his push for problem-posing pedagogy over the banking concept in continuing or breaking the cycle of oppression. Even though Dewey, Kilpatrick, and Freire presented their call for active, thought-provoking teaching and learning differently, all three wanted a similar type of pedagogy.

Freire did not have the opportunity to implement his theory of problem-posing pedagogy into America's public school classrooms. The field lacks studies focusing on implementing Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into the public school classroom (Giroux, 2011). Others, such as Shor (1987; 1992; 1996) have worked with Freire to implement the work into higher education classes. Shor's (1987) work provided an insight into how Freire's work might look with students, but even more importantly, Shor's work offered ways of using certain terminology with students. Shor's work with college students also provided a glimpse of how Freire's theory might possibly look like in practice in the Pre-K-12 classroom.

Along with Shor, Beane (1990; 1993; 1997; 2005a) used the thoughts and writings of Dewey and Kilpatrick to influence his work. Beane (2005a) grounded his work in a promotion of the democratic way of life rather than using oppression to promote active, critical-thinking in teaching and learning. Beane's work (1993) provided the field a look into how democratic teaching and learning might look like at the middle level. Along with Beane's (2005a) practical

examples, Springer (1994; 2006) and Kuntz (2005) provided educators with practical examples of the messy work with integrated curriculum and a democratic classroom. The works of Beane and Shor are invaluable pieces to this study because both provided useful information about the implementation of theory into practice within the classroom. The connections between 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars and 21<sup>st</sup> century practicing educators provided links from the seemingly out-of-reach theory to the practice on the ground floor in the classroom.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The work of Freire (1987) provided an intriguing perspective with which to look into pedagogy within the context of an American public school classroom. An American public school classroom is, perhaps obviously, quite different from Freire's context with farmers and peasants in Brazil (Shor, 1987). However, Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy is applicable and useful for an American public school teacher (Kirylo, 2011). Due to the lack of relevance within public school classrooms (NASSP, 2011), coupled with a need to promote critical thinking among students (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2011), Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy must be considered in practice (Kirylo, 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of teachers during the infusion of Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy into middle-level classrooms. The study provided a look into the practicality of implementing the theory into the practice of classroom teachers.

Along with exploring the viability of implementing problem-posing pedagogy, another purpose of the study was to investigate a tension described by many teachers associated with high-stakes testing (Noddings, 2007). Teachers describe an atmosphere where they want to use problem-based learning and critical thinking activities in their lessons, but the pressure from accountability measures tied to high-stakes testing pushes teachers into using drill-and-kill and

rote memorization to help increase test scores (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). This pressure created the aforementioned tension of “what we *should* be doing” versus “the reality of the situation.” The investigation of this tension with teachers provided a look into the opportunities and barriers for implementing problem-posing pedagogy.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided the design and methods of the study.

1. What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy into practice?
2. What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?
3. What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theorists situate Freire’s work under the theoretical framework of social reconstructionism (Casas, 2011). Leonardo (2004) argued that the framework of social reconstruction is based on two major themes:

- A belief that society needs reconstruction
- Education must initiate and lead the efforts for reconstructing society.

Social reconstructionists identify Freire’s work under the label of critical pedagogy (Casas, 2011). Critical pedagogy is, “a teaching approach that encourages students to question and challenge existing beliefs and values prevalent in today’s societies” (Casas, 2008, p. 87). Giroux (2010) defined critical pedagogy as, “the educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies,

and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (p. 73). As George (2011) described the middle level movement as a “grassroots movement,” the field of critical pedagogy is another movement based on the ethical and moral compass of a few educators who believe teaching and learning about communal and societal issues is an essential aspect of helping students develop into thoughtful and productive citizens (p. 44).

Critical pedagogy and social reconstructionism provide foundational vocabulary and a theoretical framework to examine Freire’s work in a public school setting in the United States. Critics such as Hirsh (1987; 2006) argued for the teaching of critical facts and concepts rather than the teaching of critical thinking skills. For one to pursue critical pedagogy and social reconstructionism, he or she must believe that society needs to be reconstructed with education playing a major role. Often, as Freire (1996) would argue, the leaders in power making the decisions do not believe that society needs to be reconstructed because a change in society could lead to changes that negatively affect their status or wealth. Freire’s (1970/2000) belief in problem-posing pedagogy originated in his understanding that society is fundamentally flawed, and that education is vital to reconstruct society. Freire believed that, fundamentally, the banking concept recreates society in its flaws and continues a cyclic pattern that makes it difficult for a person to improve his or her standing in society based on his or her starting place. One of Freire’s (1970/2000) approaches to reconstructing society was re-creating pedagogy as the act of problem-posing while moving away from the banking concept of education.

### **Significance of the Study**

Freirean scholars call for studies focusing on his work and the connection to the classroom (Giroux, 2011; Rossatto, Allen, & Pruyne 2006; Shor, 1987; Wink 2005). Giroux (2011) argued for the examination of Freire’s theory to practice. Giroux (2011) commented on

the lack of research focusing on critical pedagogy and the need to continue to build the research base in an attempt to promote the practice. Shor (1987) insisted on the importance of researching Freire's perspective on pedagogy. The geographical location of the research, Shor (1987) argued, is critical, in that research has been done in places like Brazil or Guinea-Bissau, but the pedagogy needs to also be examined and studied in the United States. This study answered the call for more research into Freire's work and the connection to the classroom.

Educators such as Wallace Alexander, Dennis Carr, and Kathy McAvoy (2006); James Beane (1997a, 2005a); Susan Kuntz (2005); Elizabeth Pate, Elaine Homestead, and Karen McGinnis (1997); and Mark Springer (1994, 2006) have reported on their practice of integrating curriculum, teaching democratically, and connecting curriculum with real-world issues. However, an extensive review of the literature did not uncover a study that examined teachers attempting to implement Freire's theory of problem-posing into public school classrooms. Shor (1987) and Beane (2005a) advocated for studies examining teachers' attempt to implement progressive theoretical pedagogy within classrooms. The present study investigated progressive and theoretical approaches to pedagogy as embodied by problem-posing pedagogy advocated by Shor (1987). This study could, perhaps, fill a gap by looking into connecting theory to practice and by examining teacher perceptions related to professional learning, the relevance of the written curriculum, and classroom instruction juxtaposed within a context in which accountability measures are a reality.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

It was assumed that the participants in the study willingly participated in a book study about problem-posing pedagogy and that they completed readings outside of the group meetings

to gain theoretical and practical knowledge of Freire and his problem-posing pedagogy. It was also assumed that these teachers, the participants of this study, would implement problem-posing pedagogy within their classrooms.

### **Definition of Terms**

Banking Concept—Freire (1970/2000) uses the term, banking concepts, to describe a teaching situation where the teacher lectures and students sit, listen, memorize, and regurgitate information. In the banking concept of teaching, Freire (1970/2000) noted that the teacher makes deposits into the students and then expects students to be able to withdraw the information on recall. Freire advocated against this type of instructional method and stated that he believed this method of teaching continues the cycle of oppression.

Democratic Classrooms—Beane (2005a) defines a democratic classroom as one where students learn personal dignity and common good as well as how to live together with people who have differing views and beliefs. Democratic classrooms are based on the fundamental belief that classrooms should be organized to allow students to participate in the inter-workings of the classroom since students will be expected to participate in their democratic rights as citizens living in a democratic society (Beane, 1997a, 2005a).

Integrated Curriculum—A curriculum design that promotes creating connections between all content areas as well as the reality of society (Beane, 1987; Springer, 1994). Springer (1994, 2006) described his use of integrated curriculum through thematic units and noted the major advantage was that using thematic units across the curriculum helped students make connections. Thematic units also helped students to find relevance within the curriculum and to make connections across content areas (Springer, 2006).

Middle-level Education—The act of teaching young adolescents aged 10 to 15 (NMSA, 2010).

Problem-Posing Pedagogy—Freire’s (1970/2000) idea of what teaching and learning should look like. Problem-posing pedagogy is the process of teachers and students working together to solve community issues. Teachers use this process to teach necessary knowledge and skills integrated in an effort to debate and solve the community issue. Freire (1970/2000) described teachers in a non-traditional role with teachers and students working collaboratively to make meaning of the content compared to the traditional role of the all-knowing teacher bestowing knowledge on the student. A problem-posing pedagogy is bound in the theory of using society to frame the practice of teaching and learning. In essence, the theory of problem-posing pedagogy provides a blueprint without specific details, timeline, or guides for bringing the theory to light in practice.

Relevant Curriculum—Curriculum that connects to students’ lives, cultures, and communities (NMSA, 2010). Beane (1997a) and Springer (2006) argued that democratic classrooms and integrated curriculum helps students see the relevance within the curriculum. Freire (1970/2000) noted that problems with the community provide the necessary relevance for the learner to make connections with the content.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A number of factors limited the study. First, the eight-month time frame used for the study limited participants because of the lack of continuity between two different school years. The participant meetings started in the spring of one school year and continued into the next school year. Another limitation of the study was the lack of diversity with the content areas of participants and grade levels that each one taught. It would have been helpful to have a language

arts and a science teacher as participants. The study was comprised of two math teachers and a social studies teacher. Also, all three participants taught sixth grade.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of male participants. This limitation was due, in part, to the manner in which participants were selected; the participants volunteered to be part of the study, and all three volunteers were female. Moreover, there were more female than male teachers at the research site.

### **Overview of the Research Procedures**

This study explored teachers' perceptions of Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy, along with an examination of the opportunities and barriers for implementing a problem-posing pedagogy into practice. The study chronicled the work of three teachers from a northeast Georgia public middle school as they investigated and implemented Freire's problem-posing pedagogy. Participants took part in group readings, group discussions, document creation, and reflective interviews, to implement problem-posing pedagogy.

Using qualitative methods to investigate teacher perspectives of problem-posing pedagogy, interviews were conducted along with group discussions and document analyses over an eight-month period to study the process of using Freire's (1970/2000) theory of problem-posing pedagogy in contemporary middle school classrooms. The work of Beane (1990, 1997a, 1997b, 2005) and Shor (1987, 1992, 1996) provided examples of Freire's theory in practice, but ultimately, group members collaborated with each other and with middle school students, thus developing their own individual problem-posing pedagogies. Using action research, the study can be defined as the process of three teachers problem-posing about problem-posing pedagogy.

Focusing specifically on Freire's (1970/2000) description of the banking concept, interested teachers worked to explore the relationship between Freire's theory and their own



actual classroom pedagogy. Freire (1970/2000) defined the banking concept as pedagogy focused on the teacher telling the students what they need to know while the students sit quietly, listening, memorizing, and reciting the information for the examination. Conversely, problem-posing pedagogy provides the process for working with students to solve meaningful, societal problems (Shor & Freire, 1987).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study; identifies the problem surrounding the study; describes background information; outlines the purpose of the study along with the research questions; and explains the significance, assumptions, and limitations for the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of literature starting with background information about Freire and moving into a comparison of problem-posing pedagogy and the banking concept. Chapter 2 also provides a look into current middle level best practices for incorporating relevance into the classroom. Chapter 3 provides the research design and methods. In Chapter 4, the data from the study are presented, and the implications and recommendations for teachers, administrators, and teacher-educators are presented in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the perennial push by middle level advocates to see an increase in relevant content and pedagogical practices within classrooms (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010), young adolescents often fail to see connections between the academic content presented and the world outside of a school building (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012; Goodlad, 1984; Jacobs, 2010; Schlechty, 2011). Middle level students find academic work relevant when teachers connect topics to prior experiences and real-world examples coupled with engaging students in service-learning opportunities, and they experience democracy within the classroom (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003). The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of middle level teachers as they implemented Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy in an effort to engage young adolescents in relevant learning experiences. Problem-posing pedagogy was Freire's (1970/2000) theoretical approach that pushed back against the banking concept or traditional form of the all-knowing teacher dispensing information to passive students expected to listen, remember, and recite. Freire (1970/2000) expected problem-posing pedagogy to be comprised of: (1) active learning; (2) teachers and students working together as co-learners; (3) and curriculum comprised of relevant problems within the community. Questions this study sought to answer included:

- 1) What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice?

- 2) What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?
- 3) What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?

Researchers have conducted various studies focused on Freire's work as a theoretical base for improving teacher practice and reflection (Colucci, 2007; Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002). Writers within the field of critical pedagogy, a growing movement of educators calling for students to be expected to think critically about the world around them, have historically advocated for studies focusing on Freire's work within the classroom (Giroux, 2011; Rossatto, Allen, & Pruyn, 2006; Shor, 1987; Wink, 2005).

Dewey (1959) campaigned against traditional quantitative measures for progressive classroom research because classroom relationships and the myriad variables make it difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to study progressive, non-traditional and hands-on, classrooms holistically. The present study attempted to answer the call for examining Freire's problem-posing pedagogy with classroom teachers using a qualitative research approach.

This review of literature provided information pertaining to: (1) understanding Freire through a review of his background and personal experiences (2) comparing banking concept with problem-posing pedagogy, and (3) connecting exemplary middle level instructional practices and Freire's problem-posing pedagogy with current middle level practices. Special emphasis within the middle level instructional practices is paid to create a relevant learning experience through integrated curriculum, democratic classrooms, and service-learning.

## **Understanding Freire**

Freire's prior experiences and background had a significant impact on his personal views as well as his writing (Freire, 1973, 1996; Kirylo, 2011; Schugurensky, 2011; Shor, 1987, 1993). From his experiences as a young boy battling poverty, Freire's (1985) personal understanding of politics and poverty provided him with foundational knowledge of how education can oppress in the same way that it can be liberating (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). It is critical to review the literature surrounding Freire's upbringing and background in an effort to connect his experiences to his theory.

From this brief description of Freire's background, it is important to note that his travels and experiences while living in different locations shaped Freire's beliefs. For example, Freire's belief before living in America was that all people in the United States had access to the means to meet basic human needs. This belief changed when he had the opportunity to live in Boston and see the struggle that many faced living in poverty in a First World country (Freire, 1996). The following sections provide an overview of Freire's background, a description of Freire's influence, and a look into connections between Freire's theory and practice.

### **Freire's Background**

Born in Recife, Brazil in 1921, Freire's youthful experiences shaped his beliefs and writings about pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Schugurensky, 2011). Freire's exposure to Portugal's colonial historical influence on the indigenous people of Brazil particularly played into Freire's desire to emancipate and liberate through pedagogy (Darder et al.2009; Freire, 1973). Freire's former teachers also influenced his beliefs about teaching and learning (Freire, 1996). For example, Freire noted that Eunice Vasconcelos, his first formal teacher, challenged Freire to think, and Freire reported, "I was always invited to learn and never reduced to an empty vessel to

be filled with knowledge” (Freire, 1996, p. 29). Differing from the approach of Vasconcelos, Freire’s other experiences with formal schooling involved rote memorization of facts and text, and he struggled with being able to remember and to recite (Kirylo, 2011).

Growing up in Brazil provided Freire with a viewpoint of the wealthy and poor through the trials and tribulations of his classmates (Freire, 1996). Freire’s mother’s desire and unwavering support for his education helped him to gain a scholarship to a private high school even though his family’s financial situation did not support his attendance at the school. With his family’s battle with poverty, Freire personally faced hunger on a number of different occasions (Schugurensky, 2011). Freire’s experiences with hunger provided him with a sharp contrast with his experiences as a student attending a private high school usually reserved for students from wealthy families. Freire’s high school days offered him the opportunity to compare his impoverished upbringing with how the other side lived with money and freedom (Kirylo, 2011).

While a high school student, Freire discovered a love for tutoring Portuguese, leading him to decide to accept a teaching position at the high school after graduation. Freire used student work to teach literacy instead of traditional methods of grammar through a textbook (Wallerstein, 1987). Freire resisted any type of pedagogical methods that required students to memorize or recite to show competency (Freire, 1970, 2000). His methods became popular among school administration and other instructors, and he was often asked to present his pedagogical philosophy and teaching methods to others (Kirylo, 2011).

During his time as a teacher, Freire found himself promoted on a number of occasions, but due to political instability and unrest in Brazil, military police arrested and interrogated members of Brazil’s educational association including Freire. In April 1964, the Brazilian military claimed that Freire’s teachings promoted unrest with the masses leading to political

conflict weakening the power of the wealthy (Shor, 1987). After Freire's release from jail, government authorities exiled him from his home country of Brazil (Schugurensky, 2011; Wallerstein, 1987).

Freire spent time in Bolivia after the exile, but soon after, he began working at the University of Chile. During his time in Chile, Freire traveled through the country working with peasants defining and redefining what Freire described as "cultural circles" (Freire, 1978; Shor, 1987). In the cultural circles, Freire spent a great deal of time listening to the concerns of peasants (Wallerstein, 1987). The experience provided him with an understanding of the oppressed and how he believed education should be structured leading him to write and to publish *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* based on his work with the people of Brazil and Chile (Schugurensky, 2011). After the publication of the book, Freire's work spread quickly leading to employment offers including one from Harvard University.

While working as a professor at Harvard, Freire made an interesting finding that shook him and his work. Freire (1985) realized that some people lived in America in places that resembled the Third World. Freire was shocked that people living in a First World Country could be trapped in ghettos that resembled the poorest of neighborhoods in Brazil (Freire, 1985). This experience permeated Freire's thought of the United States as he solidified his beliefs on the relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed (Freire, 1985). After a year at Harvard in 1970, Freire decided to accept the offer from the World Council of Churches (WCC) located in Switzerland (Wallerstein, 1987). Freire worked extensively with African countries during his time with the WCC because of his experience with colonization. Freire's family spent 10 years in Switzerland only to be granted a passport to return back to Brazil in 1980 (Freire, 1985).

Freire described his return back to his home country of Brazil, “I was returning hopeful, motivated to relearn Brazil, to participate in the struggle for democracy and for the public school to become popular school gradually, thus becoming less elitist, more critical, and more open” (Freire, 1997, p. 72). Freire’s return to Brazil brought back a number of challenges leading him to become involved in the political world. Freire accepted the position of Secretary of Education and served his home country of Brazil for two years (Schugurensky, 2011). After his retirement as Secretary and the death of his first wife, Freire devoted himself to the work of publishing his writings and speaking. Freire remarried, continued to travel, and committed himself to continuing to move pedagogy toward problem-posing and away from the banking concept.

### **Freire’s Influence**

Freire’s influence on education at the international level is profound (Brown, 2005). Many consider Freire to be the “most influential educational philosopher in the development of critical pedagogical thought and practice (Darder et al., 2009). Noting Freire’s influence, Kirylo (2011) claimed Freire served as one of the greatest thinkers of his time.

It would take volumes to discuss the number of people who have been touched by Paulo Freire. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Freire has had a powerful impact (and still does) on millions of people spanning the world. (Kirylo, 2011, p. 235)

Cornel West (1993) described Freire as the “exemplary organic intellectual of our time” (p. xiii). Brown (2005) stated that Freire’s “internationally acclaimed work had transformed education at all levels” (p. 155).

Moreover, Freire supporters created a charter school as a way to teach using Freire’s theory of problem-posing. The mission of Freire Charter School (FCS) located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is to provide a college-preparatory learning experience with a focus on individual

freedom, critical thinking, and problem solving in an environment that emphasizes the values of community, teamwork, and non-violence (Freire Charter School, n.d). Through the use of Freire’s theory in practice, the school is known for its high levels of academic achievement. FCS was one of three high schools in America that won an Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC) award because of its ability to raise academic achievement across the board (Freire Charter School, n.d.).

Even after his death in 1997, Freire’s work still pushes educational thought and practice internationally (Allman, 2010). Examples of Freire’s influence include UCLA’s Paulo Freire Institute or The Freire Project (Kincheloe, n.d.). The Freire Project was created in memory of Freire’s work as a way to build “an international critical community which works to promote social justice in a variety of cultural contexts” (Kincheloe, n.d). Another example of Freire’s influence was revealed from the findings from a study conducted by Steiner and Rozen (2004). Examining the texts used at 16 schools of education within the United States, Steiner and Rozen (2004) found Freire’s (1970/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to be the book most frequently used in philosophy of education courses. Freire’s work has also been highlighted and used in a number of different research studies across a variety of different fields. Table 2.1 provides a sampling of studies over the past decade in which researchers used Freire’s work as the cornerstone of the study.

Table 2.1

*Sampling of Studies within the last decade using Freire’s Work as a Centerpiece*

| Researcher(s) | Year of Publication | Purpose of the Study  |
|---------------|---------------------|---|
| Colucci       | 2010                | Use of Freire’s participatory educational methodologies to teach HIV/AIDS awareness to African youth through soccer |



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|                          |      |   |
|--------------------------|------|---|
| Darder                   | 2002 | Purpose was to examine the perspectives of 8 teachers who studied Freire, completed the book to show Freire's legacy  |
| Johnson                  | 2009 | Used Freire to show the connection between children of alcoholics and their personal school experiences, purpose was to help educators see the impact of alcoholic parents with regards to their schooling experiences  |
| Rossatto                 | 2004 | Purpose was to examine the impact of student perceptions on their success in school   |
| Smith-Maddox & Solorzano | 2002 | Purpose was to use critical race theory and Freire's problem-posing pedagogy to introduce a different instructional approach to teacher education. Researchers wanted pre-service teachers to think critically about what it means to teach in a diverse classroom. |

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The impact of Freire's work on others is noticeable through the creation and re-creation of what it means to be an educator practicing or promoting critical pedagogy (Shor, 1992). Freire's impact is most noticeable when others re-write his words in an effort to promote his profound way of thinking about education (Schugurensky, 2011). Shor's quote describing Freire's belief on teaching provided this insight into his influence.

For Freire, teaching and learning are human experiences with profound social consequences. Education is not reducible to a mechanical method of instruction. Learning is not a quantity of information to be memorized or a package of skills to be transferred to students. Classrooms die as intellectual centers when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge. Instead of transferring facts and skills from teachers to students, a Freirean class invites students to think critically about a subject matter, doctrines, the learning process itself, and their society. (Shor, 1993, p. 25)

Apple concluded in the Preface of a book titled *The Freirean Legacy* that “the way to honor Paulo Freire is to extend his struggles into the present and the future. We owe it not only to Paulo but also to oppressed people throughout the world” (2002, xii).

### **Theory and Practice**

Connecting theory and practice is critical to Freire’s work in education. The term, praxis, was used by Freire (1970/2000) to describe the point at which theory and practice meet. Freire did not believe in using theory and practice in isolation, but instead, he viewed both as equally significant. As with his theory of problem-posing, Freire (1970/2000) discussed the importance of continuously *becoming* on the part of the teacher-student as well as the student-teacher. Consequently, Freire (1970/2000) argued, “Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis” (p. 84). Finding the balance between theory and practice is instrumental in the process of locating praxis. Furthermore, the process of meshing the verbalism of theory with the reality of practice is understandably an extremely difficult part in achieving a problem-posing education (Freire & Shor, 1987). In the process of attempting to mesh theory and practice, Shor (1987) believed that the process pushes teachers to become better educators.

The tensions between theory and practice are not specific to Freire, and other educational theorists have contemplated these same tensions (Dewey, 1925; Garrison, 1997; Shor, 1987). The ones highlighted here share similar theoretical and philosophical beliefs to that of Freire and his works. For example, Garrison (1997) and Dewey (1925) advocated for democratic teaching and learning. Garrison (1997) specifically highlighted educating students about Eros, the act of passionate desire, and how it is critical in exploring the tensions between theory and practice.

Dewey (1925/1981) believed educators should cultivate student understanding to be able to comprehend, distinguish, judge, and create rather than just to memorize and recite. Garrison

(1997) argued that teachers have a role and responsibility in educating on Eros, and thought that ultimately educating Eros is “Teaching students to distinguish what they immediately and unreflectively desire from what they ought to desire after reflection (p. 126). Garrison’s belief in the importance of educating Eros coincided with Freire’s belief in a problem-posing education. Passion for Freire was a non-negotiable for a liberating educator and later in his writing, Freire connected the democratic educator with the liberating educator.

Freire (1996) connected his passion for truth by stating, “If a teacher truly believes in democracy, he or she has no option, upon realizing his or her incoherence, than to shorten the distance between what he or she says and does” (p. 162). In the statement, Freire portrayed his desire for the melding of theory and practice while arguing for truth from the pedagogical position of the teacher. Later in his discussion of democracy, Freire (1996) argued through the questions he asked:

How can a racist teacher speak about democracy, unless it is a very special democracy, on that sees blackness as diminishing it? How does a sexist teacher speak about democracy, unless it is a democracy indifferent to the presence of women? How can an elitist teacher speak about democracy, unless it is democracy for the aristocracy that dwindles in the presence of popular classes? (p. 163)

Freire’s writing on theory and practice meet in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when he described two distinctly different types of education that can be provided based on pedagogy. He started with the banking concept of education created by a dominating pedagogy of sit, listen, memorize, and recite. Freire (1970/2000) argued against the banking concept stating:

It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing deposits entrusted to them, the

less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their invention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (p. 73)

Freire (1970/2000) was making the argument that oppressors use education as a tool to control and oppress rather than to liberate. Freire (1970/ 2000) described the opposite of banking concept by presenting a problem-posing education where learning through the reality of the world is the focus. In a problem-posing education, the teacher and students are expected to work as co-learners, dialogue is present, and liberation is the goal.

### **Freire's Teaching Philosophy**

Freire's (1973) experiences as a student directly impacted his beliefs on teaching and learning. Since Freire (1970/2000, 1973) found memorization and recitation uninspiring practices as a student, he advocated for teachers to involve students in their learning through the promotion of critical thinking and active participation offered in a relevant curriculum. Freire's work was essential to the field of education because of his ability to articulate what active engagement in classrooms looked and sounded like. Freire was not the first to propose that education must be relevant to the learner, and students need to be active participants (Darder et al., 2009). Dewey (1900, 1916, & 1925) proposed active and experiential learning beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dewey's unwavering advocacy for teachers to spend time thinking and reflecting was paramount in pushing educators to think about pedagogy alongside the curriculum (Dewey, 1916; Fishman & McCarthy, 1998).

It is clear from the literature that Dewey's work had a profound impact on Freire's beliefs about teaching and learning (Gadotti, 1994). The major difference in the philosophies of Dewey

and Freire lies in the foundational beliefs about the purpose of education (Gadotti, 1994). Dewey (1916, 1925) promoted education as a means of teaching to help students live and participate in a democratic society. Freire's (1970/2000) defined the purpose of education as a way to create structural change through the process of liberating members of society through education. Freire's (1987) idea of structural change was an ideological political, social, and economical shift away from a top-down economical and political approach (Shor, 1987). Freire's work with problem-posing pedagogy should not be viewed as a method of teaching and learning, but problem-posing pedagogy should serve as a "framework for thinking about education—a framework in which the process of human liberation is at the very center of the enterprise" (Freire, Fraser, Macedo, McKinnon, & Stokes, 1997, p. 51).

Freire believed that it is not possible for education to be neutral due to students' and teachers' experiences and culture which either, "reinforces or challenges the existing social forces that keep them passive" (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 33). Due to the experiences and culture of the student, Freire (1970/2000) did not view students as an empty vessel awaiting the delivery of knowledge; but instead, he believed that the student must work together with the teacher as co-learners. Shor (1993) noted that in problem-posing classrooms, "students experience education as something they do, not something done to them" (p. 26). Shor (1993) described teachers within a problem-posing classroom as thought-provoking, empowering, and encouraging students to think about social change and democracy. Shor elaborated:

In Freirean critical classrooms, teachers reject the methods which make students passive and anti-intellectual. They do not lecture students into sleepy silence. They do not prepare students for a life of political alienation in society. Rather, Freirean educators

pose critical problems to students, treat them as complicated, substantial human beings, and encourage curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world. (Shor, 1993, pp. 25-26)

Shor went on later to note that dialogue is critical and essential to building the relationship needed for a teacher and students to trust each other in this type of classroom environment.

Freire believed the work of a teacher is critical with the assertion that the educational experience can be liberating for both students and the teacher (1970/2000). Conversely, the opposite of liberation, continuing a cycle of oppression and dehumanization, can be the result of a teacher and his or her practice. Freire described teacher practice and teacher-student relationships as either falling under the banking concept of education or a problem-posing education. Freire (1970/2000) described the banking concept as the process of sitting, listening, memorizing, and reciting; on the other hand, a problem-posing pedagogy is one of critical thought, reflection, and action. In problem-posing pedagogy, the teacher becomes a co-learner with students, while together the students and the teacher work to solve relevant and meaningful problems. Table 2.2 provides an overview of the classroom practices and beliefs of a banking concept classroom versus a problem-posing classroom.

Table 2.2

*Classroom Comparison of Banking Concept and Problem-Posing*

|                       | Banking Concept                                     | Problem-Posing   |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Action of the Teacher | Consistently using lecture; maintain the status quo | Challenge students; Using parallel pedagogies (array of different formats and methods), depends on the needs of the students and the problem being posed; create with the students |

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|                       |   |  |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Action of the Student | Sitting, listening, memorizing, and reciting; expected to be passive  | Expected to be an active member in the learning process; constantly questioning and thinking; using the knowledge to help transform the community and society; create with the teacher; students should be curious |
| Content               | Facts and knowledge-based information, expected to be memorized   | Relevant and meaningful; Importance on social issues; transformative   |
| Curriculum            | Subjects are separated by content; Ex. Math, science, language arts and social studies; lacking relevance and authenticity; information is accepted as written; controlled by the dominant culture; used a form of power to oppress and direct others | Connected to reality and the local community; Subjects are integrated; based on themed units; information is challenged, debated, and critiqued  |
| Assessment            | Standardized; based on the perception of the teacher  | Constant and collaborative between the teacher and the students  |
| Classroom Culture     | Comprised of individuals; decisions are made solely by the teacher; diversity is viewed as a challenge; one voice is usually coming from the room   | Classroom community teaching morality and values; shared decision-making; vested interest; diversity is prized and embraced; groups of voices are coming from the room   |

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### **The Banking Concept of Education**

The banking concept of education is based on the notion of the role of the teacher as the Subject and the role of the students as the object. Freire's decision to capitalize Subject is important, as he aimed to directly question the role of the teacher in the banking concept as an

all-knowing, flawless individual who dispenses truth and knowledge. Subjects are described as active individuals, “who know and act,” while objects are, “known and acted upon” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 36). Freire described teachers, serving in the role of Subject under the banking concept, as narratives who, “gift” objects with knowledge deposits.

Freire (1970/2000) commented, “Verbalistic lessons, reading requirements, the methods for evaluating ‘knowledge,’ and the distance between the teacher and the taught, the criteria for promotion: everything is this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking” (p. 76).

Within the banking concept, knowledge lies with the all-knowing teacher who acts as the depositor; while students serve as “containers” or “receptacles” waiting for the Subject to fill them with knowledge (Freire, 1970/2000, p.72). Freire noted oppressors then, in effect, are able to regulate someone’s knowledge base through methods such as memorization and recitation.

Memorizing and reciting fails to promote thinking or cognition, and the oppressor works to convince students, the objects, that being educated is the process of memorizing and reciting facts rather than thinking critically about a problem or theory. Freire’s (1970/2000) assertion against rote memorization and recitation reverts back to the, “pure verbalism or intellectualism” that can develop from the isolation of theory but also taking away the theory leads to the, “disconnectedness of practice” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 97). The banking concept implies that students are not able to think critically about societal problems and teachers are not capable of providing these types of opportunities. Freire (1970/2000) noted that the use of the banking concept dehumanizes the student and removes all creativity from within the classroom. Backing up this argument, Freire (1987) stated, “The standard, transfer curriculum is a mechanistic, authoritarian way of thinking about organizing a program which implies above all a tremendous lack of confidence in the creativity of students and in the ability of teachers” (p. 77). Shor (1992)



summed up the banking concept best when he noted that the central bank of knowledge is, “exclusionary rather than inclusive” (p. 32). Dewey (1916) described the same process as Freire, but he illustrated the process of making deposits as the act of, “pouring in” random disconnected facts or information (p. 38).

**Present state of the banking concept.** The widespread use of test-prep curriculum and overuse of high-stakes testing has allowed for teachers to continue the use of the banking concept, while even making it an acceptable practice for teachers (Darder, 2002). Brown (2005) questioned the standards-based movement based on Freire’s argument for problem-posing pedagogy by stating:

Freire’s view diametrically opposes the dominant culture’s institutionalization of the banking method of public education, which is most poignantly characterized by corrosive resurgence of the standards-accountability movement and the flattening of human learning, potential, and spirit. It vehemently opposes the resultant increasing emphasis on classroom discipline and growing trend to militarize schools in poor communities. As teachers teach to the test, students are narcotized into complacency and failure, with no active role in the learning process and educators are demoralized as this process of deintellectualization in education stifles their own and their students’ creativity and thoughtful inquiry. (Brown, 2005, p. 155)

Brown’s (2005) picturesque description of the banking method drew from Freire’s description of the essence of banking, but Brown also used Freire’s works to explain the current state of public education.

Pushing against a narrowing current of curriculum and expectations, Brown interrogated the belief that adding regulation through standards and accountability is needed. Instead, Brown

viewed standards and accountability, in their current form, as ways of lowering expectations and demoralizing creativity. The use of the word ‘flattening’ to portray the banking method is noteworthy, but coupled with what Brown tagged with flattening is even more eye-opening. The idea that the banking method can strip learning, potential, and spirit from the teacher-student and student-teacher is significant and must be explored.

Shor (1987) metaphorically described knowledge in a banking classroom as, “a corpse of knowledge—a dead body of knowledge—not a living connection to their reality” (p. 4). In this quote, “their” is referring to students. Within this discussion, Shor (1987) connected with Brown’s (2005) comparison of the current state of public education by saying, “The dominant curriculum treats motivation as outside the action of study. Tests, discipline, punishment, rewards, the promise of future jobs, are considered motivating devices, alienated from the act of learning now” (p. 5). To expound on Shor’s point, Freire (1987) argued that public schools have been organized as, “delivery systems to market official ideas and not to develop critical thinking” (p.8). Essentially, Shor and Freire connected motivation with active learning through critical thinking and pedagogy. Arguing against disconnecting motivation and active learning, the point being made by Shor (1987) and Freire (1987) is that school officials must not disconnect motivation, pedagogy, and knowledge and should see these as integrated and dependent on each other. Illuminating this, Shor (1987) described himself as a young adolescent as someone who, “disliked school, but loved learning” (p. 17). Being told random, disconnected facts and information is a central part of today’s public schools, but this is not, as Shor argued, actual learning.

For students involved in a classroom where the pedagogical choice of the instructor is the banking concept, the desire of the student to question the format of the class, to question the

instructor, or to participate in the discussion is minimal or nonexistent. Shor (1987) aptly described this scenario when he said:

After years in dull transfer-of-knowledge classes, in boring courses filled with sedating teacher-talk, many have become non-participants, waiting for the teacher to set the rules and start narrating what to memorize. These students are silent because they no longer expect education to include the joy of learning, moments of passion or inspiration or comedy, or even that education will speak to the real conditions of their lives. They expect the droning voice of the teacher to fill the very long class hour. (p. 122)

The tradition of the transfer-of-knowledge classes continues to establish the perception of what schools should look like, the role of students and the teacher, and the continued belief that schools should continue to be places to sit, listen, memorize, and take examinations involving regurgitation (Freire, 1987).

Educators continue to use the banking concept to develop entire classes as well as individual lessons, even though many educational theorists promote movement away from the traditional methods of transfer-of-knowledge (e.g., Beane, 2005a; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970/2000; Shor, 1987). A difference between curriculum and pedagogy should be noted in this discussion. Pedagogy is defined broadly as the teaching and learning process and methods, while curriculum is defined as the content learned. The difference should be noted in the following section.

Carrillo (2010) provided a look into the thoughts and emotions of a teacher attempting to implement critical pedagogy by writing a reflection based on the experiences of an inexperienced teacher. Carrillo's reflection was based on the story of Christina, a first-year Latina teacher, who quit after one year of using critical pedagogy with her students. Carrillo (2010) described

Christina by saying, “Despite successfully learning and applying critical pedagogy, Christina finds herself isolated and frustrated, stuck between a societal push for standardized success and her own desire to nurture transformation among her students” (p. 74). Unfortunately, Shor (1987, 1992) expressed the same frustration when he talked about his work with his students.

A disconnect between progressive pedagogical theory and practice is evident where teachers use the banking concept to increase standardized test score success. Conversely, other educational theorists such as Hirsh (1987, 2006) challenge progressive theorists on the basis of fundamental knowledge, such as beginning reading or math. Hirsh’s main contention lay with the curriculum, not specifically with pedagogy. Both progressive and traditional educational theorists do not deny the importance of basic skills, but disputes around pedagogical methods are evident (Beane, 1993; Dewey, 1902; Hirsh, 1987). Hirsh (1987) asserted that a child should have certain knowledge and skills at a certain age, but Freire and Shor would contend that a teacher’s role is to help students think critically about the reality of the world. Shor (1987) even contended that, “State and school authorities seek a standardized curriculum that is teacher proof” (p. 75). Failure of state and school authorities to treat educators as professionals prevents individuals attempting to implement dialogic, problem-posing pedagogy from advancing and continuing in the profession.

**A structure that supports banking.** Collectively, Freire and Shor (1987) contended that myriad factors continue to promote traditional pedagogical methods of the banking concept. The factors include: resistance from all stakeholders including educators and teachers, a perceived lack of rigor and structure, educators afraid of the repercussions for adopting dialogic pedagogy, the desire for teachers to feel as if they are an expert in their content area, worry from educators that control will be lost or students will lose respect, and the fear of educators to push against

mainstream politics (Shor, 1987). Different factors affect individual teachers on different levels. For example, a veteran teacher's prior experience might cause him or her to decide not to implement progressive methods while an inexperienced teacher might fear student resistance, therefore failing to implement dialogic methods. As Freire (1970/2000, 1987) and Shor (1987, 1993) contended, these factors are real, and history shows that progressive methods are resisted for a number of factors.

### **Problem-Posing Education**

The idea of a problem-posing education is complex and layered with many issues, obstacles, and barriers (Shor, 1987, 1993). Also, Freire's thoughts about dialogue through reflection and action, the importance of coding, and the process of problem-posing were fluid (Freire & Shor, 1987) in the sense that these things happen during pedagogical moments within the classroom structure and look different depending on the instructor, characteristics of the learner, culture, and community of the school. Each of the different characteristics can make identifying problem-posing somewhat complex. Shor's (1987) work made this easier and more practical to understand, but the act of identifying the practice connected with the theory is still challenging.

Shor (1987) noted that teachers want this question answered before ever beginning a new way of teaching: Is this relevant and practical for my classroom? In thinking about this question, Shor (1987) provided some concrete examples and practical process for leading a problem-posing education. Shor's process starts with an emphasis on truly understanding the problems within the society and community without creating fake or superficial issues. A distinct accent is placed on the importance of listening, outside of the classroom, to real problems faced by real people within the community. After identifying the problems or issues, the next step is to start a

dialogue through Freire's (1970/2000) codification or codes. Shor (1987) defined a code as, "a concrete physical representation of a particularly critical issue that has come up during the listening phase" (p. 38). Classroom teachers can creatively use a variety of diverse codes including items such as newspapers, magazines, skits, stories, photographs, plays, videos, or anything else that would represent the issue or problem. Shor (1987) defined an effective code as having the following factors:

- It should represent a familiar problem situation immediately recognized by the group.
- It should be presented as a problem with many sides or contradictions to avoid conveying a good or bad point of view.
- It should focus on one concern at a time, but not in a fragmented way; the historical, cultural, and social connections in students' lives should be suggested.
- It should be open-ended and not provide solutions; any resolution or strategies should emerge from the group discussion.
- The problem should not be overwhelming, but should offer possibilities for group affirmation and small actions towards change. (p. 38)

The idea behind the code is to provide students with a representation of a situation or problem that is not personalized. The hope is to connect students with the issue and possible solutions. From the code, students are asked to: "describe what they see, define the problem(s), share similar experiences, question why there's a problem, and strategize what they can do about the problem" (Shor, 1987, p. 39).

Leading students with a list of narrowing questions allows the teacher and students to think about the people in differing ways without quickly analyzing the problem for solutions. Shor noted the importance of Freire's labeling of a problem-posing education rather than a

problem-solving education. This distinction is notable in that problem-posing describes, “the need for continuous actions and complexity of solutions for students in their workplaces” (Shor, 1987, p. 40).

Monchinski (2008) pointed to the movie, *Dead Poets Society*, to illustrate the difference between the banking concept and a problem-posing education. This movie also highlighted some of the barriers, opportunities, and limitations of providing a problem-posing education. The movie showcased a teacher, Mr. Keating, in his attempt to provide students with a thought-provoking, intellectual experience within his classroom. Mr. Keating shares with the headmaster that learning to think for yourself should be the ultimate goal of his class and education in general. The headmaster rebuts by describing a routine of discipline and tradition as the best route to a quality education.

The philosophical difference in the *Dead Poets Society* between the two highly regarded educators is an example of these tensions between theory and practice. The headmaster and Mr. Keating clearly viewed students in different ways, both philosophically and in practice. The headmaster’s push for structure and discipline differed from Mr. Keating’s beliefs that teaching and learning through thought-provoking lessons can be liberating. Unfortunately, as described by McLaren (2000) and Monchinski (2008), too few educators live out the problem-posing ideals of Freire. McLaren noted that the reasoning for this choice to not teach using problem-posing is complex and points back to the tension between theory and practice. In theory, problem-posing provides an opportunity for teachers critically to solve problems with students, but the limitations and barriers make it difficult for practice to match theory (Shor, 1987).

The act of dialogue is foundational for a problem-posing education. Critical to this discussion surrounding dialogue is the importance of each word and the idea that dialogue is a

discussion between two or more people. The notion that dialogue is a discussion of more than one person promotes Freire's belief in a problem-posing education. It is impossible for a teacher to state that a dialogue is present in his or her class if they fail to use any pedagogical method other than lecture. In addition, Freire accentuated reflection and action, each dimensions of dialogue. The argument is made by Freire (1970/2000) that, "if one (reflection or action) is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers" (p. 87). Reflection and action, separately, are similar to studying theory without interrogating or questioning current practice. Describing the importance of reflection and action being used concurrently within the pedagogical process is another element of problem-posing education worth exploring. Combining coding, the importance of reflection with action, and connection with theory and practice, creates a theoretical base for this study.

Tradition continues to hound dialogical pedagogy from the standpoint of the teacher, students, parents, and community members (Shor, 1987). Unfortunately, dialogical pedagogy is minimized by stakeholders as fluff or lacking the rigor of a standardized, comprehensive curriculum. Freire asserted that a dialogic, problem-posing education is exactly what educators and stakeholders would define as rigor, but myths and misconceptions about what is exactly meant by dialogic pedagogy cause educators and stakeholders to resist. Simply put, many educators and stakeholders would rather have a traditional school because of its clarity and clean nature, rather than the messiness and unpredictability of a problem-posing education.

### **Role of the Students and Teacher in Banking versus Problem-Posing**

Within the banking concept, the role of the teacher and student is extremely rigid and clearly distinct. Scholars, such as Shor (1993, 1996, 1997, 1999) and McLaren (2000, 2005) have described students within the banking concept as passive, and they perceive that the role of the



teacher is minimized due to a lack of autonomy and creativity. The role of teacher and student are not as distinct in Freire's problem-posing education. Lines between teacher and student are blurred with both simultaneously serving as the teacher and the student (Freire, 1970/2000). The phrase used by Freire (1970/2000) to define this phenomenon was, "teacher-student with student-teachers" instead of the "teacher of the students" which is used within the banking concept (p. 80). Shor (1999) noted, "The role of the teacher is to ask questions but also to provide necessary information that promotes critical thinking" (p. 41).

Within a problem-posing education, students are not expected to memorize or to recite, but instead, the student is "cognitive" at all times (Freire, 1970/2000, p.80). Teachers are expected to provide relevant situations, issues, or problems and to work with students to question, trouble, and possibly solve them. Thinking, as well as communication and dialogue, are the foundation for a problem-posing classroom. Also, Freire emphasized the importance of the student comparatively in the banking concept versus problem-posing. Students in the banking concept are made to feel finished and completed at the end of every lesson or concept. On the contrary, students participating in a problem-posing education learn the importance of being, "the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire, 2000, p. 84). As Shor (1987) described, Freire does not believe in, "a sidwinder pedagogy but rather cobra-like, moving back and forth and striking quickly when the students' conditioning was broken down enough so that alternative views could be presented" (p. 151).

One interesting aspect of the role of the student and teacher in problem-posing pedagogy came from a study conducted by middle level teachers attempting to implement problem-based learning (Sage, Krynock, & Robb, 2000). These researchers found that eighth grade students resisted their new role as an active learner because students had a certain belief system about

their role as a student. Students considered their role to be that “the teacher lectures or gives us information, we write it down, and then give it back on a test” (Sage et al., 2000, p. 170). Shor (1987) noted that when students just understand that their role is to write, remember, and recall, then students just see school as a game instead of learning for the real world.

Shor (1987) fundamentally believed that the role and responsibility of the teacher and students is the heart of a liberatory education. The teacher is sometimes the student, and the student sometimes serves as the teacher. For this to be effective, both the teacher and student must be engaged and cognitive in the classroom. Cognitive, in this sense, means being active in thought and constantly questioning social reality (Freire, 1987). Conversely, Freire argued that the teacher and students are not equals due to the power infused in the position of teacher. The complexity of power within the role of teacher makes it challenging for teachers to balance their role with the role of the student. For example, Shor (1987) highlighted episodes in his class when students challenged his authority as teacher and noted the difficulty in, ‘walking the tightrope’ between empowering students and failing to maintain a classroom environment conducive to risk-taking for all learners as well as the teacher. Freire (1987) agreed and presented an example of the same idea from parenting his children. He maintained that the parent must be the authority figure, similar to the teacher, but authority in the sense of a balance between direction and discipline. Freire was not referring to direction and discipline as in an authoritarian figure or dictator, but instead as one who provides guidance and support. With regard to his parenting style, Freire asserted that the child must know that the parent is the authority figure, but the parent must not dictate each and every action. This stance, he argued, must be similar to the classroom approach of the teacher.

**Liberatory education.** Shor and Freire (1987) described their transformation process in the concept of teacher-student and student-teacher as liberatory education. Arguing for a liberatory education, the first test for such as described by Freire and Shor (1987) is, “where the teacher and the students *both* have to be learners, *both* have to be cognitive subjects, in spite of being different (p. 33). Within this transformation process, Shor (1987) looked at the type of classroom dialogue and the behaviors of the students. Shor (1987) described this dialogue and these behaviors as small things because when teachers are, “looking only for big changes, teachers may lose touch with the transformative potential in any activity (p. 35). Within this discussion, Freire (1987) made note that a liberatory education consists of much more than specific methods of questioning or teaching techniques. A liberatory educator possesses depth of pedagogy as well as a keen understanding of the place of education in society. For as Freire (1987) commented, “from the point of view of the ruling class, of the people in power, the main task for systematic education is to reproduce the dominant ideology” (p. 36).

A part of Freire’s banking concept that has been discussed greatly is the method of lecturing as a form of delivering content to students. Freire argued that all lecturing is not banking; instead, some lecturing can be quite problem-posing for students. Most lecturing is an oral transfer of knowledge, but Freire did, on occasion, see where lecturing was problem-posing and illuminating. Shor (1987) agreed stating, “problem-posing illumination which criticizes itself and challenges students’ thinking rather than a delivery system of pre-packaged information passed out verbally in the classroom” (p. 40). Freire believed that this type of lecturing is minimally used by teachers due to its difficulty and the amount of practice needed to perform at a high level.

Providing his example of a problem-posing lecture, Shor (1987) described a classroom where the teacher uses lecture at the end of class instead of the beginning. Usually, teachers use lecture at the beginning of class, and Shor saw this as a hierarchical display to students that one person is dominant over the class. Instead of using lecture at the beginning, Shor saw the beginning of class as a time for the teacher-student and student-teacher to co-develop the session. This discussion creates an atmosphere of trust and dialogue displaying to students that their thoughts and opinions are valued and essential to the class. Providing students with vignettes, situations, myths, and current events also helped Shor to create a problem-posing lecture.

Essential to this discussion is Shor's (1987) idea of parallel pedagogies, where the teacher uses myriad instructional methods throughout the class. With a problem-posing lecture, a teacher might use small group questioning, student presentations, writing prompts, observations, and other instructional methods to provide students with an array of formats. This array of formats and methods being used simultaneously is what Shor called parallel pedagogies.

A liberating education does not come without fear and risks for the teacher. For a large number of teachers, many years of experience and knowledge go into each lesson and traditional methods, coupled with pedagogical assumptions and philosophy, are present within the classroom. Also, many teachers have a desire to be the expert in their classroom and the thought of trying something new and unpredictable is not flattering (Shor, 1987). One teacher stopped Freire at a conference asking him why she needed to change from the banking concept to problem-posing pedagogy since she had always been labeled an effective teacher. Freire (1987) answered her question by challenging the teacher to think about her ability to provide opportunities in her classroom to help the students begin to illuminate the varying degrees of the fabric of society.

Freire and Shor (1987) argued that illumination is one of the goals for a problem-posing education, but the process of illuminating involves discovery rather than sitting and receiving information. Shor described illumination as a teacher's reward for providing critical issues and problems for students. The process of illuminating sheds light on another fear of teachers when thinking about choosing a problem-posing education: time for planning. Creating opportunities for students to be in a position to question and think critically about complex problems is a time-consuming process for instruction. The fears and risks are real for teachers, but Shor argued that the traditional ways of teaching and learning are not inspirational to teachers or students. Shor (1987) argued that being the teacher is not the final destination for students, but instead, students and the teacher work together for personal and professional development and transformation.

**Classroom Culture.** Freire's theory of the banking concept constructed a dominant, suppressive culture of schooling and classrooms, but Shor and Freire (1987) believed that the banking concept, also labeled as a transfer-of-knowledge pedagogy, created a culture-of-silence as well as culture-of sabotage within America's schools. Traditional pedagogy of sit-and-get continues to promote cultures not aligned with active student learning (Shor, 1987). Failure to provide students with opportunities to participate in their own learning, as well as teachers' inability to become co-learners in the classroom, impedes the progress of teachers and schools in providing relevant and meaningful learning opportunities.

The culture-of-silence was described by Freire and Shor (1987) as the culture of teaching students to sit and wait passively for the all-knowing teacher to disperse information. The only responsibility of the learner in the banking concept is to sit, listen, memorize, and regurgitate the information back to the teacher. Tradition and the history of schooling continue to build this culture of silence. Shor (1987a) argued that "in traditional classrooms, students develop

authority-dependence; they rehearse their futures as passive citizens and workers by learning that education means listening to teachers tell them what to do and what things mean” (p. 29).

As argued by Freire (1987, 1970/2000), the banking concept leads to rigid roles and responsibilities for the student and teacher as well as constantly developing the customs of a teacher-centered classroom. A problem-posing education leads to more-fluid roles and responsibilities where teacher-student and student-teacher share, trade, and co-construct roles and responsibilities. Shor (1987) agreed with Freire’s argument of the roles, and he described America’s students as falling into one of three groups when he said:

A segment of students is thrown into passive acceptance; another will not play by the rules and not rebel either but will somehow scheme how to ‘get by;’ a third group will sabotage the rules by overt aggression; a fourth group will buy into the system and actively support the status quo. (p. 124)

Groups are defined by their roles and their willingness to conform to traditional roles. Student resistance against dialogic pedagogical moves should be expected by the teacher (Shor, 1987).

Shor (1992) did provide an outline of the process that he used to provide a problem-posing pedagogy with his students. The outline is not a prescription; Shor argued that the worst thing a person could try to do is prescribe how a problem-posing pedagogy should work. Freire (1997) noted that problem-posing pedagogy should not be used a method to be copied, but instead, it is a process of learning, creating, and re-creating while working with students. One question that arises concerning problem-posing is: What does the teacher do about his or her prior knowledge, experience, and skills? Shor (1992) argued that, “Formal bodies of knowledge, standard usage, and the teacher’s academic background all belong in critical classrooms” (p. 35).

This leads to another question: If students are expected to be involved in the learning process, then does this mean that we have to re-learn discoveries that have already been made?

Shor (1987) did not believe in attempting to re-invent subjects such as biology or engineering each time that they are taught, but he did advocate for allowing students to challenge and debate past inventions or discoveries. Prior knowledge of the subjects, teacher expertise, and past experiences should be present within the class, but students within a problem-posing classroom should be allowed to challenge the curriculum, question the inclusion of items within the curriculum, interrogate items left out of the curriculum, and constantly problem-pose their community.

Keys to this format, Shor (1992) noted, are the changes between methods and activities.

Shor (1992) provided this format:

Pose a problem → Write on it → Literacy development → Peer group discussion/selection → Class dialogue → Pose a new problem → Write on it → Literacy development → Peer group discussion → Class dialogue → Integrate reading material → Writing/dialogue on the readings → interim evaluation/adjustment of the process → Dialogic lecture → Student response to lecture → Discuss solutions/actions → If possible, take action and reflect on it → Pose new problem → End-term evaluation. (p. 253)

Shor's format provided his interpretation of a way to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into the classroom. Since Freire's work focused on literacy, the lens used to view Freire's problem-posing was only literacy in this example.

This study expands Freire's theory into other content areas such as social studies and mathematics. The pedagogical process is still the same for literacy as others because the process

focuses so heavily on critical thinking and relevance. Since Freire's work has not been directly connected to middle level instructional practices, the rest of this chapter is dedicated to connecting effective middle level instructional practices with Freire's theoretical description of problem-posing pedagogy.

### **Middle Level Instructional Practices**

The majority of middle grades research over the past four decades focused on the needs of young adolescents and developmental characteristics while failing to address consistently the curriculum and pedagogy being promoted and practiced in middle grades (Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003). Dickinson (2001) even noted that the lack of pedagogical and curriculum focus by middle level educators could serve as the demise of what is known as the middle school movement. Such a spotlight has been placed on meeting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents, and the intellectual needs of middle grades students may have taken a backseat leaving major cause for concern (Jackson & Davis, 2000; SREB, 2002). The focus of middle grades reform must be on raising student achievement through engaging classroom instructional practices (NASSP, 2006). Middle level educators find it difficult to "balance the middle school as a good place for young adolescents to learn and grow with challenging and involving academic work in those good places" (Dickinson, 2001, p. 8).

Authors of a middle grades research on academic achievement called for research geared towards "instructional practices that are directly linked to higher student engagement and achievement" (Heller, et al., 2003). Davis (1996) called for middle school "missionaries" to review and research middle level theories and practices to provide evidence for use of middle level practices (p. 116). Jackson and Davis (2000) noted that they were unable to "identify a



single existing model that pulls together everything that we believe to be important in making decisions about instruction” (p. 68).

The lack of an identifiable model and hodgepodge of research on middle level instructional practices contributed to the need to explore a theory such as Freire’s that provides a viewpoint into engaging teaching and learning. The inclusion of this section on middle grades instructional practices was necessary to connect Freire’s theory with respected practices already established in the repertoire of the most outstanding middle grades educators.

### **Why Freire in Middle School?**

Over the past decade, public middle schools have faced increasing pressure to meet accountability standards with the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Evidence indicated middle level teachers believe NCLB has limited their ability to spend time on meaningful and relevant curriculum (Greene et al., 2008). In this same study of 162 teachers in 13 schools, middle level teachers noted that they struggled with balancing the implementation of test-taking strategies with providing relevant lessons that engaged young adolescents (Greene et al., 2008). Freire (1970/2000) emphasized the need for teachers to facilitate engaging learning experiences that relate to the learner and society in general. Based on the perceptions of middle level teachers, it was necessary to investigate Freire’s theoretical and philosophical beliefs on teaching and learning as a way to possibly improve the practice of providing young adolescents with relevant learning experiences.

My dissertation study examined the implementation of Freire’s (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy as an instructional philosophy for teachers serving in the middle grades. The use of problem-posing pedagogy should not be seen as just an export of Freire’s idea of problem-posing pedagogy as a teaching method. This study allowed three middle level educators the

opportunity to explore Freire's theory into practice (Macedo, 1997). Freire's (1970/2000) theoretical comparison of problem-posing pedagogy and the banking concept provided the field with an in-depth examination of teaching methods leading to a continuation of oppression with invigorating instructional practices. The foundation of Freire's (1970/2000) comparison of the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy emphasized this intense obligation to prioritize pedagogical and curricular needs over other interests. Along with calls for middle grades instructional practices to be researched, numerous educators with a background in critical pedagogy have called for more studies connecting Freire's theory with practice (Giroux, 2011; Rossatto, Allen, & Pruyun 2006; Shor, 1987; Wink 2005). This study sought to answer the calls for more classroom research focused on pedagogy from middle grades educators as well as researchers focused on critical pedagogy as espoused in the writings of Freire (1970/2000).

The middle grades research literature lacked specific acknowledgements of Freire's impact on instructional practices for young adolescents, but numerous best practices for young adolescents can be linked to Freire's problem-posing pedagogy. The link between best practices at the middle level and Freire's problem-posing pedagogy can be summed up in one term, relevance. Exemplary instructional practices are often connected to each other such as curriculum integration and the democratic classroom, but at the heart of instructional best practices is relevance (Beane, 2005b). Speaking directly to middle level educators, Sapon-Shevin (2005) asked what if middle level educators used Freire's goal of education as "raising students' consciousness of the oppressed so that they could transform their own lives and society?" (p. 522). If this were the goal of middle level education, how would the curriculum be organized and how would this goal change the pedagogical practices of teachers? Would this goal help students see relevance in the curriculum? In reviewing practices that contained an integrated, relevant

approach to curriculum, Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy provided a theoretical approach for integrated, relevant curriculum and a compelling argument for active learning.

Curriculum must provide students with the chance to think deeply and possibly question issues and concepts that affect themselves as well as the world around them (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003). A litany of questions follows this train of thought:

- How can middle level educators plan, organize, and facilitate relevant learning experiences that help students think deeply and question issues and concepts that affect themselves as well as the world around them?
- If this is the goal, then how does Freire's work with problem-posing pedagogy possibly help middle level educators think about their pedagogical practice?
- Who determines what is relevant to a young adolescent?
- Does curriculum drive pedagogy or does pedagogy drive curriculum?

At the foundation of critical pedagogy, leaders within the movement would want to start by asking the question, whose interests does curriculum serve? Educators must understand that "education is political," and students sitting in class may or may not have the same perspective as the teacher, author of the textbook, or the majority of the society or local community (Freire, 1970/2000).

Teachers must learn to teach perspective which, in turn, is the process of teaching critical thinking (Shor, 1987). When students learn perspective, they have a greater understanding of cultural norms, oppression, identity, race, gender, and ethnicity, and even teachers gain a greater appreciation for others especially people from other cultures, religion, gender, and race. In keeping with this line of thought, teachers need to reflect on how the concepts that they teach appear to others who have a differing perspective. These examples might include:

- How does the teaching and learning of the Trail of Tears appear to an American Indian?
- How does the teaching of the Transatlantic Slave Trade appear to an African-American?
- How does the teaching and learning of immigration appear to a Hispanic immigrant student?

Reflecting on these types of questions help teachers and students think through perspective.

Teachers should also push limits by questioning student understanding and perspective on other topics that would help them think critically about their world. For example, students should question topics such as:

- Who writes the history books?
- Is it written from the perspective of an African-American?
- Is it written from the perspective of an American Indian living on a reservation?
- Is it written based on the perspective of a high school illegal immigrant living in Georgia knowing that he or she has no hope to attend one of Georgia's institutions of higher education?
- Is the history book written from the perspective of a wealthy individual or a poor child from a ghetto?

Apple (1979) questioned curriculum choices when he stated, "In whose interest is certain knowledge being taught in our educational institutions?" (pp. 15-16). Instead of helping students critically think about problems, high-stakes testing and a narrowing of the curriculum to specifically math and reading have been the focus of America's public schools (Lounsbury, 2009; Spring, 2010). Educators cannot allow the standards-based movement or the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* to narrow the curriculum to basic facts, memorization, and recall (Brown, 2005). Instead, teachers need to look for ways to incorporate critical thinking through

questioning and probing while allowing students to have a voice within the classroom (Beane, 2005b; Gordon, 1998).

After describing his ideal classroom environment, Beane (2005b) described the organization of the classroom as an essential component, but he advocated that the relevance of the curriculum must be at the heart of the classroom experience.

Organizing centers are significant problems or issues that connect the school curriculum with the larger world. The organizing centers serve as a context for unifying knowledge. Knowledge, in turn, is developed as it is instrumentally applied to exploring the organizing centers. So organized, the curriculum and the knowledge it engages are more accessible and meaningful for young people and thus more likely to help them expand their understanding of themselves and their world. (Beane, 2005b, p. 396)

Research focused on learning agrees with Beane's thought that people learn by organizing their thoughts around a problem or issue (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Totten and Pedersen (1997) advocated for learning to have a "sense of social and personal relevance for the student," and they noted that this type of relevance is a "key tenet of middle-level education" (p. 1). Beane (1990) believed that the curriculum of middle grades should "center on themes that enlighten the search for self and social meaning" (p. 20) while Love (2011) posited that, "A classroom space that is isolated physically is one that becomes isolated intellectually" (p. 441). Love's intention was two-fold. He wanted to draw attention to the fact that teachers much expand the classroom and take students outside into the environment. Love also wanted teachers to think about the relevance of their curriculum and content to students as well as the reality of the real world.

The identified best practices of middle level educators do not include the promotion and sustained efforts of some to make classrooms look like worksheet factories. Instead, the best

practices involve active and engaged students; committed, thoughtful, and passionate educators; and classrooms designed to allow students to participate in the messy process of learning how to live in a democratic society. The identified best practices included integrated curriculum, democratic classrooms, and service-learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2010). The remainder of the middle grades instructional practices section provides a review of three identified best practices connected to Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy. These three practices include an integrated curriculum, service-learning, and democratic classrooms.

### **Integrated Curriculum**

Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dewey (1900, 1902, 1916) and Kilpatrick (1918, 1925) advocated for teachers to integrate curriculum rather than teach using the separated subject model (Vars, 1991). This theoretical push by Dewey (1900, 1902, 1916) and Kilpatrick (1925) provided a theoretical foundation for the implementation of curriculum integration, but the lack of practical, ground-level work with integrating curriculum served as a barrier for middle grades implementation (Dickinson, 2001). The middle school movement lacked a distinguishing curriculum until Beane (1990) unveiled his work with integrated curriculum (Dickinson, 2001; Lounsbury, 1998). As soon as Beane (1990) outlined his work using themes and questions to organize curriculum rather than by subject areas, others who had been studying and practicing the same work published their experience (Alexander, Carr, & McAvoy 2006; Dickinson, 1993; Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1994, 1997; Springer, 1994, 2006).

It was not until Beane (1990, 1997) promoted curriculum integration as a best practice for middle grades instruction that curriculum integration gained noticeable traction within the field (Dickinson, 2001). Curriculum integration soon became a popular buzz word and encouraged but not an entrenched practice in middle grades (Dickinson, 2001). Promotion of the practice

continues to be much easier than the implementation of the practice (Beane, 2005a; Vansant, 2011). The sustainability of this type of practice is also difficult since most resources and curriculum guides are organized by the separated subject design (Beane, 1997a).

Integrated curriculum, or curriculum integration, is defined by Beane (1997a) as a curriculum design that promotes creating connections between all content areas as well as the reality of society. Beane (1997a) noted that curriculum must be organized around problems and issues significant to the community and young adolescents without paying attention to boundaries created by specific subject areas.

Pate (2001) advocated for curriculum to be developed around themes culled from student interest. The examples provided by Pate (2001) included environmental problems, racial issues, societal needs, and personal concerns. Beane (1997a) argued for a change away from subject-centered curriculum to a focus on social issues using themes or questions to drive teaching and learning. Beane's reasons for the shift to a focus on social issues were numerous. He believed that subject-centered curriculum was abstract and lacked the relevance to engage young adolescents. Also, Beane (1997a) declared that using a curriculum focused on social issues would help young adolescents start to understand and grasp the issues facing society. He also said the switch would continue to help young adolescents learn how to live in a democratic society.

Stevenson and Carr (1993) called for middle grades educators to integrate curriculum based on the simple fact that if done correctly then students will be asked to think, think, and think. Muth and Alvermann (1999) wedded relevance and integrated curriculum stating "The importance of taking young adolescents' concerns and interests into account is an underlying principle of the approach to integrated curriculum (p. 81). Pate (2001) noted that democracy is at

the “heart of curriculum integration,” and schools should embrace the teacher moving from the all knowing knowledge-holder to the facilitator of learning (p. 81).

Kincheloe (2004) noted that separate subject curriculum, often written by district or state supervisors, usually “demands the simple transference of a body of established facts” which lends itself to a continuation of the status quo (p. 9). By using this type of curriculum, Kincheloe argued that teachers are being asked to teach “curriculum that is inflexible, based on the status quo, unquestioning in its approach, fact-based, and teacher-centered” (p. 9). Dickinson (2001) noted that the textbook driven separate-subject curriculum required more memorization and less thinking than an integrated curriculum approach. During curriculum integration, Pate (2001) advocated that the role of the teacher changes from the “keeper and dispenser of knowledge,” to “the seeker and co-learner of knowledge” (p. 81). Pate’s terminology along with Beane’s (2005a) description of the separate-subject curriculum sounded eerily similar to Freire’s banking concept:

The separate-subject curriculum also follows the classical tradition that defines the teacher as master and the student as novice or apprentice. The teacher is expected to completely control the setting and to evaluate and rank the student. In the separate-subject approach, status depends not only on one’s personal acquisition of knowledge, but also on whether it is more or less than that of others. Moreover, decisions about what knowledge is to be disseminated are made almost entirely apart from the classrooms.

(Beane, 2005a, p. 81)

A fair number of middle level educators published descriptions of the practice of integrating curriculum, but the field lacked a variety of studies on the topic of integrated curriculum.

Even when completing an extensive review of literature on middle grades instructional practices, SREB (2005) noted that little research had been conducted on specific instructional



practices in the middle grades. Springer (in press) also described the difficulty with researching a specific practice such as curriculum integration because of all of the other factors that may play into the results of the research. The limited research conducted on curriculum integration is frustrating for middle grades advocates, but the research focused on the practice has shown positive results starting with the Eight-Year Study (Springer, in press).

Starting in the early 1930s, researchers matched 1475 graduates from 30 experimental high schools and traditional high schools comparing students with the opportunity to learn through an integrated, experiential curriculum compared to the separate-subject, traditional curriculum (Aiken, 1943). This study, eloquently named the Eight-Year Study, provided an important comparison between students exposed to traditional and integrated curriculum (Lipka et al., 1998). Researchers found the graduates of the school with integrated curriculum were more successful than the students simply exposed to the traditional curriculum methods (Lipka et al., 1998). Not only were the graduates more successful academically, but the researchers also noted that graduates from schools with practices such as curriculum integration were more socially adept (Lipka et al., 1998).

Another study of interest with middle school students found that three-fourths of male students and over 50 percent of female students responded favorably to integrated curriculum in an open-ended survey (Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1994). A research study focusing on the integration of science and language arts curriculum found that a majority of sixth graders outperformed students in classes with separate subjects (Levitan, 1991). Springer (in press) claimed historical events such as World War II and the launch of Sputnik slowed momentum for curriculum integration, but shifts in accountability have also played a role in the dwindling

practice of integrating curriculum. For example, Sputnik created a push for more separate subject science and mathematics courses, thus slowing the momentum for an integrated curriculum push.

Powell and Skoog (2000) worked with 29 teachers of mathematics and science over the course of a year examining integrated curriculum. The in-depth project consisted of three events including a one-day orientation meeting in the spring of 1997, a two-week intensive workshop in the summer of 1997, and a two day retreat in the fall of 1997. Teachers were asked to create integrated curriculum units and implement the units into the classroom during the school year. In this particular study, Powell and Skoog (2000) did not limit the participants simply to middle-level educators as had been done in an earlier study of integrated curriculum by Powell, Skoog, Troutman, and Jones (1997).

Powell and Skoog (2000) called for teachers to have a deep understanding of being domain dependent or being able to understand “where multiple domains of knowledge converge upon broader themes or topics” (p. 24). It was also noted in the study that state curriculum mandates and accountability measures in many cases were insurmountable for teachers to move past because of the inflexibly accountability measures that politicians put in front of teachers. Powell and Skoog (2000) were also disappointed that the participants in the study did not have a greater understanding of the need for democratic teaching, and even more disheartening, almost all participants noted the importance of academic achievement over learning how to live as a democratic citizen. The study brought to life the difficulty of managing the political pressure of teaching to the test. One participant even argued that implementing a philosophical shift such as integrative curriculum required an entire school change and that it was impossible for teachers to individually implement because of the political pressure.

Sage, Krynock, and Robb (2000) organized a study examining the work of 2 teachers implementing a problem-based learning unit with 55 students for 4 weeks. Problem-based learning (PBL) is teaching and learning arranged around authentic problems that are student-centered and relevant to the learner (Torp & Sage, 1998). PBL is a strategy for teachers to use in hopes of creating “a learning environment in which students are active learners and teachers are coaches of student thinking and inquiry, facilitating deeper levels of understanding” (Sage et al., p. 151). This study developed from the frustration of two middle level teachers after they noticed the lack of engagement with their students.

Sage et al. (2000) reported the conclusions of the study as four different tensions because anyone implementing PBL will face similar tensions. One of the tensions was the aspect of standardized testing and the lack of curriculum breadth covered when PBL is implemented. Parents complained that their perspective was that students in the PBL class did not cover the necessary material for the standardized test. Similar tensions have been noted for educators looking to implement service-learning as well as others looking to transform a classroom from the traditional to include more democratic policies and procedures (Beane, 1997a, 2005a; Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland & Kerrigan, 1998)

For an example of curriculum integration in practice, Kuntz (2005) described a multi-age, student-centered team from Shelburne Village in Vermont called Alpha. The team was comprised of students from a variety of age ranges including 9 to 14. Students and teachers spent a number of years together to build long-term positive relationships. Teachers and students worked together to build the curriculum, ask questions about the content, and explore new ways of teaching and learning. When teachers on the Alpha team were asked about their students’ development, the teachers responded that they look at content through practicality. For example,

teachers believe that they teach social studies to help students learn how to be productive citizens. The teachers communicate this reasoning to the students. Teachers stated that they teach math so that students are able to pay taxes and understand how math plays into financial transactions. Alpha teachers also stated the importance of teaching reading, writing, and spelling is so that students are able to communicate with others. This practical and thoughtful approach has been extremely successful with Alpha students performing equal or above their peers in each content area.

Stories like the Alpha team are helpful, but often times, these explanations of practice lack the quantifiable statistics desired by others. Others have also published this type of work (Alexander, Carr, & McAvoy 2006; Beane 1997a, 2005a; Brazee & Capelluti, 1995; Pate, et al., 1997; Springer 1994, 2006; Stevenson & Carr, 1993; Sui-Runyan & Faircloth, 1995). In each of these publications, the authors describe the need for a more student-centered classroom through an integrated curriculum, but in every case, the authors do not provide overwhelming quantitative research data often desired by teacher educators, school administrators, teachers, policymakers, and politicians. Pate (2001) argued that the most appropriate way to check for a responsive, relevant, and engaging curriculum was not to look at a specific piece of data, but instead, review stories from practicing teachers and students within classrooms where the theory is being practiced.

### **Service-Learning**

Connecting academic content to the community has often been discussed as a way to increase relevance with the classroom and to make learning meaningful (NMSA, 2010). The authors of *Turning Points 2000* “advocate integrating community-based learning opportunities firmly within the curriculum” by providing students with chances to participate in service-

learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 211). Service-learning has been defined as an instructional method that helps students and teachers connect academic coursework with civic responsibility, personal development, and community issues (Pate, 2005; Schukar, 1997). The Corporation for National and Community Service defines service-learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (n.d.).

The curriculum of a public school should be connected to the community (Beane, 2005a; Bernard, 1993; Kinsley, 1992). Service-learning expands the classroom past the four walls of the school building and into the community (Pate, 2005; Schine, 1997). Billig (2010) shared that projects could include “reducing childhood obesity, developing museum displays, repairing playgrounds, tutoring, building nature trails, restoring cemeteries, teaching computer skills to senior citizens, addressing transportation policies, and other activities designed to meet community needs and, in fact, change the world” (para. 3). Stewart (2010) called for service-learning to be inserted in the written curriculum. Middle school students should be active problem-solvers who serve their community rather than operating as passive members who just want to be served (Fertman, White, & White, 1996). Billig (2000) noted that service-learning marries academic content with real-world experiences, emphasizes the importance of civic responsibility, and meets the need of the students and the community.

The authors of *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* also noted the importance of making service into an academic learning project rather than just fluff (NASSP, 2006). Fluff projects would be considered projects or tasks that have no academic merit or significance to students. For example, young adolescents working together with their teacher and other peers to dig holes for a garden could be considered a strong service-learning project with adequate planning, but the task

of digging holes for a garden could also be considered fluff. First, students need to believe that the project meets a need and contributes to society and the community. Also, the teacher needs to provide instruction regarding the academic content connected to the science of the garden. Then, students need to plan the garden, provide proper nutrition, till the soil, choose suitable plants, and provide directions on sustaining the project. Conversely, if the teacher asks students to dig the holes and plant the garden without any of this instruction and planning, then the project is just a simple task for students. The planning and instruction that accompany a service-learning project are critical to the overall success of the project.

Dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dewey (1916) saw school and community being interwoven, believing that educators should look beyond the walls of the school building. Dewey (1916) advocated for teachers to look into the community as a way to help students learn the necessary skills to advance personally as well as improve society in general. Even as researchers revisited the findings of the Eight-Year Study, they implored middle grades educators to look for ways to help students connect their learning to the community through different types of projects including service-learning (Lipka et al., 1998). Ruebel (2001) noted the academic focus on service-learning is critical, but the community connection and responsibility may be even more critical. If educators believe the purpose of America's public schools is to help mold and shape students capable of thriving in a democratic society, then the community connection and responsibility should be viewed as equal to academic achievement. To this end, service-learning projects provide educators with an opportunity to continue to build academic knowledge and skills while also helping students understand the value of contributing to their community.

Along with practitioners and theorists promoting service-learning alike, the research body focusing on service-learning in K-12 schools continues to grow (Akujobi & Simmons,

1997; Billig, 2004; Bradley, 2005; Furco, 2002; Kahne, 2005; Klute & Billig, 2002; Scales, 1999; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005; Schine, 1997; Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, & Rovner, 1998). Research has shown positive correlations between students' ability to gain academic knowledge and skills with the use of service-learning (Cohen & Kinsley, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2002). Research has also shown that students participating in service-learning projects are connected more to the community than students not participating in service-learning (Billig, 2003; Bradley, 2005). Billig (2010) noted that service-learning projects provide educators with a way to provide character education to young adolescents.

Similar to curriculum integration, the implementation of service-learning has been a stumbling block for practitioners (Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland, & Kerrigan, 1996). Billig (2010) noted difficulty in promoting service-learning due to the variety of different activities that teachers can do with students. Billig (2010) argued that the variety of activities in some ways has negatively impacted the implementation of service-learning because educators can be overwhelmed during the implementation phase. Another difficulty with implementation is the planning required in organizing and developing a service-learning project (Schukar, 1997). The effort required in planning a service-learning project is often overwhelming for teachers. The current state of public education with federal accountability measures focused on student achievement in mathematics and reading makes it difficult for teachers to provide time for service-learning projects (Noddings, 2007). The accountability push creates an atmosphere where teachers do not feel comfortable with implementing a strategy such as service-learning.

The characteristics of young adolescents and the properties of service-learning are a perfect match (Arth, 1992). Schukar (1997) noted the similarities between the middle school philosophy and the connection to service-learning. The similarities include a desire to provide

students with relevant curriculum as well as the need for teachers to build quality relationships with students. Beane (2005a) described service-learning projects as a way to teach young adolescents the importance of being active and engaged in a democratic society.

In a review of best practices from high-performing middle schools, Wilcox and Angelis (2009) found that contributing to community through the promotion of civic responsibility and community service was a factor in distinguishing high-performing schools. In a 2008 study, 92% of principals where service-learning is practiced noted a positive increase in civic participation (Billig & Weah, 2008). Even with the noted positive correlation between service-learning and academic performance, service-learning is practiced at less than 30% of K-12 schools in the United States (Spring, Grimm, & Dietz, 2008). The difficulty with the implementation process has been the reason given for the low percentage of schools practicing service-learning (Billig, 2010). Furco and Root (2010) called for more experimental research to be conducted in an effort to continue to promote the use of service-learning as an instructional method. With the call for more research, Furco and Root (2010) still noted that close to 70 studies conducted on service-learning have provided evidence that service-learning improved academic achievement; improved student engagement; enhanced civic responsibility and citizenship; and enhanced personal and social skills.

### **Democratic Classrooms**

Differing from integrated curriculum and service-learning, Freire directly discussed that the incorporation of democracy into the classroom was essential (Shor, 1987) and that, “Any educational practice based on standardization, on what is laid down to advance, on routines in which everything is pre-determined, is bureaucratizing and anti-democratic” (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 41). Shor (1987) also noted that a Freirean classroom is democratic and participatory.



Shor stated that in a Freirean classroom, “students have equal speaking rights in the dialogue as well as the right to negotiate the curriculum. They are asked to co-develop and evaluate the curriculum” (1987a, 33). Beane (1990, 1997a, 2005a) and Springer (1994, 2006) agree with Shor (1987) that students should have this opportunity. Beane (2006) noted that teaching democratically and integrating curriculum is “not just a program or an approach or a method, it is a philosophy—about the purpose of schools, about teaching and learning, and about our obligations to young people” (p. xi)

Lounsbury (1998) pushed that the mission of the middle schools must meet “the larger, long-term goals of a democratically-oriented, truly integrated curriculum in which students are active participants” (p. 12). According to Beane (2005a), the most important purpose for schools is to “help students learn the democratic way of living” (p. 1). Lounsbury and Beane’s use of the term democratic should not be confused with the Democratic Party or some type of government entity. Instead, Beane (2005a) focused the term in a broader sense which is for students to understand that all people have a right to human dignity and also each person has a responsibility to “care about the common good and the dignity and welfare of others” (p. 9).

One could look at the label of a *democratic classroom* thinking that the label was referring to the practice of simply allowing students to have an opportunity to vote within the classroom on certain issues. Beane (1997a, 2005a) viewed democracy as a process for conducting business within the classroom, but he also believed that people fully living democratically care about the common good and the welfare of others. Freire (1993) stated that different people view democracy different depending on individual perspectives and experiences, and Freire agreed with Beane (1997a, 2005a) and Lounsbury (1998) that the process of

democracy must be centered on the common good and as Freire put it “achieving equality of social justice for all peoples” (Freire, 1993, p. xi).

Wade (1995) and Beane (1997, 2005a) agreed that the classroom should resemble reality, and in a democratic world, students should learn to think and to make decisions within their educational experiences. Beane (1990) pointed out that empowering student voice did not mean that teachers should be silent, but he wanted to make sure that teachers were not “the persistently dominating source of power and authority over young people” (p. 19). Within this same vein, Beane (1990) wanted the classroom to be a safe place where students could challenge information or facts brought into the classroom. His desire was that the classroom would be a place “open to critical analysis rather than ...passive assimilation” (Beane, 1990, p. 19).

Borrowing from the results of the Eight-Year Study, middle grade advocates argued that the experimental schools, which performed at a higher level than the traditional schools, organized the curriculum around real-world issues and open-ended problems (Lipka et. al, 1998) By using this type of problem-centered curriculum, researchers found that the teachers and students within the experimental schools had a large amount of freedom to collaborative plan and organize productive learning activities (Lipka et al., 1998). Vars (1998) noted that “Since the recommendations coming out of the Eight-Year Study stress student involvement and democratic processes, their implementation virtually guarantees improvement in measures such as student satisfaction, attendance, and reduction in discipline referrals” (p. 146).

Due to the current environment of high-stakes testing, the number of educators using democratic structure and policies within the classroom continues to decrease (McDaniel, Necochea, Rios, Stowell, & Kritzer, 2001). Wade (1995) noted that teachers are expected to teach the importance of democratic ideals, but often, teachers are not expected or encouraged to

help provide students opportunities to practice democracy. Schlechty (2011) argued that the pressure of test scores and accountability measures has shifted the focus away from engagement with the curriculum and to ritual compliance full of test-taking strategies and memorization techniques.

In the same way that Pate (2001) described the need for educators to read and to review the work of other practitioners attempting to integrate curriculum, the practices and results of democratic classrooms are often difficult to see in quantitative statistics. For this reason, it was critical to review the experiences of a middle level educator that has worked extensively with democratic classrooms. Mark Springer (1994, 2006) is a distinguished practitioner of democratic classrooms that incorporate integrated curriculum in middle schools over the past 30 years. Springer's (1994, 2006) work as a middle school teacher at Radnor Middle School in Wayne, Pennsylvania provided a view into the intersection between theory and practice. Springer (2006) argued that "fragmented schedules based on separate subject classrooms; classrooms with too many students; standards that emphasize covering far too much material in each class; scripted lesson plans; standardized tests designed to hold students, teachers, and administrators accountable for promoting memorization" does not seem to be the best way to help young adolescents become successful citizens (Springer, 2006, p. 1). Instead, Springer (2006) noted that students in a democratic society need higher-level thinking skills from "analysis, reflection, self-assessment, and synthesis, along with creativity" rather than just rote memorization skills (p. 2).

Springer (1994, 2006) grounded his work in Beane's (1997a) belief that an integrated curriculum is the most appropriate approach to teaching young adolescents, but after reading Beane's (1997a) argument that the integrative approach can be even more powerful through a democratic lens, Springer (2006) looked for ways to incorporate more democracy in his

classrooms. Springer went on to say “the true reality of curriculum integration and democratic learning exists when students purposefully experience democracy in the classroom. All the rest is rhetoric” (2006, p. 19).

### **Closing: Looking Beyond Traditional Ways of Teaching and Learning**

Lounsbury (2009) argued that progressive teaching practices are not often fully implemented over established traditional practices because “few educators have ever experienced schooling except in those old ways” (p. 33). Integrated curriculum, service-learning, and democratic classrooms are the type of progressive middle level instructional practices advocated by Lounsbury (2009) and the Association for Middle Level Education, formerly known as the National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2010).

Noddings (2007) noted that teachers also fear trying new ideas or innovative practices because of the administrative push for high test scores on standardized tests. This chapter provided an appraisal of the current research on the practices of integrated curriculum, service-learning, and democratic classrooms. This review of literature also included an examination of Freire’s theoretical debate that learning takes place through active dialogue, constant questioning, and continuous reflection. The review provided a glimpse into the why and how of progressive instructional practice with the hope that the study will provide the field with information on the process of looking beyond traditional ways of teaching and learning.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### **Statement of Purpose**

Many of America's public school students view schoolwork as disconnected and irrelevant to their lives (NASSP, 2011). Schoolwork's lack of relevance has historically been a topic of discussion for educators (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012; Jacobs, 2010). This study evolved from discussions about how middle level educators could create classroom cultures where students thought critically about relevant problems within society. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of middle grades teachers as they implemented Freire's theory of problem-posing pedagogy as a way to incorporate relevance and critical thinking. Additionally, this study explored the pressure associated with the promotion of pedagogical practices aimed at higher-order thinking and relevance in an era of high-stakes testing and accountability measures. In an effort to achieve these purposes, three questions guided the study. The questions included:

- 1) What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice?
- 2) What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?
- 3) What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in middle school classrooms?

## **Research Design and Rationale**

The research design was a qualitative-focused, collaborative action research study. The study was organized in a way for the researcher and participants, a teacher research group, to collaborate about Freire's problem-posing pedagogy, to implement the theory into practice, and to investigate the participants' perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy. Gordon (2008) described this process of an outside researcher entering a school and working with teachers to research and to learn more about a particular issue as collaborative action research. Gordon argued that "collaborative action research, when it works as intended, can empower educators, transform school cultures, and most importantly, dramatically improve student learning" (2008, p. 1). The teacher research group was comprised of three middle level teachers and the researcher.

Collaborative action research is a form of action research. Lewin (1946) defined action research as the process of moving from theoretical to practical. Action research provided a framework for conducting a study that would impact practice while investigating theory through discussion, reflection, and action (Creswell, 2005). Wythe (1991) defined action research as a form of research examining application and an opportunity for the researcher to serve as a facilitator in helping participants to partake actively in the search for understanding of a theory or concept. In connecting his work with Freire, Wythe argued that research and action must be closely linked and connected in the same way that Freire (1970/2000) believed in the association between theory and practice. At the heart of action research is "full collaboration between the researcher and participants in posing the questions to be pursued and in gathering data to execute them. It entails a cycle of research, reflection, and action" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 7).

The teacher research group discussions served as opportunities for the group collectively to make meaning about the readings and discussion. Lewis (1995) argued that teacher research group interviews and discussions allow participants to share their thoughts and views within the group as well as to interact with group members about their thoughts and viewpoints. An underlying assumption of teacher research centers on the belief that teaching is a process where practice must continuously be questioned and researched (Cole & Knowles, 2000).

The researcher's role did not involve participation in the study as a teacher, but instead, the researcher conducted interviews, organized readings, and facilitated discussions among the teacher research group. A difficult part in designing this study was the decision of what role the researcher should take within the study. The role of the researcher was contextual and based on a number of factors such as the preference of the researcher and the subject of the research (Cargan, 2007). Mackewn (2008) described the researcher as a facilitator, but she noted that the role of facilitator varies depending on the degree to which the research takes on the role of participant. In the discussion of facilitating a research study, Mackewn noted the skills and work of a facilitator can be contradictory and paradoxical. Mackewn (2008) stated:

Sometimes the facilitators need to question, inquire and consult, while at other times they need to direct. Sometimes facilitators need to listen; other times they need to tell people what to do. Sometimes they need to nurture and support the people in the group or community; other times they need to challenge. Sometimes facilitators need to provide structure and time boundaries; at other times they need to flex structure and time boundaries. (p. 616)

This study demanded a facilitator to lead due to a number of factors including: the theoretical nature of the study; the difficulty of implementing a problem-posing pedagogy; and the demanding context of a middle school classroom.

## **Context**

A significant factor in the overall success of the study was finding a school system, an individual school, and administrative team that would allow teachers to take chances within their classroom. The administrative team and school need to be willing to allow a group of teachers to implement Freire's progressive thoughts on teaching and learning into the classrooms. One aspect in the school selection was the researcher's desire to work with a school that was not under the burden of failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress for a number of years under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (20 U.S.C. § 6319, 2008). In researching potential sites to conduct the study, Morris Middle School in the Jarrard County School District developed as a potential site. After meeting with district and school officials, the researcher chose this school as the context for the study. Even though the researcher served as a middle school principal at the time of the study, the researcher chose to conduct the study at a different middle school other than the one where he was serving.

Gaining entry into Morris Middle School was a critical point within the study. The researcher met with the principal of Morris Middle School on two separate occasions to discuss the study and the potential of Morris Middle School as the research site. After the second meeting with the principal, the researcher sent a draft e-mail message designed to recruit participants and asked the principal to revise the draft if necessary and then send the recruiting e-mail to her faculty. This recruiting email included an indication from the principal that she fully supported the study and would support study participants in their efforts to implement Freire's theories in their classrooms. Potential participants answered the e-mail from the principal and



contacted the researcher directly. The researcher then met with participants individually to provide an overview of the study and to ask about the willingness of the teacher to commit to the study.

All three of the participants in this study teach at Morris Middle School in Northeast Georgia. The public school serves students in grades 6 through 8 and is located outside of a city with a population of just over 100,000 people. Morris Middle School is one of two middle schools in Jarrard County. The two middle schools feed into different high schools. The overall student population of the Jarrard County School System is slightly under 6500 students. The racial demographics of the school district mirror the demographics at Morris Middle School. The average teacher in Jarrard County has over 15 years of experience and earns over \$55,000 per year. The majority of all faculty members have advanced degrees. Within the system, there is not a great deal of racial diversity within the teaching ranks in Jarrard County. For example, out of 419 teachers within the district, only 6 are minority with 4 being black, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Asian. The school district is extremely high performing, and all nine schools within the district have comparable test scores and accomplishments. The school district is divided into different attendance zones. The zones determine the school that students will attend within the Jarrard County School District.

The mission of Morris Middle School is centered on educating the whole child while providing a safe learning environment. The school could be considered a suburban school. However, with the agricultural history of the county where the school is located, many people in the area would label the school as rural. Approximately 800 students attend the school with around 22% of the students on free and reduced lunch. The majority of the students in the school come from wealthy households with the median house in the county costing around \$320,000.

The school is approximately 80% white, 10% Hispanic, 5% black, and 5% Asian. Almost 10% of the student population is identified as special education. School attendance is extremely high, with less than 3% of the student body missing over 10 days annually. Morris Middle School has been open since 1997 and was built to accommodate the growth in one section of Jarrard County

Administrator and teacher turnover has not been an issue at the school. For example, the current principal is in her second year as the school’s instructional leader, and she is just the second principal to serve at the school. Also, a number of teachers currently teaching at Morris Middle School have been teaching at the school since its opening. The faculty averages 11 years of service which is below the system average of over 15 years. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 provide comparisons of the demographic information between the Jarrard County School District and Morris Middle School.

Table 3.1

*School and District Student Population Demographics*

|                                 | Jarrard District | Morris Middle School |
|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Total Student Enrollment        | 6,437            | 803                  |
| Student Demographic Percentages |                  |                      |
| White                           | 84%              | 80%                  |
| Black                           | 5%               | 5%                   |
| Hispanic                        | 6%               | 10%                  |
| Asian                           | 3%               | 5%                   |
| Multiracial                     | 2%               | <1%                  |

| Student by Other Subgroups      |     |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Students with Disabilities      | 9%  | 11% |
| Limited English Proficient      | 3%  | 6%  |
| Eligible for Free/Reduced Meals | 22% | 22% |
| Migrant                         | 0%  | 0%  |

Table 3.2

*School and District Certified Teacher Demographics*

|  | Jarrard District | Morris Middle School |
|--|------------------|----------------------|
| Total Number of Certified Teachers             | 419              | 46                   |
| Average Number of Years of Teaching Experience | 15.67            | 11.50                |
| Certification Level                            |                  |                      |
| T-4 Bachelor's Degree                          | 26.9%            | 26.1%                |
| T-5 Master's Degree                            | 44.9%            | 52.2%                |
| T-6 Specialist's Degree                        | 26.8%            | 21.7%                |
| T-7 Doctoral Degree                            | 1.4%             | 0%                   |

Morris Middle School, as well as the entire Jarrard School District, carries a strong reputation in the community, as well as throughout the Northeast Georgia area. During a recent survey conducted by the district, 85% of parents of students at Morris Middle School rated the school as exemplary. The school is known as high-performing and has been recognized with numerous distinctions and awards from the Georgia Department of Education. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Morris Middle School has made Adequate Yearly Progress

(AYP) each year of the existence of the Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). Each of the participants described their experiences in the school as positive. Ms. Owens, one of the three participants, commented:

I love this place. Our students are excellent and top-notch. There are definitely challenges and days that test my patience, but in the overall scheme of things, this place is almost as good as it gets. This is the only place that I have ever taught, but I can honestly say that this is where I want to teach and stay. Morris Middle School is a place where teachers love to teach, students love to learn, and parents feel comfortable with sending their students. I'm proud to be a member of this staff.

Each participant depicted a school focused on student learning and supporting student needs. All three participants described the school administration of Morris Middle School as encouraging.

Critical to the study was the willingness of the school administration to provide teachers with the autonomy to be able to take chances, pedagogically, within the classroom. Morris Middle School's administration provided their teachers with this autonomy, and the three participants took advantage of this opportunity by incorporating a new approach into their classrooms. The school climate and culture within Morris Middle School was one where teachers felt supported in taking risks with their instruction. Oja and Smulyan (1989) noted that a foundational piece of collaborative action research studies is a school climate that allows teachers to experiment within the classroom. Morris Middle School within the Jarrard County School District provided this context.

### **Data Sources**

This study was not a program evaluation to measure the effectiveness of a specific program; instead, this was a study geared at gaining an understanding of a philosophy and the

possibilities of changing paradigms, believing in a different way of engaging students, and changing the view of the role of the teacher and student. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of middle level teachers as they implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in an effort to incorporate increased relevance and critical thinking within the classroom.

The importance of strategic selection of data sources, or purposeful sampling, was vital to conducting a study that reached the depth needed to answer the research questions. Patton (2002) highlighted the importance of purposeful sampling when he stated, "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (p. 230). The teachers chosen for the study ultimately provided the quality, as well as depth of the study, and their selection was critical. The decision to select participants from only one school was one of convenience as well as a strategy because participants were able to collaborate more frequently. One difficulty with investigating a different philosophy is the participant's willingness to question their practices, reflect on their beliefs, take action, and then reflect on the new action. The participants and their willingness to be open can have a significant impact on the outcomes of the study.

The participant selection process started by meeting with the principal of Morris Middle School and discussing the possibility of working with a few teachers on staff in an effort to research Freire's problem-posing pedagogy. The researcher provided the principal with an overview of Freire's theory and examples of the types of classroom instruction that may result from the participants' work with the theory. Appendix A provides the outline for the meeting with the principal of Morris Middle School. After two meetings to discuss the project, the

principal sent a forwarded e-mail from the researcher to all faculty members asking for possible teachers that would be interested in participating in the study. Appendix B provides the e-mail forwarded from the principal to the teachers at Morris Middle School.

Concurrently, the researcher contacted the Assistant Superintendent of the Jarrard County School District to gain permission to move forward with the study. Gaining the support of the school administration was an essential component in the process of site selection. Five teachers responded to the e-mail, and the researcher visited Morris Middle School to meet with each teacher, individually. During the individual teacher meetings, the researcher explained the study and provided an opportunity for each potential participant to ask questions. Appendix C provides the first e-mail from the researcher to the participants. The e-mail was provided to show the communication from the researcher to the participants and also to show how group meetings and individual interviews would be organized.

At the conclusion of these individual meetings, three teachers agreed to participate in the study. It was critical in the participant selection process to make sure that the teachers who agreed to participate in the study were willing to read all of the different documents, invest in the participant discussions, work with the other participants to learn more about problem-posing pedagogy, and take the time to fully devote themselves to exploring problem-posing pedagogy in their classrooms. Appendix D provides a list of participant readings. Table 3.3 provides a profile of the participants by using the pseudonyms to identify each participant, school, and teaching background information.

Table 3.3

*Profile of Participants*

|   | Ms. Carter   | Ms. Bowen  | Ms. Owens  |
|---|--|--|--|
| School                                    | Morris Middle School                                   | Morris Middle School   | Morris Middle School   |
| Grade                                     | 6 <sup>th</sup>  | 6 <sup>th</sup>  | 6 <sup>th</sup>  |
| Content Area(s)                           | Mathematics  | Mathematics  | Social Studies   |
| Years of Teaching Experience              | 11 years   | 5 years  | 3 years  |
| Years at Morris Middle                    | 3 years  | 5 years  | 3 years  |
| Highest Advanced Education Degrees Earned | Education Specialist Degree in Middle School Education | Currently finishing her Master's Degree in Mathematics Education | Currently finishing her Master's Degree in Middle School Education |

**Data Collection Methods**

The data collection aspect of this study was multi-faceted. Marshall and Rossman (2006) noted that qualitative researchers usually have four ways of collecting data: observing, analyzing documents, interviewing, and participating. Data were collected in various ways including interviews, participant discussions, and document analysis. The process of collecting and

analyzing data in tandem allowed the researcher to continue to refine interview questions and discussion topics as the study progressed

Data collection took place from late February, 2011 through October, 2011. Data collection was approved by the Assistant Superintendent of Schools of the Jarrard County School District, the principal of Morris Middle School, and the Institutional Review Board of the University of Georgia.

The researcher interviewed each participant at the beginning of the study and at end of the study. The format of the interviews was semi-structured. Appendix E and Appendix F provide a list of questions posed in the initial and final interviews, respectively. The questions for both interviews were open-ended to allow participants to share and to elaborate on their perceptions and beliefs about problem-posing as a theory implemented into practice. Both interviews with all three participants were audio-recorded and transcribed. The researcher took field notes during every interview and compiled the information to aid in the analysis of data. Table 3.4 provides an overview of the data collection process and data sources used by the researcher.

Table 3.4

*Overview of the Data Collection Process and Sources*

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| Data Collection Procedure                   | Data Sources  |
|---|---|
| 1. Participant Discussions and Observations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio-recorded and transcribed meeting notes</li> <li>• Meeting notes of the researcher</li> </ul> |
| 2. Interviews                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio-recorded and transcribed interviews</li> <li>• The researcher’s Field notes</li> </ul>       |

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### 3. Documents

- Descriptions of classroom activities
  - Lesson plans
  - E-mail discussions between participants and researcher
  - Agendas
  - Information documents including system and school demographic information, school mission statement, and test scores
- 

**Participant discussions and observations.** Participant discussions are an important part of most action research studies, and these types of discussions allow the researcher to gain a large amount of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). At every meeting, participants spent a majority of their time working together trying to make sense of Freire's theory and looking for ways to connect his theory to practice. Participants also spent a large amount of time looking for ways to transform their classrooms into a problem-centered, collaborative environment for students. These discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed to provide an accurate account of what was discussed during these meetings. Each meeting had an agenda based on the group readings, but time was allotted for questions and side discussions about Freire's theory and practice. Appendix G is an example of the agenda for the participant group meeting on April 20, 2011. Each agenda included the plan for the next session as well as possible questions for the teacher research group. Important to each of these discussions was the use of different texts and readings to start discussions, to look for new ways of thinking about concepts, and to allow for connections between theory-practice. At the end of each participant discussion, the audio-recordings were transcribed and reviewed. The researcher reviewed the transcripts in an effort to help guide the next participant discussion. This allowed each session to build on participants' work at the previous session. After a review of the transcript, an agenda for the next session was developed.

**Interview data.** Interviews provided data on each individual teacher and his or her perception of Freire’s theory. As Patton (2002) stated, “The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into another person’s perspective” (p. 340). This mention of perspective leads to an, “assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant’s perspective on the phenomenon should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 74). The interview followed the questions in the interview guide, but the interview guide was ultimately only a guide. The researcher wanted to have flexibility to explore different topics at discretion based on the direction the participants went as they were responding to the questions. To these ends, semi-structured and open-ended interviews were developed. Each of the interviews was audio recorded and transcribed. Table 3.5 provides interview questions aligned with individual research questions.

Table 3.5

*Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions*

| Open-Ended Interview Question  | Aligned Research Question   |
|--|---|
| <b>Interview I</b>   |   |
| Describe how you attempted to implement problem-posing pedagogy into your practice as a middle school teacher.   | What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?  |
| Looking back, what could have helped you as you attempted to infuse problem-posing pedagogy into your classroom? | What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy in middle school classrooms? |
| <b>Interview II</b>  |   |
| Compare and contrast the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy in your teaching.                           | What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy into practice?                |
|  | What are the perceptions of teachers  |

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What do you think was different in your classroom when you practiced banking compared to attempting to implement problem-posing pedagogy?

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attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice?

**Documents.** Documents originated from the participant discussion group, and these documents contained useful information about the thoughts of the participants. The documents included a list of characteristics of problem-posing pedagogy and the banking concept. This document served as a roadmap for participants to use in designing lessons. Also, the teacher research group revised the document throughout the study to reflect changes in their thinking about problem-posing and the banking concept. Participants also brought lesson plans during teacher research group sessions so that the group could work through the process of taking the banking concept lesson and developing it into a problem-posing lesson. Other documents analyzed included meeting agendas. The agendas serve as a rich source of data that was analyzed throughout the study.

### **Meeting Schedule and Topics**

- Late February 2011 (55 minutes)—Each participant was provided a personal copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The teacher research group organized potential meeting dates and times. During this initial meeting with participants, they were given details regarding the study, and they setup the first individual participant interviews. Participants were directed to read Chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* before the March 15<sup>th</sup> participant discussion.
- Early March 2011—The researcher conducted an initial one-hour interview with each of the participants to gather background information on each participant. The researcher also questioned each participant's teaching philosophy to help provide initial information

about participants and their current practice. The interview guide for the initial interview is provided Appendix E.

- March 15, 2011 (65 minutes)—After completing the initial individual interviews, the first participant discussion started with a recap discussion of Chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a group. The discussion centered on what problem-posing pedagogy might look like inside and outside of the classroom. The group developed a list of characteristics of a problem-posing classroom compared to the banking concept. The list is provided in Appendix H. The researcher shared a chart comparing problem-posing pedagogy and the banking concept. See Table 2.2 for the chart. Participants were asked to review the chart and to share their feedback on the content within the chart. This discussion led to a discussion about potential barriers and opportunities associated with adopting and implementing problem-posing pedagogy into classroom practice.
- April 20, 2011 (75 minutes)—The majority of meeting time during the second participant discussion centered around developing a working definition of problem-posing pedagogy that the group could use throughout the study to reference. The working definition created by the participants can be located in Appendix I. After creating our working definition and reviewing the chart detailing differences between the banking concept and problem-posing, the group reviewed Beane’s (2005) chart displaying a comparison between Beane’s ideas of democratic classrooms versus his view of traditional classrooms. This comparison led to a discussion about the practicality of implementing problem-posing pedagogy into a middle level classroom.
- May 19, 2011 (55 minutes)—The third participant discussion opened with the researcher asking participants to describe a time when they had to problem-pose within their own

life. In asking participants to reflect on their life outside of a middle school classroom, the researcher wanted participants to think about their personal life experiences and a time during their life when they believed they had learned a great deal through a specific problem.

This opening provided a lively discussion topic that could be used throughout the rest of the sessions. After all three participants responded, the teacher research group read through “Rigor is depth and change: Understanding versus memorizing” that is included in the book publication titled *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (Freire & Shor, 1987). Participants focused on the difference between organizing classrooms for memorizing compared to organizing classrooms for understanding.

- June 20, 2011 (63 minutes)—The June participant meeting started with a recap of our discussion from May 19, 2011. The recap of the discussion led participants to start talking and thinking about the implementation of problem-posing in August, 2011. All three participants noted confusion at the beginning of the study when they thought about implementation, but participants stated that they felt much more comfortable thinking about the implementation after the previous reading and participant discussions.

Participants were asked to report what problems or issues that they planned to bring into their classroom starting in August. The group generated a list of potential problems or issues that might accompany the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy within the classroom. The list is included in Appendix J.

- July 21, 2011 (75 minutes)—The discussion started with each participant reporting out to each other about their compiled list of problems or issues. After hearing the lists, the

group discussed the role of the student and teacher within problem-posing and banking classrooms. An example of the data that originated from this discussion included this part of the participant discussion:

A teacher in a problem-posing classroom facilitates instruction. A banker lectures and expects students to memorize and recite back to him or her. Students find problem-posing engaging with the content, but they sometimes get frustrated because they are constantly being asked to think. Students in the banking concept enjoy not being asked to continuously think like in problem-posing.

The researcher challenged participants to reflect on the role of a student in a problem-posing classroom. Within the process of reflecting, participants bantered about classroom organization so that students can experience this role in August. In this last participant discussion before the school year, the researcher asked the participants to send their thoughts on implementation over e-mail between the meeting and start of school.

The e-mails provided an opportunity for the researcher to speak directly with each of the participants to answer any questions and help each one think through classroom organization and planning. For example, Ms. Bowen e-mailed the researcher and asked, “Philip...How am I supposed to help my parents understand that I’m implementing a new way of teaching without freaking them out?” The researcher responded with a phone call back to the participant to discuss possible solutions to address the potential issue.

- August 25, 2011 (78 minutes)—Participants talked about the start of school and the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy. The session provided participants a chance to share their experiences along with an opportunity to collaborate and question each other about the possible successes and failures involved with implementing. The

researcher asked participants to re-read Chapter Two of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* before the September meeting. The researcher asked participants to re-read the chapter to see if their viewpoint and opinions on problem-posing had changed from earlier participant meetings and interviews.

- September 2, 2011 (62 minutes)—The September participant discussion focused on the collective definition of problem-posing pedagogy and its alignment with our current practice. The group reflected over the opening of school and shared current problem-posing practices. The discussion also centered on the barriers that slowed or prohibited the full implementation of problem-posing pedagogy. Since a majority of the meeting was spent talking about the barriers, the researcher requested for participants to think about the opportunities associated with implementation so that the group could discuss these at our final meeting in October. The list of barriers identified by participants can be found in Appendix K.
- October 11, 2011 (75 minutes)—The final participant discussion started with each participant describing how her teaching philosophy had changed based on the discussions of Freire, Beane, and Shor. The group also reviewed the research questions and reflected on responses after attempting to implement the theory into practice. Teacher research group members were asked to share their final thoughts on Freire’s theory and implementation of the theory into a middle school classroom. Ms. Bowen provided this information in her final thoughts on problem-posing.

You have to go back to teacher training. It has to be a mindset of teachers and it’s a total shift so you couldn’t take a traditional teacher out of a traditional classroom and expect them to teach using problem posing pedagogy. It’s not

going to happen so you have to go back to teacher training, but then you have to clear the slate. I mean as far as curriculum and mandated testing and all that's required of the student...that can't be there because if students are to make the decisions and to guide where the class goes and to really be invested in their learning, there can't be a structure of ok by 12<sup>th</sup> grade, you have to know X, Y, and Z in order to graduate because one student may know X and another student may know Y but that's based on their own interest and their own learning. So, I would almost say you have to clear the slate with teachers and with curriculum.

The researcher also took time in the final meeting to thank the participants for participating in the study. At the conclusion of the final teacher research group meeting, the researcher also scheduled final one-on-one interviews with each of the participants in an effort to discover any burning questions or thoughts that each individual had concerning the study and as a way to conduct the second interview.

- Late October—The researcher concluded the data collection part of the study by conducting final one-hour interviews with each participant.

### **Overview of Data Analysis**

Data analysis within an action research study is a continuous process of systematically reviewing, questioning, and checking back to the research questions for possible solutions (Berg, 2009). The problem-posed within this study was the lack of relevance noted by students within America's public school classrooms. The researcher used Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy as a theoretical base to provide teachers with a substantive argument for incorporating authentic community-based issues within the curriculum. Data collection took place over eight months and included interviews, participant discussions, and document analysis.



Due to the amount of data collection in this qualitative, collaborative action-research study, the researcher used a number of different methods to analyze the data. Marshall and Rossman (1999) described data analysis as, “the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data (p. 150). Data analysis took place continuously throughout the study and began during the data collection. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) noted the importance of conducting analysis throughout the study and especially at the beginning of the data collection process. Each participant discussion and interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. After each interview and participant discussion, the researcher reviewed his notes as well as the transcription to prepare for the next session. The researcher started each one of the new participant discussions with a statement recapping the previous discussion between the participants. During this statement, the researcher asked for feedback from the participants to clarify interpretations from past discussion. This allowed the researcher to synthesize the data during the course of the study, but also provided a way for the researcher to check with the participants to make sure that interpretation was reflective of their thoughts and beliefs.

During the data collection process, the researcher reviewed all of the data by reading each transcription and document. The researcher listed potential codes by reviewing the data for patterns across participants as well as within individual participant data. The next step in the process was to compile and enter the participant discussion and interview transcriptions into NVivo 9, a computer program aimed at helping compile and sort data during the data analysis process. After completing the inputting process, the researcher appraised the research questions to make sure that the codes developed would help guide answering the research questions.

The researcher decided to use specific codes aligned with the research questions in an effort to streamline the data and to look for themes across the group data as well as individual

participants. For example, the researcher used the word “barrier” as a code, but each time the code was used, the researcher linked “barrier” with the specific barrier to implementing problem-posing pedagogy. If the barrier was time for planning, then the researcher coded the paragraph, sentence, or thought as “barrier—time for planning.” By coding specific parts of the conversation as barriers toward implementation, this process allowed the researcher to look holistically at all of the barriers of implementing problem-posing pedagogy.

Using NVivo provided the opportunity to look not only at barriers, but also to see each time within the study that participants commented that time was a factor for them not being able to implement problem-posing pedagogy. The researcher examined the quantity of times that “barrier—time for planning” was coded and compared it to the other barriers. This was part of the analysis process, but even more importantly, the researcher read through each of the times that “barrier—time for planning” was coded and compared the depth of discussion. The researcher was more interested in the quality of the discussion regarding the barrier than the actual number of times that each barrier surfaced in the discussion. This process for analyzing the data allowed the researcher to focus directly on the research questions because of the simple, yet effective way that the codes were arranged and identified.

Another aspect of data analysis was looking at participant discussions and coding each transcription by each individual speaker. Using codes such as “barrier—standardized testing” and then labeling each of these sections by the participant, allowed the researcher to quickly identify any time during the study that Ms. Owens said anything about standardized testing being a possible barrier to implementing problem-posing pedagogy. Therefore, many statements within the transcripts had numerous codes. Table 3.6 provides a list of example codes that accompany the research question regarding barriers toward implementing problem-posing pedagogy.

Table 3.6

*Examples of Codes*

| Code                  | Definition of Code   | Example of Statement from Participant   |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Administration        | Referring to school principal or assistant principals, also references made to the Georgia Department of Education or U.S. Department of Education   | “That’s where there’s the biggest disconnect in education, is you have the theories and these wonderful ideas that are great, that are made by all these people that are at the state level or you know in local level and they’re so disconnected from application”                        |
| Curriculum            | Standards expected to be taught by teachers  | “With the strain of curriculum and how much we have to teach and how fast we have to teach it, um...just with everything that’s expected of a student, that we’re expected to impose upon our children so it’s kind of handed down to us as a banking concept”                              |
| History of Classrooms | Used to describe when teachers are expected to stand and deliver content through lecture because of perspective that this is the way classrooms should look because they have always looked this way | “I believe teachers teach this way because teachers were taught this way. Teachers revert back to how teachers acted when they were students.”  |
| Lack of Experience    | Refers to the need for teachers to reach a certain level of experience to have the confidence to try innovative practices within the classrooms  | “First of all, it first of all, it takes years of experience to do that. The first couple of years, uh, that I taught school, I probably wasn’t the best facilitator but I think many years of teaching, watching others, learning from others, certainly advancing my degree helped learn” |

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|                            |  |  |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Lack of Relevance          | Refers to curriculum deemed unimportant to young adolescents                                       | “I think there’s a real disconnect between what I teach and what’s applicable in a sixth-grader’s life.”   |
| Lack of Student Motivation | Refers to lack of student motivation to work differently in a problem-posing classroom environment | “They didn’t want to have to go through that thought process of why does it work that way? They just wanted the rule so they can memorize it and keep on truckin.” |

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After coding all of the transcripts, the researcher read through each of the codes in an effort to synthesize the codes into themes through inductive analysis. Patton (2002) described inductive analysis as the process, “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (p. 453). Borrowing from case-study methodology, the researcher examined the data across-cases and within-cases. It was clear from the data analysis that the across-case analysis provided the most powerful and enlightening analysis. After coding the data within-cases, the researcher did not feel that the data provided a comprehensive look at each individual participant. The within-case data also failed to answer adequately the research questions to the extent of the across-case analysis. Consequently, the researcher focused on the across-case analysis and reported these findings in greater depth.

At the beginning stages of the coding process, the data appeared to fit together under the large research question categories, such as barriers. During the second and third look at the data, it was clear that certain parts of the data fit together to provide more specific themes that fit under each, or part of each, of the research questions. The coding and themes narrowed during the data analysis process, and the use of the research questions to code the data contributed to specific codes. The coding process helped manage the data into smaller, concise themes, but

through this process, it was easier to grasp three individual teachers' perspectives on problem-posing pedagogy.

After coding and establishing themes, the researcher listed the themes under the research questions and attempted to visualize the implementation process for teachers through concept drawings. The researcher created webs that showed relationships and the inter-connectedness of the themes. These webs helped to conceptualize more deeply the study and served as the springboard for reporting the findings. Table 3.7 shows the transition from codes to establishing themes. The data in Table 3.7 are based on the research question aimed at the opportunities associated with implementing problem-posing pedagogy.

Table 3.7

*Moving from Codes to Themes*

| Code  | Theme   |
|---|---|
| Opportunity for the teacher to be a student | A chance to facilitate  |
| Love of learning                            | An increased depth of student learning  |
| More content knowledge                      | An increased depth of student learning  |
| Learn from students                         | A chance to facilitate  |
| More teacher reflection and thought         | A chance to facilitate  |
| Student collaboration                       | A new role for students   |
| Relevance                                   | An increased depth of student learning  |
| Respect for each other                      | A new role for students, a chance to facilitate   |
| Teaching creativity                         | An increased depth of student learning, a chance to facilitate, a new role for students |
| An increase in test scores                  | An increased depth of student learning  |

After moving from the codes to emerging themes, each theme was organized with the corresponding codes. This allowed the researcher to visually examine the relationships themes and research questions. To conclude the analysis, the researcher matched the themes with research questions to provide a clear, concise view of the progression from research questions, data collection, data analysis, findings, and data analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

A critical piece within qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to organize and to execute a study that helps the audience to trust the accuracy of the study and its results (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002). Transparency about purpose, methods, and analysis is vital in developing credibility with the audience. Along with transparency, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that multiple methods of data collection and creating an audit trail also create trust between the researcher and audience. Patton (2002) argued qualitative research studies must have three essentials including: precise methods; a knowledgeable and trustable researcher; and an appreciation and firm belief in the importance of qualitative research.

Trustworthiness was a foundational aspect of this study. A constant question asked throughout this study was if the consumers of the research are unable to trust the data, then what is the value of the conclusions? Procedures provided structure for transparency. For example, respondent validation assured that participants had an opportunity to review their statements in each transcript. The practice allowed participants to change their statements to reflect more accurately their beliefs.

Another practice that provided structure was the alignment of the interview questions to the three research questions. Also, documents were analyzed by the researcher, and any unclear

topics were more fully examined by asking participants more questions. This dialogue between the researcher and participants provided a layer of communication that allowed for clarity. Each of these procedures was put into place to assure that the conclusions reached by the researcher were reliable and valid in the context in which the study occurred. The next two sections continue to delve into the practices of the researcher that make this study more reliable and more valid.

**Reliability.** Reliability means that another study with a comparable context will produce the same or similar results (Creswell, 2005). In this type of qualitative study, reliability is difficult to assure due to the variability and specific context of the study (Merriam, 1998). Each participant presents his or her own unique perspective and beliefs. With the small number of participants, assuming that another study developed with three different participants might reveal new opportunities, barriers, and perceptions. The context of the study contributed greatly to the depth of the study, and another study in a different context might generate different conclusions. With that being said, the themes and conclusions of the study connect directly with the information provided in the literature review.

**Validity.** The question of validity is one that continues to resonate within qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Maxwell 2010). Studies with valid conclusions require well-written research questions, a thorough review of the literature supporting the need for the study, a triangulation of the data, and a clear methodology (Schwalbach, 2003). Maxwell (2010) provided a checklist for researchers to increase the validity of the conclusions reached within a study. The top three items on the checklist included the need for extended participation in the field by the researcher, quality “rich data,” and respondent validation (Maxwell, 2010, p. 283).

Measures throughout the study were taken in an effort to ensure the validity of this study. The eight-months invested in this study show a long-term commitment toward researching and reporting an accurate perspective. The use of individual interviews coupled with participant discussions and document analysis provided the rich data needed to examine the research questions. Respondent validation, also referred to as member checks, systematically took place throughout the study.

For an example of respondent validation or member check, the researcher provided participants with a copy of the transcription of their individual interviews as well as the participant discussions. Participants were asked to review each transcript and to validate their responses. In specific situations, the researcher and participants followed up to clarify statements and any misunderstandings. For example, one participant emailed the researcher after receiving a copy of the transcript. The participant noted that the transcription did not seem to capture her frustration with the barrier of common classroom assessments. The e-mail from the participant wanted to make sure that the researcher would use his notes to express the annoyance of the participant. The participant noted that the transcript could not illuminate the level of frustration and wanted to make sure that the level was documented. The researcher confirmed that the level of frustration was captured in his notes from the participant discussion and as elaborated in the data. An e-mail between Ms. Carter and the researcher provides an example of this communication.

Hey Philip! In looking over the transcript, I don't know that I communicated the level of annoyance that I have with common assessments. These things [common assessments] completely destroy any type of student-centered assessments that I'm trying to use with my students. I've been working on trying to create an atmosphere where students think



that their voice is heard, but every three or four weeks, I've got to give them this test which is a waste of time. I want to use the time exploring, probing, and learning with students. I wanted to make sure that the transcript and study reflected this frustration, but in looking over the transcript, I think I was a little too nice on those darn things! Thanks for your help with this. Talk with you soon. Ms. Carter

Another layer of validity discussed by qualitative researchers is reactivity. Reactivity is defined as the response between the participants and researcher within the study (Patton, 2002). It has been noted that participants may react differently to classroom observations or interactions based on their understanding that they are being researched (Glesne, 1999). Since classroom observations were not part of the data collection process, the chances of reactivity were decreased. The researcher also reported researcher bias at the beginning of the study in the form of a subjectivity statement. Appendix L provides the subjectivity statement that the researcher wrote at the beginning of the study. Another step that the researcher took to lessen the effects of reactivity was to take time at the beginning of the study to build a relationship with each of the participants.

### **Chapter Summary of Research Design and Methods**

This chapter provided a description of the research process while highlighting different ways that each of the research questions was investigated. Collaborative action research with the use of a teacher research group was used to provide a method of action for studying the research questions. Along with highlighting the reasoning for using action research, the chapter provided the process of data collection and analysis through a description of the sequence of events. Also, data collection, context of the study, and participant selection were described.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an examination of the findings that emerged during the data collection and analysis parts of the study. The chapter begins with the research questions followed by an overview of the research process. After describing the research process, the chapter offers introductory descriptions of each of the three study participants. After these introductions to the three middle school teachers involved in the study, this chapter includes the across-case findings organized around the research questions that guided the study: participants' initial feelings about implementing Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice, opportunities that support implementation, and barriers to implementation.

#### **Research Questions**

In responding to a query about what makes for a good action research question, Caro-Bruce (2000) asserted that good action research questions must be significant, manageable, and contextual. The research questions used in this study meet Caro-Bruce's expectations. The questions are significant in that they focus directly on the classroom and a philosophical approach that could change the roles of teachers and students. The questions are manageable and answers to the questions provide insight into a philosophical implementation process. Also, the questions are contextual in that they are based in the setting of the classroom, which is at the heart and soul of teaching and learning.

Three research questions guided the design and methods of the study.

- 1) What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice?
- 2) What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?
- 3) What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?

### **Research Overview**

This study is an examination of middle level teachers' perceptions of a theory being implemented into practice. Specifically, Freire's problem-posing pedagogy provided a foundation to examine pedagogy within the classroom. Three participants worked together as a collaborative action research team in studying, learning, implementing, and reflecting on the process of moving from theory to practice about problem-posing pedagogy.

Morris Middle School, a sixth through eighth grade school in Northeast Georgia, provided the context for the study. The three participants in the study had varying levels of teaching experience. All three participants were female. Participants were chosen based on their interest in learning more about the theory and agreeing to implement the theory into their instructional practices for the duration of the study.

Data collection took place over eight months and included interviews, participant discussions, and document analysis. The data are presented first through introductions of the individual participants and then through the themes that developed within data analysis. Each research question contained specific themes that helped to organize the findings sections. Each interview and participant discussion was transcribed and imported into a computer assisted

qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo version 9. The researcher coded each interview and participant discussion in relation to each research question. For example, the code, “barrier—administration,” was used any time that it was determined that a perceived barrier to implementation was the school administration. The researcher defined each code to determine consistency with the usage of each code and Table 3.6 in Chapter 3 provides a sample list of codes along with a definition of each code. After the coding process, the researcher determined themes from patterns that developed within the coding process. The researcher placed more emphasis on the across-case findings than the within-case findings.

The next three sections provide a description of each one of the participants. After each of the participants is introduced, the next sections provide the across-case findings. The across-case findings were divided into four sections based on the research questions: Initial feelings toward problem-posing; post-study perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy; opportunities that exist for teachers and students when problem-posing pedagogy was implemented; and barriers toward implementing problem-posing pedagogy.

### **Ms. Carter**

Known by her students as Ms. C, it was clear that Ms. Carter cared deeply for her students and wanted each one of them to reach his or her full potential. Ms. Carter had 11 years of experience in public school education. Her experiences took place in two different school systems, and she was in her third year of working within this school system. She attended a private Catholic school until transferring to a public high school for her final four years of study. She had a Specialist in Education Degree in middle school education. Her teaching experiences ranged from instructing all core subjects in fifth grade to teaching solely the sixth grade level. She commented that her favorite thing about teaching was, “to help children learn math and also

making math fun for them.” At the beginning of the study, Ms. Carter described the role of the teacher as “...the facilitator, and the role of the student is several things. Students need to be engaged, critical thinkers, and self-discovering.”

From the first meeting with Ms. Carter, the researcher could tell that she was tentative and anxious about the possibility of trying something new in her classroom. Admittedly, Ms. Carter lacked a great deal of confidence in her abilities as a teacher, even though she had always received high marks from her administration, students, and parents. She openly questioned her place in the first group meeting because as she stated, “I’m definitely not as talented as these other two, but I’ll try whatever you tell me to do.” After the researcher assured her that he would not just be telling her what to do in her classroom, she reluctantly, and understandably, shared surface level information at the first interview and few group sessions.

Once Mrs. Carter realized that she also brought something to the study with her ideas and innovations during the second participant group discussion, she moved forward with understanding and implementing problem-posing pedagogy within her classroom. The change was also noted in her body language, which went from timid and closed initially to confident and poised. Near the end of the study she even admitted, “I was intimidated at the beginning of the study because I know that you [the researcher] are an administrator, but I’ve learned you are just like the rest of us. You don’t know what you are doing either!”

As the participant with the most experience as a teacher, Mrs. Carter was also the most jaded about the idea of incorporating new ideas into her classroom. She loved to play the game of trying to figure out why something would not work in the classroom. Mrs. Carter enjoyed being the one to remark, “Now do not forget that we have these standardized tests come April and May.”

### **Ms. Bowen**

Ms. Bowen was in her fifth year as a sixth grade math teacher. She had an undergraduate degree in middle school education with a focus on mathematics and social studies. She was also in the process of completing her Master's Degree in mathematics. Her personal K-12 school experience took place in a rural public school system. Ms. Bowen spent all five years of her teaching career at Morris Middle School in a sixth grade classroom. She commented during her first interview that she "prefers a volume of understanding conceptually rather than just a memorization of formulas and facts." Ms. Bowen stated that she loved the fact that her classroom provided structure and routine for students.

Even though Ms. Bowen only had five years of experience, it was clear from the first interview that she was confident in her ability yet also still looking for ways to improve her practice. During the first interview, she made a statement that resonated throughout the entire study when she stated, "I'll do whatever it takes. I just want to see my students find success, love math, and ultimately, become better people and citizens." After working with her for a number of months, Ms. Bowen's work ethic and practices confirmed that not only did she believe this statement, but it was also clear that she acted this statement out in her classroom.

Throughout the study, Mrs. Bowen had a desire for practical, hands-on examples of problem-posing pedagogy taking place in classrooms. She even admitted that in her pre-service training, "We heard professors talk about this type of philosophy and theory, but we brushed it off because most teachers in the field were not teaching like this." Ms. Bowen's behavior at the beginning of the study was skeptical but willing to listen to new ideas. As participants progressed through the study, Ms. Bowen fully participated in all aspects of the study from reading the book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in its entirety to researching Beane's work with democratic

classrooms. She truly enjoyed learning about the opportunities that problem-posing presented to students, and she was completely willing to step out of the boundaries of “normalized public school educating” and fully participate in this line of inquiry. It was in her final interview that the researcher realized the study had pushed Mrs. Bowen to think at a different level. Mrs. Bowen stated, “I know that we discussed this idea of praxis where theory and practice meet. I really wonder if this even actually exists.” In this statement, Ms. Bowen articulated in her own words that the practice may never actually meet the theory exactly, but the journey of intersecting theory and practice is where the power is located.

### **Ms. Owens**

Ms. Owens was a third-year, sixth grade social studies teacher. She also taught language arts along with social studies for one year of her teaching career. All of her teaching experience has taken place at Morris Middle School. Ms. Owens is currently working on her Master’s Degree, and her undergraduate degree is in middle school education with a focus on language arts and social studies. Ms. Owens commented that she enjoyed her classroom being a “laid-back environment where students felt comfortable with sharing and discussing different topics in social studies.” In her first interview, Ms. Owens responded that an outsider coming into her classroom would say “Oh my goodness. This is chaos but things are going on.”

Out of the three participants, Ms. Owens had the most training in progressive pedagogy at the undergraduate level. She believed problem-posing pedagogy was a natural fit in her social studies classroom and noted, “It made it easier to implement problem-posing pedagogy because the subject can be just that, problem-posing.” From the first meeting, it was clear that she was eager to experiment with new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. Ms. Owens wanted to take her thoughts on the readings about pedagogy and attempt to implement them the next

day. She was the type of teacher that administrators describe as a “go-getter.” In every opportunity throughout the study, Ms. Owens opted to push the limits, ask questions that interrogated our basic understanding of pedagogy, and collaborate with her peers in hopes of improving her daily classroom practice. At the end of the study, Ms. Owens commented, “I greatly enjoyed the chance to discuss my classroom practice, and I will definitely miss the opportunity to collaborate on a deeper level with my peers.”

### **Teacher Perceptions of Problem-Posing Pedagogy**

A major part of the study was examining and questioning the potential for implementing problem-posing pedagogy into three middle school classrooms. In an effort to provide a comparison, the researcher decided to break down this section into two major parts: initial feelings and post-study perceptions. For the initial feelings section, the researcher used data mostly from the first two participant group discussions and first individual interview because this was the part of the study when the participants were just trying to form their initial thoughts and feelings concerning problem-posing pedagogy. The researcher used the final participant discussions and final individual interview to describe the post-study perceptions.

#### **Initial Feelings About Problem-Posing**

At the first group session, Ms. Carter asked, “Have you actually even ever seen problem-posing pedagogy implemented into a classroom, a middle school classroom at that?” If the researcher had to describe the initial feelings of the group with one word, then “hesitant” would have been the word choice. The three participants wanted practical suggestions and strategies. All three participants agreed that, theoretically speaking, problem-posing pedagogy provided students with an excellent opportunity to critically think about community problems that needed to be discussed and solved at the local level. The participants wanted to provide this type of



classroom instruction, but the researcher surmised that each one of them felt overwhelmed with the task of teaching and assessing all of the Georgia Performance Standards.

Below, the group's definition of problem posing pedagogy is discussed followed by a more detailed discussion of the process for developing the group-created definition. The next section details the themes generated from the cross case analysis related to the participants' initial feelings: (1) concerns with the link between theory and practice, (2) "it's easier to bank," and (3) "why change."

**Developing a group definition of problem-posing pedagogy.** After reading Freire's description of problem-posing pedagogy and discussing this as a group, the researcher asked all three participants to write down their definition of problem-posing pedagogy. Once all three of the teachers completed the activity, the participant group then discussed their descriptions in an effort to reach consensus on their understanding of problem-posing pedagogy. The researcher believed this to be a critical part of the study because for the participants to implement problem-posing strategies into their classroom, they needed to understand what it meant to problem-pose. The participant group settled on this definition of problem-posing pedagogy:

Problem-posing pedagogy is a philosophical stance taken by the teacher where the teacher truly values the student and their knowledge. Using community issues or problems, the teacher facilitates active learning through various activities depending on the understanding of the students. Different than the banking concept, students in a problem-posing classroom are not spectators, but instead, they create and re-create knowledge throughout their time as a student-teacher.

The curriculum is also created and re-created in the process of a problem-posing lesson. Using the hyphen to show relationship and connection, it is clear that Freire desires for

everyone in the teaching-learning environment to be cognitively active in all aspects of the discussion-focused classroom. The very act of problem-posing is the process of searching for solutions while not losing sight of the constant need to trouble what we have always known as truth. Conversely, the banking concept is the act of distributing solutions without ever questioning the process. Naturally, this leads the banking concept into a passive state, while problem-posing pedagogy develops into an active state.

After developing their own working definition of problem-posing pedagogy, the participant group looked over the researcher's comparison of the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy (Table 1.1). The researcher asked participants to review and critique the table created by the researcher as a way of continuing to refine our understanding of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy and to work toward being able to implement effectively problem-posing pedagogy into the classroom. The participants agreed that the table provided a helpful way to compare the two different philosophies.

Then, we looked over Table 2.2 because it provided a comparison of a banking concept class versus a problem-posing class. Participants noted that the difference in the classrooms ultimately comes down to the role of the teacher and the role of the student. After we finished comparing the information in both tables, the researcher provided the participants with a copy of Beane's table that compares the "usual way" to the democratic way (2005). Participants needed to be able to compare the tables on the banking concept and problem-posing with the practical information that Beane includes in his chart about the democratic classroom. Ms. Owens commented that she found the problem-posing and democratic classroom information to be very similar. Ms. Carter stated, "I like the fact that Beane's chart shows this in a practical way that I can begin to use to transform my classroom."

## **Concerns with the Link Between Theory and Practice**

One of the initial responses from the participants concerning problem-posing pedagogy was the lack of connection that they saw between theory and practice. The difficult part of taking problem-posing and implementing the theory into their classroom practice was the lack of examples provided by Freire. Due to the lack of practical examples, we used Beane (2005a) and Shor's (1987) work to supplement Freire's descriptions of the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy. The researcher wanted the participants to see others in the field attempting to practically implement their understanding of Freire's work into the classroom. The participants wanted these practical examples, and Ms. Owens even commented about the lack of practicality at the end of the second group session when she said:

There's no way that all these great things can take place in the classroom because the application is so different than theories. And theories are great and wonderful and I really appreciate a lot of the stuff that we are working towards but you know, I'm working 10-hour days and that's very difficult to work 10-hour days and go home and still work on the weekends as well. It's hard. Application is hard because of all of the work, time, and planning that goes into effectively planning lessons that make students think. It is much easier to bank.

The lack of practical examples as described by Ms. Owens contributed to the hesitancy of the group to implement changes within their classrooms.

During one of the latter sessions, Ms. Owens made it clear that she and the other participants wanted the information to be practical more than anything. Ms. Carter commented at a participant group meeting that, "Being able to problem-pose on the fly is a gift that only exceptional teachers possess." Ms. Carter noted that she found this out after attempting to

problem-pose with her class without adequately planning her lesson. Ms. Owens chimed in that she felt like problem-posing took more planning because “as the teacher, you have to be ready for anything. When I bank, I know exactly how the lesson will progress.”

The participants struggled for ways to connect theory and practice during the early stages of the study because they viewed problem-posing akin to what Ms. Owens described as a “process of constant change and development. As a history teacher, I see history as a banking process because you repeat the same thing.” After she made this comment, the researcher followed up with: “Then how do you view problem-posing?” noted that, “problem-posing is futuristic in that you are being asked to prepare students for a different world, in the job sense, than is current. This is very similar to what you are asking us to do as teachers.”

**“It’s easier to bank.”**

One of the aspects of problem-posing that the researcher wanted to explore was the idea of problem-posing as reality. To this end, participants were asked to reflect on their past experiences as a student and teacher and to think of times that they were asked to problem-pose. In a participant discussion, participants were asked the question directly: Can you think of a time that you had to problem-pose? Ms. Bowen responded quickly and said:

I am the type of learner that very much enjoys the banking concept. I’m one of those students that...feed me. Feed me the knowledge and information and I will spit it right back out at you. I’m a good student in that way because I can regurgitate very well. But in my first year teaching, when I had all of the problems of a first year teacher, there was not a solution. There was not a correct answer.

Ms. Carter agreed that her first year of full-time teaching was full of problem-posing and a lack of solutions. Ms. Carter stated, “I felt like the first 20-something years of my life were banking,

and then I started teaching. The first year of teaching was problem-posing. The bad part was I went back to what I knew: I banked.”

The researcher followed up with the question: “Do you think that you banked in the past because your teachers in the past banked?” The group responded and agreed that they banked in the past for a couple of reasons. One of the reasons was the general history of the classroom and role of the teacher. Another was the belief that they would be stepping outside of the box, and each participant was hesitant to do so. Ms. Owens even suggested, “In the end, teachers are going to go back to what makes them feel comfortable, and this is back to banking.”

### **“Why Change?”**

In an effort to play devil’s advocate, Ms. Bowen provided this scenario at the end of the second group meeting:

A fifth-year teacher has excellent standardized test scores without any major classroom management issues. The teacher provides students with daily worksheets, but only occasionally uses activities to help students learn the material. She coaches the volleyball team after school to help build relationships with her students. She is often praised by administration because the parents never complain about her or her class. If you had to judge her as a problem-poser or a banker, then everyone evaluating her would agree that she is a banker. Why does she need to change?

Ms. Owens and Ms. Carter agreed that the teacher did not need to change. Ms. Carter even commented, “In all the ways that success is currently being measured, the scenario teacher has been and will be successful. I think that she needs to stay the course. Why change?” After hearing this discussion, the researcher asked each participant why Freire would ask them to change. Ms. Bowen chimed in with, “Freire would ask us to change because he believes that our

use of the banking concept starts and continues the cycle of oppression by failing to teach skills and abilities.” Ms. Carter added, “If I bank, then I do not feel like I’m oppressing students or their thoughts. I feel like I’m failing to ask them to think, but I do not think that I’m hurting them.” Ms. Bowen noted:

If banking hurts them, then we have a large number of hurt students because the majority of teachers bank. At the end of this study, I will probably be convinced that I need to problem-pose, but unless teachers are challenged to move towards implementing more progressive curriculum and pedagogy, their response is going to be: Why change?

Ms. Bowen’s argument provided the words for the thoughts of all three participants. After Ms. Bowen made the statements, each member of the participant group nodded in agreement. “Why change just for the sake of change” was the rallying cry for Ms. Owens. Understandably, the participants wanted the best for their students, but changing teaching philosophies solely to show change was not appreciated.

### **Post-Study Perceptions of Problem-Posing Pedagogy**

Throughout the study, the participants and researcher used the idea of a continuum to describe the difference between problem-posing and banking. We imagined banking and problem-posing on opposite ends of the continuum, and the participant group often wondered if it was possible for a teacher to strictly bank or solely to problem-pose. Our discussions were lively and thoughtful, but the participants never decided if it was possible to always bank or always to problem-pose. Interestingly, the participants argued that at times all teachers bank, but they did not agree that all teachers problem-pose.

Overall, the reception of problem-posing pedagogy was positive, and the participants agreed that, in the end, the face of education would change if all teachers would adopt a

problem-posing philosophy. The difficulty in this was noted by the participants, and each one described the barriers as things that were extremely difficult to overcome. As Ms. Owens stated, “It is one of those things where you agree with the philosophy, but the practice is almost impossible across the board on a daily basis.” A number of different themes developed as post-study perceptions. The themes included student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking instruction; problem-posing equals relevance; being patient with a sense of urgency for relevant teaching; and the role of schools.

**Student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking instruction.** In her final interview, Ms. Bowen commented, “I want my class to be student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking. Problem-posing pedagogy provides an opportunity for my class to be all of these things.” Ms. Bowen tried a number of different activities in her class during the duration of this study in an attempt to move towards what Freire would consider a problem-posing classroom. She tried to transform her math class into more than a math class. Ms. Bowen said, “My math class is not only a math class; it is a class that examines the world and uses mathematics to help solve some of the problems.” She used school issues, such as examining the rise in class size, to help her students think through the concerns of the community, as well as the mathematics involved in calculating these statistics.

Ms. Bowen also noted heavy student involvement in the topics of interest and discussion within the classroom. She commented that the more she involved students in the learning environment, then the more that the students felt connected to the classroom. For Ms. Bowen, it was essential to, “turn the classroom into a community.” By using school and community issues, she believed that her students were more engaged in the curriculum and thinking about the process of solving problems.

All three participants argued that the implementation of problem-posing pushed them towards integrating curriculum from other content areas. Ms. Carter noted her math class was discussing social issues and making connections across other content areas quickly after implementing problem-posing pedagogy. Ms. Owens described projects in her social studies class that incorporated mathematics and science. For example, Ms. Owens reported that one of her students connected poverty with cost-of-living calculations. She stated that the young man decided to use his new knowledge to research how cost-of-living calculations take place in different states.

Ms. Bowen argued for problem-posing pedagogy because she believed that the desired characteristics of her class matched the characteristics of problem-posing pedagogy. Ms. Owens and Ms. Carter also believed the same. The only characteristic that Ms. Owens questioned from the three was the idea that problem-posing pedagogy was student-centered. Ms. Owens stated that, at times, she believed problem-posing focused on the community issues and problems rather than the students. She noted that Beane provided the student-centered curriculum through the idea of democratic classrooms using student ideas and suggestions to drive the curriculum. Ms. Owens did not think that this was the case at all times with Freire's problem-posing. In the end, Ms. Owens stated, "I incorporated Freire's idea of community and thought-provoking through questioning, but I also used Beane's student-centered approach to find my own place in pedagogy. Ultimately, this is what teaching is about: finding your own place in pedagogy."

Participants described an increase in student desire to serve the community with the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy. Participants asked students to think deeply about community issues, and students responded by questioning participants about next steps for helping solve some of the community issues. Ms. Bowen noted that students are always "looking



for ways to be a solution to a problem. Middle school students just have this type of heart.”

Participants noted an increase in desire for students to get involved in service activities. When asked about the possibility of using problem-posing pedagogy as method for increasing service-learning at Morris Middle, participants agreed that activities needed to be planned with students, but planning on the front-end needed to happen with school leaders before approaching the subject with students.

All three participants noted that the depth of questioning changed during their experience with problem-posing. The change in questioning created a classroom where students were constantly thinking deeply about different issues. Ms. Carter argued, “Becoming a facilitator rather than a lecturer allowed me to have time to think about the questions that I asked my students.” Ms. Owens agreed and commented, “My classroom is now a place where students expect to be asked questions which challenge their beliefs and thinking.”

**Problem-posing equals relevance.** Ms. Bowen expressed her frustration with the difficulty in connecting students to the curriculum from the start of the study. At one point, she commented:

Well what is going to engage a sixth grader in math? I mean, surface area certainly is not...and volume, fractions, or decimals. But for a sixth grader, I mean what is relevant in a sixth grader’s life? What’s relevant in their life and what they are ready to learn? When I bank, I feel like students are not connected with the curriculum. I used the community issues of county economy, water issues, and school budget to provide a chance for my students to problem-pose. From the start, they were engaged because of the connection.

Ms. Bowen shared her feelings about implementing what she called a “problem-posing project” compared to using just the day-to-day banking method during a participant group discussion. When questioned about the project, she noted that connecting students to curriculum through personal issues is more effective than teaching subjects and concepts in isolation. The difficulty of this type of instruction is the time that it takes to prepare these types of lessons, but in the end, she stated that it was worth the effort. She did say that the problem-posing projects seemed to be more of a time issue before the start of the project than during the development and organizing phases. Ms. Bowen commented, “The planning at the beginning of the project allowed me more time during the class to facilitate instead of stand at the board and work problems.” Ms. Owens expressed this frustration during one of the final participant discussions:

I feel like the problem with the projects I have done in the past is that students get so worried about what the product looks like that they miss out on the learning that I’m wanting to take place. They get so worried about their display board, not realizing that I’m more concerned about their summary, the write-up, and the actual learning that was supposed to be communicated in their presentation...I’ve said so many times that the students focus on the cuteness of the project while failing to realize what they should be learning. Their display board is beautiful but the content is lacking. I’m concerned about their understanding of the content. I could care less about the attractiveness of the display board.

All three participants expressed a desire to help students see the relevance of the curriculum. Ms. Carter even noted “I want students to care more about understanding the content than just the act of playing the game of school.”

Mrs. Owens was concerned the curriculum and content had taken a backseat to the neatness of projects. This segment of the discussion led into the description of her classroom project. Mrs. Owens was working with students on African culture. First, she described the difficulty with the broadness of the curriculum, but she noted that the Georgia Performance Standards narrowed the content while focusing on simple recall facts. Ms. Owens further commented, “One would think that performance standards would push teachers toward problem-posing, but I feel like performance standards in social studies leads straight to the banking concept.” For her culminating project with Africa, Mrs. Owens noted that she wanted students to think critically while being engaged in the content. In examining past culminating projects involving Africa, Ms. Owens noted that all seemed to be “banking.” For this new project, she decided to open up the project to students’ thoughts and interests. Mrs. Owens allowed the students to choose an area of concern that they had regarding Africa. She worked with the students to set the parameters of the project. Quickly, Mrs. Owens noticed students working diligently on issues such as drinking water, poverty, corruption of government, healthcare, and more. She stated, “I’m extremely proud to see my students take on problems that affect large groups of people.” Mrs. Owens continued, “By allowing students to choose and serve as a member of the curriculum-producing process, my students are as involved as ever. I guess all they needed was a connection to the curriculum.”

**Being patient with a sense of urgency for relevant teaching.** One of the aspects of problem-posing that seemed to surprise the participants was the need to remain patient with students during discussions or class time while also trying to create a sense of urgency. For example, Ms. Owens shared an example of this during one of our participant discussions by saying, “I started the lesson out with the topic of poverty, and I asked them to report what they

knew about the topic.” After asking the question, Ms. Owens stated that a number of the students did not want to discuss the topic because they claimed poverty was a result of people not wanting to work. Knowing this was a very narrow-minded view of the topic of poverty, she shared, “Earlier in my career, I would have just let them off the hook and not made them participate.” In this instance, she noted that she remained patient with them regarding the topic, but she worked extremely hard to help them understand that poverty is not always, and not even most of the time, a result of someone choosing not to work. Ms. Bowen chirped in and said, “Just think, with the banking concept, there is no need to think quickly and critically about pedagogy because the teacher is just telling students how it is.”

After stopping and reflecting, Ms. Owens told the group that she helped the students understand the different levels of poverty not by telling them as the teacher, but instead, she placed the students in new groups where students who understood the poverty situation could help educate the other students. During the final interview with Ms. Owens, the researcher asked her, “What is the most important thing that you have learned from your students?” Mrs. Owens replied, “I’ve learned that I must be patient but also have a sense of urgency in there somewhere.”

**Role of public schools.** Ms. Carter stated in the final interview that, “my view of the role of public schools has changed completely after reading and reflecting on Beane, Freire, and Shor. I never realized that our most important role is to teach students to think critically as productive citizens.” Ms. Carter noted her number of years of experience as a public school educator had probably jaded her view of this important role. She commented, “I always read on mission and vision statements about productive citizens, but our practice as public schools has lately been about AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress], not preparing thoughtful citizens.” When

Ms. Owens was asked about the role of public schools in her final interview, and she shared, “I believe the role of public schools is multi-faceted, but I really think educators have a different perspective than the media and general public. Most educators see the big picture. Others just see test scores and dropout rates.”

After participating in the readings and discussions, Ms. Owens noted that her perspective had broadened, especially as it relates to the purpose of public schools. She stated, “Public school education needs to be focused on students, and problem-posing pedagogy provides us as teachers with this chance to make a difference for students.” Ms. Carter noted that problem-posing pedagogy provides an excellent opportunity to help students develop into critical, community-minded citizens. Ms. Carter said, “Freire was right. If we bank, then we limit our ability to help students think. By problem-posing, we open up the opportunity for them to learn for themselves about their own individual school or community.”

### **Opportunities**

Along with examining pre- and post-study perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy, the researcher also noted the opportunities and barriers that surfaced as the three participants began to implement the philosophy of problem-posing pedagogy into the classroom. Many of the opportunities and barriers are mentioned in the perceptions section of the chapter, but the opportunities and barriers that resonated across all three participants are included in this section. The opportunities that come with implementing problem-posing pedagogy include an increased depth of student learning, a new role for students, and a chance to facilitate.

**An increased depth of student learning.** Ms. Carter noted during her final one-on-one interview, “When I bank, I cover the surface-level of the topic. When we problem-pose, we get our hands dirty and really play with the content.” She shared the example of her class working

with percentages and fractions through worksheets and practice problems compared to the activity this year looking at poverty in the areas surrounding Morris Middle School. In previous years, the students were asked to work problems based on the examples that Ms. Carter had developed at the beginning of class. Ms. Carter noted that her participation in class was much higher when students were asked to think about poverty within the context of the mathematics classroom. She stated, “Students usually learn mathematics only in a math classroom. Now with problem-posing, we can combine social, environmental, and community issues to help reach multiple goals.” Ms. Carter believed that the depth of student learning was greater due to the increased engagement of using an issue like poverty to help students see the real-world connection.

In her social studies class, Ms. Owens noted “I believe programs such as PowerPoint and the way that they are used have contributed to the banking concept.” When questioned about this, Ms. Owens explained:

I guess it is because of the nature of PowerPoint, but it seems like to me that presentations like this by the teacher are simply banking. It takes more time to plan the engaging hands-on lessons, but it is easier to present a PowerPoint. I think PowerPoint has provided an easy way out for teachers. They argue that they are implementing technology, but most times, it is a glorified overhead projector. It is the way that you use it. It is not simply if you are using it or not.

By using problem-posing pedagogy, Ms. Owens argued that it goes away from being teacher-centered with the PowerPoint presentations to a classroom where students are doing the work. Students conduct the research on the problems, question the motivation of the people involved, compile the data, and use this information to educate others.

During this same group discussion, Ms. Bowen noted, “It is the same thing that Freire discusses with the role of teacher and student. In a problem-posing situation, the teacher and the student switch often.” In both of their experiences, Ms. Bowen and Ms. Owens stated that they believed the biggest opportunity with adopting a problem-posing philosophy was the chance to push students and help them understand the concepts on a deeper level. Ms. Owens argued, “Clearly, if I just lecture the students, then they only know what I know or parts of what I know. If I give them the keys to the car, then the places they can and will go are undetermined. They can push themselves as far as they want to go.”

**A new role for students.** Freire (1970/2000) stated:

It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited to them. (p. 73)

Ms. Carter commented that, “I now realize what Freire was trying to say. He wanted us as teachers to provide students with opportunities to teach students to think as individuals in the world.” Ms. Carter went on to say that she believed that if all students were exposed to a problem-posing type education, then the world would be a more-thoughtful, progressive society. Ms. Owens noted, “When students only hear what we tell them, and they are not asked to think for themselves, then they are adaptable and manageable to what I as the teacher say.” Ms. Bowen questioned, “Then does that mean because I bank then I oppress my students?” Ms. Owens

commented, “I believe that you might not oppress them as individuals, but you oppress their thinking.” Ms. Carter questioned, “Do you really think that you can oppress someone’s thinking without oppressing them as an individual?”

I asked the participants to compare the role of the student in the banking classroom and the problem-posing classroom. Ms. Owens stated, “The role of the student in a problem-posing classroom is an active participant in creating, thinking, and developing an understanding of the content.” Ms. Bowen agreed and added, “Students in the banking concept are being asked to sit, listen, memorize, and recite facts to show comprehension.” Ms. Carter voiced that, “The banking concept versus problem-posing is evident when looking at Bloom’s taxonomy. Problem-posing is at the top of the pyramid while the banking concept is at the lowly knowledge or comprehension level.” It was clear from the discussion that the participants wanted students to think at high levels, but they also commented often about the amount of time and effort needed to provide problem-posing type lessons on a daily basis.

Freire (1970/2000) described the teacher-student relationship as one based on narration. He noted that, “The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power” (p. 71). After reading this sentence, the participants stated that they felt as if standards and the standards-based movement had pushed teachers toward offering a narrative education. Ms. Carter pointed out that she agreed with Freire’s (1970/2000) assertion that the best teachers in a banking concept classroom happened to be the ones that, “completely filled the receptacles” (p. 72). Ms. Owens exclaimed to the group that Freire wanted teachers and students to serve both roles in problem-posing. Ms. Bowen suggested that the worldview of a banking concept teacher is as Freire (1970/2000) described, “reality as if it were



motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (p.71). Ms. Owens added, “Then I guess that the teacher’s view of the role of the student is a major contributor in a teacher’s effort to either bank or problem-pose.”

Ms. Carter argued, “I guess then it is our responsibility to problem-pose with our students and help change the role of students. They need to move from the passive state to the active state. The way that we teach can change this.” All three participants agreed that problem-posing pedagogy provided an opportunity for them to help discuss, challenge, and potentially change the role of the student in their classroom. Ms. Bowen finished the discussion by stating, “Most students seem to want to be passive in the classroom, but I think that this is a result of the history of the role of students. We can change this by moving towards a more collaborative classroom.” Ms. Owens interjected, “By changing the role of the student based on the teacher’s pedagogy, one could change the face of teaching and learning.”

**A chance to facilitate instruction rather than dictate.** In the final interview, Ms. Bowen commented, “The opportunity that I appreciated the most with problem-posing was the chance that I had to facilitate.” Ms. Bowen went on to say that she had always been what Freire would say is a “narrating Subject.” She noted that she wanted to move away from this role to the role of a facilitator, but she stated:

It takes an extreme look into pedagogy and the role of teacher to think about changing your teaching philosophy. My teaching philosophy continues to evolve, but problem-posing pedagogy gave me a chance to move from the narrating Subject to a facilitator. The difficulty in this move is that it is a change in philosophy that is much different than the current climate and culture of teaching. Most teachers are the narrating Subject because of a laundry list of historical pieces, the current accountability measures in place,

the difficulty of trying new lessons, the challenge of classroom management when facilitating, and the list could go on and on. The thing that implementing a problem-posing philosophy allowed me to take on was this role of facilitator. The problem is that everyone does not have some of the things that I had. Everyone does not have a group to discuss the issues and challenges. Everyone does not have a supportive administration. Everyone does not have all of these things. These type things make a difference.

Based on Ms. Bowen's comments about facilitating, the group discussions provided her with an outlet to discuss her experiences with implementation. The ability to discuss similar challenges with others was helpful for each of the participants as they worked towards being a facilitator.

Ms. Carter echoed similar sentiment in her final interview. She noted that trying to become a facilitator taught her the difficulty of delegating. Ms. Carter stated, "It is almost like a parent watching your kid going away to college. You hope that they have learned everything, but part of the difficulty of the process is knowing that they have not." Ms. Carter even compared the facilitating part of the classroom to the difficulty of an administrator delegating. Ms. Carter commented, "I'm sure for administrators it would be easier just to tell everyone how it is going to be rather than trying to facilitate the group coming to some type of consensus. I'm sure that the administrators at times just want to bank also. It is always easier on the front end."

Ms. Owens noted the chance to work as a facilitator provided her the opportunity to differentiate her work with students. As a banker, she noted, "It seems like everyone gets the same thing. As a facilitator, everyone gets something a little bit different. This is exciting as well as tiring." Ms. Owens stated that she recognized by facilitating she had the chance to watch her students interact with each other and the curriculum in different ways. This experience led her to

believe that by problem-posing, she provided her students a chance to learn to collaborate and innovate. Then Ms. Owens noted, “Look at all of the successful companies today. They all problem-pose, facilitate, and collaborate.”

## **Barriers**

A number of different barriers surfaced that participants believe limited or prohibited their ability to implement problem-posing pedagogy. The participants expressed their frustration with the barriers at various times throughout the study, but each participant in the final interview agreed that all of the barriers identified definitely contributed in one way or another to making it difficult to implement problem-posing pedagogy. The following barriers were identified: administration; curriculum; history of classrooms and teachers; time; standardized testing; and teacher professional development and pre-service training. In the following sections, the participants’ reasoning for noting each as a barrier is presented.

**Administration.** It was clear from the first discussion about pedagogy that the group of participants perceived that school administrators were a barrier toward implementing a different philosophy toward teaching and learning. Even during the first discussion with each participant about the possibility of taking part in the study, each teacher questioned whether or not the administrators had knowledge about Freire and the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy into their classrooms. They wanted to make sure the study had been approved, and they had the support of the administration before agreeing to participate in the study. Ms. Carter seemed serious when she said this during one of our participant discussions:

The main reason that I feel comfortable trying to implement problem-posing is because you have taken the time to discuss with my administrator. Otherwise, I do not feel

comfortable trying something as innovative as problem-posing. This is scary stuff when you think that your job depends specifically on student achievement as measured by a single standardized assessment.

The researcher started to laugh because he thought that she could not be serious. However, as it turned out, all three participants agreed that they did not feel comfortable trying new strategies due to the constant pressure and fear that comes with faltering in front of school administrators. The researcher asked if any of the participants had been chastised for trying something new or messing up in front of an administrator with an ineffective lesson, and none of them had experienced this. Instead, they commented quickly that other teachers had told them about times during their teaching career when administrators had criticized them for trying out new or progressive strategies. Then, Ms. Owens replied with this thought:

What happens if you have an evaluator who was a bad teacher? In the past, we have had administrators who were not effective teachers so...they are evaluating what is supposed to be effective teaching when they were not effective as a teacher. This makes it extremely difficult when you do not trust the evaluator or possibly the evaluation tool.

All three participants noted the subjectivity that can accompany teacher observations because as Ms. Bowen stated “I love it that I can be evaluated for an entire year on a 20-minute observation based upon an administrator that taught PE or even better never taught.”

The barrier of administration was discussed throughout the study because at the beginning of each participant group session, the researcher and the participants would discuss attempts to implement problem-posing practices. During each of these times, participants complained of new initiatives set in place by school-level, district-level, state-level, and national educational administrators and politicians. For example, at the school level, the participants

complained of a new program put in place to provide extra time for remediation. The participants felt like the program was put into place to assure that a certain number of the students, less than 10%, would pass the end-of-the-year standardized test to make adequate yearly progress, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). Ms. Owens summed it up best when she stated:

Our administrators set up this 30 minutes each day for remediation but for the 90% of our students that don't need remediating, they are just sitting during this time doing homework or reading a book where as our kids could really get involved in the communities, do a lot of community-based activities, a lot of service projects cause I think our kids could really benefit from some service projects cause they don't realize the needs that are in our county or surrounding counties. This is really a waste of time and energy. Instead, we could be focusing on the community and pushing our students to be creative and think outside of the box.

The remediation was an example of a school-level decision made by administrators that teachers within Morris Middle School felt created an environment that limited their ability to implement any new type of teaching and learning philosophy. The participants definitely did not discriminate because they also complained about policies and rules created by administrators at the state level. Ms. Bowen commented on this during the second participant group session:

That's where there's the biggest disconnect in education, is you have the theories and these wonderful ideas that are great, that are made by all these people that are at the state level or you know in local level and they're so disconnected from application that there is just no, there's no way that all these great things can take place in the classroom because the application is so different than theories.

Participants complained that many major decisions being made currently in education are being made by people away from students and classrooms.

Participants also discussed some teachers using administration as an excuse for not trying out new ideas or ways of engaging students. Instead of possibly implementing something new, the participants said that they have seen other teachers use the excuse of “my administration will not support this” without even asking administrators what they thought about it. In these cases, teachers are either afraid to try something new or possibly too lazy. Participants stated that they had seen both cases at Morris, but they hoped that collaboration within the school would help push teachers to try new ways of engaging middle school students.

The researcher also included teacher evaluation under the administration barrier because the participants discussed the issue of teacher evaluation that limits their ability to be creative and to push the limits with regard to pedagogy. Ms. Owens even commented that she felt like, “teachers that are doing their job are being pulled down by teachers that aren’t. All of the policies for teacher evaluation are being put in place because there are people that are not doing their job.” Ms. Owens argued that due to new teacher evaluation systems, the time that teachers were given for planning, organizing, and developing thought-provoking lessons was going by the wayside due to the amount of time that must be spent on checking off boxes for new teacher evaluation systems.

All of the participants argued for differentiated evaluation systems that treat teachers individually based on previous performance, years of experience, student feedback, parent surveys, and overall performance of teachers. They believed using this type of system would help provide the effective teachers with more time to push the limit and to implement philosophies like problem-posing pedagogy into their classrooms. The major issue they saw that

would develop with differentiated evaluation systems was the lack of backbone from some administrators. They felt like administrators would treat everyone the same, and this would just create another ineffective teacher evaluation system. As Ms. Carter put it, “The evaluator makes or breaks the evaluation system.”

**Curriculum.** “Depending on the way that the teacher interprets it, standards-based instruction in many ways is the banking concept of education that Freire despises,” Ms. Owens said during a participant group meeting. The researcher stopped the conversation because the group needed to investigate this idea fully. Each of the participants agreed that they thought the idea of standards-based instruction hurt teacher autonomy and creativity in schools. As soon as the researcher heard this, he challenged them to collect specific examples from their classrooms of when standards-based instruction hindered their ability to implement a problem-posing pedagogy between that meeting and the next meeting. Before the researcher could make the request, Ms. Owens piped up and stated, “Have you ever looked over the standards for 6<sup>th</sup> grade social studies in Georgia? Those standards are so narrow and fact-based that it makes it extremely difficult for anyone to do anything thought-provoking and problem-based.” Ms. Bowen joined the conversation and said:

With the strain of the curriculum and how much we have to teach and how fast we have to teach it, just with everything that’s expected of a student, that we’re expected to impose upon our children so it’s kind of handed down to us as a banking concept. And then to make a shift in the classroom is very, very difficult.

Ms. Owen noted that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade standards across all of the content areas do not provide any opportunities for students and teachers to connect the content to their personal lives and community. The social studies curriculum specifically focuses on Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Math is a combination of volume, surface area, area, fractions, and decimals. Science is mostly geology with a little bit of geography scattered into the subject. Language arts have the broadest set of standards, but it is still difficult to incorporate community and individual understanding into this content curriculum. With that said, relevance becomes a major issue in the curriculum barrier due to the specificity of the state standards. Ms. Carter mentioned relevance when her class attempted to tackle equations and surface area by commenting:

I mean I feel like when kids come in my room, and we're talking about equations and I don't have real life examples for every problem I'm giving them, then they don't make the connection that eventually down the road they might use it. I think some parts of our curriculum are applicable but a lot of stuff, surface area...why do they care about surface area? They just see it as a means to an end.

Ms. Bowen echoed the comments by Ms. Carter, and she expressed a lack of desire on many of the students' behalf to understand why equations work the way that they do. Ms. Bowen commented, "My students just want me to give them the algorithm instead of teaching them the reasons why it mathematically makes sense and works." Ms. Bowen then asked the group if they thought students were unmotivated and lazy or if the lack of relevance causes students to lose their desire to be able to fully understand things. The other two participants felt like it was the lack of relevance causing students to just want the easy way out of the work.

It was clear from the participants that within the curriculum, relevance and time were major concerns. All three participants felt like the curriculum failed to connect to students' real lives. The researcher asked the participants if they thought students had been given the opportunity to study something this year that interested them. Ms. Carter stated that she would, "probably hit everybody's interest maybe once a year, if I'm lucky." Another participant



mentioned that the core content classes were not for student interest, and she mentioned that connection classes in the middle school should be used for relevance because very few students are connected to mathematics, science, social studies, or language arts due to the standards. Ms. Bowen responded with, “how sad that our students are not interested in our classes.” Ms. Owens mentioned that the lack of relevance creates a passive student. She stated that the standards are supposed to be performance standards, but she believes that the lack of relevance causes the standards to be passive standards, not performance standards. After making this statement, Ms. Owens shared that she does not trust her students to be active participants in their own learning by saying:

I don't think we're teaching them the get-up-and-go that they need. I mean in the real world, there's not always someone that has the solution for your problem. You can't go to the teacher and get your solution. You have to actively seek that out and we're not teaching them that. We're saying you have a problem, come to me and I'm gonna give you the answer. I don't think we're teaching active problem-solving. I don't trust my students to engage in critical and creative thinking because many of my students prefer the banking education. It's easier for them...there's a lot of work on both sides...It's a lot of preparation for the teacher. It's a lot of backing off and trusting them to do that but it's a lot on their side too.

Participants argued that a culture change should be expected for teachers implementing problem-posing pedagogy, but students must also expect and prepare for a culture change. Ms. Bowen noted, “problem-posing provides an opportunity for teachers and students to think each and every class period. Banking does not.”

Noting Beane's work (1990; 1997; 2005a) with curriculum planning with students, Ms. Carter felt that, "if students could have some say in the curriculum, they would, thrive. I think there's a real disconnect between what I teach and what's applicable in a sixth-grader's life." Ms. Owens replied with, "Yeah and by limiting knowledge and only giving what we deem as important or the Georgia standards, then we're oppressing the students from their potential and also withholding important information." It was clear from the discussion that all three participants were reflecting on Freire's belief that the banking concept limits thinking within students because of the oppressive nature of the teacher and student roles and relationship within this type of classroom.

The participants even questioned whether or not the Georgia Performance Standards were presented to them through the banking concept or problem-posing. The teachers agreed that most, if not all, of the work done at the state department of education was done through the banking concept. Even though this is the case, the participants agreed that teachers and students could still collaborate about important decisions, such as class rules and procedures, without being able to decide on the prescribed curriculum. Ms. Owens stated, "Obviously we can't make decisions about what they want to learn but there are ways in our classrooms that we could include students in collaboration about the ways that we could learn the possible topic, assessments, and classroom groups."

Along with the barrier that the preset curriculum creates, the participants also made it a point to show how the curriculum limits the opportunity to teach the standards with rigorous depth. One of the participants showed the contract from the school system, which stated the teacher was responsible for teaching all of the standards in their curriculum before the start of the standardized test at the end of the school year. At the end of a participant group session, the

researcher asked what the participants thought that students would do if they had a say in curriculum decisions. The researcher received this interesting response from Ms. Bowen: “I don’t think they know what it would be like to have input so it would definitely be a struggle. That would be a completely different paradigm. Do you think that we are ready for that?”

**History of classrooms and teachers.** Ms. Owens decided to bring up the historical perspective during one of our first participant group sessions because she thought that she would get pushback from students and parents if she tried to implement problem-posing. She said, “Part of the issue with trying to implement problem-posing pedagogy into a middle school classroom is that teachers have almost always worked under the banking concept, and the banking concept is expected by students, parents, and the community.” After hearing Ms. Owens describe the historical perspective, the researcher asked, “What percentage of today’s middle school teachers are bankers?” The participants all wrote down numbers over 90 percent. Then, the researcher asked, “What percentage of teachers in one-room schoolhouses were bankers?” The participants all reported numbers between 80 and 90 percent. This was extremely interesting because they felt like teachers in one-room schoolhouses had the autonomy to teach in any way that they saw fit. Ms. Bowen said, “Teachers in the one-room schoolhouses were not stuck with a rigid curriculum like we have today.” After hearing this information, the researcher asked the participants, “What percentage of your teachers in middle school or junior high were bankers?” They all responded with 100 percent. Ms. Carter said, “This is the problem. We have not seen problem-posing pedagogy in practice. We can discuss it until we are blue in the face. I need to see it being done by a middle school teacher under the same rules as me.” Ms. Owens responded:

How do you and this is because I’ve just never been in a problem posing classroom, but how would you make situations relevant to all students? Is it possible in a classroom or in

a day where I teach 100 students? I just think it'd be enormous amount of time that would have to be spent in order to be able to meet those types of demands.

In her statement, Ms. Owens combined a number of the different barriers, such as the historical perspective and the issue of time, facing a middle school teacher attempting to implement problem-posing pedagogy.

A barrier described by each participant in the final interview was the difficulty with changing practices in the classroom because of the historical expectations of teachers. Ms. Carter spoke about the feedback she received from one of her students early in the process by sharing “The student asked why I wasn’t completely explaining the algorithm. I told her that I wanted the students to understand the process.” When Ms. Carter arrived at school the next morning, she described an e-mail from the student’s parents wanting to know why she was not willing to show students how the algorithm works. At the end of the e-mail, the parent even mentioned that she learned the algorithm in school and had no problem understanding the content. Ms. Carter noted that this situation was one specific instance, but she argued other parents had the same concern with the new role for the teacher and students. Ms. Carter described her process with problem-posing as successful, but she also stated, “I felt like I was walking uphill the entire time. Barriers here. Barriers there. For me, it was difficult to push back against students who were asking for things to be the old way.”

**Time.** “During this study, I’ve definitely grown to appreciate problem-posing pedagogy, but I think it would definitely be a daunting if not impossible task for anyone to expect a middle school teacher to do this on a daily basis,” Ms. Bowen commented, directly before she just said the word “time” in her final interview. Time is definitely a barrier that was discussed heavily throughout the study. The participants mentioned a lack of time with regard to planning time for

the teachers, class time with the students, and the curriculum pacing guide. In each group discussion, participants would talk about the length of time that problem-posing pedagogy takes compared to the banking concept. Ms. Owens said this after attempting to implement a new idea, “It is so much easier to bank on the part of the teacher. Problem-posing presents new challenges to teachers. You must be able to work well on your feet; otherwise, the students are going to run over you.”

After a comment was made that student creativity should be a function of a problem-posing process, Ms. Carter reminded the group that

Everything is driven by curriculum. When do we have time to do that? I mean...any opportunity that I can allow for creativity is not gonna be a lengthy opportunity. I may get a day in and say, “Well you’ve gotta finish this at home because we’ve gotta go go go go go.” I mean we just push kids so so hard, especially the gifted, the accelerated learner. There’s no time for any depth in the curriculum, none cause we’re just pushing so hard to get so much in.

Throughout the study, each of the participants discussed their feelings of inadequacy due to a lack of time. With some teachers, the researcher could see where time management could have been the reason for a teacher feeling this way, but in this case, the researcher felt like each of the participants was using their time wisely. It did seem like they did not have enough time to complete all of the tasks that were being expected of them during a 50-hour work-week. The researcher asked for a list of issues that were constricting their time. The list was extensive and included some of these items: Pyramid of Intervention meetings; Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings; content meetings, grade-level meetings, leadership team meetings, team leader meetings; hospitality committee meetings; regular parent-teacher meetings;

standards-based grading committee meetings; school council meetings; parent-teacher organization (PTO) meetings; coaching an athletic team meetings and events; grading and providing students with feedback; keeping website and blogs updated; and so on. As the researcher looked over the list, it was clear that planning time for teachers continues to diminish because of meetings and other demands. Ms. Owens even suggested:

It seems like there is always so much to do, but I never have enough time to get everything done. I worked on planning my weekly lessons this week through the eyes of a problem-posing teacher, and it took me 6 hours on Sunday. It is easier just to bank.

**Standardized testing.** When the researcher met with each participant for the first time to discuss the possibility of joining in the study, each participant asked the same question, “Do you think that this is going to hurt my CRCT (Georgia K-8 standardized test) scores?” It was clear that all three teachers were extremely concerned about the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy if there would be a negative effect on their standardized test scores. Even while discussing the study with other teachers and administrators, the question regarding standardized test scores always seems to come to the surface.

Before the first participant group meeting, the researcher asked all of the participants to read the second chapter of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* so that we could discuss it as a group. The researcher asked the participants at the beginning of the meeting to describe a time when they felt like they could provide a lesson that Freire would consider problem-posing. The response that Ms. Owens provided was quite telling:

I will say I would have to wait until after CRCT is over. I wouldn’t do something like this before then because I know that I have to get through with that curriculum in honesty. I

mean... would I like to do a problem-posing type lesson for every unit? Yeah. It'll be really nice to let them do that as far as the time and the restraints with standardized testing.

The researcher followed up this response with another question: "Do you think if we did away with standardized testing that more teachers would problem-pose?" Ms. Bowen answered with, "I think that the teachers who take a great deal of planning would probably do more problem-posing type lessons. The others would continue to bank. It's easier." Ms. Owens responded with, "Because of the way that we've been set up for high score testing, I don't know if there's a lot of wiggle room to be anything other than bankers."

After these two responses, the researcher followed up with another question. "What is the goal of public education?" Each teacher mentioned helping students become well-rounded citizens in their response, but all three participants said that they felt their goal for public education was different than Georgia's current goal. All three participants agreed that they felt like Georgia's goal for public education was to have all Georgia students pass the standardized tests in the spring of each year. To continue this discussion, Ms. Bowen asked the group, "If I'm teaching, values, citizenship skills, motivation and determination and creating a community setting, and my CRCT scores are lower, [and] then am I mediocre teacher?" Ms. Owens replied with, "It depends on who is doing the judging." The group laughed, but it was clear that the nervousness surrounding testing was felt by all of the participants.

At the first meeting with Ms. Carter, she asked if Freire would like the fact that she used CRCT review each Friday to make sure that students would be prepared for the standardized assessment in the spring. The researcher laughed because he knew Freire would argue that this type of instruction is a waste of time for the student as well as the teacher. By the end of the

study, Ms. Carter even argued that her use of CRCT on every Friday was, “definitely a waste of time and energy. I should be making my students think, not just memorize!”

**Teacher professional development and pre-service professional learning.** During the final participant group meeting, the researcher asked, “What do you think could help increase the number of public school teachers that use problem-posing pedagogy?” The researcher wanted the participants to look holistically at the system of education and possible ways that we could help our teachers engage more students. Ms. Owens piped up with a discussion about pre-service training and professional development:

You have to go back to teacher training. It has to be a mindset of teachers and it’s a total shift so you couldn’t take a traditional teacher out of a traditional classroom and expect them to teach using problem posing pedagogy. It’s not gonna happen so you have to go back to teacher training but then you have to clear the slate. You have to get teachers to change their paradigm. The only thing that most of us know, until now, is the banking concept. We’ve never seen problem-posing teachers.

Ms. Bowen responded that college professors needed to lead by example:

If you’re teaching a college class for pre-service teachers, then you have to lead by example so you have to teach those future teachers in a way that you expect them to teach. I know, I sat in so many education classes and was lectured to. In an education class, they didn’t use problem-posing type lessons...they just lectured the whole time and I thought is that the way they want me to teach? Of course it’s not but they lectured to me about differentiation and all this stuff but they never did it. So if you’re gonna implement in public school education, then you have to have problem posing pedagogy in that college classroom.



Pre-service training contributed to the progressiveness of Ms. Owens as a participant. The lack of progressive teaching methods in Ms. Carter's pre-service training contributed to her hesitancy in implementing problem-posing. Ms. Carter referenced this during a discussion by saying, "Since I've been out of pre-service training for so long, I'm definitely not as progressive as Ms. Owens or Ms. Bowen." She added that even though Ms. Owens and Ms. Bowen had participated in pre-service training in the past five years, more information and training could have been provided across the board to help teachers move away from the banking concept. Ms. Bowen and Ms. Owens agreed that even more could have been done to prepare them to problem-pose, but Ms. Bowen suggested that, "it is difficult to move away from the pack, and with problem-posing, you are stepping out on a limb." Ms. Owens agreed and said:

If one person is pushing towards problem posing or trying to give kids more choices and more opportunities in their learning to experience different things then if the rest of the teachers aren't doing similar things, then if their philosophy is a little bit different then it really negates and takes away from what one teacher's ability and confidence to problem-pose and be progressive.

Ms. Bowen added that she felt if more training would happen at the pre-service level, then the practice of problem-posing would become more accepted. Even then, Ms. Bowen commented that the historical nature of teaching would continue to push teachers to bank, but she noted, "We have got to start somewhere. It might as well be with our new teachers. This will have the most impact."

### **Summary of Findings**

This chapter provided the across-case findings of the study examining three research questions. The questions were: What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement

Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice? What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy? What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom? The chapter was divided into four sections based on the research questions: Initial feelings toward problem-posing; post-study perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy; opportunities that exist for teachers and students when problem-posing pedagogy was implemented; and barriers towards implementing problem-posing pedagogy. Each section provided themes that resonated for all three participants.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore three middle school teachers' perceptions of Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy as they worked to implement theory into practice. Along with examining initial and post-study perceptions, barriers and potential opportunities that might exist when implementing problem-posing pedagogy were explored. Three research questions guided the design and methods of the study.

- 1) What are the perceptions of teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy into practice?
- 2) What opportunities exist when teachers attempt to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?
- 3) What are the barriers facing teachers attempting to implement Freire's problem-posing pedagogy in a middle school classroom?

#### **Summary of the Research Design**

This study was designed as a qualitative-focused, collaborative action research study focusing on the work of three, middle-level teachers over an eight-month period. Collaborative action research focuses on a specific problem using the expertise of practitioners to investigate and collaborate to develop potential solutions (Gordon, 2008). The study was needed to help investigate potential ways that middle-level teachers can increase relevance and critical thinking within the classroom. All three participants represented Morris Middle School in the Jarrard County School District in Georgia. At the time of the study, the participants taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade

mathematics or social studies. The context of the study was critical in the overall success of the research because the researcher and participants were given autonomy to implement a progressive theory daily within their classrooms.

The theoretical framework used throughout this study to examine the data and its analysis was social reconstructionism. Social reconstructionists foundationally believe society is flawed, and education can and should be a solution for recreating a better society (Casas, 2011). Scholars identify Freire's work within social reconstructionism since much of his writing and many of his presentations identified social problems and looked for ways to change society through education (Casas, 2011; Leonardo, 2004). Fundamentally, problem-posing pedagogy is Freire's process for reconstructing society through pedagogy, and conversely, the banking concept illustrated Freire's belief that education can continue and even sustain certain cycles within society, especially those related to poverty.

In an effort to validate the findings, data were gathered from different sources. Data sources included the following:

1. Individual interviews with each participant at the beginning and end of the study
2. Eight participant group discussions including the researcher's field notes
3. Documents including descriptions of classroom activities as captured in lesson plans, e-mail discussions between the participants and the researcher, meeting agendas, and information documents (e.g., system and school demographic information, school mission statement, and test scores)

Data were analyzed through a systematic process of reviewing transcripts, creating codes aligned with research questions, and comprehensively reviewing documents. During all parts of data analysis, the researcher made an effort to review data as it related strictly to the research

questions. The researcher transcribed each interview and the participant group discussions. The transcripts were culled using codes found in the data and aligned with the research questions. The codes were grouped and reviewed for themes. The findings of the study began with the initial feelings toward problem-posing and moved into the themes that developed as the participants began implementing the theory into practice.

### **Overview of Findings**

The findings provided perspectives from the viewpoint of middle school teachers. Participants described their experience with the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy as positive, but participants also grappled with a variety of internal and external pressure throughout the process. As Ms. Owens noted, “I believe that we all want to do the right thing in our classrooms for our students, but balancing the right thing and not working 100-hours per week is difficult.” The researcher focused on the across-case findings but also provided information regarding each participant and her experience. The across-case findings are organized by the research questions that guided the study: participants’ initial and post-study feelings about implementing Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy into practice, barriers to implementation, and opportunities that support implementation.

The findings of the study, structured around themes based on the data, provided an opportunity to examine pre-study perceptions compared to post-study perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy. Within the findings about the participants’ initial feelings regarding problem-posing pedagogy, the themes included concern with the link between theory and practice in which the participants spoke of the tensions in these ways: “It’s easier to bank” and “Why change?” The teachers also worked together in the initial part of the study to develop a working definition of problem-posing pedagogy as they understood it.

Teachers described their initial feelings toward problem-posing pedagogy. The participants shared that they were willing to experiment and implement problem-posing pedagogy, but they were very hesitant about an overall philosophical change. Unsure of how to connect Freire's theory of teaching and learning, teachers expressed frustration toward understanding the process of implementing the theory into classroom practice. Even as the researcher met with each participant individually before the start of the study, every participant asked in various ways, the same question; "What does this look like in a middle school classroom?" The participants wanted a blueprint or guide to implement Freire's theory. Participants expressed hesitation and concern with the practicality of implementing Freire's work into today's classrooms. Participants also believed it was easier to serve as a teacher within the banking concept and questioned the rationale behind making a paradigm shift to problem-posing pedagogy.

For the post-study perceptions, the following themes emerged: student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking instruction; problem-posing equals relevance; patience with a sense of urgency for relevant teaching; and the role of public schools. Participants observed a number of changes within the process of implementing problem-posing pedagogy. The participants noted instruction changed from teacher-focused to student-focused. Along with this change, classes started to evolve into a place where community problems and issues became discussion topics and problem-solving opportunities. This change in focus allowed participants to probe and question student interests and beliefs, thus creating classrooms more relevant to young adolescents. Along with classroom changes, participants noted a need to sit back and allow student discussion and experimentation. Participants also described changes in

their view of the role of public schools. Instead of viewing schools as test-prep centers, participants noted a vision and understanding of the role of public schools.

Throughout the study, the teachers described a number of opportunities that emerged as they implemented problem-posing pedagogy, but the major themes that developed under opportunities include an increased depth of student learning; a new role for students; and a chance to facilitate instruction rather than dictate. Participants viewed problem-posing pedagogy as a process for helping organize lessons into “think-tank sessions.” The opportunities to open up discussion and collaboration among students and the participants helped increase depth of student learning based on the perceptions of participants. Along with adding rigor to the classroom, the implementation of problem-posing provided participants with the chance to change the role of students from one of memorizing and reciting to one of thinking and creating. Concurrently, the role of the teacher changed from a dictator of information to a facilitator. Participants noted tentativeness with the new roles, but quickly within the process, participants advocated for these changing roles.

Participants also discovered barriers along the way toward implementing a problem-posing philosophy into the classroom. The barriers included administration, curriculum, history of classrooms and teachers, time, standardized testing, teacher professional development, and pre-service training. Participants complained about the fear of school administration regarding observation and evaluation. School administrators never chastised one of the participants for classroom instruction, but participants claimed the described “fear” muffled some of their desired instructional changes. Participants contended state-adopted curriculum also stifled their ability to implement certain changes within their classroom teaching. Along with curriculum, participants expressed frustration when told by other teachers that “this is the way that it has

always been so this is the way that it needs to stay.” This historical argument by other teachers quelled the momentum of participants at times during implementation.

Participants also said a lack of time for planning and organizing served as a barrier towards fully implementing problem-posing pedagogy. The participants described standardized testing, specifically the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test, served as another barrier. Teachers felt as if the standardized test results were viewed as more important than the day-to-day classroom lessons. Participants noted that they dread reviewing standardized test results because as Ms. Owens described “what happens if I try something new with my instruction and students fail because of the changes. Knowing that my decision to change my ways of teaching could negatively impact students is a great deal of pressure.” Connecting with the history of classrooms, the participants noted the need for professional development and pre-service training to continue to evolve and help new and veteran teachers understand why and how to change in line with problem-posing pedagogy. Participants also advocated for higher education instructors and leaders of professional learning to model the type of instruction that is expected. Overall, participants noted positive results when implementing problem-posing pedagogy into their classrooms. Not surprisingly, participants did note a number of barriers, but the potential opportunities outweighed the barriers from the perspectives of the participants.

Using the themes as the framework, the rest of this chapter is organized to highlight current research and literature that connects with the findings within and across the identified themes. The chapter also contains recommendations for middle school educators, administrators, higher education professionals, and policymakers. Implications for future research are also discussed.



## Discussion

### Initial Feelings Toward Change

Within the findings about participants' initial feelings regarding problem-posing pedagogy, the three themes identified pointed toward hesitancy about the implementation of the theory of problem-posing pedagogy into the practice of a middle school classroom. The three themes that emerged include a concern with the link between theory and practice; "It's easier to bank;" and "Why change?" Because the themes are connected and focus on the hesitancy toward implementation, the themes were combined into one section.

Examining the research surrounding hesitancy toward change or implementation, it is clear that certain factors contribute to the reluctance of educators to change their practices. Dickinson (2001) argued that one of the aspects holding middle level education from matching its theoretical foundation to practice is a hesitancy to implement an integrated curriculum. Although problem-posing pedagogy and integrated curriculum are not one and the same, studies focused on the implementation of integrated curriculum show similar findings to this study of problem-posing pedagogy (Dickinson, 2001). Joyce and Showers (1983, 1995, 2002) noted similar findings in studies over an extended period of time relating professional learning to implementation. A variety of factors stifle the implementation of a pedagogical change. Joyce and Showers (2002) noted that implementation is the greatest challenge in any type of professional learning that involves training. Participants deserved the right to be hesitant since problem-posing pedagogy provided such a different viewpoint into the role of teacher and students.

Perhaps the hesitancy of the participants was in some way related to the increased demands for accountability. Studies show that teachers' efforts to resist changes are often

associated with internal and external demands based on increased instructional expectations (Hjelle, 2001; Wagner, 2001). Based on Levin's (2003) work in the area of teacher development, the resistance toward change and hesitancy from the participants is normal. Through time-consuming work with teachers in the form of case studies, Levin (2003) found that teachers must feel supported throughout the process in order to effectively change pedagogical beliefs. In this study, all three participants noted hesitancy with the work, but by the end of the study, all participants noted an appreciation of the philosophical change. When asked why they felt successful, all three participants highlighted the support of the group as helpful with the change.

The lack of teachers using an approach in keeping with problem-posing pedagogy within Morris Middle School caused hesitancy among participants when they discussed the possible implementation of problem-posing pedagogy. This sentiment was evident in the first group discussion when Ms. Carter questioned if middle school teachers were practicing problem-posing pedagogy. The lack of practical examples within the same building made the process of presenting and encouraging the practice of problem-posing difficult. It was as if the teachers wanted a blueprint for the correct way to implement fully problem-posing pedagogy into a middle school classroom just like theirs. Finally, participants were told that a blueprint did not exist and that they would have to experiment to find the way that worked best for each of them as they implemented problem-posing pedagogy.

Teacher stress was another area mentioned by participants. Two of the participants, Ms. Bowen and Ms. Owens, declared that the number of initiatives within Morris Middle School and Georgia's State Department of Education had created stress for Georgia's public school teachers. The stress caused teachers to resent many of the new initiatives from the school level as well as the state level. It has been noted that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations (Kyriacou,

2000). In a 2012 survey, 51% of teachers indicated that they were under great stress at least several days of the week (Metlife, 2013). This 51% is up from 36% in 1985 (Metlife, 2013). Many reasons have been discussed for the rise in teacher stress, but Brown and Ralph (2002) believed the rise in teacher stress could be traced back to the number of changes taking place within the education field. A rise in teacher stress could be linked to many different things including the introduction of the changes, the management of the changes, the speed of implementation, and the responsibility of the teachers with regard to the changes (Brown & Ralph, 2002). The resistance to change and the hesitancy on the part of the participants is noted, and the body of research within teacher stress sheds light in this study on the initial lack of excitement about adopting Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing pedagogy as the participants worked to implement new theory into practice.

Participants stated that the banking concept was easier on teachers than trying to implement a theory like problem-posing pedagogy. In the final interviews with participants, a comparison of the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy was requested. Participants articulated that banking was definitely easier, but teachers, according to Ms. Bowen "should not bank because it is easy, nor should teachers problem-pose simply because it is difficult. Teachers should review the goals for their students and then make decisions about instruction." Ms. Carter chimed in after Ms. Bowen and noted, "doing the right thing pedagogically speaking may not always be the easiest thing to pull off instructionally."

If implementing a philosophical change such as problem-posing is met with such resistance and comes with issues such as teacher stress, then why look at ways to implement problem-posing pedagogy? Freire's work provided the foundation to help answer this important question. As Brown (2005) stated, "Freire's work reveals the pressing need for educators to

examine, analyze, and deconstruct the multitude of educational reforms that surface to determine who benefits in the short run, and whose interests are served in the long run” (p. 156). It is essential for educators to think critically about reforms and initiatives that are supportive of students while also fulfilling the responsibility of schools (Noddings, 2007). Ms. Owen articulated her belief that “students must be pushed to think for themselves and the type of teaching needed for this to happen is extremely difficult. Like most things that are desirable, the road is not always paved and smooth.”

### **Post-Study Perceptions of Problem-Posing Pedagogy**

Although teachers met problem-posing with resistance at the beginning of the study, participants felt that the philosophy “on the whole” was powerful and helpful for students. For the post-study perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy, the following themes emerged: student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking instruction; problem-posing equals relevance; patience with a sense of urgency for relevant teaching; and the role of public schools.

**Student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking instruction.** When asked to describe the philosophy of problem-posing at the conclusion of the study, the participants decided on three characteristics: student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking. It was interesting that all of the characteristics involved the hyphen Freire made famous with his examination into theory-practice and teacher-student.

The participants stated that problem-posing pushed each of them toward integrating the curriculum as much as possible. Participants described this push toward integration as a push toward using student knowledge to help create lessons and assessments. This push created classrooms not focused directly on the content of the class but on students and their interests. Recently within middle level education, Springer’s (1994, 2006) work with integrated

curriculum served as an excellent resource for participants to review. With this shift to integrated curriculum, participants described a classroom more connected with students and a classroom connected with the community.

The characteristic of community-oriented was not a surprise since participants had discussed the need to connect service-learning with classroom pedagogy. Participants noted Freire's decision to connect local community problems with pedagogy. Participants advocated for increasing the connection to community within the curriculum, but all three participants complained of the barriers standing in the way of implementation. For example, participants mentioned that it would be nice to serve at the local food bank, but time and the need to cover content did not support this endeavor. Another aspect of incorporating service-learning into the classroom was the amount of work involved in planning and organizing this type of instruction and associated activities. Participants resisted the frequent use of service-learning as an instructional practice because of the barriers, but all three participants stated that service-learning is the type of pedagogy desired by Freire (1970/2000).

One of the purposes of this study was to explore ways to increase critical thinking among young adolescents. When participants described problem-posing pedagogy as thought-provoking, each participant noted that the use of community issues created a classroom culture where students started questioning the world around them. Democratic classrooms provide this type of classroom culture mixed with the critical thinking that should be expected. Based on the perspectives of the participants, democratic classrooms help provide another structure and philosophy working toward problem-posing. Participants even said that a teacher using a democratic approach and a teacher practicing problem-posing pedagogy in many ways are one in the same.

In connecting the best practices, it is critical to note the importance of the synergy created by combining best practices. Jackson and Davis (2000) provided an excellent representation of this synergy in the *Turning Points 2000* design with a figure of the elements needed in a middle school to “ensure success for every student” (p. 25). Examples of elements included items such as the “use [of] instructional methods that prepare all students to achieve high standards” and the ability to “organize relationships for learning” (p. 25). Jackson and Davis (2000) made it a point to state the importance of the interactions of all of the elements. There is no doubt that individual best practices are essential, but the incorporation of multiple best practices provides a classroom that is student-centered, community-oriented, and thought-provoking.

**Problem-posing equals relevance.** A term that continually surfaced in the discussions with the participants was the term *relevance*. Participants noted within the discussions that they felt like the written curriculum was not always relevant to students or in the real world. For example, participants noted the box and whiskers plot as a part of the math curriculum that lacks any relevance to students and the real world. A box and whiskers plot is a statistical representation that highlights the middle set of the data. When questioned about the relevance of the box and whiskers plot, participants lacked the ability to describe the importance of the mathematics concept even though two of the participants had taught the concept in their classes. Although making curriculum relevant to young adolescents is critical for middle level teachers (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010), the participants failed to describe a time when students would use or see the box and whiskers plot in the real world.

With problem-posing pedagogy, participants found more ways to make the curriculum relevant not only to students but also in the real world. Also, the participants described problem-posing as a relevant process to students because the process of problem-posing changed the way

that the teachers looked at the curriculum, students, and the overall role of the teacher. When asked to describe what participants meant by using the term *relevant*, Ms. Owens stated that she believed problem-posing makes curriculum relevant to students because it is a problem within the community. Ms. Carter followed up by stating that relevant in her mind was the same thing as being connected. She noted that a problem-posing classroom is one connected to students and the community. Freire (1970/2000) emphasized that, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72). Freire (1970/2000) wanted the curriculum to be relevant to students as well as relevant to the community.

**Patience with a sense of urgency for relevant teaching.** In middle-level education, one of the most difficult parts of teaching young adolescents is learning to balance the academic needs of students with their affective needs (NMSA, 2010). It is essential for middle-level teachers to have an understanding of the social and emotional development of young adolescents (George, Lawrence, & Bushnell, 1998). This tension between pushing a young adolescent to think critically about a social issue such as hunger within his or her community when the young adolescent is experiencing tensions within him or herself has been and is still present within middle-level education. When Ms. Owens made the comment about having the need to be patient with a sense of urgency, she was attempting to articulate this on-going tension within the field of educating young adolescents.

In her observations with the Alpha team, Kuntz (2005) asked students and parents this question: What are good teachers? In both surveys, students and parents commented that good teachers are patient. Being patient and providing appropriate wait time is a characteristic of an excellent middle-level teacher because it shows an appreciation for the social and emotional

development of young adolescents (George et al., 1998). Along with being patient, all three participants noted a need for teachers to have a sense of urgency for providing relevant learning opportunities. Participants also argued for relevant learning opportunities to take place within every classroom.

**Role of schools.** Participants in the study noted a change in their beliefs about the role of schools after participating in the study. One of the participants, Ms. Carter, stated that through the readings and discussion, she now sees the main role of schools as one of helping students work toward becoming thoughtful, productive citizens. Ms. Carter singled out the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 and the part of the law called Adequate Yearly Progress as part of the reason for the lack of focus on the true mission for America's public schools. She also pointed to the media, politicians, and their affection for tests scores and focus on dropout rates. Within this vein, Schlechty (2002) argued:

America's schools have been designed to produce compliance and harvest engagement. If our schools are to succeed in the twenty-first century, they must be organized to nurture and develop engagement, just as they are now designed to produce compliance. Such changes will require dramatic alterations in the way teachers do their work as well as in the nature of the work students are expected to do. (p. 16)

Schools must look past compliance into developing students who can think critically and participate within society. Educators must reorganize the structure of school to push against the assembly-line model by creating opportunity and fostering innovation. Historically, Beane (2005a) pushed back against the common belief that schools were created to serve the business community or help the economy. Beane (2005a) stated that the main purpose of schools is to help students learn how to live within a democratic society. If this is the main purpose of public



schools, then Beane (2005a) declared that schools should align their practices with the purpose. Participants within this study started the process of questioning the purpose of public schools after they investigated their individual practices. Schools become more than assembly lines with problem-posing pedagogy as the theoretical foundation.

### **Opportunities**

Participants discovered a number of opportunities that came out of the implementation and practice of problem-posing pedagogy within their classrooms. The participants noted the opportunities with the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy were based on their comparisons of their previous instructional methods and pedagogy with their new use of problem-posing pedagogy. The opportunities with problem-posing pedagogy included an increased depth of student learning, a new role for students, and a chance to facilitate learning.

**An increased depth of student learning.** Sustained efforts of researchers have produced a large quantity of information and research findings on the topic of higher-order thinking skills (Higgins, Hall, Baumfield, & Moseley, 2005; Pogrow, 2005; Wenglinsky, 2004). For example, in a study of math and writing coursework, Newmann, Byrk, and Nagaoka (2001) found that students who received higher-level work scored better than their peers on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. In another study, Higgins et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis that showed providing students with opportunities to practice higher-order thinking skills increases student motivation as well as student achievement.

Participants noted an increased depth of student learning during the process of implementing and transforming their classrooms into problem-posing. The participants were not asked to provide quantitative data to explain their description of the increased depth of student learning, but the participants noted their students' ability to discuss and articulate the concepts in

greater depth and with more rigor. For example, Ms. Owens described the types of presentations that her students completed on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the effect of the trade on Georgia and the local community. She compared the rigor of the project with the multiple-choice examinations that she had used in prior years. Ms. Owens noted that her students' completed projects definitely provided evidence that problem-posing pedagogy helped push her students to a higher level of learning.

One of the participants, Ms. Owens, noted the need to prepare students for a different world, and she connected this attempt to prepare students for the unknown in the same way that the teacher must be prepared for the unknown when implementing problem-posing pedagogy. Ms. Owens commented that she could predict all banking concept lessons, but as soon as she started to problem-pose with her students, then the lesson was fluid and changing based on student knowledge and interests. When thinking about the curriculum being relevant to young adolescents, the use of community issues, and pedagogy focused on individual student interest, it makes sense that students would be more interested in the content thus resulting in an increased depth of student learning.

**A new role for students.** Participants saw a change in the role of students as they progressed with the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy. Students within a problem-posing class asked more questions, challenged peers, wrote critical pieces, and advocated for their beliefs. This change in roles was one of Freire's desires for problem-posing, and the change also helped students understand what it means to participate in a democratic society. This change was one of Beane's (2005a) wishes for public schools because, as Beane argued, democracy is not a passive process of sit, memorize, and repeat.

Goodlad (1984) asserted that for the most part, students spend their time in school either working on worksheets or listening to a lecture. The participants agreed that students in most middle school classes still sit passively while the teacher dictates the curriculum. Problem-posing pushed teachers and especially students to take on more active roles as true participants in the classrooms. As Goodlad (1984) sadly described, the most successful students are often the ones capable of playing the game of school by remembering specific dates, facts, and vocabulary words out of context. In the problem-posing classrooms, teachers found that students able to work together, collaborate, problem-solve, question, assume a role, think critically, apply, evaluate, and synthesize were more successful than the rote robotic rememberers.

Participants noted a change in the role of students while implementing problem-posing pedagogy. Freire (1970/2000) believed students need to be active participants in the learning process because, otherwise, students would become “lifeless and petrified” (p. 71). As noted by Jacobs (2011), the world continues to change and expectations of students must evolve with the changing world. Costa and Kallick (2010) agree that 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and teachers must undergo a paradigm shift from the passive transmission of information to a process of “meaning making” (p. 224). Participants expressed a positive change with students while implementing problem-posing pedagogy, but students, as well as parents, must be willing to change their beliefs about the role of students before widespread change will take place.

**A chance to facilitate instruction rather than dictate.** Participants noted the new role for students, but each one was quick to note that the role of the teacher also changed as each one implemented problem-posing pedagogy. One of the identified opportunities within the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy was the chance for teachers to facilitate instruction rather than dictate the content and process of the class. In *Breaking Ranks in the Middle:*

*Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform*, authors recommend that teachers facilitate instruction by designing high-quality work that engages students in important tasks (NASSP, 2006). Beane (1993, 2005a) and Shor (1992, 1996) articulated a need for teachers to empower students and, as a result, students take more responsibility in their classes. The push to provide students with opportunities to be leaders within the classroom grants teachers with the chance to facilitate instruction rather than dictate information (Shor, 1996).

Participants asked this question throughout the study: What does this look like in the classroom? An excellent example shared by the researcher with the participants came from Patrick Inglis's 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class (Inglis & Willinsky, 2006). Patrick melded the work of his students with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and provided students with the chance to visit to the local soup kitchen. Inglis used his instructional time and discussion about the book to teach a number of different concepts including plot development, dialogue, and the need to be specific when telling a story. Using the book and his main teaching concepts, Inglis also used the book to discuss social topics such as racism, poverty, and class. The lesson and the service-learning activity of working at the soup kitchen provided the class with an opportunity to connect the fictional story with the practical reality of society. It was at that moment when students started to see their purpose as concerned and caring citizens that the true purpose of public schools manifested itself in the work of Mr. Inglis. In a description of his work, Inglis and Willinsky described the efforts.

It makes perfect sense that something as full and rich with contested and contingent meanings, and as often troubled and discouraging, as *democracy* should be capable of supporting a wide variety of theories and practices. It falls to practical, critical educators to push against all possibilities and prospects of the current range of theorists in pursuit of

those democratic moments in which the world appears to have become a better place. It is not that we imagine that we are without prejudices and theories. Those we do favor are part, after all, of the originating impulse behind the soup kitchens of democracy. For that reason alone, there can be no finer place to begin to share and develop an understanding of this form of governing by the people and for the people. (Inglis & Willinsky, 2006, p. 48)

Teachers must be creative and thoughtful as they plan for ways to help students learn the content of the class and other skills needed to be a productive member of a democratic society. The change in classrooms necessitates a new role for teachers.

Beane noted this change in role from “disseminator of knowledge and holder of knowledge” to “facilitator” (1993, p. 88). Beane contended that teachers are hesitant to relinquish what they see as their power in the classroom by allowing students to explore a new active role. Problem-posing helped participants work through these issues, but as Beane (1993) stated by letting go of this control “the teacher becomes even more powerful” to students (p. 89). Ms. Bowen articulated this tension in our third group meeting: “I am having trouble with turning over my power as the teacher. Facilitating takes so much more time than just telling them, but I know they need to discover it.” Ms. Owens agreed, “The control lies with me, and I don’t know that I’m ready to give this up to the students. But I know it is the right thing to do, but just because it is right does not make it easy.”

## **Barriers**

Along with a number of opportunities that came out of the implementation of problem-posing pedagogy, participants also identified barriers that prevented or stifled the

implementation. The barriers included administration, curriculum, history of classrooms and teachers, time, standardized testing, teacher professional development, and pre-service training.

**Administration.** Participants mentioned that school administration, as well as administration at the state and federal level, can serve as a barrier toward implementation of a progressive pedagogy such as problem-posing. From the start of the study, participants wanted assurance that the administration of Morris Middle School had knowledge of the study and supported the implementation of problem-posing into practice. Participants also argued that continual changes in teacher evaluation stifle creativity within the classroom. Within the discussion surrounding teacher evaluation, Ms. Owens noted “Most teachers always resort back to their comfort place, which Freire would label as banking when observation time comes around.” Participants advocated for a differentiated evaluation system that would treat individual teachers differently based on their years of experience, previous evaluations, student feedback, parent surveys, and overall performance. Another critical piece of administrators as a barrier was Ms. Carter’s statement regarding individual administrators. In her view, it is not fair to speak in generalities about school administration because the field has quality administrators as well as poor ones. As Ms. Carter mentioned, finding the right, supportive administrators serve as one piece of the puzzle in removing school administration as a barrier toward creating environments where creativity and innovation are fostered—not silenced.

One of the foundational pieces for helping teachers view administrators as resources for support instead of barriers lies in the establishment of trust (Bottery, 2004). Busher (2006) noted the importance of building trust as new middle level administrators alongside of the need for school teams to work together collaboratively in building a climate and culture that supports innovation and change. Creating a school culture that fosters innovation takes time and a

concerted effort by school leaders to support classroom teachers (NASSP, 2006). All three participants agreed that trust exists between administration and teachers, but Ms. Bowen noted, “It always feels like teachers are paranoid that someone is out to get them. I can tell you that our administration thinks the three of us can teach, but we still worry for some reason.”

**Curriculum.** A barrier discussed often with participants was the written, standards-based curriculum. Participants claimed a lack of autonomy with regards to the Georgia Performance Standards, and they also noted curriculum changes such as common assessments continue to take away the opportunities for students to participate in problem-posing lessons. The participants collaboratively agreed that they believe standards limit the creativity of the instructor, but the participants indicated an apparent need for common curriculum because teachers would just teach what they wanted when they wanted without that common guidance.

One of the misconceptions with regards to curriculum is that the standards are the only curriculum. Many educators lack a broad vision of the definition of curriculum. Brown and Knowles (2007) provided middle level educators with a broad vision of curriculum by comparing what curriculum is to what curriculum is not. Educators must view curriculum as the entire school experience for students instead of the narrow view of just standards or textbooks (Brown & Knowles, 2007). If all educators would widen the scope of their definition of curriculum, then educators could perhaps create a shared understanding of what young adolescents should experience within schools.

Middle school educators also need to examine the process of combining content areas in the hopes of helping students see the importance of the content. Curriculum experts should continue to advocate for integrated curriculum within the middle school to help students see the connections and relevance of curriculum and school to the outside world. Classes that investigate

problems across traditional subject boundaries need to be explored, e.g., a course in humanities instead of continuing the practice of separating language arts and social studies. Programs such as the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program have already made the push to integrate curriculum (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013). A need for integrated curriculum must be recognized based on the practical work of Beane (1997a, 2005a) Shor (1987, 1992, 1993), and other progressive educators, but the research conducted in the 1930s with the Eight Year Study (Lipka et al., 1998) must also be reviewed.

Middle level educators have a blueprint for curriculum. Curriculum must be relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). A separate-subject curriculum based on the interests of adults is not able to fulfill the structural requirements of the middle level blueprint. As Brown and Knowles (2007) stated:

In a world that may appear contradictory and confusing, such a curriculum requires little student input and does not offer the challenging and integrative experiences that best engage them in learning. Textbooks rarely explore concepts or offer connections, often propagate the status quo, and typically present information from a White, male European point of view. The relevance that students crave, the challenge that they demand, and the connections that they require are difficult to find in such a curriculum. (p. 124)

When students participate in a relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory curriculum, they become critical thinkers.

A key barrier to a more integrated and relevant curriculum is a self-imposed barrier that seems at least partially attributable to the public's expectations for input and output with regards to public education. Members of the public should expect schools to teach students new skills and knowledge each day. Standards serve as the minimum bar for expectations, and a standards-



based curriculum must be viewed only as a *guide* for student learning expectations. Educators' interpretations about the perceived rigidity of curriculum is a barrier towards fully implementing problem-posing strategies each minute of the day, but the pedagogical freedom experienced by most teachers provides opportunities to overcome curriculum as a barrier. Ms. Carter noted, "Teachers have a chance to be creative and have autonomy. Sure, we have standards, but we cannot allow standards to hold us back from being creative teachers."

**History of classrooms and teachers.** One of the discussed barriers toward implementing problem-posing pedagogy was the history of classrooms and teachers. Participants believed that the majority of teachers practice the banking concept, thus making it difficult for other educators to implement philosophical changes within their own classrooms. Throughout the study, participants repeated the statement that "most teachers teach the way in which they were taught." Ms. Owens described the barrier of the history of classrooms and teachers as the barrier of "this is the way that we have always done it." Ms. Bowen stated that she felt as if "anyone looking to make significant changes in the way they teach is swimming upstream against the current."

During each participant group session, participants acknowledged a desire to push back against their perspective of historical and current models of education. For example, Ms. Carter stated, "Why can't I have more than just one stagnant block of time per day. Where is the flexibility?" Ms. Owens followed Ms. Carter and chimed in with, "Why do our communities and students expect us to just stand at the front of the class and deliver. Great teaching is about much more than standing and delivering." Ms. Bowen argued that, "Our students are ready for the changes in pedagogy and organization. Are the parents ready for this change? At the beginning of every school year, our parents want two things: an explanation of the grade book and a textbook." Participants often noted feeling like they were on an island because the teachers

around them banked on a daily basis. Ms. Carter stated, “When is being innovative going to be the norm? When I say innovative, I’m not talking about a program; instead, I want to know when teachers are going to start innovating their pedagogy.”

Our American society expects teachers to stand at the front of the class lecturing and directing students to complete assigned class work (Newman, 2006). A teacher practicing problem-posing pedagogy is not going to meet this expectation, and the teacher must be prepared to defend his or her pedagogy to parents and the community. As Ms. Bowen stated in her final interview, “I wish people would start reviewing what students are learning rather than what teacher are teaching.”

The history of classrooms and teachers is a barrier because education is a political process. First, education is a big business with a large amount of money flowing through the field in the form of tax money. Since public schools operate based upon money generated by taxes paid by members of the community, public school leaders often feel obligated to listen and respond to the desires of the community. Another factor in the failure to innovate is based upon the organizational structure of public schools. A board of education, elected by the people of the community, makes decisions on policy as well as personnel decisions (Newman, 2006). Teachers understand that pushing against the system or status quo can create waves and uneasiness within the board of education. The setup of this system makes it difficult for teachers to desire to be different or innovate. Instead of being innovative or changing the system, teachers conform to the system and stay with the group in maintaining the status quo.

**Time.** Time was a barrier discussed at each group meeting. The participant group stated that they were not able to implement anything, including problem-posing pedagogy, fully due to the wide range of initiatives and programs at the school and system level. Participants often felt

as if they were one step behind due to the amount of initiatives and program changes happening at the local, state, and national level. When asked if the participants thought that this was a specific school or system issue, Ms. Carter responded, “No, I believe this issue is facing every teacher. The focus is on passing tests instead of focusing on teaching and planning.” Focusing on the ever-changing landscape of public education, participants stated that they understood the need for change, but they often disagreed with the rationale behind changes. For example, participants described common assessments being written at the district level. Ms. Bowen argued, “Why must we write these common assessments? Can they not be written at the state level?” Participants noted the amount of time being taken away from teachers to complete initiatives such as this leaves little time for planning creative lessons or even using the data to change instruction.

The research of VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2005) noted the importance of daily and weekly extended planning times for teachers. Jackson and Davis (2000) called time “the most important but least available resource in American history” (p. 131). Brookhart (2010) noted that time is often a barrier in attempting to implement new ideas or collaborate with colleagues. Time is often mentioned by teachers as a barrier toward implementing an innovative practice, and these types of barriers are mentioned on the basis of fear of failure (Kuntz, 2005). Participants acknowledged time as a never-ending barrier, but participants argued that time should not be viewed as a stop sign toward implementation. As mentioned by Ms. Bowen in her final interview, “Yes, we realize that time constrains our ability to do everything, but it does not stop us from doing something.”

**Standardized testing.** From the start of the study, each participant complained extensively about the Georgia standardized assessment called the Criterion Referenced

Competency Test (CRCT). The CRCT is administered to all students in third grade through eighth grade. In sixth grade, students take tests in mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. The participants felt like the CRCT and the accountability that comes with the examination negatively affected their ability to feel comfortable implementing problem-posing pedagogy. In Georgia, the CRCT is high-stakes at third, fifth, and eighth grades, but teacher effectiveness with regards to evaluation is based on student test scores on the CRCT in every grade in which it's required. Standardized testing, coupled with the accountability measures of NCLB, is a noted barrier toward many innovative and progressive practices within the field of education (Noddings, 2007).

Lounsbury expressed his passion for rethinking standardized testing in its current form to politicians and policymakers by stating:

With a fever pitch, federal and state politicians and policymakers have gone headlong into efforts to make public education—and *all* of its students—accountable by testing them regularly with the results tightly tied to various sanctions. The inadequacies of this limited approach have become increasingly apparent, particularly when coupled with the confusion that has plagued implementation efforts. It is time for all persons who are genuinely concerned with the improvement of middle level education to stop, reflect, and reconsider before taking action. (2004, p. xiii)

Lounsbury's call for action was an attempt to open the eyes of politicians and policymakers in an effort to reduce the stranglehold that standardized testing currently has on teachers' ability to make decisions in the best interest of their students. The argument may be made that the standardized testing is not the issue as much as the accountability measures, media scrutiny,

community pressure, and negative repercussions that come with the use of standardized tests to be the sole measurement of the effectiveness of a teacher or school.

In Perlstein's (2007) book, *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade*, she chronicles the efforts of the principal, Tina McKnight, as she works to increase test scores in a Maryland elementary school named Tyler Heights. Throughout the book, Perlstein described the often-negative effects of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). At one point, Perlstein depicted a classroom full of science materials and resources, but she quickly noted that science was not being taught in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. When she asked a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher named Ms. Johnson about this, it was communicated to her that it did not matter if the state standards included science because the only thing that would be taught at Tyler Heights was content that was going to be tested. In other words, science and social studies would not even be mentioned because students were only tested on mathematics and reading.

Noddings (2007) has written extensively about the negative impact of high-stakes standardized testing on students, schools, and communities. She challenges policymakers and politicians on the assumption that standardized test scores are the only and best way to monitor student achievement and hold teachers, administrators, and student accountable. Kohn (2004) provided an excellent argument by stating,

Part of the problem is that the enterprise of raising standards in practice means little more than raising the scores on standardized tests, many of which are norm-referenced, multiple-choice, and otherwise flawed. The more schools commit themselves to improving performance on these tests, the more that meaningful opportunities to learn are sacrificed. Thus, high scores are often a sign of *lowered* standards—a paradox rarely appreciated by those who make, or report on, education policy. (Kohn, 2004, p. 41)

Standardized testing is a barrier that teachers must overcome when dealing with implementation of any type of curricular or pedagogical change. It appears on the surface that standardized testing is the barrier, but looking past the surface level, the entire accountability movement may be to blame for this barrier. Teachers must push back against the barrier of standardized testing by providing students with opportunities to think deeply about the content. The opportunities to think critically do not evolve from the banking concept. Instead, teachers must examine ways to provide students with relevant learning experiences and a chance to interact with the content through dialogue and written expression. The face of public schools will change when teachers use progressive practices such as problem-posing pedagogy to help students learn more than just surface-level knowledge.

**Teacher professional development and pre-service professional learning.** Participants discussed their current professional development from the school district as well as their pre-service training as barriers toward implementation of problem-posing pedagogy. The participants described the professional development from their local school and system as “focused on improving standardized test scores” and “extremely narrow in scope.” In contrast to the participants’ description of their experiences with professional development, Wilcox and Angelis (2009) argued that the climate and culture of high performing schools provides an atmosphere that promotes high-quality, thoughtful professional development. Professional development needs to be aimed at improving pedagogy since teaching and learning is at the heart of the success of a middle school.

Pre-service professional learning provided the foundation for Ms. Owen to understand the philosophical approach of problem-posing pedagogy as well as practical skills in the implementation process. In her pre-service professional learning, Ms. Owens was exposed to

different ways of thinking about teaching and learning other than just sit, get, and memorize. These different approaches provided an easier transition toward a more progressive approach. Jackson and Davis (2000) called for pre-service professional learning for middle-level teachers to be specialized based on the intricacies of the middle-level. Pre-service professional learning should not serve as a barrier toward implementation of problem-posing or any other progressive approach to teaching and learning.

Middle-level advocates need to continue to push local, state, and federal levels of educational agencies toward the creation of middle-level specific preparation programs for teachers. It is imperative for pre-service teachers to be exposed to middle-level best practices such as democratic classrooms, integrated curriculum, and service-learning. As Ms. Bowen noted in a group discussion, “It seems absurd that some of the barriers that we can control like pre-service training or professional development are the barriers that do not allow us to do some creative and innovative things.”

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for teachers, administrators, and higher education professionals.

#### **For Teachers**

This study highlighted the tension facing teachers regarding everyday pedagogical choices. Teachers make philosophical statements, in effect, each day based on their pedagogical choices. Freire (1970/2000) defines these pedagogical choices through his description of the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy. The implications for teachers based on the findings of this study are simple. Teachers need to strongly consider the pedagogical decisions made within the classroom because these decisions have significant ramifications for students.

Based on the findings, the opportunities created by implementing problem-posing pedagogy are present but often more difficult to identify than the barriers of implementation. Teachers need to review the current middle-level practices of service-learning, democratic classrooms, and integrated curriculum. Mixing these practices with a review of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy will continue to help teachers see the ethical obligation that they have to provide students with relevant learning experiences.

Students deserve the experience of having a teacher willing to plan engaging, thought-provoking lessons. Teachers should feel obligated to expose students to relevant curriculum that has meaning to the students. Communities should expect teachers and schools to provide students with this type of rich educational experience. Fundamentally, public schools exist to help students learn how to live and participate in a democratic society.

Teachers using the banking concept are not preparing students to live and participate in a democratic society. Teachers practicing the banking concept may be telling students how to live and participate in a democratic society, but students are not able to experience the process of participating when the teacher does not allow them to participate. Teachers practicing problem-posing strategies provide the opportunities for students to participate and experience the process. Therefore, teachers have an ethical obligation to use more progressive curriculum and instructional methods in order to meet the fundamental responsibility of public education.

The barriers facing teachers to implement a progressive pedagogical practice such as problem-posing continue to grow. These barriers are real and easy to identify. Teachers must look at the barriers as hurdles instead of stop signs. As mentioned by participants, teachers



should find partners or groups of individuals who are willing to work together implementing progressive pedagogical practices. The group will provide a support system as well as a resource network.

### **For School Administrators**

Whereas an implication for teachers was the need to examine the teaching of critical thought and perspective, the challenge for school administrators is to promote creative, engaging, and learning-focused teachers as facilitators of best practices. Moving away from rote-memorization and worksheet-based classrooms will represent a paradigm shift for many school administrators because of the historical nature of schools but also the current focus on high-stakes testing. Based on the researcher's personal experiences, a number of school administrators have become accustomed to displaying standardized test scores for each teacher to the entire faculty during the annual preplanning faculty meeting. This clearly displays the focus on student achievement as measured solely by the single administration of a multiple-guess, high-stakes examination.

School administrators need to have an understanding of critical pedagogy and look for ways to motivate teachers to incorporate problem-posing strategies into the classroom. School administrators must confront "everyday bankers" by pushing them toward a more engaging, thought-provoking classroom. As noted in the participants' initial feelings toward problem-posing, administrators must provide the atmosphere and school culture needed for teachers to feel like they are able to take chances without having to fear repercussions or termination. The atmosphere and school culture also needs to focus on classrooms full of students thinking critically about their community, content, and service. The focus does not need to be simply on a single multiple-choice standardized test.

Resources are another critical support necessary for teachers to move toward a problem-posing classroom, including literature that promotes critical pedagogy, more time for planning, and opportunities to observe other teachers who are philosophically aligned with critical pedagogy. As evidenced with the theory and practice section in the Chapter 4 description of findings, it is not only helpful for teachers to see the theoretical framework involved in problem-posing pedagogy, but it also critical for teachers to have access to practical examples of implementing theory into practice.

### **For Higher Education Professionals**

As indicated in the findings chapter, the effectiveness of pre-service preparation is critical to the success of teachers. The best practices of democratic classrooms, integrated curriculum, and service-learning must be foundational instructional practices for middle level teachers. Pre-service teachers need to be exposed to these practices through participation, but equally important, higher education professionals should use these best practices to model expectations and possibilities for beginning educators. Along with building an understanding of best practices for teachers of young adolescents, pre-service teachers need to be exposed to progressive theories like problem-posing so that they are able to articulate the reasoning for best practices like service-learning, integrated curriculum, and democratic classrooms.

Another critical element for higher education professionals is the need to continue to build quality, lasting relationships with administrators and teachers at potential school sites. Building these types of relationships and trust takes time, and researchers must be willing to invest the time to build relationships with these individuals in order to conduct the type of research desired.

## **Future Research**

More research studies must be conducted on pedagogical practices to help identify and define best instructional practices for middle grades. Research focused directly on classroom instruction will continue to help teachers and administrators to develop a framework for identifying and promoting best practices. While this research looked at the perspectives of teachers regarding implementing problem-posing pedagogy, it may be of interest to future researchers to focus on specific lessons and units of study that incorporate social issues into the curriculum. For example, how can teachers effectively address social issues such as poverty and racism in a middle grades classroom? This type of research would continue to refine and enhance the literature within critical pedagogy and help practitioners navigate the political landmines that accompany bringing real world issues into the everyday classroom.

An important study that needs to be conducted is one examining individual teachers as they implement problem-posing pedagogy. The study should focus more on the within-case analysis rather than the across-case analysis. It would be helpful for the researcher to require participants to keep a journal of their experiences. Classroom observations would also provide another layer of data collection and data analysis. Another potential study is one examining the perceptions of school administrators toward the implementation of critical pedagogy and progressive curriculum. It would be interesting to research what administrators think about this work and to see if there are tensions between this work and the accountability imposed on them by local and state requirements related to student achievement, the Common Core State Standards, and other such perennial issues that educators face.

Other areas of interest include professional learning for teachers, the process of removing barriers, and teachers' perspectives of others attempting to implement progressive philosophies

such as problem-posing pedagogy. Since this study took place over eight months, it would also be intriguing to gather more longitudinal data about this group of teachers as they continue to develop and refine their individual practices. Also, examining problem-posing pedagogy in the high school and elementary school would provide the field with more useful data. Another study that would contribute to this body of research would be one where the researcher conducted the same study in a school with a higher percentage of students from a lower socioeconomic status.

Along with the topic of improving practice within the classroom, more researchers need to explore the possibilities of partnering with schools on collaborative action research teams. The participants noted a comfort level with knowing that other teachers down the hall were experiencing similar frustrations and anxiety. Collaborative action research allows educators to learn, but the experience also provides a chance to share with the rest of the field. Educators have started the process by using school leadership teams to develop questions that need to be answered within individual schools (Saurino, Saurino, & Crawford, 2005). The research cycle helps schools to collect critical data, understand the reasoning for particular programs, and to make decisions about the effectiveness of different strategies and programs within specific contexts.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

During different parts of the data collection process, all three participants reflected on and questioned their teaching practices. Throughout the study, the researcher also reflected and questioned his practices as an educator. Documenting this process of questioning, reflecting, and changing practice was critical to the field, but also, the researcher wanted to understand the barriers that complicate this process for public school teachers. The end result was three teachers and a researcher still thinking about and questioning Freire's ideas of problem-posing pedagogy

and the banking concept. During the last interview, one of the participants even asked, “Was your goal to raise more questions or to find answers?” The researcher answered with, “I guess a little of both.” This study definitely continued the process of providing answers while contributing a number of unanswered questions back to the field for more discussion, reflection, and action. Freire would be proud.

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## APPENDIX A

### OVERVIEW OF THE MEETING WITH PRINCIPAL AT MORRIS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Overview of the Project

Expectations of the Participants

Table 1.1

Table 2.2

Banking Concept—Freire (1970/2000) uses the term, banking concepts, to describe a teaching situation where the teacher lectures and students sit, listen, memorize, and regurgitate information. In the banking concept of teaching, Freire (1970/2000) noted that the teacher makes deposits into the students and then expects students to be able to withdraw the information on recall. Freire advocated against this type of instructional method and stated that he believed this method of teaching continues the cycle of oppression.

Problem-Posing Pedagogy—Freire's (1970/2000) idea of what teaching and learning should look like. Problem-posing pedagogy is the process of teachers and students working together to solve community issues. Teachers use this process to teach necessary knowledge and skills integrated in an effort to debate and solve the community issue. Freire (1970/2000) described teachers in a non-traditional role with teachers and students working collaboratively to make meaning of the content compared to the traditional role of the all-knowing teacher bestowing knowledge on the student. A problem-posing pedagogy is bound in the theory of using society to frame the practice of teaching and learning. In essence, the theory of problem-posing pedagogy provides a blueprint without specific details, timeline, or guides for bringing the theory to light in practice.

Collaborative Action Research

List of the articles/book that participants would be reading

Expected classroom changes

- Community issues within the classroom
- More dialogue with the class
- Less teacher-focused instruction
- Potential for service-learning opportunities

Questions from the principal

## APPENDIX B

### E-MAIL TO TEACHERS AT MORRIS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Dear Middle School Teacher,

I hope your school year is turning out to be your best ever. Currently, I am in the process of recruiting teachers to participate in a study entitled “An Examination of Freire’s Notion of Problem-Posing Education.” As noted in the title, this qualitative study will focus on the work of Paulo Freire and his ideas about how to use problems as the means to engage people in active learning. Using collaborative action research, the middle school teachers involved in the study (approximately 3-4 total) will participate in readings and small group discussions over two semesters, spring and fall 2011. Teachers will be asked to share their interpretations and reactions to the readings and attempt to put their understanding of problem-posing pedagogy into practice in their own classrooms. Small group discussions, journal reflections, and individual interviews will provide data to discover middle school teachers’ perceptions of problem-posing pedagogy. If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews, eight group meetings to discuss the readings, and put your thoughts about the readings and your efforts to put the ideas into practice in a journal.

If you would like to learn more about the study, then please feel free to e-mail me at [pmbrown2424@gmail.com](mailto:pmbrown2424@gmail.com). Thanks for your time and consideration.

Philip Brown

## APPENDIX C

### E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS AT MORRIS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Potential Participants,

In speaking with you earlier in the week, you expressed to me that you would be interested in participating in the study. Since I have been able to find 3 sixth grade teachers at Morris Middle School, it will be easier for us to conduct parts of the study during your planning periods and at other times. I will be more than flexible to make sure that you are well-taken care of on all fronts. I will pick-up lunch, breakfast, coffee, or whatever it takes to help your participation.

With all of that said, I would like to go ahead and get started on the study next week. To start the study, I will interview all participants individually about their teaching philosophy (more of a conversation). Is there a time next week that we could sit down for an hour for the interview?

Look forward to working with you.

Philip

## APPENDIX D

### PARTICIPANT READINGS

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—Chapter 2

James Beane's *A Reason to Teach: Creating Classrooms of Dignity and Hope*—Chart of Democratic Classrooms versus Traditional Classrooms

Ira Shor and Paulo Freire's *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*—Read section titled “Rigor is Depth and Change: Understanding Versus Memorizing”

#### *Other Books and Articles Provided to Participants*

James Beane's *A Reason to Teach: Creating Classrooms of Dignity and Hope*

James Beane's *Curriculum integration: Designing the core of democratic education*

Mark Springer's *Soundings: A democratic student-centered education*

## APPENDIX E

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – BEGINNING OF THE STUDY INTERVIEW

#### *Semi-Structured Interview Protocol*

Describe your classroom.

If I were a stranger walking into your classroom, what would I see?

What would stand out to me about your classroom?

What do you view as the role of a student in your classroom?

How do you view yourself as a teacher?

If students could say three things about your teaching five years after they leave your school, then what do you think that they would say about you?

Do you have anything else that you would like to add to the interview?



## APPENDIX F

### FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Compare and contrast the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy in your teaching.

What would make you want to implement the banking concept? Problem posing?

Describe how you attempted to implement problem-posing pedagogy into your practice as a middle school teacher. Looking back, what could have helped you as you attempted to infuse problem-posing pedagogy into your classroom?

What other ways (other than the ways that you tried) do you think that problem-posing pedagogy can be implemented in middle school classrooms?

What are the barriers and limitations to implementing problem-posing pedagogy?

What are the opportunities or supports for a middle school teacher to implement problem-posing pedagogy?

Without participating in this study, would you have ever tried this type of philosophical approach to your teaching?

Do you have anything else that you would like to add to the interview?

## APPENDIX G

### PARTICIPANT MEETING AGENDA – APRIL 20, 2011

Welcome

Review of meeting on March 15, 2011

Any participant questions...

Handout chart paper to each participant...Ask participants to define what they believe Freire means by problem-posing

Have participants define the banking concept in their own words

Remind participants to look back at Freire's exact words in Chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Start the process of creating a group definition

Complete group definition and type up the final product

Have participants compare final definitions with Beane's chart of difference between traditional classrooms and democratic classrooms

Ask participants to compare and contrast

Ask participants for examples from within the classroom

Ask participants about thoughts on implementation of problem-posing

Review session

Talk about next meeting

Remind participants to check on dates in May

Questions

## APPENDIX H

### PARTICIPANT GENERATED LIST OF CHARACTERISTICS OF PROBLEM-POSING COMPARED TO A BANKING CLASSROOM

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| <b>Problem-Posing Classroom</b>                             | <b>Banking Concept</b>   |
|---|--|
| Focused on community issues                                 | Focused on transferring information  |
| Allows the learners to have input                           | Attempts to control information and communication                                  |
| Tough to manage   | Easy to manage and control   |
| Difficult to replicate                                      | Easy to replicate  |
| Focused on learning and thinking                            | Concerned with memorization and spitting back the information                      |
| Stressful for the teacher                                   | Control makes it easy to manage  |
| Engaging for the students                                   | Boring for the students  |
| Teacher and students moving throughout the classroom        | Teacher at the front with students sitting and listening                           |
| Content is focused on community issues and student concerns | Curriculum is set by others and teacher is expected to conform to specific content |

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## APPENDIX I

### PARTICIPANT GENERATED DEFINITION OF PROBLEM-POSING PEDAGOGY

Problem-posing pedagogy is a philosophical stance taken by the teacher where the teacher truly values the student and their knowledge. Using community issues or problems, the teacher facilitates active learning through various activities depending on the understanding of the students. Different than the banking concept, students in a problem-posing classroom are not spectators, but instead, they create and re-create knowledge throughout their time as a student-teacher. The curriculum is also created and re-created in the process of a problem-posing lesson. Using the hyphen to show relationship and connection, it is clear that Freire desires for everyone in the teaching-learning environment to be cognitively active in all aspects of the discussion-focused classroom. The very act of problem-posing is the process of searching for solutions while not losing sight of the constant need to trouble what we have always known as truth. Conversely, the banking concept is the act of distributing solutions without ever questioning the process. Naturally, this leads the banking concept into a passive state, while problem-posing pedagogy develops into an active state.

## APPENDIX J

### POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OR ISSUES THAT MAY ACCOMPANY THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROBLEM-POSING PEDAGOGY

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|  |                                      |   |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| Parent complaints  | Bad evaluation from an administrator | Lack of time for planning                                 |
| Failure to be able to communicate the goals for problem-posing with others | Unmotivated students                 | Need different classroom furniture (tables, not desks)    |
| Trouble connecting standards with real-world issues and problems           | Classroom management during projects | Students working on different projects at different times |
| Fairness with grading  | Issues with lack of structure        |   |

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## APPENDIX K

### BARRIERS IDENTIFIED DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROBLEM-POSING

#### PEDAGOGY

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|  |   |                            |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| Administrators                                 | Amount of curriculum                      | History of classrooms      |
| Lack of experience                             | Lack of relevance                         | Lack of student motivation |
| Lack of trust between the teacher and students | Middle schools becoming mini high schools | Lack of parental support   |
| Specific content concerns such as mathematics  | Politicians                               | Standardized testing       |
| Student ability                                | Time                                      |                            |

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## APPENDIX L

### SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT

Beane (2005a) stated that the most important purpose for schools is, “to help our students learn the democratic way of life” (p.1). I agree with Beane that our mission as public school educators must be focused on teaching students to be quality citizens, able to accept the responsibility of living in a democratic society. Our main mission is not to prepare the workforce or to help America compete economically in a global society. Both of these are important reasons to justify America’s public schools, but the most important purpose must be to help students learn the democratic way of life. Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy provides an opportunity for students and teachers to place the ability to live in a democratic society as the main mission of public schools. The banking concept gives students the opportunity to learn about democracy through the process of listening to the teacher, but banking takes away the chance for students to participate. Democracy is based on participation and action. The banking concept is a passive process that contributes to thoughtless, passive citizens. To this end, I believe in problem-posing pedagogy, but I realize that banking takes place in a majority of classrooms.

As a current principal and former teacher, I definitely held certain opinions regarding classroom instruction before starting the study. The most important person in a school is the classroom teacher because teachers have the power to create an enlightening and influential experience for any student. On the contrary, teachers can sway students in the other direction with their ability to turn a classroom into a miserable and hated place. As I think about teaching

and leading in schools, I can think of one thing, balance. In the classroom, the need for balance is necessary and critical. Depending on the content and curriculum, teachers must strike a necessary balance between teaching skills, facts, and stories with the need to help students develop rich, creative critical-thinking processes. Teachers must develop a skill set that allows them to help students think critically, but also teachers must push students to study, memorize, and be able to recite certain dates, biographical information, facts, and other information.

Certain questions come to mind when thinking about classroom balance such as: What is this specific information that all students should be required to know? What are the process skills that all students need to have in order to be competent citizens? I realize that these questions could be, and have been, debated for centuries. I believe Freire's description of the banking concept and problem-posing pedagogy provides educators with this balance. Even though Freire endorsed only problem-posing pedagogy, the need to strike a balance between the banking concept and problem-posing has never been so necessary and urgent. I do not see this balance needing to be 50% banking and 50% problem-posing because the majority of class time in America's public schools should be spent on teaching students to problem-pose.

This balance is delicate in that students must be exposed to certain facts and knowledge in order to progress to different levels of thinking. The problem that we currently have in education is that standardized testing is driving pedagogy to strictly banking. Pedagogically speaking, banking leads to narrowed and hollow curriculum. Instead, teachers and students would be more successful if teachers learn to strike this necessary balance between the banking concept and problem-posing. This balance is the separation between the successful and the unsuccessful teachers. The difficult part is striking this balance.



The balance is critical and difficult, but ultimately, problem-posing pedagogy must find its way into public school classrooms. This is my reasoning for conducting this study. I want to understand the perceptions of teachers and the implementation process. Grundy (1987) labeled this type of action research as emancipating. Berg (2009) noted that one of the goals for action research was to, “attempt to bring together theory and book knowledge with real-world situations, issues, and experiences” (p. 260). This study is my way of fusing research of problem-posing pedagogy with the attempt to positively influence teachers to use problem-posing pedagogy as a philosophical stance to provide thoughtful and critical-thinking type lessons to students. The study is a systematic process for me to gain an understanding of problem-posing pedagogy while also helping liberate and emancipate teachers from the strains and struggles of the banking concept.

## APPENDIX M

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study titled “*An Examination into Freire’s Notion of Problem-Posing Education*” conducted by Philip Brown from the Department of Elementary and Social Studies Education at the University of Georgia (706-542-4244) under the direction of Dr. P. Gayle Andrews, Department of Elementary and Social Studies Education, University of Georgia ([gandrews@uga.edu](mailto:gandrews@uga.edu)).

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to examine what happens when teachers attempt to implement Paulo Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy into their middle school classrooms. If I decide to take part, I may be asked to participate in these evaluation activities:

- Nine, approximately one-hour, group meetings (audio taped and transcribed)
- Weekly one page, double-spaced, journal entries (approximately 250 words) in which I write about my experiences and perceptions of Freire’s work.
- Two one-hour semi-structured individual interviews, one at the beginning of the study and one at the end, discussing my experiences and opinions about problem-posing pedagogy (audio taped and transcribed)

Risk from participating in the study is minimal and consists of possible discomfort discussing personal beliefs about teaching and learning. I understand that I can skip questions that make me feel uncomfortable and that audio-recordings of the interviews will not be publicly disseminated. I may also experience discomfort in implementing new strategies in the classroom. I understand that I may stop participating at any time I wish to do so. Benefits from participating in the study may include beneficial changes in my teaching pedagogy, specifically related to providing a problem-posing education to middle school students, and findings from this study may help middle school teachers incorporate problem-posing pedagogy into their practice.

I understand that the researcher is asking for my permission to use my information for research and possible publication.

Any individually identifiable information I provide will be kept confidential. My real name will not be used in any reports, and the information from my participation will not be reported in any individually identifiable form. All contact information and data that include identifiable information will be stored in a locked cabinet and destroyed after the dissertation is written.

The researcher will answer any questions I have about the study now or during the project.

I understand the project described above. My signature indicates that I agree to participate in this project. I understand that I may stop participating at any time if I wish to do so. I have received a copy of this form to keep.

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|                                  |                    |               |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| _____<br>Name of the Participant | _____<br>Signature | _____<br>Date |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|

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|  |                    |               |
|--|--------------------|---------------|
| _____<br>Philip Brown, Researcher<br>Email: <a href="mailto:pmbrown@uga.edu">pmbrown@uga.edu</a> | _____<br>Signature | _____<br>Date |
|--|--------------------|---------------|

**Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher**

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The IRB Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address [IRB@uga.edu](mailto:IRB@uga.edu)