CRITICAL SCHOLARS INVESTIGATE (CSI): ENGAGING STUDENTS IN RESEARCH ON ISSUES RELATED TO SCHOOLING AND COMMUNITY

by

ERIKA YVETTE TUCKER

(Under the Direction of JoBeth Allen)

ABSTRACT

Rarely are students allowed opportunities to conduct research on issues or topics of relevance to their school and community lives. The purpose of this critical action research study was to explore the question of How can a teacher-researcher create critical literacy opportunities that build on students’ questions about their own schooling and community? In addition, it addressed a second research question, How do students use research to construct perceptions of their school and its surrounding community? Using thematic analysis networks, the researcher identified three deductive themes for categorizing data and also found four global inductive themes that worked in conjunction to answer the research questions above. The study took place with the researcher’s own eighth grade English Language Arts students in a mixed-ability classroom in a small county outside the metropolitan Atlanta area.

INDEX WORDS: critical pedagogy, critical action research, student perceptions, thematic networks
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DEDICATION

To my children

Sydney Nylah, My Promise

Caleb Andrew, My Present

&

My father, the late Rozelle LaVertis Blanchard and my mother, Willie Bell Blanchard whose unconditional love and support continue to motivate me to achieve what seems impossible and persevere in times of doubt and despair.

&

My wonderful eighth grade students during the 2013-2014 school-year,

the absolute best year in my entire career in education!!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A very special thank you is extended to my CMS family. I never would have reached my goal if not for your prayers, laughter, love, and encouragement. Love you more!!!

I will be forever indebted to my family-Mama, Oretha Mae, Renee, Patrice, Akia, LaParis, Mann, Rogeree, Alexandria, Paul, Sheravia, Victor, and of course, Xavier. You are by far the best babysitters in the world!!

And finally to my husband, Malcolm. It seems as if I’ve been in school as long as I’ve known you. Thank you for being interested in my work and sometimes pretending to be when I knew you weren’t. Thank you for all the small and big things you did to show your support.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

Romans 8:26
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“Students bring experiences and information to school from the context in which they live their lives. When students become researchers, they begin to see that their knowledge counts in classrooms. The received message is that what they say is valuable.” (Johnston, 1992, p. 75)

The quote above clearly, yet eloquently, explains the rationale behind my research study. My goal was to capitalize on the meaningful experiences and interests my students shared on a daily basis. In most instances, these conversations occurred as side bars, ancillaries to the planned activities I implemented each day. However, they were not irrelevant to the standards I was supposed to teach. Rather my students’ interests provided more authentic and rigorous instructional opportunities than what typically occurs in the classroom.

“She was placed on this team because we are slow?”

I was often impressed by the insightful comments made by my eighth grade English Language Arts (ELA) students in regards to relationships of power. In the beginning of the year, I tried to set a tone where students would feel comfortable questioning anything they learned in my classroom. The theme for all class periods was CSI: Critical Scholars Investigate and was woven throughout my academic instruction and behavioral expectations. Although my students were not yet adept at reflecting critically on much of the content presented, they did have some insightful perspectives on policies and procedures within the school. We often engaged in lively
discussions about topics such as the dress code or student recognition procedures. While students did not have the academic language to articulately convey their feelings, it is apparent that certain issues of power or access did not go unnoticed by them. For example, at the beginning of the year, the students questioned why they had been placed on team B. “Were we placed on this team because we are slow?” was a question asked by several students during that first week of school.

Later in the first quarter, students again proved their critical awareness during a review of the questions on the first district-wide benchmark. As I explained the correct response to one question missed by the majority of the students, several in each class period remarked how they disagreed. The question asked students to identify why the author had purposefully included an error in pronoun usage in the dialogue. The correct choice as given in the answer key explained that the error was made to reveal the character’s lack of education. During our discussion of this question, students argued how instances of non-standard English use did not necessarily mean that a person was uneducated. In addition, they pointed out a lack of textual evidence within the rest of the story that supported such an interpretation.

**Statement of the Problem and Purpose**

Instances of meaningful, critical reflection such as those described above, however, did not occur as often as I would have liked. As a teacher-researcher interested in engaging students critically, I found that while they noticed issues of power around them, students were generally disengaged from formal classroom assignments. To be honest, when I intentionally planned lessons that I felt would lend themselves to critical engagement with a text or topic, students seemed incapable or reluctant to perform. The dilemma as their teacher was how to find authentic opportunities that students felt were relevant and worthy of critical reflection yet also
related to content. The purpose of my study, then, was to create a unit that provided a space for this type of critical engagement to occur. In addition, the goal was for students to learn and apply the tools of critical research to become more socially and politically active in their school and communities.

**Research Questions**

In this critical action research study, I worked with a class of eighth grade English Language Arts students at a middle school in a suburb metropolitan Atlanta in order to answer the research questions below:

1. How does a teacher-researcher create critical literacy instructional opportunities that build on students’ questions about their own schooling and community?
2. How do students use research to construct perceptions of their school and surrounding community?

**Overview of the Research Design and Methods**

This study was designed as critical action research because it takes the tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972; Kincheloe, 2008) into the actual classroom of the researcher. Patricia Hinchey (2008) defined action research as “a process of systematic inquiry, usually cyclical, conducted by those inside a community rather than by outside experts; its goal is to identify action that will generate some improvement the researcher believes is important” (p.4). Drawing upon a sociocultural framework, I tried to create a teaching environment that provided spaces for critical inquiry drawn directly from students’ own questions about their schooling and community. Ernest Stringer (1996) explained how the findings of traditional, quantitative scientific research has done little to predict or improve social behavior. How often have we heard teachers complain that the theoretical knowledge of their education programs did little to prepare
them for the day-to-day realities that confront them in the classroom? Stringer offered that qualitative studies designed as community-based action research provide a way for teachers to connect the links between theory and practice, the idea of “praxis” as described by Freire (1972). Action research pairs well with critical pedagogy because it emphasizes the integral role of participants in the research process:

A fundamental premise of community-based action research is that it commences with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. Its purpose is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus resolve problems that confront them. Put another way, community-based action research provides a model for enacting local, action-oriented approaches to specific problems in specific situations (Stringer, p. 9).

Stringer further explained how community-based action research has gained favor among teacher-researchers because it offers an inquiry-based design that can be used to improve the quality of lives in public community settings, namely schools. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to my study only as action research because I have chosen to present data as it relates to school and community both separately and collectively. In my opinion, to use the term community-based action research may draw attention away from the individual importance of school in this study.

**Rationale and Researcher Background**

As someone who was a new teacher to the district, I was also interested in learning about the relationship between tracking and student scheduling in Hawthorne County. Although I had prior experience with master scheduling, I was unaware that the policies regarding course options and student placement can vary from one district to another. Thus, I was just as curious
about the students’ findings and hoped they would enable me to become a more informed member of the community. In the first phase of my study, I introduced students to the concepts of tracking and differentiated instruction so they would know the appropriate vocabulary and existing research to effectively address their questions about course options. Students discussed various print and digital articles to form their own opinions about tracking and make recommendations as to how this practice should inform the current course selection process in their own school district.

During the second phase of the study, students researched the history of their school and surrounding community. Since most of my students have lived in this area since early childhood, they were more aware of its history than I was. Through their family, neighborhood, church, and other affiliations in the area, my students had easy access to a variety of both primary and secondary community history resources.

Although this study was based on the questions of my students, I also had a vested interest in the information we would discover about tracking in Hawthorne County, but Walker Middle School in particular. As a resident of the town of Walker, I wanted to learn why the community held such negative opinions about the one school in the district that carried its name. There was no Walker Elementary or even a Walker High School. Perhaps because I had come from the neighboring district, Thomas County, whose data in several areas (standardized test performance, discipline, teacher salaries, teacher attrition, etc.) were far more disappointing, it was difficult for me to understand what others saw so problematic with Walker Middle.

Prior to teaching at Walker Middle School, I had worked twelve years in the neighboring Thomas County School District. Although I had lived eight of those years in the town of Walker located in Hawthorne County, I did not feel truly connected to my community because most
activities in which I was involved both personally and professionally took place in Thomas County. After graduating high school, I earned both my Bachelors and Masters Degrees at a small women’s college in Thomas County. Most of my friends were raised or lived in Thomas County. Although I grew up in Tennessee, I did have several family members who had relocated to the Atlanta area, and most lived in Thomas County. My daughter’s day care, our church, and my family’s doctor’s offices were all in Thomas County. For me, Walker was just the place where my family lay to rest each night, but it was not our home.

However, as my daughter got older and entered school, I became more involved in activities in Walker that pertained to her such as PTA, school clubs, dance, and gymnastics. Because of my daughter, I began to learn more about the Hawthorne County school system. I was thoroughly impressed not only with Sydney’s school but with the entire district. Typical school procedures such as registration and open house were more organized and structured that what I was used to in Thomas County. The teachers at Sydney’s school were friendly, proficient, and actually seemed to like children. The administrators were outgoing, accessible, and genuinely interested in any concern I had about my daughter. Working twelve years as a teacher, instructional coach, and assistant principal in the Thomas County School System had given me the opportunity to see operations at both a local and district-wide level, which unfortunately led me to question its supervision of students’ emotional, social, and instructional needs.

Although Sydney has had overwhelmingly positive experiences in Hawthorne County Public schools, I realize this may be due in part to its system of tracking, which has allowed Sydney to be placed in advanced classes with access to a more engaging and challenging curriculum than the average student. Similarly, I also benefitted from being placed in higher
tracked courses as a young student. However, I recognize that Sydney’s and my positive experiences with tracking contrast drastically from that of most minority and poor students, students who actually represent the majority in Hawthorne County. It is for these reasons, that I shared my students’ interests in course scheduling at Walker Middle School. In the section below I provide a brief narrative of both Sydney’s and my experiences with tracking.

**Tracking: A Mother and Daughter’s Shared Narrative**

Tracking is the practice of dividing students into different classes or ‘tracks” (high, mid, or low) based on their achievement (Oakes, 1986). For this reason, some refer to tracking as ability grouping similar to the reading groups formed in many elementary classrooms, i.e. bluebirds, red birds, etc. However, in some secondary grades, tracks refer to the different types of courses students may take such as college-preparatory or vocational. According to Oakes (1986), there is little support to suggest that tracking is a viable solution to achievement gaps plaguing education. Because it perpetuates racial, social, and economic inequalities, tracking actually impedes rather than promotes its intended goal of educational excellence (Oakes, 1986; Lucas & Berends, 2002).

*In the second grade, I was recommended for testing for the gifted program. I remember following a strange woman down to the cafeteria to take a test. I can only remember being shown several illustrations and being asked questions about them by the woman. I must have passed the test because the next year I was enrolled in CLUE, the title of the gifted program in Memphis. CLUE (Creative Learning in an Unique Environment) was a pull-out model where elementary students would go to a different teacher two times a week (http://www.scsk12.org/uf/exceptional/about.php).*
Although being in CLUE may have been prestigious, actually taking the classes was inconvenient to say the least. There were only three students in my entire school that went to CLUE—two sixth graders Phoebe and Ashley, whom I idolized, and myself. Because there were only a few of us, we took our CLUE classes at another school with a higher gifted population, but transportation was not provided. Carpooling was not an option since I was younger than Phoebe and Ashley and couldn’t take my CLUE classes the same day as they did. In addition, the hours of my CLUE classes were in the middle of the school day, which meant my mother had to pick me up from my home school, take me to CLUE, pick me up from CLUE just a few hours later, drive me back to my home school, only to pick me up again at the end of the day. CLUE also overlapped with lunch time at my home school, which meant I would get fast food, usually Krystal’s, for lunch twice a week. Of course, this was a treat for me, but what if I had been a student who received free lunch? Would my home school or my CLUE school have made provisions to ensure I received a hot meal those days I had to miss lunch?

Looking back, I realize just how classist the whole CLUE program was. When I think about the other friends I met (and actually still have) from CLUE, we were all pretty typical middle class individuals with mothers who occasionally worked part time, frequently volunteered at the school and served as our personal chauffeurs to various school and community events without worry. Another classmate, however, was not so fortunate. Sharlinda Jackson (name changed), a model-skinny, brown skinned girl in my same grade who also tested for the CLUE program, was from a single-parent household and lived in subsidized housing.

As research on distinctly Black names reveals (Fryer & Levitt, 2003), Sharlinda’s name, while not a predictor of her potential economic livelihood, does offer much information about her background and the consequences of continued segregation. Her story like so many other
speaks to the false meritocracy that is schooling. Here was a bright and energetic youth whose academic performance clearly indicated that she was an ideal candidate for CLUE; yet she was denied entry. This closer look into Sharlinda’s background reveals some telling information about tracking programs and their exclusion of minorities and the poor.

In her research on tracking, Jennie Oakes (1986) revealed a “well-established link” between tracking and students’ background. For example, minority and poor students are frequently underrepresented in high-track courses like gifted programs but over-represented in low-track courses such as special education or vocational. She further explains that these differences in course placement often occur when other factors such as test scores or teacher and counselor recommendations might suggest placement in a higher track. In some schools, placement in higher tracks is not based on any academic data at all but rather on student or parent choice.

Against my protests, my parents decided that they would not allow me to follow all of my elementary friends and attend the neighborhood school when I entered seventh grade. Instead, I applied and was accepted at an honors/college preparatory program at a junior high school in another part of town. I took advanced courses in all four content areas and even foreign language. Although Sharlinda attended the traditional neighborhood school in seventh and eighth grades, she transferred to my junior high school for her freshman year. She and I became close friends because we were both in the band and still lived in the same community. For tenth grade, we attended the same high school and also took classes in its honors/college preparatory program. Although we had taken advanced courses in junior high, our teachers had not delivered the same rigorous instruction that we encountered once we became sophomores. In high school, the expectations were definitely much higher. There was greater competition from
the students from two other honors/college preparatory junior high schools which also fed into this same high school. Although the classes were more challenging, I was still able to excel whereas Sharlinda struggled to balance the increased academic workload with other school activities; we were both still in the band. By the middle of the first semester, Sharlinda’s mother had withdrawn her from the school and decided that it was best that she return to our neighborhood high school, the same school my parents had refused to allow me to attend once we left elementary.

It is my belief that while Sharlinda did eventually take classes in higher tracks her freshman year, the difference in the type of instruction she received as early as elementary had not adequately prepared her for the rigorous course work she encountered once she began taking college preparatory classes. According to Oakes (1986), “students bring differences with them to school, but by tracking, schools help to widen rather than narrow these differences” (paragraph 38). That one year of honors courses she took in junior high was not enough to bridge the achievement gap between Sharlinda and other students, like myself, who had been placed in higher tracked classes for several years prior to high school.

The State of Georgia determines gifted eligibility based on four categories-mental ability, achievement, creativity, and motivation (http://www.gadoe.org). Qualification can be determined using two different options. In Option A, middle school students must score in the 96th percentile on a nationally normed test of cognitive ability and in the 90th percentile on a nationally normed test of achievement. Although evaluation data regarding students’ creativity and motivation must also be collected, no specific rating or percentile is listed. By contrast Option B recognizes more varied and subjective evaluation data to determine gifted eligibility, and requirements only have to be met in three of the four categories. Under Option B students
must score in the 96th percentile on a nationally normed test of cognitive ability and in the 90th percentile on a nationally normed test of achievement. A more detailed explanation of the gifted criteria for the state of Georgia is listed in Figure 1.1. Although the state provides specific criteria for gifted eligibility, schools still have much autonomy in the type of standardized tests they use to determine mental ability and achievement, to which grades those tests are administered, and what types of assessments (standardized tests, rubrics, portfolios, etc.) they use to determine creativity and motivation.
**Figure 1.1 Georgia Department of Education: Rule 160-4-2-.38 Gifted Eligibility**

**Georgia Department of Education**

**Rule 160-4-2-.38 Education Programs for Gifted Students**

**Evaluation and Eligibility Chart**

- In option A and B, information shall be gathered in each of the four categories.
- At least one of the criteria must be met by a score on a GaDOE approved nationally normed reference test.
- Any data used to establish eligibility in one category shall not be used to establish eligibility in another category.
- If a rating scale is used to evaluate creativity, a rating scale shall not be used to evaluate motivation. If a rating scale is used to evaluate motivation, a rating scale shall not be used to evaluate creativity.
- Any piece of information used to establish eligibility shall be current within two years.
- Local school systems must establish policies in regards to the use of data gathered and analyzed by private entities.

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<th>Category</th>
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| **Mental Ability** | > Grades K-2 99\% percentile composite score on a nationally age normed mental ability test  
> Grades 3-12 ≥96\% percentile composite score on a nationally age normed mental ability test | > Grades K-12 ≥96\% percentile composite on a nationally age normed mental ability tests OR 96\% percentile on a component score on a nationally age normed mental ability tests (see pg. 27 of Manual for addl information) |
| **Achievement**  | > Grades K-12 ≥90\% percentile Total Reading, Total Math, or Complete Battery on a nationally normed achievement test | > Grades K-12 ≥90\% percentile Total Reading, Total Math, or Complete Battery on a nationally normed achievement test  
> Grades K – 12 Superior product/performance with a score ≥90 on a scale of 1-100, as evaluated by a panel of three or more qualified evaluators |
| **Creativity**   | > Evaluation data required                                               | > Grades K-12 ≥90\% percentile on composite score on a nationally normed creativity test  
> Grades K-12 Rating scales used to qualify student creativity must equate to the 90\% percentile  
> Grades K-12 Superior product/performance with a score ≥90 on a scale of 1-100, as evaluated by a panel of three or more qualified evaluators |
| **Motivation**   | > Evaluation data required                                               | > Grades 6-12 Two-year average of a 3.5 GPA on a 4.0 scale in regular core subject of mathematics, English/language arts, social studies, science, and full year world languages (see page 30 of manual for addl info.)  
> Grades K-12 Rating scales used to qualify student motivation must equate to the 90\% percentile  
> Grades K-12 Superior product/performance with a score ≥90 on a scale of 1-100, as evaluated by a panel of three or more qualified evaluators |

Identification of gifted students shall be nondiscriminatory with respect to race, religion, national origin, sex, disabilities or economic background.

7/8/2013

Georgia Department of Education
Dr. John D. Barge State School Superintendent
July 8, 2013
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When my daughter, Sydney, was in the first grade, her teacher recommended she be tested for Experiment (name changed), the gifted program in Hawthorne County. As a parent and educator, I also felt Sydney was capable of tackling much more challenging work than what she had been receiving, but I was hesitant to allow her to begin the gifted in-take process. In Hawthorne County, students are only allowed to test for the gifted program every two years, which meant if Sydney did not qualify in first grade, she would have to wait until third grade to test again. I was also concerned about how not being selected would affect Sydney’s self-esteem. She was really excited about becoming a gifted student, and I feared she might internalize not being selected as a sign that she was not smart enough or as capable as other students. I shared my concerns with Sydney’s teacher who assured me that she felt given her performance in first grade thus far, Sydney would qualify. So, reluctantly, I consented to the testing.

Sydney missed qualifying for the gifted program by only a few points in Reading based on the achievement tests she was given. My husband and I were devastated although Sydney appeared to take the news well. The school sent home the letter with a complex rationale about testing criteria that was even difficult for me, a gifted certified teacher, to interpret. I was especially distraught because of the area where she was weak. Language arts is my passion. Both my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees are in English. I was enrolled in one of the top Ph. D. programs in literacy and language education in the country, and I was an English Language Arts educator with more than ten years of experience. In my efforts to ensure that my students received a quality education, had I somehow neglected the learning needs of my own daughter? At the same time that I was lamenting my horrible parenting skills, the gifted teacher was also struggling to make sense of the test results. She had worked with Sydney previously and felt the results simply weren’t valid given what she knew about Sydney’s above average potential. After
sharing her concerns with her supervisor, the teacher was granted permission to give Sydney another eligibility test that had been used in previous years. Sydney’s scores on this second assessment were higher, allowing her to be accepted into the program. Regardless of whether it was the second round of testing or the prayer group of teachers Sydney’s first grade teacher had assembled to intercede on my daughter’s behalf (or in my belief, a combination of two), Sydney began taking gifted courses the following semester. Although I was thrilled about her acceptance, I couldn’t help but wonder how many other students had been denied a second round of testing when initial, perhaps even invalid test results revealed they weren’t qualified.

“In Gifted Education as a Vehicle for Enhancing Social Equality,” Jennifer Reidl Cross (2013) explained how the under-identification of gifted students from non-dominant groups in the United States is antithetical to the guiding principles found in the Declaration of Independence:

Under certain circumstances, gifted education plays into the maintenance of the hierarchical structure that undeniably exists in our society. The influence of the dominant culture can be seen in curricula and accountability requirements. When identification of students for gifted services is dependent on success in these arenas, it is unfair to students from other cultures or classes. When services for identified students are of a higher quality than what unidentified students receive, identified students have been given an unfair advantage. When participation is open exclusively to those who have had experiences that only those in the dominant culture or social class have had, an injustice has been done to those with similar potential who lack appropriate experiences because of their language or economic or cultural differences. All of these conditions presently exist in gifted education
to varying degrees. For gifted education to be truly fair, it must address these affronts to our American ideals. (Cross, 2013, p. 117)

Since countries with lower levels of social inequality tend to show greater progress than the US, Cross advocates for a change in education policies that currently reserve more robust and challenging instructional opportunities for a select group of gifted students from dominant socioeconomic or cultural classes that would, in fact, benefit all students.

My own students represent the marginalized groups of students who have traditionally been excluded from a quality, stimulating education in US public schools. Unless critical educators, like myself, make it a priority to create rewarding and enriching opportunities for these students, few will reap the same positive benefits from schooling that Sydney and I have. However, it is not enough simply to expose minority and poor students to a more challenging curriculum. As a critical educator, I must make students aware of the power issues at play that will significantly impact their pathways with school and their life options beyond it. This study was one way I hoped to accomplish that goal.

**Theoretical Framework**

Research on adolescent education has shaped our current understandings of how students have a sophisticated knowledge of multiple literacies (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Vesudevan, 2010). As such it is incumbent upon teachers to find meaningful ways for these literacies to be seamlessly incorporated within classroom instruction. Taking up this argument, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2005) employed a sociocultural framework to suggest that students use popular culture and various new literacies in their everyday experiences although they may have trouble accessing text within the traditional classroom setting. They explained that using a sociocultural framework, critical
educators should draw upon literacy and language practices related to popular culture and other student interests to enhance the literacy skills needed for “academic advancement, professional membership, and active membership” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005, p. 294). They argued, however, that such teaching should be a liberatory practice as advocated by Freire and Macedo that encourages students’ reading of the word and the world (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987). This study was designed using a sociocultural lens because its purpose was to engage students in critical reflection about social issues important to them. The theoretical framework that informed this study was critical pedagogy due to its focus on critical thinking and problem-posing education.

**Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008) is grounded in a sociocultural approach to education because it urges educators to look beyond issues related to schooling, curriculum, and policy but also to understand the importance of “social justice and human possibility” (p. 7). Kincheloe recommended the following “reconceptualizations” that should guide the educational vision of critical educators:

1. What human beings are capable of achieving,
2. The role of the social, cultural, and political in shaping human identity,
3. The relationship between community and schooling,
4. The ways that power operates to create purposes for schooling that are not necessarily in the best interests of students,
5. How teachers and students might relate to knowledge,
6. The ways schooling affects the lives of students from marginalized groups, and
7. The organization of schooling and the relationship between teachers and learners.  

(Kincheloe, 2008, p. 6)

It is this last point upon which I feel the theories of Paulo Freire are based and serve as the foundation of critical pedagogy.

Freire (1972) argued that most classroom settings are infected with a “narration sickness” (p. 69), whereby the teacher acts as a narrating subject who transmits knowledge to a “patient, listening” object, the student. Teachers lecture on what may be very important topics but do so in a way that is lifeless, static, and totally alien to the child’s everyday experiences. Learning then becomes an insignificant, meaningless aspect of a child’s life. He may learn to complete procedural tasks such as identifying parts of speech in isolation but fails to truly understand and appreciate how words actually function within a sentence. Students become receptacles and the teacher’s duty is to fill them with the knowledge that perpetuates the students’ oppression. Freire offered the following behaviors as examples of how such a philosophy manifests itself in the classroom:

a. The teacher teaches and the students are taught.

b. The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.

c. The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.

d. The teacher talks and the students—meekly

e. The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.

f. The teacher chooses and enforces his choices, and the students comply.

g. The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the teacher.

h. The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.
i. The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.

j. The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere object. (p. 59)

Freire further explained how this banking concept of education depicts students as ignorant, almost slave-like beings incapable of independent or transformative thinking. The oppressor will instinctively attempt to destroy any action that seeks to arouse the critical faculties of the oppressed. The longer students are kept as mere depositories for information, the less likely they will develop the critical awareness to rise above their oppression.

The banking concept of education allows the oppressor to disguise his exploitive tactics as acts of humanitarian interest. He pretends to use education as a way to uplift the oppressed; however, he instead uses dominating tactics to restrict their social consciousness. According to Freire, the oppressor’s interests lie more so in controlling how the oppressed regard their circumstances rather than in transforming the situation which oppresses them. As such, he uses a paternalistic approach coupled with the banking concept of education to objectify the oppressed as lazy, incompetent, and marginalized beings who represent the pathology of society. He then offers the guise of education as a charity to these “welfare recipients” that will assimilate and integrate them into back into the society that they had previously rejected. It is this false humanism of the oppressors that masks their true desire to turn individuals into “automatons—the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human” (Freire, 1972, p. 61).

The more willingly they believe the oppressors’ negative identification of them, the more likely the oppressed will accept the version of reality offered to them by the oppressor. The banking concept emphasizes a dichotomy between man and the world. Man may be in the world, but he
is not one with the world or with others. He is the possessor of a *consciousness* rather than a conscious entity within himself, a spectator passively open to the deposits of an outside world. Thus it follows that the banking concept of education seeks to control how the world is presented and enters the student. The teacher controls the information to which the student has access and only presents a version of the world that will make the student more passive and willing to accept his current position and status vis-à-vis the oppressor. Freire suggested that typical activities that occur in the classroom such as reading requirements, methods of evaluation, criteria for promotion, and even the spaces between teacher and student are deliberate attempts to control students’ thinking and ultimately, their actions. Because the banking concept perceives students as objects only, it does not allow for authentic thought that is only developed by students’ action upon the world and not merely a passive association with it. When teachers treat students as objects to be controlled, their actions become necrophilic. Citing Fromm, Freire explained how the oppressor regards people as things rather than living beings, and as such is motivated by a desire to destroy all that might lead to growth among the oppressed:

> Memory, rather than experience; having, rather than being, is what counts.

> The necrophilous person can relate to an object—a flower or a person—only if he possesses it; hence, a threat to his possession is a threat to himself…He loves control, and in the act of controlling his kills life. (Qtd. in Freire, 1972, p. 64)

Under the banking concept of education, teaching practices inhibit or *kill* the creative powers of the students by treating them as objects. Whereas the banking concept seeks to maintain a submersion of consciousness, a liberatory approach develops critical consciousness through the constant unveiling of reality.
In contrast to the banking model discussed above, Freire recommended a liberatory approach to teaching. The purpose of education should not be to maintain the oppression of men but rather to liberate them or more appropriately, work with them to help them liberate themselves. As such, Freire defined liberation as a praxis, which is the “action and reflection of men upon their world to transform it” (p. 66). Rather than conceptualizing education as a means of transferring knowledge from one person to another, a liberation model sees education as problem-posing. Problem-posing education, Freire argued, encourages not only critical consciousness among students but also requires them to be conscious of their consciousness. With the banking concept of learning, knowledge begins at one end of the learning situation with the teacher and finally rests at the opposite end with the student. At its outset, the problem-posing approach to learning presents a resolution to this teacher-student conflict found in the banking concept of education. Liberating education transforms the student from cognizable object to a shared position of cognitive actor with the teacher.

Freire offered that a liberatory education provides the solution to the banking concept because it transforms the teacher-student relationship into one not defined by polar opposition. With this approach, teacher and student are no longer mutually exclusive terms but allow for each to simultaneously act as both teacher and student. My study was designed to resemble a more liberatory approach to teaching because it allows the teacher and students to act as co-researchers as they collaboratively explored issues that were meaningful to the student. I purposefully designed activities that did not privilege the teacher as the sole possessor of knowledge. On the contrary, by analyzing and discussing research, students found the answers to the questions they have about schooling and their community.
Overview of Chapters

Chapter two provides a review of the literature related to several studies where students engaged in co-research opportunities. Although my students did not conduct formal research, they were required to read both print and digital texts that addressed their interests in schooling and their own community. The findings from the five studies presented hold important implications for my study and informed the three deductive themes used to analyze my data.

Chapter three describes the specific design of the study, which was divided into two separate phases—1) research on tracking and 2) research about Walker Middle School and its community. The data from each phase of the study collectively address both of my research questions and were used to categorize the findings related to both the deductive and inductive themes of the study. It also provides a detailed description of the site of the study, the participants, and my role as researcher. Chapter three concludes with a discussion of thematic networks (Attride-Sterling, 2001), the approach used to categorize and analyze the four inductive themes identified from the study.

Chapter four presents the findings and implications related to the three deductive themes of the study—1) shifts in teaching authority, 2) increased student self-efficacy, and 3) social action. Together these themes describe the conditions necessary to provide meaningful and authentic critical literacy opportunities. Chapter four ends with a description of specific ways I became an advocate for students based on our conversations during class discussions of the research and those comments revealed during focus group and individual interviews.

Chapter five offers a detailed look at how the emic perspective of the students helped to identify the four inductive themes from the study—1) student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy, 2) student perceptions on personnel, 3) student perceptions on tracking, and 4) student
perceptions on school and surrounding community. Chapter five provides a more in-depth description of the participants and how their varied backgrounds influenced their responses and, subsequently, shaped the analysis of the data presented in this section.

Chapter six concludes this dissertation by providing an overview of how both the deductive and inductive themes work together to answer my research questions. It ends with a discussion of the micro and macro implications of the study and suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER 2
STUDIES EXAMINING STUDENTS AS CO-RESEARCHERS

The purpose of this literature review is to examine previous studies where students participated as co-researchers. After reviewing this body of research, I identified three interconnected themes. When students engage as co-researchers, 1) the practice of teaching transforms, 2) students’ self-efficacy improves, and 3) students engage in social action. It is important to understand that these themes both influence and are influenced by one another. In order to more coherently explain these themes, I have tried to discuss each in a separate, linear fashion. However, because of the symbiotic relationship among all three themes, there will be overlap in the examples presented from each study.

The Transformation of Teaching Practices (Shifts in Authority)

Several research studies reveal that the transformation of teaching practices is both a cause and effect of engaging students as co-researchers. One of the most important factors and affordances of such action is the shift of authority between the student and teacher. All of the studies presented here are examples of Freire’s (1972) notion of a liberatory approach to education. In each scenario, researchers and teacher-researchers come to realize the importance of relinquishing control of the classroom.

In his study, Jeffrey Schwartz (1992) worked with students at two schools in the Pittsburgh area to research their community history. Students and staff from Sewickley
Academy collaborated with the students and staff at Clairton High School to research and share findings about the history of the Pittsburgh area. These schools were vastly different in terms of the economic backgrounds of their students. Despite their differences, the students participated in collective inquiry to learn more about not only their community but themselves. The teachers for this project allowed students’ research questions to guide the direction of the course. Although students began by asking general questions about their own past, other questions about the past of co-researchers emerged as well as those regarding making judgments.

Schwartz found that if students were to engage as true inquirers, the traditional roles of student and teacher had to change. Students from both schools soon realized that teachers can also be learners, not having all the answers and sometimes learning them from students. The definition of the term “teaching” also gained new meaning. Teaching went beyond the act of imparting information to include that of “raising questions, reflection, creating, and sharing ideas” (Schwartz, 1992, p. 114). In addition, teaching could refer to an act among an entire class, between partners, or by oneself. Much of the students’ shared authority in the class was gained through writing assignments. Schwartz argues that students naturally take on more responsibility when writing itself is taught as a process of inquiry. When writing is taught effectively, students understand it as not only a process of learning but one for learning as well. Through this inquiry, students realize that they too can contribute knowledge rather than merely receive it. The excerpt below is from the course description written by Schwartz:

We are all learners when we conduct research by asking genuine questions, creating and testing hypotheses, observing, finding answers, and writing about what we find. Since writing is one of the best ways to learn, we will write often to explore ideas, to make
connections, and to share results. This will lead us at times to examine language—how we use words to think and communicate, and how to be better writers. (p. 109)

Schwartz revealed how it is easier for the shift in authority to occur when the teacher does not possess all of the knowledge. As an English teacher, Schwartz was unfamiliar with the general content of a history class and did not know much about Pittsburgh history at all. Thus, it was easy for him to assume the role of learner. He admits, however, that many teachers will not be comfortable with such vulnerability and that even students may find it difficult to operate in a classroom without “centralized authority” (Schwartz, 1992, p. 118).

After the History of Pittsburgh study was over, Schwartz spoke with students on several occasions to discuss what conditions made it possible for the shift in authority to occur in the classroom. Together, Schwartz and his students compiled the following list of factors:

1. Posing real questions,
2. Students and teachers share expertise,
3. Sharing decisions,
4. Creating a sense of community,
5. Hands-on experience,
6. Respect for the little guy,
7. Providing models of inquiry, and
8. Focus on process of learning as well as the content. (p. 116)

A second study conducted by Sarah Allen (1992) did not formally include students as co-researchers; however, the teaching practices suggest students were considered as such. Allen’s (1992) study addressed the collaborative teaching and learning process. The purpose of the study was to discover ways that students could lead their own literature discussions. I include
her study here because although students were not labeled as co-researchers, Allen engaged them as such. Using a data analysis process known as Project inquiry, Allen convened a study group of two teachers and a transcriber to analyze audio and videotapes of her classroom discussions. Their analyses garnered insights “that went far beyond what [Allen] as a single observer could gain” (Allen, 1992, p. 84). However, Allen often shared the group’s analyses with her students and even had students analyze data through close readings of videotaped class sessions. Thus, students became participant-observers as they reflected on their own learning processes.

Allen shared that once students become responsible for their own learning, the teacher as the position of certainty disappears. She wrote, “Distinctions between teacher and learner become less certain, everyone is teaching; everyone learning. We think together,” (Allen, 1992, p. 91). Students discussed how they were capable of constructing their own meaning from a text instead of learning the teacher’s perspective. Allen’s willingness to let go of control of the classroom further emphasized to students that there is no single, authoritative interpretation of a text.

In her study with middle school students as ethnographic researchers, Patricia Johnston (1992) found that shifts in authority not only occur between teachers and students but also between texts and students. As students analyzed and wrote research about people in their lives, this work became the “texts” that were read and discussed in the classroom. As such, students learned that the information and experiences they brought to school were of equal value to the knowledge taught in school.

Ernest Morrell’s (2004) study with high school students represents yet another look at how students engaged as co-researchers leads to a shift in authority. However, this shift extended beyond the traditional teacher-student relationship and instead, afforded students the
opportunity to become “more fuller participants in a critical research-focused community” (Morrell, 2004, p. 85). Students researched and presented to university faculty members their findings on 1) the impact of hip hop music on urban students and implications for teaching, 2) the identification of various types of resistance models, 3) familial understandings of education across generations, or 4) the impact of student language on teacher perceptions. Morrell explained how the students were able to use the language and tools of researchers to tell their story from their own perspective, creating a new position to inform research. He wrote:

This positionality gives these street sociologists the perspective from below (or within) that allows for the development of a critical and transformative sociology leading to revolutionary praxis emerging from the people who, according to the tenets of critical social theory, are the only ones who can liberate themselves. (p. 81)

After each presentation concluded, professors gave feedback to each group. One professor, who studied under Freire, described how the students’ research provided spaces for them to also participate in the dialogue of sociology. In addition, the professor “[spoke] to the promise of their ability to take the language of sociology to places where the university faculty cannot travel” (Morrell, 2004, p. 81).

In each study presented here, the importance of the shift in authority is emphasized when students are engaged in collaborative research with the teacher. Not only does this process allow students to take more responsibility for their own learning, but it also provides meaningful opportunities for teachers to learn from their students. Not surprisingly, students who become co-researchers increase their self-efficacy as well.
Increased Student Self-Efficacy

While I choose to discuss improved student self-efficacy after addressing the shift in authority, I recognize that neither condition will occur without the other. Students must believe they are capable of learning and take ownership of their learning if a genuine shift in authority is to occur. At the same time, once students’ confidence increases regarding their abilities, they are more likely to seek opportunities to assert greater authority in the classroom.

During the 1981-1982 school-year, Shirley Brice Heath and N. Amanda Branscombe (Branscombe & Thomas, 1992) worked with high school students to introduce them to ethnographic methods as they studied their community’s oral and written language. Students practiced various data-gathering techniques such as field notes, observations, tape recordings, and surveys in addition to learning about data analysis. Because the students knew Heath would really use their data to inform her own ethnographic research, they were motivated to use those methods with much more accuracy and clarity. One particular student who was a teenage mother used the ethnographic tools to record and analyze her son’s language acquisition. Even though she eventually dropped out of school during the project, Thomas continued to do ethnographic field work with her son. Over the next two years, Thomas recorded and shared her field notes about her son with Branscombe and Heath. Ten years later Branscombe renewed contact with Thomas. Thomas revealed that despite having had three additional children during that time span, she was still using ethnographic methods to collect data on all of her children. Because she was able to complete her research mostly independent of a teacher, Thomas’s story is a model example of how critical research leads to increased self-efficacy in students. In the third section of this literature review, I return to Thomas’s experience to show how developing the student researcher’s self-efficacy has longer, rewarding effects for those students engaged in it.
In Allen’s (1992) study with student-led discussions, she learned that when students took control of the conversations, it significantly altered their perception of themselves as learners. As students led discussions, they felt a new sense of authority that encouraged them to truly reflect on concepts rather than simply look for right answers. One student wrote the following passage to describe how she learned to trust interpretations of her peers as well as herself once she could no longer depend on the teacher’s providing one for them:

I noticed that these class discussions in which the teacher was not involved helped me to become more confident about my classmates’ opinions as well as my own. At first I felt shaky about accepting my classmates’ ideas and I always needed the “OK” from the teacher. Now I accept ideas more willingly at my own discretion which has also helped me become more confident about my own thoughts. (Allen, 1992, p. 89)

Although teachers may find it difficult at first to relinquish control to the students, Allen shares how the benefits well outweigh risks. As students become more confident, they appreciate how what they learn in school holds much greater value than just preparing for a test. They are preparing for life.

As students in Johnston’s study (1992) collected and analyzed interview data to help them answer the question, “What is a good student?” they became sophisticated researchers who realized the value of their work. Johnston observed in her field notes:

It seems to me that students are taking pride in their work. I don’t have to remind the kids to put their names on their papers before I collect their folders; instead, students are using their full names, their middle names, their given names. What does that mean? (p. 72)
Although getting middle school students to write their name on papers may seem an insignificant accomplishment, this simple act demonstrates that students began taking more ownership of their work and appreciated receiving credit for it.

Through the explorations with critical research, Morrell’s students (2004) not only improved their academic standing but also acquired and refined their skills in data collection and analysis. Using the tools of ethnographers, students learned how to rely on their own cultural experiences to grapple with complex texts and create their own texts. Not only were these high school students exposed to dense theoretical frameworks typically used in graduate courses, they were also able to critique them to understand how they might inform their own research. For example, one group relied on critical social theory in their study of art forms from popular culture such as hip hop. Morrell (2004) explained how their successful practice with critical research caused the students to “see themselves as members of intellectual and countercultural communities” (p. 89). A second professor who also provided students with feedback about their presentations was especially impressed with the confidence students showed in discussing and even challenging resistance theory. He admitted, “I was stunned. Even I can’t do it so confidently,” (Morrell, 2004, p. 84). As they made connections between their research and their own experiences, students also developed the literacies that would enable them to succeed in school. It is important to note here that the high school participants in this study were not model students. All participants were from non-dominant cultural groups who attended an urban school. Although they were clearly intelligent, the students’ performance in school up to this point had been meager. Even when they did advocate and were eventually granted enrollment in their school’s advanced courses, these students sometimes still struggled to obtain academic success. Yet, outside of the confines of traditional schooling, we see just how adept and skillful
these students were in using their knowledge for authentic, social purposes. In the next section, I return to this study to discuss how the students’ increased self-efficacy gave them the confidence to become politically and socially active in their communities.

**Student Participation in Social Action**

Once students become more aware of and dedicated to their own learning, they come to understand how that learning should be used to help them make informed decisions outside of school. In particular, two studies reveal how students used the tools of critical research to become social change agents.

Although Charlene Thomas (1992) was unable to return to school after becoming a teenage mother, she still used the ethnographic methods taught to her by Branscombe and Heath to become an advocate for herself, and especially for her children. In her narrative which was included in this article, Thomas shared how research skills informed any important decision she made for her family. When contemplating moving to a neighboring town, Thomas visited there on several occasions, interviewing the residents and visiting the schools and recreation facilities. She read about Habitat for Humanity in *Reader’s Digest* and then researched how she could apply for one of the homes.

In her own words, Thomas said she tried to “problem-solve to accomplish [her] goals” (Branscombe & Thomas, 1992, p. 11). For example, when her application for project housing was denied because she made too much money, Thomas decided to question other people who lived there. From these interviews, she learned that she needed to gather reference letters and write a personal letter to the leasing office to explain why she wanted to live there. In addition, she discovered that certain apartments in the particular section she desired would be vacant soon
and mentioned this information in her letter. Within only a few weeks, Thomas’s application was approved.

Thomas’s story proves the realistic reasons why students benefit when they engage in critical research. In addition to the examples listed above, Thomas also used her data collection and analysis skills to advocate for her children at their school, research information about court proceedings, or speak with doctors. Thomas felt that when she met with people who worked at these various agencies, they were more apt to listen because she had concrete data to support her position.

Like Thomas, students in Morrell’s (2004) study also used the critical research skills they learned to become agents of social change. They also used the tools of ethnographic researchers to become more informed and politically active in causes that were of importance to them. Although Morrell had purposefully included activities that would teach students about acts of informed resistance, students used this knowledge to seek out, participate in, and even initiate acts of social and political action by themselves. The students attended a rally sponsored by a state senator and the National Conference on Community Injustice to protest Disney’s release of a *Toy Story 2* video game that depicts a Latino villain, Frito Bandito. Players had to shoot Frito Bandito in order for Buzz Lightyear to advance to the next level. This Latino villain, however, was not even a character in the movie, which is why protestors felt the video game promoted violence and racism. As acts of informed resistance, the students conducted research about the game, wrote letters of protest to politicians, and made signs for the rally. One student from the project even spoke to protestors at the rally, reminding them that in the wake of the Columbine tragedy, society should challenge the influences of violent video games on the actions of children. In addition, he urged the crowd to question images of bigotry, racism, hatred, and
stereotyping the *Toy Story 2* game promoted about the Mexican American culture and how it also negatively affected children.

Because the students became so adept at using the tools and language of sociology and ethnography during their summer program, Morrell and his colleagues felt they should have similar opportunities for more critical participation during the school year. Students were allowed to take a course in the morning before their regular classes that permitted them to continue their explorations into social issues of importance to them. As part of a presentation for this course, three students used both academic and critical literacies to question student access to a prestigious exam. Although all students were eligible to take the exam, the school only encouraged AP students to participate in an effort to keep scores high, thereby encouraging white parents to keep their students in a seemingly high performing school. Students who did well on the exam would receive an extra seal on their diploma. Disgruntled with these unjust practices, the students researched the exam, interviewed school staff and administrators, and collected documents to support their argument that discriminatory practices were used to exclude non-AP students from the test. The students hoped their findings would shed light on the oppressive structures faced by non-AP students, primarily those of color.

**Connections**

All of these studies emphasized the conditions necessary for student’s research in areas of importance to them to be effective and how it also provides spaces for critical pedagogy to flourish. In each study, teachers realized that once students assert more authority in class, academic and critical literacies are strengthened, and students become more aware and involved in their learning. Perhaps most importantly, this self-efficacy encourages students to make connections between what they learn in school and their experiences out of school, challenging
them to question authority in all situations. The goal of my study was for students to use the tools and language of critical researchers to become more socially and politically active in their school and communities.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

My study was designed as critical action research because it seeks to include participants as co-researchers in the study rather than merely conducting research on them (Hinchey, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) define action research as a “collective enterprise that involves participants who are generally excluded from the research process” (p. 108). Patricia Hinchey (2008), explained how action research is a methodological approach that is appropriate for teacher-researchers of all levels, from pre-kindergarten to graduate school, to further understand their students and discover alternative options that enhance the teaching and learning process. Because the scope of action research in education is so far reaching, it allows for the development of questions regarding students’ academic, physical, and social well-being and leads to answers that can effect positive change both within and beyond the classroom walls. Hinchey listed the following four descriptions as key characteristics of action research:

1. It is conducted by those inside a community (teachers, administrators, community members) rather than by outside experts.

2. It pursues improvement of better understanding in some areas the researcher considers important.
3. It involves systematic inquiry, which includes information gathering, analysis, and reflection.

4. It leads to an action plan, which frequently generates a new cycle of the process. (p. 4)

Site Selection

The site of my research study was a middle school in a suburb of metropolitan Atlanta. It is one of only four middle schools in the second to smallest school district in the state (based on square mileage). Most schools in the district qualify for Title I status because more than 40% of students participate in the federally funded free/reduced lunch program (www2.ed.gov). However, this group has not always been a significant demographic of the district. The percentage of students from this particular socioeconomic background has increased significantly in recent years. The number of students identified as economically disadvantaged increased from 40% for the 2005-2006 school year to more than 60% for the 2010-2011 school year (www.gadoe.org). The district, however, continues to boast high academic performance, making AYP every year since the inception of the now defunct No Child Left Behind mandate. Hence, residents and district employees display a less than modest degree of pride about the school system.

Hawthorne County’s fervent commitment to quality education is touted at many district wide events such as professional development and new teacher orientation. As a new employee to the district, I experienced firsthand the induction into the culture of what is Hawthorne County Public Schools. Over the course of the two-day orientation, the mantra of the district was frequently stressed by district level employees—“In Hawthorne County, there are only two jobs—those who teach and those who support teachers.” To further emphasize this commitment
to teaching and learning, the superintendent and his cabinet frequently visit schools. During the teachers’ first day back for a new school year, the entire cabinet arrived to present Walker Middle an award for its outstanding results in English Language Arts on the state criterion referenced test. Later in the semester, the assistant superintendent volunteered in the serving line during lunch. Although an integral part of the success story that is Hawthorne County Public Schools, Walker Middle occupies a precarious position as both the delight and disappointment of the district.

Built in 1990 and with a current population of approximately 1000 students, Walker Middle School is the largest middle school in the city of Walker, located in Hawthorne County. In addition with 75%, it has the highest population of Title I students in the district. According to data published by the Georgia Department of Education, Walker Middle School is comprised primarily of the following subgroups—African American (64%), White (20%), and Hispanic (11%) (www.gadoe.org). In part because of its socioeconomic and racial demographics, Walker Middle is considered by many to be the worst middle school in the district. However, its location may also be one factor contributing to its low ranking among the other middle schools within the district. Walker is the middle school in closest proximity to the city of Atlanta, just five minutes from the major interstate that runs east-west in the city. In fact, when I mentioned my decision to transfer, colleagues from the neighboring, yet significantly more urban district (Thomas County) in which I previously worked, stated the conditions and student population I would soon encounter was strikingly similar to that which I was leaving. This is not to suggest that my reasons for leaving my prior school district were to avoid working at an urban school and all of the circumstances associated with it. On the contrary, my decision to transfer to Walker Middle was primarily because I was both a resident and parent of the Hawthorne County
district. Most importantly, I felt it was better for my children for me to be closer to home and also on the same academic calendar. Hawthorne County uses a balanced calendar, whereby students receive a week-long break four times a year in addition to regular breaks such as Christmas and the summer. Most schools within the metropolitan Atlanta area use a more traditional school calendar.

Perceptions, however, are misleading as standardized test scores from 2013-2014 at Walker Middle school are above the state average, but only slightly below that for the district average and almost on par with the Hawthorne district’s top performing middle school, Dickens. Dickens, however, is nestled deep with the county, with a much longer and less direct commute to Atlanta. Its socioeconomic and racial demographics are also dissimilar. Dickens Middle does not have as many students from non-dominant racial groups as Walker. Percentages for African American students are 50%, White students 37%, and Hispanic students 5%. In addition, a higher percentage of Dickens’ students come from more affluent backgrounds as evident by its low percentage of students on free or reduced lunch, 41% compared to Walker’s 75% (www.gadoe.org). Due to their high performance, schools within the same cluster as Dickens are considered the jewels of Hawthorne County; hence, many residents new to the area look specifically for homes in that part of the county.

The administrative team frequently stressed that Dickens was Walker’ strongest competition and in reviewing data, pointing out how despite the significant differences in the demographics of the two schools, Dickens’ students with all of their social capital advantages only score a few percentage points above Walker. The principal of Walker Middle at the time of this study was well aware of the negative perceptions surrounding the school but implored his staff to make conscious decisions to operate in a manner that could change those perceptions.
During the summer leadership meeting, the principal shared data from a recent school climate survey to support his recommendation that Walker must improve its community relations. In particular, he stressed that the staff could be its own worst enemy or best advertiser for the great things that take place at Walker on a daily basis.

I feel it important to pause here to discuss the administration in detail at Walker Middle because their collective presence at the school is necessary in understanding the current but changing school climate. The administrative team at Walker during the time of this study consisted only of the principal and two assistant principals, all of whom were new to the school. The principal and one assistant principal both started late in the first semester the year prior to my arrival at Walker but at different times amid administrative changes at the school. The principal, a former assistant principal at a Hawthorne County High School in a different cluster, was sent initially as the interim leader but later assumed the permanent position. The assistant principal, a woman who was a first-year administrator and former Hawthorne County teacher but whose most recent position was as a teacher in a neighboring state, was hired shortly thereafter. The second assistant principal was also new to an administration position, coming from a larger, more urban district only a few miles from Hawthorne County where he served as athletic director and classroom teacher. Only the female administrator currently works at Walker Middle School. Toward the end of the school year, the principal took a position in another district in Georgia due to the need to be closer to family. His announcement of this decision to leave will be discussed in more detail in chapters four and five in terms of how it affected students and their perception of the community. Over the summer break the other male administrative team member was transferred to the high school to serve its assistant principal.
All three administrators worked diligently in maintaining a professional yet collegial atmosphere among staff, students, parents, and the community at Walker Middle. Their presence in the building, much like that of the superintendent and his cabinet, was one of support and encouragement. While they were first and foremost committed to sound, quality instruction, they also understood that the teaching and learning process is influenced by multiple factors both within and outside the school. Unlike many Title I schools in which I have worked where the lower socioeconomic conditions of the student population seem to influence most instructional decisions, the administrators at Walker Middle did not focus on this particular aspect of the school. They instead operated under the motto “Committed to Excellence, Motivated to Learn, Success for All” rather than working from a deficit model of education. I also pause here to include a description of the administrative team to explain how certain conditions at the school that were questioned during this study were inherited rather than implemented. Although only time will tell how the brief tenure of the administrative team will influence both academic achievement and overall perception of Walker Middle, the school is making strides in the right direction.

Despite the negative perceptions about Walker, there is significant historical pride surrounding the school stemming from the many county residents who boast generations of children who have come through Hawthorne County, specifically attending schools within the same cluster as Walker Middle. Pride also stems from the school’s close ties to a large university only an hour’s drive away. Although Walker Middle is closer in distance to another well-known college located in downtown Atlanta, both Walker and the high school into which it feeds share their colors and mascot with the other university, Alcott. School spirit for Walker Middle is, therefore, synonymous with school spirit for Alcott as several employees are actual or
self-proclaimed alumni as evident by their room décor, attire, and car decals. I must admit the reverence for the university is quite infectious. As one who also attended Alcott University but who is not a native of the state, I did not feel much allegiance, especially since I was a commuter. Yet, somehow after only a few days of working at Walker Middle, I too felt proud to be a part of this rich college tradition.

Conducting my study at Walker Middle was a logical decision since I worked there as an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher. My assigned content area lent itself naturally to working with students to conduct research, and the skills taught for this study were well aligned with Common Core State Standards. In addition, teaching that promotes critical research and reflection is evident of the philosophy undergirding Common Core that instruction should be designed to rigorously develop both students’ writing and presentation skills in order to make them college and career ready (www.corestandards.org).

Working as a participant observer with my own students also allowed for a more authentic and collaborative research approach (Hinchey, 2008). Also, because I taught four different academic periods of Language Arts with a combined total of 87 students, I had access to more than enough participants to conduct a valid study.

Since the beginning of the school year, I tried to develop an open, honest, and collegial relationship with both students and parents, which was an advantage as I recruited participants for this study. In addition, the principal at Walker Middle was very supportive of my work and accommodating of most requests I made regarding my study.

**Participant Selection**

The participants in this study were from my four eighth grade English Language Arts (ELA) classes taught during the 2013-2014 school-year. Although all students were invited to
participate, only 21 out of 88 students returned the signed consent form. Of the 21 participants, sixteen were girls and five were boys. Fourteen of the students were Black, four were White, one is Mexican-American, and two were of mixed race (Black and White). The students had varying levels of academic strength in ELA. Although I was assigned to the team for students’ who had a 504 medical impairment form or were enrolled in the school’s ESOL program, none of the participants in this study qualified for either of these services.

Although I made flyers, sent mass emails, and even called some parents, only seven of the students and their parents attended my informational session about the study, but all agreed to participate in the study. The remaining fourteen participants submitted their consent forms throughout the study, with some agreeing to participate as late as the last week of school. At first, I was reluctant to continue to ask students to submit consent forms several weeks after the study had already begun. However, citing Feldman, Bell, and Berger (2003), Butler-Kisber explained that consent can “continue throughout the life of the project and beyond” (p. 16).

Student participants in this study represented a wide range of academic abilities. Although some students were highly capable, with one with one being admitted into the Hawthorne County magnet high school, others struggle to master the eighth grade Common Core Georgia Performance Standards. State standardized test data from the previous school year suggest that of the nineteen students who took the test, eighteen were at or above grade level in the Reading domain. All nineteen of these students were at or above grade level in the Language Arts domain. This test data, however, may be misleading given the low cut-off score for the state test. The threshold for passing the test is only 50%; thus, if students answer only 20 of 40 questions correctly in Reading, they pass. Similarly, if a student answers only 25 of 50 questions correctly in Language Arts, he passes. On the other hand, Lexile scores paint a more
accurate picture of the students’ true academic ability in English Language Arts. The Lexile range for these participants was 780 to 1210, which according to the 2012 Common Core Lexile Text Measures suggest the reading ability of these students varies anywhere from a third-grade to twelfth-grade level (www.corestandards.org). According to research included in Appendix A of Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, Lexile levels are only one of seven computer generated quantitative measures of text complexity based on word frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion and other criteria. Although there is research that raises concerns about the usefulness of the Lexile Framework (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; Krashen, 2001), I believe my students’ Lexile scores may be a more dependable indicator of their abilities than standardized test scores alone.

**Researcher Participant Relationship**

Because I was a new teacher to the school, I did not have a prior relationship with any of the students. I consider myself to be a nurturing teacher, and thus, had established a benign, almost motherly rapport with students. I would often share with students that they were my family away from home and that I prayed and worried about them as much as I did my own biological children. As a veteran teacher and former administrator, I have developed numerous strategies to establish productive relationships with parents (Allen, Tucker, & Newsome, 2013). As such, I had only positive experiences with all of my parents even when I had to contact them because of discipline issues or failing grades. I am certain that at least eleven of the participants returned consent forms only because their parents wanted them to. These were parents with whom I communicated frequently and who had personally informed me of their willingness to assist me in completing my degree.
I do not want to paint an unrealistic picture of perfection about my students. Although I believe I had developed a close and respectful bond with them, there were still typical episodes of middle school behavior and angst among the 21 participants. Some days they fully participated in discussions and activities, other days students might have been withdrawn or simply disengaged. There were even instances when some students were absent from class because they were serving either in-school or out-of school suspensions. On only a few, rare occasions, these infractions may have been committed in my class, but most often they occurred in another school location. Absences due to suspension was limited to only a few participants but occurred at different times throughout the study.

**School Structure**

Like most middle schools, each grade level at Walker was divided into four-man teams, so that students traveled to the same group of teachers for their core classes—Math, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies. At Walker Middle School, there were three teams of teachers in the eighth grade. Although most classes contained a heterogeneous group of students, each team did serve a specific segment of the student population. Students who took accelerated or honors courses were assigned to Team A. Students who had a 504 medical impairment form or required ESOL services were assigned to my team, Team B. Any student who needed Special Education services was placed on Team C. Although each team was assigned a target population, all teams had at least one section of students who did not receive special instruction; these students take what is referred to as “regular” classes. In addition, some students leave their teams to take gifted courses or in Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, or Math from a different group of teachers on a different hall.
The current teaching assignments for the gifted program are a source of contention in the school for a variety of reasons, but primarily because all three gifted teachers are White. Several teachers in the building have gifted certification, but all gifted students take courses from only those three teachers. However, state law does allow a variety of scheduling options for gifted courses that would alleviate this issue. For example, each grade level could have one team of gifted teachers, which would increase the number of teachers’ assigned gifted courses from three to twelve. The new administrative team at Walker Middle did not create the current gifted schedule; on the contrary, this arrangement had been in place for some time. Teachers who were disgruntled about the current gifted assignments were vocal at leadership team meetings and other forums dedicated to address issues at the school.

I feel it necessary to address the different levels of courses or tracks offered at Walker to give a broader context within which this study is set. As mentioned previously, I taught on the team which serves students who have a 504 or ELL plan. I began the year with four students who had 504 plans for either Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyper-Activity Disorder, but three of those students were withdrawn. Two moved to other school districts within the state of Georgia, and one was assigned to the alternative school in Hawthorne County because of fighting. The only remaining 504 student, however, did not agree to be a participant in this study. There were no ESOL students placed on team B during the school year of this study.

**Research Design**

As mentioned previously, my students frequently questioned their placement on Team B. Even late in the first semester, students wanted to know if they were on the “slow team.” The movement of two students late in the first semester from the honors team (Team A) to our team was a signal to our students that certainly there were some differences among the eighth grade
teams on the hall. Team A, the honors team, made numerous schedule changes to ensure that their students had been placed in more rigidly defined academic tracks. Thus, students who were considered more capable based on standardized test scores from the previous year and current classroom formative assessments (formal and informal) were given an all-honors class schedule while other students who were deemed ill-equipped to handle the more challenging honors curriculum were placed in the “regular,” lower-tracked classes. Quite naturally, these massive schedule changes on Team A caused quite a stir among those students. After administrators issued the new schedules and not only removed two students from their Honors classes but also entirely from Team A, the only logical explanation our students could imagine was that Team B was the “slow” team. What else could account for the transfer of these students at such a late juncture in the school year? One young man was so distraught about his transfer to my team that he refused to follow his new schedule. He was returned to the Honors team by the end of the day. While it is not uncommon for students to be switched from one team to another, it usually takes place at the beginning of the school year either because students have been assigned to the wrong leveled class or to balance class size. Schedule changes made later in the school year are usually due to severe discipline infractions and preceded by a suspension. No discipline infractions, however, had occurred before the two students were placed on my team, an important fact that had not gone unnoticed by my students.

Since I began the year emphasizing our class theme “Critical Scholars Investigate,” I felt it would be immoral and hypocritical to continue to ignore my students’ questions about the different tracks each eighth grade team had been assigned. Here they were doing exactly what I had implored of them—using a critical lens to question their own circumstances, while I was trying to protect them from their own reality. Whereas I had been quite vocal discussing my own
misgivings with former colleagues about the blatant tracking in the school, I was uncomfortable broaching the subject with the students who obviously were concerned about it too. What I came to realize was that their concerns were the perfect and much more natural platform to spark critical conversations. If my goal was to mold my students into sophisticated, critical thinkers, what better way to do it than by allowing them to critically investigate issues that were meaningful to them? Below I describe the two phases of my study in greater detail.

Study Part I

In the first part of the study, students analyzed and discussed various print and digital resources about tracking. Although this lesson addressed multiple common core eighth grade standards, the focus standards were RI8.9 (Reading: Informational Texts): *Analyze a case in which two or more texts provide conflicting information on the same topic and identify where the texts disagree on matters or facts* and W 8.1 (Writing): *Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.* The essential questions that guided this unit are listed below:

**Essential questions**

1. What are the different perspectives on tracking? What evidence do people cite for developing their opinion on tracking?

2. What is differentiated instruction and how does it look within and among classes at Walker Middle School?

3. Given the current research regarding tracking and differentiated instruction, what suggestions would you make to stakeholders about scheduling options?

To begin our discussion about tracking, student answered an anticipation guide that listed statements that described practices that are often used to group students in middle and high
school. After a brief discussion of their responses to the anticipation guide, students then viewed two short video clips that provided an overview about tracking. The clip was from director David Guggenheim’s documentary about the failure of the American public education system, *Waiting for Superman.* The second video, “Tracking in Public Schools: Meet Jenny and Sally,” was a short advertisement by social advocacy group, TakePart, urging citizens to sign a petition to support Common Core State Standards. In the *Waiting for Superman* clip which was animated, students learned how tracking began in the early 20th century as a way to ensure there remained a viable working class. The “Tracking in Public Schools” clip showed two puppets Jenny and Sally who have been placed on very different tracks. Each puppet explains the type of instruction she receives and the inevitable outcomes of these divergent opportunities. The clip continues with the explanation that the rigorous expectations of the Common Core State Standards is a viable solution to the problem of tracking and ends with an appeal for viewers to sign a Common Core petition.

Students were then asked to form their own definition of tracking. No prior discussion other than videos took place so that students would have an opportunity to construct a definition of tracking for themselves. Discovery learning (Bruner, 1979) is a constructivist approach that encourages students to rely on their own past experiences and prior knowledge as they tackle problem solving scenarios similar to those that will be explored during this study.

Since both videos presented only a negative view of tracking, I wanted to ensure that students had an opportunity to read research based articles that present both a positive and negative position on tracking. Students were already familiar with the components of rhetoric from previous argumentative writing pieces from the first semester and would, therefore, have no problem delineating and evaluating opposing views on a topic. The first article, “Keeping Track,
Part 1: The Policy and Practice of Curriculum Inequality” by Jennie Oakes (1986) reported the findings of a research study about the harmful effects of tracking. Initial discussion about the article was done during whole group sessions to ensure that students would understand key terms in the articles, identify the claims Oakes made against tracking, and also find any counterarguments that she addressed. Students then worked in groups to identify the specific findings from the study in one of three key areas—access to knowledge, opportunities to learn, and classroom climate. Our reading of Oakes’ article concluded with students’ responding to three constructed response items to help them summarize the article and also identify any connections with the way courses were scheduled at Walker Middle.

The second article, “Making Sense of the Tracking and Ability Grouping Debate,” (Loveless, 1998) was published by the conservative think tank, The Tom Fordham Institute. Due to the length and complex research data presented in the article, students only read excerpts from the article’s four sections. Section one provided a technical explanation of tracking and distinguished between ability grouping, primarily seen in elementary schools (i.e., red birds and blue birds reading groups), and tracking, which occurs more often in middle and high schools and is characterized by distinct levels of courses. Section two gave a history of tracking and compared how tracking looks now versus when first implemented at the turn on the century. Section III, which was of most relevance to this study, refutes four popular critiques of tracking that were also mentioned in the Oakes’ article. These four critiques are listed below:

1. Tracking fosters race and class segregation,
2. Tracking harms self-esteem,
3. Tracking locks students into specific tracks or course types, and
4. Tracking only privileges those in higher tracks.
Finally, the fourth and final section offered recommendations for improving tracked and untracked schools to better meet the needs of today’s students. After completing our study of tracking, students wrote a short reflective essay to explain their own definitions and opinions about tracking.

Although there is much debate about the advantages and disadvantages of tracking, there is a body of research on differentiated instruction (Coil, 2004; Coil & Merritt, 2011; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) that may offer one solution to this problem. After completing their opinion pieces, students were assigned research related to differentiated instruction in order to construct their own philosophy regarding student placement and course options. The unit of study on differentiated instruction began with a read aloud of a picture book entitled, *The Animal School* (Reavis, 1940). Written by George Reavis, *The Animal School* is a fable about differentiated instruction. In the book, several animals of the forest come together to create a school but soon realize that a single curriculum does not suit the needs of the variety of animals and teachers who attend. The epilogue explains how schools would best be improved by using more funding to “make…schools places where children are held to high, yet different, standards.”

Next, I presented a more formal direct instruction lesson on the three ways to assess students using differentiated instruction (readiness, learning styles, and interests) and the four ways modify assignments using differentiated instruction (content, process, product, and learning environment) (Coil, 2004; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

I then provided students a copy of the rubric for Performance Standard 4 from the Georgia Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (www.gadoe.org), which outlines the criteria for differentiated instruction upon which each teacher will be evaluated regardless of the course
track he or she teaches. This lesson on differentiated instruction concluded with the students’ constructing their own definition of differentiated instruction based on the various texts they examined as well as our class discussion. In addition, they were required to answer three questions below:

1. Describe a lesson where a teacher differentiated instruction in one of your elementary or middle school classes.

2. What type of assessment and/or modification did he/she use?

3. Using the rubric from the TKES teacher evaluation rubric, what score would you give the teacher’s lesson? Explain your answer.

As a former middle school administrator, I grappled with scheduling courses to best meet students’ individual learning needs while simultaneously trying to avoid homogeneous grouping that privileges higher level students and their teachers but sometimes stifles and stigmatizes struggling students and their teachers. I have worked with numerous scheduling options such as placing all high performing students on one team and leaving average students and special education students on the other teams. I have scheduled gifted students alongside special needs students in a co-teaching model. I have also scheduled gifted, accelerated, and special education courses among all teachers on a grade level so that each team receives students of varying abilities. Unfortunately, I cannot suggest that any one scheduling option works better than another. Scheduling is another complicated part of the bureaucracy that is schooling, and it is difficult to satisfy all stakeholders, e.g. parents, teachers, students, district-level employees, board members, etc. Not to mention the climate and clientele can vary tremendously even at schools with similar racial and class demographics and just minutes apart in distance. While I
found one scheduling option to work well at one school, it was a disastrous experiment at another school just a few miles away.

I included this personal experience to reveal the dilemmas school administrators face when trying to choose appropriate course options to meet the needs of the extremely diverse group of learners within a typical middle school. In this study, I wanted students to understand that although course assignments may not be to their liking, there are many factors that administrators must consider when creating a master schedule. This unit concluded with students’ returning to their original anticipation guide to reconsider their initial responses and explain why they may have changed any responses.

**Study Part II**

In Part II of this study, students conducted research on their school and community.

Focus standards for this phase of the study were W8.6 (Writing): *Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and present the relationship between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others;* W8.7: *Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration,* and W8.8; *Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source.* This essential questions for this unit were:

**Essential questions**

1. How can writing become a tool for critical thinking and metacognition?
2. How do critical writers choose appropriate text formats to influence their audiences?
3. What are the multiple perspectives in our community about Walker Middle School and the Hawthorne County?

As mentioned previously, Walker Middle School does not have the best reputation among all four middle schools in Hawthorne County. In order to counter the prevailing opinions about their school, I wanted students to research their community to appreciate its rich history and pride. The second unit encouraged students to discover what information has been published formally and informally about their community. Students critiqued various print and digital texts about Walker in order to develop narratives and counter-narratives about their school and community.

Freire (1972) described that the teacher-student and students-teachers evolve when genuine dialogue occurs in the classrooms. Teachers and students are jointly responsible for a process in which all involved have something of value to share, causing both teacher and student to learn something new. Here no knowledge is privileged as correct based on authority; instead, authority resides in that which leads to freedom. The problem-posing teacher always keeps in mind that cognizable objects should be considered and reflected upon by both teacher and student. The students no longer act as passive listeners but now become critical co-creators of the knowledge shared within the classroom. Although the teacher may initially present material to the students for their consideration, he becomes motivated to perhaps alter his own interpretations about the material as students share (and alter) their own.

This is true of the knowledge that both my students and I brought to the table during this unit on community history. Although I was also a resident of Walker, I was not born in the area and actually learned much from what they already knew about Hawthorne County and the
research they gathered. The knowledge I brought as a teacher to this study was that of critical research methods.

This unit incorporated several instructional formats that exposed students to a variety of ways in which they could publish their own findings about the Walker community. The first lesson, “Take Two: Reading Community Photos” was developed by Mimi Dyer (2005) and was designed to help students develop deeper meaning of the term community and to see their community from different perspectives or lenses through close readings of photographs. By analyzing different photographs, students come to understand how “local communities continually redefine themselves through material culture such as buildings, neighborhoods, parks and public places, and that it is through study of this culture that [teachers] and students can truly appreciate the essence of community (p. 15). Dyer recommended using photographs that illustrate both permanence and change such as old architecture and signs announcing the erection of new public spaces. Pairs of photographs from various locations in Walker were distributed separately to students on opposite sides of the classroom. Students wrote for ten minutes about the thoughts or feelings the picture evoked, what was seen, or not seen, which modeled to students how writing becomes a tool for critical thinking. After ten minutes had passed, students found a classmate with the same picture to share their responses. In their discussions, I encouraged the students to analyze not only how their picture represented permanence or change but also to consider what groups of people were represented and which groups may have been excluded. Finally, the students analyzed the picture through a more personal lens to discuss whether they felt it represented who they were as a citizen of Hawthorne County.

The last lessons in this second phase of the study addressed community perceptions and the use of counter-narratives as a voice for silenced or marginalized groups. A fight that occurred
between two students on our team in early fall exposed just how negatively Walker Middle was viewed by the community. The victim in the fight suffered substantial injuries, and his mother’s public criticism of the administration’s handling of the incident made great media fodder. The local newspaper ran several stories about the incident and an Atlanta news affiliate even interviewed the mother and son at the corner of the school’s premises. The coverage and community was so pervasive that the principal called a school assembly to speak with each grade level to encourage them not to be discouraged by the “haters” and continue to strive for excellence.

My experiences as an assistant principal had warranted my handling of numerous fights along with negative media coverage fueled by an angry parent. Even though the fight was between two of my students, it did little to change the positive regard I had for Walker students, teachers, and administrators. To help students process this situation, I introduced them to counter narratives and nurtured their discussion of ways we could present an alternative view of Walker Middle. Like the first phase of my study, this unit also began with our discussion of a picture book, The True Story of the Three Little Pigs (Scieszka, 1989). After discussing the term metanarratives I asked students to consider what features made this text counter. Since we had studied argumentative writing throughout the year, students were familiar with the skill of addressing counter perspectives. From their discussion, students constructed a list of traits for a good counter narrative.

After our discussion of counter-narratives, students analyzed various print and digital texts about Walker Middle School. In their written responses and during a concluding whole group discussion, they had to share what information was presented in their selected texts, their
personal opinion of how the text depicted the school, and whether the text format was an appropriate way for the author to communicate his/her point of view.

**Data Collection**

Using a qualitative design affords the opportunity to work with students as they critically engage with print, visual, and digital research. Data methods included participant-observations, student interviews, an on-line survey, and document analysis. I chose multiple data collection methods to ensure that conclusions drawn from my research were more credible than relying on a single source or method of data (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) explained that perspectives of participants can be generated through multiple data sources. The researcher can make inferences about behavior based on verbal or physical evidence as well as determined through written data sources such as documents. The activities for both units of this study were aligned with the eighth grade English Language Arts Common Core State Standards listed on the Hawthorne County ELA pacing guide during the quarters in which both units were taught. Thus, the teaching of these activities did not require any time outside of normal school hours. The total length of the study was approximately three months but was interrupted by several events outside of my control that will be discussed in the next section. Data included transcripts from approximately ten hours of video-taped class sessions, thirteen transcripts from individual student interviews, three transcripts from student focus-group interviews, student work samples, and results from an anonymous end-of-course evaluation. I tried to take anecdotal records during class, but our short 55 minute class periods prevented my writing or reflecting extensively while students were in class. Since my planning period was at the beginning of the day and all four class periods were taught consecutively, most of my notes were written immediately after
students had been dismissed for the day. Below I describe each data collection method in more detail.

**Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with thirteen of the twenty-one participants using a semi-structured approach (Hinchey, 2008; Seidman, 2006). Although I had five questions that I asked each participant, I allowed the flow of the conversation to determine whether I asked additional questions. According to Hinchey, “less structured interviews hold the possibility of expanding the researcher’s thinking; given free rein to shape the conversation, a participant following his own line of thinking may open a new perspective the researcher hadn’t considered” (p. 82). As will be discussed in the Data Analysis section, the actual words uttered during these interviews were an integral part to my inductive analysis. However, I found the interviews were also a great way to learn more about my participants’ interests and experiences outside of school.

I had initially planned to conduct pre and post interviews with each participant. However, because of unforeseen time constraints that will be discussed under the section, Limitations of the Study, there was not enough time to follow my initial interview plan. To address this obstacle, I decided to conduct focus group interviews with three separate groups of participants during the last week of school. This approach allowed me to collect a broad range of student opinions on the two main topics of the unit (tracking and community perceptions) in one single session (Hinchey, 2008). Also because these sessions took place at the end of the year, the students were more relaxed and candid in their responses than they may have been if interviews had been conducted earlier in the year. Since my students would be attending a new school the next year, I also appreciated the opportunity the focus group interviews gave me to interact with the students one last time before they left for the summer.
There were, however, some negative consequences to conducting focus group interviews. Students who were more outgoing sometimes dominated the conversations, which discouraged other withdrawn students from actively participating in the interview. Also, it was not until I transcribed the interviews over the summer that I realized that the recorder did not pick up some of the comments from students who spoke softly or were seated farthest from the microphone. Audio recorded interviews also prevented the analysis of non-verbal cues. It was clear that a follow-up question or comment made by me or a participant was in response to some non-verbal communication made someone else in the focus group. Fortunately, I transcribed the focus group interviews immediately after the school year ended, so I was able to recall some of the context that may not have been captured in the audio recording.

**Document Analysis: Student Work**

I collected both formal and informal student work samples during this study. Students were required to complete advance organizers (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2003) to help scaffold their understanding of the complex content we discussed such as tracking and differentiated instruction. However, sometimes students completed less structured assignments such as a quick write or an exit ticket to jot down their reflection or opinion. In Repositioning Documents in Social Research, Lindsay Prior (2008), urged qualitative researchers to reconsider the importance of documents in their analysis:

Documents should not be merely be regarded as containers for words, images, social interaction, instructions, and so forth, but how they can influence episodes of social interaction, and schemes of social organization, and how they might enter into analysis of such interactions and organization…in matters of social research, documents do much
more than serve as informants and can, more properly, be considered as actors in their own right. (Prior, 2008, p. 822)

The analysis of student work samples was especially helpful in determining student perspectives when a student did not elaborate during individual interviews or did not speak often during a focus group interview. They also allowed a fuller analysis to occur when a student’s comment during an interview or observation may have appeared to be insignificant.

My participants, however, were like typical middle school students who do not always complete or submit assignments. I could always tell when an assignment was too long because the length of students’ responses would decrease to just a few words with very little analysis or citing of textual evidence. Unfortunately, many of the questions that were designed to elicit the most critical reflection were usually at the end of an activity. Practically all of the assignments were constructed response items, which required students to write extensively during both units. Initially, I was disappointed by what I thought was their disengagement or poor work habits, but in hindsight, I realize just how much more rigorous and lengthy these assignments were. Also, because our class sessions were only 55 minutes, I should have chunked the assignments, so that one activity would not require several days to complete.

Videos

Because it was difficult to conduct classroom observations while I was also teaching or facilitating lessons, I video recorded some classroom sessions. I hoped that video recordings would provide additional information on “context, body language, [and] facial expression” that may have gone unnoticed during actual class sessions (Hinchey, 2008, p. 85). The use of video recording, however, presented several challenges that I had not considered. The only working video camera at the school was a flip camera with a limited recording capacity of one hour.
Once I had recorded an hour’s worth of footage, I would have to download the video to another device, which was a slow process given our school’s outdated technology. This also meant that on a perfect day, I could video only two class sessions per day, provided that no one else had checked out the camera. In addition, having a stationary camera was not the best way to capture conversations that took place in a location that was out of reach of the camera. Although some transcripts from the video recorded class sessions proved useful in my analysis, interview transcripts and document analysis were much more beneficial.

Anonymous Survey

Although I feel I had developed a great rapport with most of the participants, I do realize that not all of their responses would be as reliable due to the natural hierarchy between teacher and student. The use of the anonymous survey enabled students to speak openly and honestly not only about their opinions regarding tracking and their community but also provided a way for them to provide feedback about instructional design of the units. I used Survey Monkey to create a short, free on-line survey that contained questions that used a Likert scale as well as open-ended items.

Triangulation of Data

Using multiple and varied sources of data was an attempt to reduce ambiguity in the findings (Hinchey, 2008). Having multiple data sources is a strategy known as triangulation, which “reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific source or method, and allows you to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93-94). Maxwell further explained that triangulation improves the validity of your findings. Some, however, have argued that the need for validity does not necessarily apply to the field of qualitative research (Mason,
As an interpretivist approach to research, qualitative inquiry allows and even encourages the use of multiple data sources with the intended outcome of identifying multiple interpretations. Terms typically associated “scientific criteriology” such as validity, generalizability, and reliability are seen as “anathema” to qualitative research (Mason, 2002, p. 38). I agree with Tracy’s point that while the use of multiple sources of data does not always result in increased accuracy in the findings, it does “allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent interpretation” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

**Limitations of the Design**

The timing of the study was problematic. I had initially planned to begin teaching the first unit on tracking the last week of January, but a huge ice storm devastated our town and surrounding areas, causing school to be closed four days. Two weeks later, another ice storm hit, closing school an additional four days. Because I was also preparing students for the district benchmarks as well as the end of year state standardized assessments, I could not devote as much instructional time to the study as initially planned. The second unit on community history should have ended prior to the state assessment. However, because of the snow days, this second unit began during the testing window and continued until the last week of school. An additional hurdle to implementing the unit was the numerous end of year activities planned for the eighth grade students. Once testing was completed, there were very few days that weren’t interrupted do to a field trips, field day, awards day, or other events designed to culminate their middle school experience.
Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using an interpretivist or constructivist approach because it allows for multiple interpretations of research findings (Hinchey, 2008). An interpretivist analysis recognizes that knowledge is not objective but is rather influenced by human perception and culture, therefore, affording multiple realities to exist simultaneously. I feel an interpretivist approach is ideal for action research because it seeks to understand various perspectives.

For this study, I combined deductive and inductive approaches to analyze my data. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) also used a “hybrid approach” of inductive and deductive analysis in their study on the role of feedback in the self-assessment of nurse practices. The authors explained how a combination of these two analysis approaches allowed them to look for pre-determined codes as well as identify other themes that were prevalent only after data had been collected. They further described how codes used during a deductive analysis are helpful because they are based on the research questions and theoretical framework. Similarly, the three deductive codes I used to interpret data were based on my first research question that focused on critical literacy as well as the related theoretical framework that guided my study, critical pedagogy. During the early stages of my deductive analysis, I looked for examples of the three themes that I found from literature review on studies where students conducted critical research. Although my study was initially designed as participatory action research so that students would act as co-researchers, the study evolved more into critical action research to discover what happens when students analyze research (rather than collect) related to their own interests. Thus using a critical lens, I identified the following conditions are necessary in order for students to critically reflect on issues important to them: 1) there must be a shift in teaching authority, 2) student self-efficacy improves, and 3) students engage in social action. Sipe and Ghiso (2004),
however, warned that “the [analysis] process is paradoxical; theoretical frameworks are essential to structuring a study and interpreting data, yet the more perspectives we read about, the greater the danger of over determining conceptual categories and the ways in which we see the data” (p. 473). It was, therefore, necessary to develop a new code whenever a particular segment of data revealed a theme that could not be accounted for by the three deductive themes. In the subsequent paragraphs, I explain how inductive analysis prevented the data from being confined by the preliminary codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

During data collection, I wrote memos about particular student actions, conversations, or other instances I felt exemplified at least one of the themes. Butler-Kisber (2010) wrote, “The delicate balance that every qualitative inquirer faces is to know what the relevant literatures are saying about the research topic…while remaining open to what the field texts in the study reveal” (p, 28). However, I realized that I would need to take a more inductive approach to the data so that I was not imposing any categories upon it. Maxwell (2005) explained how the strength of qualitative research resides in its inductive process because it allows the data to emerge from the context and people on which it is focused.

Sipe and Ghiso (2004) explained how it is difficult to approach the site of our data as “blank slates” because we are “influenced by our theoretical readings and life experiences” (p. 473). During the first iteration of formal analysis, I read through the transcripts still looking for instances where student responses fit under my pre-determined categories. During the second iteration of data, I focused on the students’ responses and how they connected (or not) to the tracking research we had read in class. From there, I asked students to construct a definition of tracking during focus group interviews. Using the transcripts from their responses, I created codes such as ability, behavior, how they learn, and misconceptions to organize the various
definitions that were offered. It was during my third iteration of analysis that I discovered how students were providing responses that were richer and more insightful than what I had actually been asking. Because I was only focusing on what I thought the data should do, I had overlooked some telling information regarding student perceptions of teachers, curriculum, and school administration. I went back and began to do a more faithful line by line analysis and noticed connections among several students’ responses. Although I never explicitly asked what qualities they desired in both their teachers and curriculum, several students addressed these issues. Butler-Kisber (2010) recommended that researchers should use the actual words of the participants to determine the names of codes, which will allow an analysis of the data drawn from a more emic perspective. Based on this strategy of using participants’ words, I identified new codes such as patient teachers and challenging curriculum.

In the next round of analysis I applied an inductive approach which was helpful in identifying specific student comments or actions that related to my research questions. My inductive analysis of the data yielded four overarching, or global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001): 1) student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy, 2) student perceptions on school personnel, 3) student perceptions on tracking, and 4) student perceptions on school and community. Although my first research question does not focus specifically on student perceptions as question two does, I chose to entitle the four inductive themes “Student Perceptions” to emphasize how these behaviors present a more emic perspective because they arose specifically from what students said during interviews or observations or expressed in student work.

Although there is significant overlap in the development and interpretation of these themes, I have chosen to discuss the deductive and inductive themes separately. By so doing, I hope to distinguish between the findings of my etic perspective as a researcher (which of course were
still heavily influenced by student participation) in question one versus the more emic perspective of students that addresses question two. Table 3.1 below provides a visual representation of how key themes addressed each research question.

**Table 3.1: Relationship between Research Questions and Identified Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 1:</th>
<th>Research Question 2:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>How does a teacher-researcher create critical literacy instructional opportunities that build on students’ questions about their own schooling and community?</em></td>
<td><em>How do students use research to construct perceptions of their school and its surrounding community?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deductive Analysis Themes</td>
<td>Deductive Analysis Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shifts in teaching authority</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased student self-efficacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inductive Analysis Themes</td>
<td>Inductive Analysis Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy</td>
<td>• Student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student perceptions on school personnel</td>
<td>• Student perceptions on school personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student perceptions on school and community</td>
<td>• Student perceptions on school and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student perceptions on tracking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006) described thematic analysis as a process used to identify themes through close, repeated readings of the data. They further defined thematic analysis as “a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis. I used Attride-Stirling’s (2001) analysis tool, thematic networks, as my inductive analysis approach, which ultimately led to the development of the themes identified that specifically addressed my research questions. In her work, Attride-Stirling explained how thematic networks both support thematic analyses and also provide a way to display them. She
wrote, “Thematic analyses seek to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels, and the thematic networks aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 387).

When using a thematic network, the researcher begins in way similar to the constant comparative method because it first breaks down the data into manageable chunks of text. Thematic networks organize data into three distinct categories of themes, which represent a hierarchy of the data. Basic themes are in the lowest order and may describe specific actions or patterns noticed. They are summarized into more abstract categories called organizing themes. Global themes are overarching categories used to further join premises listed as organizing themes into even broader categories. Table 3.2 below shows the four thematic networks that I identified through inductive analysis.
Table 3.2 Thematic Networks of Themes Identified Using Inductive Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
<th>Organizing Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>(Actual coding names are capitalized and in bold.)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Students want <strong>Challenging Curriculum</strong> and courses</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Curriculum and Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers should use a variety of <strong>Instructional Practices</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lessons should focus on <strong>Student Engagement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teachers should use <strong>Differentiated Instruction</strong> to address individual student needs, learning styles, and interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lessons should include <strong>Real-Life Applications</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Teachers should be <strong>Patient</strong></td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on School Personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Teachers should be <strong>Nice</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Students’ <strong>Confidence</strong> in teacher ability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How administrators address <strong>Discipline</strong></td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <strong>Leadership Style</strong> of administrators affects student experiences at Walker Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. <strong>Fighting</strong> is an issue at Walker Middle School</td>
<td>Walker Middle School</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on School and Surrounding Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. <strong>Safety</strong> is an issue at Walker Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Students’ <strong>Opinions</strong> about Walker Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. <strong>Racial/Cultural Diversity Issues</strong> at Walker Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. <strong>Crime/Safety Issues</strong> in the Walker Middle School community/Walker County</td>
<td>Walker Middle School Community/Walker County</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. <strong>Racial/Cultural Diversity Issues</strong> in the Walker Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School community/Walker County</td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>17. New Residents to Walker County</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18. Tracking is based on Behavior</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>19. Tracking is based on Ability</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20. Tracking is based on How Students Learn</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>21. Students’ Opinions on tracking</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>22. Students use actual Terms from the Research</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>23. Racial Implications in Tracking</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>24. Student Misconceptions about tracking</strong></td>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Student Perceptions on Tracking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Role of the Researcher**

A criterion for action research is that the researcher be a stakeholder that is involved in finding the answer to the research questions (Hinchey, 2008). The role of the stakeholder is important because it distinguishes teacher research from other research methods. Whereas with research on teaching, questions may be in response to earlier research or expert theories, teacher research is based on the questions and interests of the researcher.

As both teacher and researcher in this study, my subjectivities are informed by a variety of sources. First, I consider myself to be a follower of critical theory, especially critical pedagogy and regularly allow its tenets to inform my instruction. Second, I bring twelve years of experience in the middle school. Third, I am a teacher of students who have not been granted access to higher curriculum courses. Fourth, however, I am the parent of a student who has been identified as gifted and placed on a higher track.
CHAPTER 4
CRITICAL LITERACY INSTRUCTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES THAT BUILD ON STUDENTS’ QUESTIONS

In chapter four, I focus specifically on the findings related to my three deductive themes—1) shifts in teaching authority, 2) increased student self-efficacy, and 3) social action. Chapter five presents a detailed analysis of my four inductive themes—1) student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy, 2) students perceptions on personnel, 3) student perceptions on tracking, and 4) student perceptions on school and surrounding community. Together, both the deductive and inductive themes work together to address both of my research questions. Thus, in chapter four I have included a discussion of one or more inductive themes as they relate specifically to my deductive themes.

Although all three deductive themes work together in an interrelated relationship, I have chosen to discuss them separately to make the analysis more coherent for the reader. In one sense, I hope this linear discussion of the themes will provide teachers with a structure on which to design lessons and activities that promote critical literacy opportunities in their classroom. I do not, however, want teachers to assume that activities that will promote each or all of the themes are easily implemented. Creating a classroom environment that lends itself to true critical interpretation requires extensive planning and reflection on the part of the teacher in
addition to a willingness to take their students to a place of discomfort and unfamiliarity. Critical education encompasses “a terrain of discomfort where knowledge is too complex to simply give it out for use on multiple choice texts or convergent questions” (Kincheloe, p. 113). Although Kincheloe was referring to teacher education programs in the previous quote, I feel the same is applicable for those critical educators who take their academic knowledge into the field of the classroom. Requiring students to question their own circumstances and challenge power structures will also be an unfamiliar terrain. However, if critical educators diligently try to incorporate the three themes listed below, they will eventually find success.

**Shifts in Teaching Authority**

As students began reading, analyzing, and discussing tracking, I used questioning approaches that provided opportunities to speak candidly about what they did and did not like about their classes, even my own. As mentioned before, my students were usually very vocal about the things that they did not like about the school, but were not as comfortable expressing their opinions about my class. As we struggled through the dense literature on tracking, I bracketed my own opinions. Even when students asked specifically what type of course I was teaching, I always asked them to provide their own examples to answer the question. The conversation below provides an example of when this type of exchange occurred during a whole-group discussion of the Jennie Oakes’ (1986) article “Keeping Track: The Policy and Practice of Curriculum Inequality”:

**Me:** What kinds of students were in that last group, you said it, starts with an M

**Jason:** minority

**Stephanie:** Minority

**Me:** No
**Ricky:** Mixed ability

**Me:** Good, ok so what is mixed ability?

**Jason:** They’re not tracked

**Me:** A mixed ability classroom is one that would have high, average, and low

**Stephanie:** I think this is a mixed ability classroom

**Me:** Why do you say this is a mixed classroom?

**Stephanie:** Me, I’m not gon’ explain it

**Brooklyn:** I can explain it, so like we were just talking about this yesterday. We were texting and she said I think Ms. Tucker’s class is mixed because I’m really smart and some of them are a little lower than me because I’m brighter

**Dee:** giggles

**Brooklyn:** And I’m like, I’m up there too

**Me:** Ok, so Anthony had that question [earlier], what track are we on? So are all classrooms tracked?

**Stephanie:** No

**Me:** Is every class, even if you have a tracked school…Is every classroom tracked?

**Several:** No

Instead of my providing answers to students’ questions about the type of track they were in, I encouraged students to reflect on their own experiences and the research to find answers. My using this liberatory (Freire, 1972) questioning style demonstrated to students that I was not the only person in the class who had contained all of the knowledge; they too could contribute meaningful, instructional information to the class. The transcript above also highlights how students carried our discussions into their social interactions beyond my classroom.
Eventually students began making recommendations on how to improve instruction in the class, not just limiting their comments to the specific content for the day. These instructional recommendations actually illustrated how students had a novice understanding of best practices and pedagogy as they made comments to me both in person and during interviews about ways I could improve instruction. Below, I will discuss instances of increased student self-efficacy that I identified during classroom observations. Throughout this section, I include excerpts from interviews that also support my deductive analysis of increased student self-efficacy. The inductive analysis global theme, student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy, demonstrates a more emic display of increased self-efficacy articulated through the actual comments of my students. Together these deductive (increased student self-efficacy and inductive themes (student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy) reveal how teachers can create spaces for critical literacy learning opportunities to occur.

**Increased Student Self-Efficacy**

Through their engagement with authentic research texts related to their own questions and interests, students displayed increased instances of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). They became more confident about their intellectual abilities and also improved their skills in critical reflection. In addition, students were able to make connections between my choice (or lack thereof) of instructional practices and their own learning. Two different scenarios illustrate how students began making recommendations to me about how I could improve my instructional practices. At the conclusion of a unit, I would often provide students opportunities to offer constructive criticism about the methods or activities used, usually by submitting an exit ticket at the end of class. However, during this research unit, students began offering instructional
suggestions not just as a reflection on a particular unit but also during class time and without my urging.

During a compare/contrast discussion of our two research articles on tracking, one student suggested that we make a T-chart to help organize students’ responses since this same information would have to be included in their essays:

**Shatoya:** So is there any research out there that says tracking is better?

**Me:** Well, that’s what we’re going to talk about today. How does he (Loveless) feel about tracking?

**Shatoya:** He supports it.

**Other students:** He’s for, no he’s against, etc.

**Shatoya:** No he’s against tracking cause the other lady (Oakes), she’s for it

**Anderson:** I have a question

[Several side bar conversations]

**Me:** Anderson, what’s your question?

**Anderson:** Like this gon’ be a hard essay to write cause like everybody has their own opinion

**Me:** Well, that’s why we’re doing similarities and then differences.

**Anderson:** So can we do like synonyms and antonyms?

**Several:** What?

**Anderson:** No, not antonyms and synonyms, the other thing we do on the board, when you draw a T-chart.

**Roxanne:** Oh, pros and cons

**Anderson:** Yeah, pros and cons
**Roxanne:** So why can’t we put that on the board, Mrs. Tucker?

**Me:** So you all want to do a T-chart or something?

**Roxanne:** Yeah

**Me:** Ok, well there’s a marker up there. (Anderson goes to the board to draw the T-chart and act as the scribe.)

When I taught argumentative writing earlier in the year, I had suggested that students use a T-Chart to list the pros and cons of a topic as a brainstorming strategy. Once completed, the chart would help students determine the position they should take on an argumentative topic. I’m almost embarrassed that I had not thought to use a T-chart for this discussion myself. However, this incident reveals several important ways that students displayed an increased sense of self-efficacy. One, students were able to take a strategy learned with one instructional topic and apply it to a new, more complex topic, namely tracking. Second, they were able to question a text and then clarify their misconceptions with minimal teacher support. Notice how Shatoya asked whether there was any research that “says tracking is better,” meaning research that contradicted what we had already learned from our first article. Initially, she incorrectly stated that the author, Loveless, supported tracking. However, once several other students (not me) corrected her, Shatoya amended her response and provided evidence to support this change, “No, he’s against tracking cause the other lady is for it.”

In this same discussion, Anderson makes a recommendation regarding pedagogy or my instructional practices when he suggested we use a T-chart to list the pros and cons about tracking discussed in each article. Although we had not yet discussed differentiated instruction (Coil, 2004; Tomlinson, 200; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) as a way teachers could address
individual student needs without tracking. Anderson demonstrated his awareness that visual representations are useful ways to help students organize content.

Later when we actually discussed differentiated instruction, Anderson again demonstrated his knowledge that visual representations make learning easier for students when he made the following comment during class. In this example, however, Anderson explains how math teachers should address students who are visual learners by using more illustrations and diagrams:

**Me:** What does that mean when you say, “I’m a visual learner?” Give me some examples.

**Anderson:** Math, like if you’re finding the circumference of a circle, you have to see the circle, you have to draw it. Like say for instance the circle is here right, but say they give the circumference of say for instance like 9 cm or something like that. You have to draw the circle, but some people like can’t do it, but you have to draw the circle.

**Taylor:** Say for instance when Ms. Gordon (team math teacher) is working on a problem, you won’t know how to do it unless you see her work it out.

**Me:** So to see her actually go through the steps helps you?

The conversation above demonstrated two basic themes under the inductive global theme, student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy: 1) teachers should use a variety of instructional strategies or best practices and 2) teachers should use differentiated instruction to address individual student needs and/or learning styles.

Freire (1972) suggested that typical activities that occur in the classroom such as reading requirements, methods of evaluation, criteria for promotion, and even the spaces between teacher
and student are deliberate attempts to control students’ thinking and ultimately, their actions. Because this banking concept perceives students as objects only, it does not allow for authentic thought that is only developed by students’ action upon the world and not merely a passive association with it.

Freire offered that a liberatory education provides the solution to the banking concept because it transforms the teacher-student relationship into one not defined by polar opposition. With this approach, teacher and student are no longer mutually exclusive terms but allow for each to simultaneously act as both teacher and student. In the next section, I explain how what I learned from the students’ comments during our classroom conversations and participant interviews influenced me to advocate for changes both at the school and district levels.

**Taking Social Action: A Surprise**

When I originally designed the study I believed students would take their research about the community and engage in some sort of social action, which is usually one outcome of action research (Stringer, 1996). However, given the time restraints, students did not engage in any overt instances social action. Surprisingly, however, as a participant-observer, I did engage in social action, acting as an advocate for my students within the school building and later as a district-office employee.

The new administrative team at Walker Middle did not create the current gifted schedule; on the contrary, this arrangement had been in place for some time. Thus, I felt comfortable sharing my knowledge of scheduling with the principal. As a former assistant principal, I had built the master schedule for two different middle schools and understood how a change in the gifted schedule would not only benefit students but the school as a whole since an increased number of gifted sections offered would provide an increase in state gifted funding allotments.
After students read the tracking research, I expressed my concerns about the way gifted courses were scheduled to our principal. He listened patiently and agreed that perhaps a new gifted model should be implemented, but shared that 1) the current gifted pull-out model was preferred by parents and encouraged them to keep their students at Walker rather than moving them to a more prestigious school within the district, and 2) scheduling decisions were usually made at the district level by someone who was paid specifically for this task. I was disheartened; but because I highly respected my principal, I did not press the issue at that moment, but planned to share some of the students’ comments with him at the conclusion of the study. However, only a few weeks after this conversation, he approached me in the cafeteria to ask was I gifted certified because he was working on the master schedule for the next year. I told him that I did have my certification but reminded him of our previous conversation about gifted models and how I was opposed to teaching a pull-out class. He responded that he understood and was taking my suggestion into consideration. He was actually taking a poll of the entire staff to determine how many teachers had gifted certification so that he could increase the number of gifted classes for next year. After the school year ended, the principal shared with me the new Language Arts gifted models for the upcoming school year that would eliminate the homogeneous gifted ELA classes and mainstream gifted students into mixed ability classrooms.

Also at the end of the year, I was able to advocate for student recognition in the eighth grade closing ceremony. During an individual interview with Angela, an academically and athletically talented student, I learned how a lack of recognition of achievement can actually hinder students’ sense of self-efficacy. This inductive theme of student perceptions about school and community explains how students used critical thinking skills to identify the school’s role in
promoting an atmosphere of mediocrity or student complacency. The conversation below is an excerpt from Angela’s interview after I asked her opinion about the school:

Angela: It, it’s straight.

Me: What does that mean, straight?

Angela: I mean it’s not good…It could… I think they could improve on some things.

Me: Like what?

Angela: Some students may not pass that class or something like that. Or when they get their report cards, their grades are not that good, but they probably keep getting them grades like over and over again because they probably not getting any recognition or seeing people get recognition to make them push harder. You know how you do like honor roll or stuff like that

During our final grade level meeting of the year, each team had to select only a handful of students who would win awards based on a list of specific criteria. The awards were given to model students who displayed a combination of desirable traits such as academic strength, citizenship, athleticism, etc. Remembering Angela’s words, I suggested that we also give awards to students who had made honor roll all year long. I was put in charge of this endeavor and worked with each team to ensure that students who had made the Honor Roll were appropriately recognized during the closing ceremony. Although these forms of social action were committed on behalf of rather than by the students, I still feel this finding is relevant to the study because it reveals immediate positive outcomes (honor roll students’ being recognized at awards day) and future positive outcomes (the elimination of homogeneously tracked gifted language arts classrooms for the next school year).
In chapter 1, when providing a description of the background of my study, I mentioned a benchmark test item that had troubled students at the beginning of the school year. The test included the passage “Them Bakers,” which was about a hardworking family from a rural area and was narrated by the family’s young neighbor. The story recounts how Mr. Baker, not one to accept a handout, worked two weeks milking the neighbor’s cows to pay for a pair of shoes the family had given his son. As a prelude to the story, the narrator’s father exclaims in the first line of the story, “Them Bakers is proud folk,” In question 2, students were asked to select why the author chose to have the father use the pronoun “them” incorrectly in the story. The correct answer choice was B. to suggest that his father had not attended much school.

In Hawthorne County, even giving district benchmarks is treated as seriously as administering the state standardized test. I did not have the opportunity to review this or any other items prior to my students’ taking the benchmark. Once the students’ answers sheets had been scanned and the scores entered in our district’s data management system, I was given permission to check out the tests to review with my students. Thus, the first time I saw the questions was when I went over the most frequently missed items with my students. When I explained to my students that the correct answer choice was B, they vehemently expressed their disagreement. Several students explained that incorrect grammar usage should not be associated with a lack of education. They further questioned what other evidence in the text supported the inference that the father was not educated. The students were right. The inference they were supposed to make about the father’s incorrect pronoun usage was a symbol of his lack of education was not supported by the textual evidence. The narrator described his father as a hardworking man who held two respectable jobs as a dairy farmer and barber, which allowed him to make a comfortable, although modest, living for his family. Nowhere in the text, does it
mention anything that would lead the reader to a logical inference that the father had little education.

Approximately a month after the school year ended, I was promoted to the English Language Arts Coordinator for the district. One of my responsibilities is to review items for the district ELA benchmarks. The same tests are often used from one year to the next, which was the case for the same eighth grade benchmark discussed here. I met with the person who created the test and explained how my now former students felt about question 2. Although she thought the question was fine as is, she agreed to change the answer choice and remove the wording about the father’s lack of education completely (See Table 4.3). The new answer choice read B. to show that his father did not speak Standard English. The word “standard” is the actual term referenced in the Common Core Language Standards. However, during any professional learning development sessions that I conduct with teachers, I remind them to discuss the important implications of this word and caution them to be mindful and value the diverse home languages that their students bring, which may at times be very different from what is considered Standard English.
Table 4.1 Original and Revised Benchmark Answer Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence as used in the passage</th>
<th>Original Questions and Correct Answer Choice (2013)</th>
<th>Revised question and Correct Answer Choice (2014)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My dad set down his fork, looked hard at me, and said, “Them Bakers is proud folk.”</td>
<td>2. In the first sentence, why did the author use the pronoun <em>them</em> incorrectly? B. to suggest that his father had not attended much school</td>
<td>2. In the first sentence, why did the author use the pronoun <em>them</em> incorrectly? B. to show that his father did not speak standard English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I mention this incident regarding the benchmark item to further illustrate how students’ own questions can lead to instructional opportunities that prove ripe for social action. Although my students did not engage in any formal instances of social action, I was able to advocate on their behalf. Their comments held important immediate consequences for them such as the added recognition of all students who had made honor roll at the Awards Day at the end of year. In addition, their participation in this study influenced both assessment and course scheduling procedures for students who will attend schools in Hawthorne County in subsequent years, particularly those attending Walker Middle School.

In chapter four, I have presented the findings based on my three deductive themes this study demonstrates are necessary for when providing opportunities for critical literacy in the classroom-1) shifts in teaching authority, 2) increased student self-efficacy, and 3) social action. These themes were described from a more etic perspective, as I tried to present the interrelated relationship among all three themes. In chapter four, I discuss how I used thematic network analysis to identify and analyze four inductive themes. Each of these themes is entitled with the
phrase, Student Perceptions, to suggest a more direct relationship between the students’ emic perspectives and the findings than was described in chapter four.
CHAPTER 5

STUDENTS USE RESEARCH TO CONSTRUCT PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

I am from trucks
From Diesel and Guns
I am from the home on un rancho
Brick walls, cement, and floors
It smelled like carne cosido y tortillas
I am from the corn, the trees
Heavy rainfall
I’m from Cinco de Mayo and big brown eyes
From Mama Lola and Papa Martin
and Uncle Mario
I’m from the tortillas with Thanksgiving dinner and
Big Family Reunions

From “Get what you get and don’t pitch a fit” and
The tooth fairy existed
I’m from Catholicism
High Priestess Guadalupe
I’m from Guanajuato, Mexico
Blue Corn and Pomegranates
From the houses built by my grandfather’s strong hands
To the Uncle shot and killed on my birthday
In books, many pictures stay
I am from the Red Skin and Drunken kisses and hugs
“Where I’m From” Poem by Emilia, 4th period student participant

Using thematic network analysis (Attride-Sterling, 2001), I identified four global themes: School Curriculum and Pedagogy, Tracking, and School Personnel, School and Community. As I analyzed and categorized data, I identified 25 codes based on individual student interview transcripts, student focus group transcripts, classroom observations, field notes, and an on-line
student survey. For a complete list of my thematic networks categorized into basic, organizing, and global themes, refer to the thematic network chart presented previously (See Table 3.2). The names of codes are, in most cases, from the students’ own words except when I found I needed to use a more scholarly term to describe what was occurring in the data.

**Student Perceptions on Curriculum and Pedagogy**

One of the most frequent words mentioned during student interviews was “challenging.” Two questions in particular from the interview often elicited responses that included the word challenging: “What are the differences among Teams A, B, and C? and “If you had a choice, which team would you prefer to be a part of?” Practically all students responded that team A offered a more challenging learning experience than the other teams because the honors and gifted students were on those teams. What was most interesting is that very few could give concrete examples of what made the instruction Team A students received more challenging than what was taught on our team. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Anthony, a student who was actually quite smart but seemed to lack motivation to achieve in school.

**Me:** Alright, what team would you rather be on A, B, or C?

**Anthony:** Team A because it’s more challenging.

**Me:** You think it’s more challenging. How do you know that?

**Anthony:** Kids on that hall say their work is harder.

**Me:** Ok, have, do you know anything specific, umm the things that may be different than what’s on Team B?

**Anthony:** No

Anthony’s responses are similar to other students who felt that Team A offered a more challenging instruction. In another interview, Brian offered a similar response that the type of
assignments given to student on team A were more challenging, yet he failed to provide evidence to support his belief:

**Me:** Ok, second question. If you had to choose, which team would you want to be on?

**Brian:** A

**Me:** Why

**Brian:** Because I think it’s the smarter team

**Me:** Ok, but you don’t know what they do differently, but you just think because everyone says it’s the smart team, that’s the team you want to be on

**Brian:** Yes

**Me:** So you feel like you’re capable of being on the smart team

**Brian:** Yes, yes

**Me:** So is there anything that you are not getting on B team?

**Brian:** No

**Me:** Ok, but even though you don’t really know, you think it’s something better out there, and if there’s something better, you want to be on the A team

**Brian:** Yes

When students did provide examples of why the instruction was more challenging, they usually pointed out that the type of students who were on Team A as proof that rather than any discussion of the actual assignments or requirements that may have been different. Below, Allison explains how the instruction must be different because most of the students from AVID are also on team A. AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) is a national program developed by a non-profit group whose goal is to close the achievement gap by exposing more
students to the type of instructional opportunities that will prepare them for college (www.avid.org). According to the organization’s website, approximately 70,000 students in 45 US states and 16 countries participate in its program.

**Me:** Ok, if you had a choice what team would you want to be on?

**Allison:** A probably

**Me:** Why so?

**Allison:** Because they always have the higher kids like AVID. Mostly AVID kids are on the A team

**Me:** Ok, and what’s the purpose of AVID?

**Allison:** Umm, to help you get ready for college and explore colleges

**Me:** Ok, why A?

**Angela:** So I can be more challenged because I like being challenged. I’ll pick A

Regardless of whether students wanted to move to a team on a supposedly higher track or whether they were content with remaining on their current team, most students described being challenged as something they felt was necessary in getting a good education.

Shatoya, a student in my last period offered a different, and in my opinion, more insightful definition of “challenging” by discussing teaching behaviors rather than focusing solely on the type of assignments given. During a focus group interview, Shatoya shared her belief that teachers should push students to do their best even when they are disinterested or disengaged. What is different about Shatoya’s response is that she actually describes why she feels the teachers on her own team, Team B, challenge students instead of ascribing these behaviors to teachers on Team A. She told the group, “The teachers [on Team B] try to push you
anyway although you aren’t listening or that you are distracted and all the things, they try to push you in the right way although they [students] don’t listen.”

Students also commented that teachers should use a variety of practices to make learning more engaging for students. In many instances, students referred specifically to the term or practices associated with differentiated instruction because this particular practice was one that I presented to students as a possible alternative to tracking. Once we began our official discussion about differentiated instruction, I noticed the students began using the language associated with this term. Students began to describe themselves as specific types of learners (visual, auditory, etc.), to advocate for more assignments that provided student choice, and to make connections between their performance on assignments and their interest in the topic. I do not know that my introducing students to differentiated instruction significantly fostered their ability to critically reflect on the type of instruction that was best for them. I do, however, believe that our discussion of differentiated instruction empowered students with the appropriate language to speak about their specific learning preferences more articulately.

During the lesson on differentiated instruction, students were able to use the actual teacher evaluation rubric from the Georgia Department of Education to rate a specific lesson taught by one of their teachers, either past or present. I particularly enjoyed this lesson because it gave me insight into the truly remarkable differentiated activities that were used by the science teacher on our team, Mr. Crenshaw. In every class, students made specific references to the variety of lessons and approaches he used to meet students’ individual learning needs, but especially student interests and learning styles. Students shared how Mr. Crenshaw used multiple ways to teach content rather than just traditional methods such as taking notes or doing pencil and paper assignments in class. He would often take the students outside to demonstrate
different principles related to physical science such as playing tug of war when teaching about force and motion or illuminating the science principles involved in cooking by making pancakes.

During our class discussion, students described tracking as similar to differentiated instruction based on readiness. Students discussed how although differentiating by readiness is similar to tracking, teachers can offset the negative consequences by also differentiating based on interests and learning styles. Thus, what they called “low students” wouldn’t always have to be in the same groups and would get to interact with stronger students. Students called out their interests, and we discussed how teachers could incorporate them into their lessons. Although not all students could identify a lesson that was a positive example of differentiated instruction, I felt this discussion inspired students to reflect on past learning experiences with a new sense of respect and also gave them the tools to critically explain why a particular lesson was not effective.

It is interesting here to note that many of the students’ perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy are actually quite similar to the body of research regarding best practices in education, specifically in language arts. Themes such as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006), student engagement (Strambler & McKown, 2013), and instructional strategies (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2003) were listed as desirable practices by students.

Suggestions my students gave as desirable qualities in both teachers and their instructional delivery were similar to those recommended by students in the Schwartz (1992) study referenced in the literature review in chapter 2 (See Table 5.1). Next to each student recommendation from the Schwartz study, I have listed how they relate to the five basic themes that together make up the organizing theme of Curriculum and the global theme, Student Perceptions on Curriculum and Pedagogy.
### Table 5.1: Comparison of Schwartz’s Student Recommendations with Basic Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Recommendations from Schwartz Study (1992)</th>
<th>Related Basic Themes from My Study based on Student Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posing real questions.</td>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Real Life Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers share expertise</td>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Real Life Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing decisions</td>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a sense of community</td>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands-on Experiences</td>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for the little guy</td>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing models of inquiry</td>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional Practices/Best Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on process of learning as well as the content</td>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional Practices/Best Practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Student Perceptions on School Personnel

The second global theme I identified through inductive analysis was Student Perceptions of School Personnel. Of course, students had plenty to say about what qualities both teachers and administrators should possess. Basic themes that led to this global theme included the belief that teachers should be patient and nice, not surprising findings at all. However, what was most interesting to me was how students seemed to have a blind confidence in teachers’ proficiency. On more than one occasion, students revealed an almost essentialist belief that teachers by the very nature of their position were good. It was difficult for them to imagine that since teachers had to have a college degree, had chosen the profession, and had been hired meant that they could not be good teachers. If children don’t learn, it’s not the teacher’s fault but the students’.
Below I have included an excerpt from a focus-group interview about teacher quality with Katrina, a strong and driven student:

**Katrina:** Um, well first, if a teacher isn’t a good, I don’t see how a teacher cannot be a good educator.

**Me:** OK

**Katrina:** And, um the students (inaudible) because honest in my opinion, if you don’t want to learn, then you don’t need to go to school. Cause if you want to be a bum, you should not waste the teacher’s time with your behavior and talking back and stuff like that because they are here to teach people who actually want to learn. They not here to babysit… (Someone makes an inaudible comment and all the girls giggle)

**Me:** You mentioned that there are no bad educators? What did you mean?

**KS:** I think all teachers, you have to be very, you have to love what you do to be a teacher, honestly. ‘Cause I don’t think I could be a teacher.

Although students often displayed a keen awareness of power issues, silenced voices, or other topics common to critical discussion, not all of their responses displayed the type of sophisticated reasoning required for critical, problem-posing pedagogy. During a different focus group interview, several students offered their solutions to the dilemma with tracking.

**Me:** Ok, alright, so some of you here, probably all of you could qualify for the high track…Is that ok with you? Knowing that if you are in a high track, then you may not get the best teacher? Are you ok with giving the best instruction to students who struggle?
Brian: No

Allison: Yes

Kia: inaudible, No

Me: That’s what you said

Kia: No, because that would affect my…

Me: But that’s what you said, so what do you do?

Kia: So, have all good teachers.

Brian: That’s not possible

Prior to this excerpt, in her defense of tracking Kia had suggested that students in the low tracks should get the best teachers because they needed the most instructional support. However, when I asked her if she would mind giving up a good teacher so a struggling student could receive better instruction, she quickly changed her response to suggest that all students should get a good teacher. Yet it was Brian, a less capable, but still hard working student who pointed out how unrealistic it would be for all students to receive a good teacher. Kia is strong, capable student who wrote an excellent essay reprinted below (See Figure 5.2) to discuss the research we had read on tracking. Reprinted here exactly as Kia wrote, the essay argues that since tracking benefits high performing students, it is an appropriate way to group students.

**Figure 5.1 Kia’s Argumentative Essay on Tracking**

Have you even wondered why the students at your school are separated and may even do more fun activities in class? Well, this is because of the system of tracking. Tracking is a practice in most public schools of grouping students of similar learning abilities together. In the system of tracking there are two tracks that students would be grouped in. Tracking systems usually change when students are taught and the styles are different according to the
track they are put in. There is the high track where the students learn at high levels and are taught with more learning activities and spend more instructional time on learning, therefore, students in high track class’s benefit because of better classroom opportunity. Students in low track classes the students get more independent working and more focused book work and less activities and projects. Studies were found that high track students were more expected to spend more time on learning and working. In the low track classes the students took most of the instructional time socializing, being off task and the teacher dealing with discipline issues in the classroom. They also found that students in high tracks study higher mathematics classes, more foreign languages and learn more in their literature classes. Students in low tracks are expected less and don’t get as much of a quality education as the high track students.

Two writers did a study on tracking and the effects on students learning in this way of educating. After Loveless’s study on tracking he thinks that tracking is a good idea to group students with the same learning abilities together but all students should get an equal quality of education. After Oaks study on tracking she thinks that tracking is “unnecessary, nor appropriate, nor effective” and does not benefit the students therefore she thinks that tracking should be abolished all together because it simply unfair.

Both Loveless and Oaks did studies of tracking in public schools and found that tracking is unfair to those in the low tracks because they get less opportunity and a less complex education were the teachers are only focused on teaching the basics. They both found that students in low tracks don’t benefit from tracking also because the students have the reputation for being in the “low classes” therefore that lowers their self-esteem and may change their behaviors and outlook on their education. Both Loveless and Oaks believe that the system of tracking doesn’t always benefit the higher tracked students either. They both strongly agree that all students should have the same opportunity to receive a good, quality education.

The two main differences between oaks and loveless were weather the practice of tracking should stay in the public school system or be taken out permanently and the question of if tracking even benefits students at all. Oaks believed that tracking should be completely abolished and taken out of the public school system. She found that “students who are placed in vocational tracks do not even seem to have any benefits in the job market. Indeed, graduates of vocational programs may be less employable and, when they do find jobs many earn lower wages than other high school graduates.” So she is saying that even though these students are put in higher classes this doesn’t guarantee them a good paying job in the future. Oaks also said that “Slower students suffer emotional strains. Rather than helping students feel more comfortable with them, tracking can reduce self-esteem, lower aspirations, and foster negative attitudes toward school. Studies have shown that tracking leads low-track students to misbehave and eventually drop out all together.” She has found that tracking also lowers students’ self-esteem and can them make them have a bad outlook and could cause them to fail even more and eventually drop out of school.

Loveless found that “assigning students to separate classes by ability and providing them with the same curriculum has no effect on achievement. When the curriculum is altered; tracking appears to benefit high ability students. Heterogeneous classes appear to benefit low ability students but depress the achievement of average and high achieving students.” So, Loveless found that mixed classes benefit low ability students and but no so much the high achieving students. But he does not agree with Oaks when she said high achieving students won’t benefit in the future from taking higher classes. During his research he said, “There is little research support for the charge that tracking harms students’ self-esteem. IN FACT, the
evidence tilts slightly toward the conclusion that low ability student’s self concept is
strengthened from ability grouping and tracking, although the effect is insignificant.”

So, with the studies of both Writers, Oaks thinks that tracking should be completely
abolished and taken out of the public school system. She thinks that tracking is “unnecessary,
not appropriate, nor effective” and is simply unfair. Loveless thinks that they should continue
to use the system of tracking but to focus more on the low track students to given them more
motivation and encouragement and the same opportunity as the high track students. Loveless
said that, “Schools should focus their energies for improvement. Low tracks should be small,
well-managed by teachers who are competent in their studies, and relentlessly focused on
academics.” Oaks said that, “Certainly students bring differences to school, but by tracking,
schools help to widen rather than narrow these differences. After reading and learning about
the system of tracking I agree with Loveless. I also think that students should be grouped
together with people the same learning abilities but all students should get the same quality
education. in fact, instead of giving the low tracked students a lower advantage I think they
should get more motivation and better learning opportunities because they really need it more.
So, after reading my essay on tracking what is your opinion?

Kia’s essay is similar to the sentiments she expressed during the focus group interview.
In Kia’s opinion, schools should track students because this grouping arrangement benefits high
performing students. Recognizing, however, the counterargument that would be posed by those
against tracking, Kia remembered to offer a rebuttal that tracking would be fine as long as low
performing students received a quality instruction as well. As mentioned before, Kia was one of
my brightest students, and so I am hesitant to think she truly believes that such as simple solution
such as hiring all exceptional teachers is even plausible. Rather, I believe that based on the
research, Kia understands how she will benefit personally from being in a tracked classroom. Kia
was the only student on our entire team who qualified to attend the magnet program in high
school next year, so although she had not been placed on the gifted/honors team at Walker
Middle, she knows is an exceptional student. However, even students who were not as bright as
Kia offered similar opinions. In the next section, Student Perceptions on Tracking, I present and
analyze the findings related to this third global theme.
**Student Perceptions on Tracking**

Since I presented specific data regarding students’ reading and analysis of the tracking articles, I will now discuss a third global theme, student perceptions of tracking. This discussion will include the eight basic themes I identified from the tracking data including student definitions of tracking (ability, behavior, and learning styles), use of research terms, misconceptions, racial implications, and opinions on tracking.

I was surprised by the findings for this global theme because I assumed that with a school population with over 80% African American students and over 70% receiving free or reduced lunch, participants would have a strong reaction to the tracking research that revealed how lower tracks are comprised of mostly minority and poor students. In addition, I thought that by the end of this unit, the vast majority of students would be against tracking. On the contrary, most students still seemed to be in favor of tracking despite its harmful effects on poor and/or minority students, the demographic of most of the participants. On the one hand, I was encouraged by students’ opinions because they showed how I had done a good job of bracketing my own negative thoughts about tracking. However, I now believe that students may have been hesitant to reflect on the racial and social class implications because they were unwilling to place themselves in a vulnerable position to openly discuss their roles as minority and/or poor students. I doubt that students had previous experiences in school where they were allowed or even encouraged to discuss issues of power and control, especially those that directly affected them.

Kincheloe (2008) wrote:

> Students are typically not taught about the complex nature of interpretation and the assumptions embedded in and power imprinted in all knowledge. Many political and educational leaders deem such profoundly important dimensions of learning unimportant.
Indeed, many power wielders view such insights as downright frightening, as critical teachers begin to uncover the slippery base on which school knowledge rests.

Knowledge production and curriculum development are always and forever historically embedded and culturally inscribed processes. (p.108)

However, helping students feel safe and also competent to broach issues of power, even those that require them to question and challenge their own circumstances is the goal of critical pedagogues. Before beginning our unit on tracking, students completed an anticipation guide (See Table 5.2) to give their opinion about tracking practices. Students checked whether they agreed or disagreed with several statements that were related to tracking practices.

**Table 5.2 Tracking Anticipation Guide Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Discussion</th>
<th>Post-Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
take such as honors, gifted, vocational, etc.

In their pre-discussion responses, only four of the twenty-one students answered the questions in a manner that would suggest they disagreed with grouping students based on their ability whereas the responses of the remaining seventeen reveal that they agreed with this practice that is characteristic of tracking. The anticipation guide was followed by numerous class discussions about our two research-based articles, video clips about tracking, and an in-class essay about tracking. After analyzing the data in the Jennie Oakes’ article that offered compelling data against tracking, the students were asked if they were aware of any evidence of tracking at Walker Middle School. Most students immediately realized that tracking did occur. Dee Dee, a student from my second period class, wrote: “I think our school is on tracking. The reasons I say that is because team A has the more advanced kids therefore they don’t need that much support. Team B is the team that needs just a little support. Team C is the team that needs extra support. Also in most of my classes, everybody makes about the same score on a quiz.” Dee Dee’s written response for this particular assignment is not only similar to what most of the other students said but also consistent with their comments during both group and individual interviews. Students were well aware that tracking occurred at Walker, which was no surprise to me based on their questions from the very beginning of the school year. What did surprise me, however, was that despite their recognizing that tracking was evident at Walker and learning about the detrimental effects of tracking clearly outlined in the Oakes article and mentioned (but refuted) in the Loveless article, most of the students still seemed to agree with tracking.

After reading both articles, students had to decide which author made the most convincing argument about tracking. Student responses were almost evenly split with 38%
responding that the Oakes article against tracking made a better argument, 30% responding that
the Loveless article was more convincing, and 32% of the students either choosing not to answer
the question or not having enough time to complete the assignment. It was the very last question
after students spent approximately two weeks reading and discussing both articles. Class
discussions, however, revealed that a greater percentage of students by the end of this unit had
not changed their initial opinion that ability grouping was an appropriate way to teach students.
Although I repeatedly reminded students about the detrimental consequences tracking had on
minority, poor, and low-achieving students, results from the post-discussion responses to the
anticipation guide demonstrate that students still felt tracking was acceptable.

The first statement on the anticipation guide asked students whether they agreed or
disagreed with the statement, “All students should take the same type of courses regardless of
how smart they may be.” Only four responded they agreed whereas seventeen answered that
they disagreed. This statement explains a practice common to mixed ability grouping, a counter-
approach to tracking. After our discussion of tracking, only ten students disagreed with mixed
ability grouping. These results suggest that students had realized that mixed ability grouping
rather than ability grouping and other tracking practices was more beneficial for most students.
However, student responses to the next statement, “Students should only take classes with people
who are just as smart as they are” are inconsistent with their response to the first statement. This
second statement supports the tenets of tracking and is in contrast with the first statement which
supports mixed ability grouping. Ten students also agreed with the second statement.

In trying to make sense of the similar results for these conflicting statements, I began to
look closer at the other statements where there was any difference between the students’ pre and
post answers.
For statements three and four, there were no significant differences between how students responded before our tracking unit versus how they responded afterwards. For statement four, “Students from wealthy families are smarter than students whose families do not have a lot of money,” a total of twenty students disagreed before and after the tracking unit. This statement was included in the anticipation guide because several of our print and digital sources addressed the fact that students from wealthy families are more likely enrolled in high track courses. The same results are true for statement five, “All students can learn, but some may have strengths in different areas,” where twenty students agreed both before and after the unit. Statements five and six, however, did see a slight difference in responses from pre to post anticipation guide. Statement five, “Students who do not perform well should not be allowed to take college preparatory courses” saw a decrease of three responses for disagree and an increase of two responses for agree. While this difference is small compared to the changes in the first statement, it may offer an explanation as to why student responses for the first and second statements are conflicting. Students may understand that ability grouping is harmful for many specific populations but believe that they would personally benefit more fromtracked classes. Student responses to statement six, “Students and their parents should have some choice in the types of courses they take such as honors, gifted, vocational, etc.,” may suggest that students feel that the decision as to how students should be grouped should be left to teachers or other educators. Although all students agreed with this statement before our discussion of tracking, three changed their response to disagree after the unit.

Initially, I believed that my students were simply unable to critically interpret the findings or claims from the various sources we discussed regarding tracking. However, upon closer analysis of the data, I did find two reasons why students continued to express a preference for
tracking versus mixed ability grouping. First, students did not believe that the practice of tracking was harmful to certain groups of students but rather expressed that lower performing students (who tend to be overwhelmingly poor and/or minority) do not get the best teachers. Second, many participants also believed that high performing students regress when they are placed in classes with students who struggle.

The students’ ideal solution would be to continue to ability group students but to ensure that all students have quality teachers and quality instruction. The students actually prefer ability grouping because in their opinion, it is the best way to provide instruction to students with varying skills. The statements below are examples of the type of responses from the anonymous survey.

**Respondent #15:** I agree that tracking is ok as long as we have equal treatment [and] good educators.

**Respondent #17:** Tracking is good for each student therefore, students can be on the team that fits them best.

**Respondent 22:** Tracking is good cause kids should be with the kids that learn at the same pace as them.

**Respondent #32:** I would say there should be tracking, because without tracking people would have trouble learning.

Although mentioned in the previous section, “Student Perceptions of School Personnel,” I believe the comments made by Kia during her focus group interview further illustrate how students see quality instruction as a simple way to fix the problems with tracking. Below I include more of the transcript from this interview since this context includes data that reveals students’ perception on tracking and its relationship to teacher quality.
Me: Ok, so now that you’ve done some formal research on it and you realize who benefits and who doesn’t how do you feel about tracking now?

Dawn: I feel like it’s necessary

Me: How so?

Dawn: Because you know it can help students on different levels, like how they learn…what level they are on

Allison: I don’t think it’s necessary. The low tracking students, they don’t really improve, they just stay basically the same…but the high track students, they do benefit from tracking

Me: So you feel it’s not necessary, how do you feel classes should be structured then?

Allison: Basically on how they learn…like, if you don’t understand math, you should be in a class that will like break down math to you

Me: How is that different from tracking? Or are you saying the quality of instruction needs to be?…Ok, so lower tracks need better instruction? Ok

Kia: Cause if you don’t understand something, you need more help.

Me: Because what did we learn,,,who usually gets the best teachers?

Several voices:…umm, high track

Allison: [Gifted]

Me: And [gifted] represents the…?

Allison: The high track

Me: Ok, so you all feel that…keep tracking but give the better teachers to lower students
Brian: No

Allison: Yes

Me: Ok, alright, so some of you here, probably all of you could qualify for the high track...Is that ok with you knowing that if you are in a high track, then you may not get the best teacher? Are you ok with giving the best instruction to students who struggle?

Brian: No

Allison: Yes

Kia: inaudible, No

Me: That’s what you said

Kia: No, because that would affect my…

Me: But that’s what you said. So what do you do?

Kia: So, have all good teachers.

These comments by Kia reveal the second reason why students preferred tracking, the fact that tracking or mixed ability grouping can sometimes impede the progress of higher performing students. This belief is actually supported by the findings of Loveless (1998) research on tracking. Citing a National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) begun in 1988, Loveless described the risks as greater when high achieving students were placed in de-tracked or heterogeneous classes, and in some instances the losses suffered by high achieving students actually outweighed the gains made by lower achieving students. Even Oakes, who does not support tracking, reveals that students placed in the top tracks “do benefit from the advantages they receive in their classes.” However, she warns that “in their quest for…super academic
performance, schools seemed to have locked them into a structure that may unnecessarily buy the achievement of a few at the expense of many” (paragraph 38).

It is important to note that the two reasons why students prefer tracking are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps in the case of many students, their rationale for supporting tracking stems more from the belief that as a higher performing student, they would receive a better education if enrolled in courses only with higher performing students. In their individual interviews, most students expressed a belief that they would receive a more challenging instruction if they were on team A with the gifted and honors students although they could not offer any explicit evidence of instructional strategies or activities that were different on team A. When comparing the student responses with other data from their interviews and the anonymous end-of-unit survey, it is evident that while students understand the detrimental effects of tracking on poor and minority students, some participants felt the sometimes harmful effects of tracking on gifted or high performing students was more damaging.

**Student Perceptions on School and Surrounding Community**

I end my presentation of the findings by discussing the fourth global theme, student perceptions of school and community. Topics that will be discussed with this last global theme are safety, racial/diversity issues, and new residents. I include not only student perceptions about the school and surrounding community but also students’ articulation of the perceptions of others regarding the same topics.

As we conducted historical and critical research about Walker Middle School and its surrounding community, students read several newspapers articles and other digital resources that offered multiple viewpoints about the school. Not only did students have to summarize the
data, but they also had to analyze its validity and whether it converged or diverged with their own perceptions about the school.

For this activity, students read and critiqued two print texts and two digital texts about Walker Middle School. I gave students a list of several texts of both formats from which they could choose. Print texts were local stories and pictures about Walker Middle from the town’s local newspapers. The digital texts were a local news station clip about a fight that had taken place in early fall, a blog about Walker Middle posted on a real estate website, YouTube clips of championship athletic competitions, and lessons posted on the school’s flipped classroom YouTube channel. Figure 5.3 presents a brief description of each text. Any words in the title of the text that might comprise the anonymity of the site have been blocked out.

Table 5.3: Print and Digital Texts for Community History Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Text Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrating Teachers</td>
<td>Principal’s column on the importance of teachers as the school celebrated American Education Week</td>
<td>Newspaper Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Fight Brings Battery Charge</td>
<td>A local newspaper article about a fight between two students on Team B.</td>
<td>Newspaper Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists “Believe, Dream, Inspire”</td>
<td>A brief article about student finalists in the annual National PTA Reflections Contest.</td>
<td>Newspaper Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Middle School Interact Club at</td>
<td>A brief article and photograph about the launching of the school’s first Interact club sponsored by the local Rotary Club.</td>
<td>Newspaper Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finish Strong</td>
<td>Principal’s column on celebrations and accomplishments that occurred during the second semester of the school year.</td>
<td>Newspaper Article</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students also had the option of finding their own resources to analyze as long as they received approval from me first. Below are the three questions students had to answer about each source:

1. **Provide a summary of the source.** Be sure to include whether it depicts Walker Middle School in a positive or negative light.

2. **Write your own reflection about the source.** Explain why you agree or disagree with its depiction of Walker Middle School.

3. **Explain why the format of this source is or is not an appropriate way for the author to convey a particular perspective about Walker Middle School.**

   When students were able to research the various media depictions of our school, they were more engaged and worked diligently. In addition, because students worked independently,
I had more time to talk one-on-one to assess their comprehension of the assignment but, more importantly, talk with them about their feelings about the depictions. Several students commented that they were frustrated and angered by how the school was portrayed and admitted that they had not taken the time to really reflect on how they had never considered how great the school was. It was an especially meaningful activity because the parent of the student who was injured in the fight had made some very negative comments about the principal in particular and how the entire administrative team mishandled the fight. Because he had recently announced that he was leaving the school to move closer to his family, it encouraged the children to consider how good the principal was and how unfair it was for this parent to criticize him publicly.

I was proud of the way students handled their analyses of texts that offered negative depictions of the school. Three of the print and digital texts were about the fight between two male students who just happened to be on our team. Although the fight had taken place nearly seven months prior to this activity, students still had very intense reactions to the texts. Of the nineteen participants who completed this activity, fourteen shared a belief that despite the negative press it had received, Walker Middle was overall a good school with strong teachers, a caring administration, and respectable students. Most of their responses supported the opinion that one bad incident should not define the school.

Two of the students who also chose to critique at least one of the texts about the fight felt that it was an accurate depiction of the school. Tyler, a white student who was extremely intelligent and curious but often contrary and seemingly disinterested in school wrote about one negative article, “I agree cause this school is one of the worst in the country from what I seen and read.” Even when critiquing a positive article about Walker Middle, Tyler maintained his
negative stance, “I disagree cause I find nothing positive about this school because this school lacks some of the things we need.” Tyler later decided to write his own comments on the Redfin blog. Although I did not personally agree with Tyler, I allowed him to post his comments, but warned him to ensure he used appropriate language. Tyler who in my opinion often made questionable or negative comments just to get a reaction from the teacher, was surprised that I was okay with his posting his comments. I explained that the purpose of this unit was for students not only to critique the various media depictions about the school but also to find appropriate ways to share their own opinions. I reminded him about our discussions about counter narratives and how they provided a way for voices that are often silenced to have a platform. In the case of this unit, Tyler’s voice was the one in danger of being silenced because he was one of the few students who had only a negative opinion about the school. A few days later after I had interviewed Tyler, he shared with me one of his hobbies, extreme paintball fighting. This was the first time Tyler had shared any insight into his personal life, and the only time I remember his ever being excited about anything. I believe his willingness to share this glimpse into his life outside of school was due to his realization that despite my personal opinions, I valued him and his experiences. My regret is that it was almost the end of the school year before I made this connection with Tyler.

Shatoya, a Black female student who was more adept at critical analysis than most students, viewed a lesson from the school’s flipped classroom channel on YouTube. Although she explained that this clip depicted Walker in a positive light, in her response she explained how these videos were not useful because the school had done nothing to publicize that the videos even existed, “[The videoed lessons] are not helpful to the student because no one knew it was there. It could not be helpful if no one [has] seen it.” In answering the question as to whether
this format was an appropriate way to convey a particular opinion about the school, Shatoya wrote, “Putting video lessons on YouTube is appropriate. However, again it cannot help if no one is saying anything.” Shatoya’s comments demonstrate how students improved their ability to make more insightful analysis. Shatoya was able to see beyond the surface of the flipped classroom videos and pointed how they were useless unless the school did more to promote them.

**Native Residents versus New Residents**

When analyzing the opinions of others about the school, most participants were more likely to defend Walker Middle. Students’ responses to the interview questions about Walker Middle School and community, however, were not as overwhelmingly positive. What I found interesting in this section is how student responses tended to differ based on the number of years they had been living in Walker County. I divided the participants into two groups—native residents, those who had lived in Walker County more than five years and new residents, those who had moved to Walker County in recent years. Of the twenty-one participants in this study, thirteen were native residents and eight were new residents.

Native residents tended to have a more negative opinion about Walker Middle and the surrounding community. One student, Zaniah lived in Newberry, a neighboring county to the east, until the fourth grade; however, I have included her in the group of native residents because that county is also a rural/suburban area with similar demographics and close ties to Hawthorne County. Because of its small size, Hawthorne County often co-hosts community events with Newberry. In addition, the state athletic region for this area operates as a hybrid of both Newberry and Hawthorne County school districts since neither has enough middle or high schools to sustain a full season of competition. Of these thirteen native residents, only three
initially responded that they felt positively about Walker Middle and Walker County. Anthony, however, changed his opinion to “somewhat” after I asked him if fighting made Walker a bad school. Fighting was mentioned several times during individual interviews, so it will be discussed separately in the next section.

Although student misbehavior (e.g., fighting, bullying, disrespect, etc.) was mentioned most often as the reason why Walker Middle was not a good school, four students shared alternative opinions as to why they believed Walker Middle was in the words of Zaniah, “not the best.” Both Tyler and Kia discussed instruction and curriculum as reasons why they had a less than positive opinion about the school. Their responses were not surprising as both were highly intelligent students who often questioned the relevance of certain activities and on many occasions chose simply not to complete an assignment if they did not find it engaging. Stephanie responded that she felt the administration was too strict and that she preferred the old administrative team whom she felt was more “fun.” Again, the most insightful comment came from Shatoya, who was the only participant who discussed racial implications as a reason why she did not like Walker Middle.

**Shatoya:** Well, I think it’s kind of segregated to me.

**Me:** Ok, explain that

**Shatoya:** Well, like most of the time like when we go in the gym, it’s kind of weird because it will be like these type of kids playing basketball and these type of kids playing soccer, and these type of kids talking on the bleachers.

**Me:** So be specific, what type of kid would be playing basketball

**Shatoya:** Black kids

**Me:** And then what type would be playing soccer
Shatoya: Mexicans and like black and white would be sitting on the bleachers

Me: Ok, do you feel like that’s just this school or do you experience the same thing like when you leave and just go home in your community?

Shatoya: Yeah in my community

Me: So in your community, they’re separated by race?

Shatoya: Hmm mmm

Although Shatoya was the only student who specifically mentioned race as one problem in the school and community, other native residents did comment about recent changes in the population of Walker County. Since 2000, the racial demographics of Walker County have changed significantly (See Table 5.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.4: 2000 and 2010 Demographic Census Data for Walker City (United States Census Bureau)</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>10,689</td>
<td>15,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
<td>56.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of Black or African American residents increased from 33.4% of the total population in 2000 to 56.6% in 2010. With this dramatic change in the Black and White population balance, I thought many native students might comment specifically on the effects of this shift in racial demographics, but they did not. Kia, a native resident of mixed race (Black
and White) who was born in Walker, moved away for a few years, and then returned felt the change in the racial demographics was positive. The interview below was conducted after a class discussion about permanence and change in the community. Two of the areas we discussed were the racial demographics and crime rates in the Hawthorne County community:

**Me:** How do you feel about that since you’ve been here from a very young age and now that these other people and groups of people and types of people have come here, how do you feel?

**Kia:** I think it’s good. It’s bringing new people to be with, so it’s new personalities, more people to meet.

During her focus group interview Katie, a White student who was born in Walker and was recently crowned Ms. Teen Walker in the pageant at the annual fall festival shared a similar positive sentiment about Walker. She was one of only three native residents who initially shared a positive opinion about Walker Middle School and the surrounding community. Unlike most native residents who expressed (at least initially) a negative opinion about Walker Middle School and/or the community, Katie whose family has lived in Walker for several generations, shared only positive comments. An excerpt from her focus group interview is below.

**Katie:** I like Walker because I was born here. A lot of people think bad of [Walker] because of how some people act, but if you really meet the people and live like in [Walker], it’s not really that way. I think there are a lot of good people here.

**Me:** Ok, has your family been in [Walker] for a while?

**Katie:** My family grew up in [Walker].
Katie shared similar impassioned and supportive comments about Walker Middle during her analysis of the print and digital texts about the school. When writing about the blog posted by the parent of the injured student during the infamous fight, Katie not only condemned the parent for her scathing remarks but also criticized the woman’s son’s actions as well:

The woman who wrote about [Walker] Middle is angry because her son was in a fight. Which does not give her reason to bad mouth [our] school. That was her son’s fault for being so angry and fighting a lot. I’m sorry for what happened to him but that’s not reason to disrespect our principal and school.

I could not identify any differences based on the racial background of the student. Three of the native students who offered their opinions about the school and community were White but held very different views. Similarly, there were no common threads among the comments made by the three students of mixed Black and White race nor the comments made by Black students. For example, Stephanie a native Black student felt the increase in population held a negative impact for Walker. She chose to focus on the crime rate as the subject of her final project on permanence and change in Walker. She made the following comments during the individual interview:

**Me:** Do you think because there has been a change in the number of people and maybe the type of people that moved to [Walker] recently?

(Stephanie nods)

**Me:** What is that change? What have you noticed?

**Stephanie:** I’ve seen a change like in crime and stuff.

**Me:** So there’s more?

**Stephanie:** un, huh
**Me:** And why do you think the fact that more people have moved here, how did that affect the crime rate?

**Stephanie:** Oh, it made it go up. People from different counties that had like a high crime rate, they moved down here so

**Me:** So you think those are the types of people perpetrating these crimes?

**Stephanie:** Mmm hmm

**Me:** So as a person who was born here, do you feel that [Walker] would be better, if these people, if these new people had not moved here?

**Stephanie:** Mmm hmmm

Although during her interviews, she did not associate increased crime rates with the growth of people from racial minority groups, particularly African Americans in the area, Stephanie did bring up this point during our class discussion on permanence and change in the area. In fact, Stephanie was the only student of all my classes to point out how the increase in crime rate seemed to coincide with the rise in crime in Walker. Stephanie was an energetic student who had close ties with family members who lived in the neighboring community to the east, Thomas County, which had a higher percentage of African American residents. On more than one occasion, Stephanie would refer to people who had moved to Walker from that community as ghetto and expressed her relief that she had only had to attend schools there for a brief moment before her mother moved back to Walker. Other students may not have referred specifically to race, but when speaking negatively about the school, may have used pejorative terms such as “ghetto or hoodlum” that are often used to refer to African Americans.

Diversity and safety in the school and community were also issues raised by participants who were new to Walker County; however, their comments tended to be more positive. Angela a
Black student who moved last summer from Thomas County, said she appreciated Walker because it was more diverse than where she used to live:

**Me:** What’s your opinion about the community, so not just the school but [Walker and Hawthorne County]? What’s your opinion about this community?

**Angela:** It’s very diverse. Like they got Hispanics, African Americans, Indians, and all the other

**Me:** So do you like that it’s very diverse?

**Angela:** Yeah, cause it’s like good bonding with different you know cultures and stuff like that?

**Me:** So how does it compare moving from [Thomas County] to Hawthorne County?

**Angela:** Like the people you just see all African American people…mostly every place I went to in [Thomas]

**Me:** So [Thomas] it was all African American, but here?

**Angela:** You can see different cultures anywhere

**Me:** And how do you feel? You know moving from a place where it’s all African American to a place where it’s more diverse, how do you feel?

**Angela:** I feel good about it. It helps me express myself more. It helps me `ummm like not you know judge other people and stuff like that.

Other new residents explained how they felt positively about Walker Middle because they felt they had better educational opportunities. Although they all mentioned negative incidents that took place at the school such as fighting or drugs, they quickly remarked how these
were isolated incidents and were in no way indicative of the school as a whole. The two students who were born outside of the state of Georgia offered perhaps the best defense of Walker Middle. Brian, a student from New York responded, “I mean everybody’s not doing that stuff. It’s just those students, it’s not the whole school, and we got good teachers and good administration.” Emilia, a student who was born in Mexico and whose poem introduced this chapter, expressed a similar sentiment, “[Walker] is a good school…the teachers are cool. The [current] principal has taken better control of the school than the other principals have.” These positive comments by Emilia and Brian are similar to those of even some native residents who cited the quality of teachers and especially the administrators (more so than student behavior) as evidence that Walker was a good school. What I found interesting about Brian’s and Emilia’s responses are that they painted a more positive picture of the school even though they acknowledged there were some negative aspects. The same was true of other students who were new residents. Even students who had lived most of their lives in Walker County but had attended another school in Georgia for at least one school year held a more positive opinion about Walker.

All of the new residents offered positive comments about Walker Middle School and/or community except one. Deirdre, however, could actually be categorized as a hybrid between the two groups of native and new residents because she had attended schools not only in Walker, but also its two neighboring counties to the east (more rural) and west (more urban). Deirdre, a Black student, had strong opinions in particular about the school as evident in her focus group interview where she called the school the “worst” of all schools she had attended:
Deirdre: Really the only thing I like about the school is my friends. Other than that, I think the school’s pretty ghetto. (Natalie, another Black student, rolls her eyes)

Me: What do you mean it’s ghetto?

Deirdre: I mean there are a lot of fights here. A lot of girls “pop off” as they say…too many times

Me: Have you only gone to school in Hawthorne?

Deirdre: I’ve gone to school in Thomas, Newberry, and [inaudible]. (Counts off on her fingers as she mentions each place.

Me: So based on your experiences, this is the worst?

Deirdre: Umm, yeah

Me: You want to respond (directed towards Natalie because I can see she is in strong disagreement with Deirdre’s comment)

Natalie: mm hmm, (She shakes her head in disgust)

It wasn’t until this moment that it dawned on me that I rarely see Deirdre hang around other Black female students. Natalie’s response to her comments caused me to wonder how the other Black students feel about Deirdre or how she feels about them. Natalie was not in the same class period as Deirdre, so this is the first time I had an opportunity to see their interaction with one another. I had never noticed any similar negative interactions between Deirdre and the other Black female students in my fourth period class. However, I do not recall any interaction between them unless placed in a group together by me. Certainly the terms she uses such as “ghetto” and “pop off” are ones used in association with Black girls. Could it be that Deirdre has a negative opinion of the school because she disproves of some of the behaviors
of her Black female classmates? This last focus group interview was held the day before the last
day of school, so I was unable to follow up with Deirdre about her feelings.

In addition, Deirdre was one of the few students who wrote mostly negative statements
about the school in her analysis of the various print and digital depictions of Walker Middle. I
was totally surprised by her comments because Deirdre was a bright and highly motivated
student who seemed to enjoy learning. I never would have thought she would hold such negative
opinions about the school. Deirdre was a voracious reader whose favorite titles were from the
popular fantasy series such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. She and her friends would
often rush through their work to write pages and pages of stories in their journals. However,
looking back I can see that even Deirde’s reading interests were different from most of my Black
female students.

Regardless of their racial background or whether they were new or native residents, all
participants described how the outside community held an extremely negative opinion about
Walker Middle School. Amy, a White native resident, explained that her own father felt Walker
Middle was a “school for hoodlums and people from the hood.” Elisa offered several reasons
why people believed Walker was a bad school, “They always have fights, they have drugs,
gangs. They, the teachers don’t control the students, the principal doesn’t know how to control
the school, the students run amuck in the halls, never listening…” Finally, Angela who had only
moved to Walker the summer before school started explained that several people told her mother
that they there were too many fights and that the teachers were mean. Although Angela shared
mostly positive comments about her transfer to Walker, she admitted that she felt she would have
a better experience at another school in Hawthorne County.
Fighting

The theme of fighting came up repeatedly, but students’ perceptions of fighting sometimes differed greatly between native residents and new residents. In the interview transcript below, Anthony, a resident of Walker County since birth explains, what other people outside of the school say about it,

Anthony: It’s a lot of fights

Me: Ok, but as a person who goes here, do you agree with them.

Anthony: Yes

Anthony: You think there are a lot of fights here?

Anthony: Yeah

Me: So you think that makes it a bad school?

Anthony: Somewhat

In the excerpt from Brian’s interview, a student who moved to Walker County from New York just three years ago agrees with Anthony that there are a lot of fights, but he still expressed an overall good opinion about the school.

Me: And what kinds of things have they (people in the community) heard on the news about Walker

Brian: About fighting and kids bringing pills to school, yeah.

Me: OK, so do those things actually happen? Or do you just think people are taking and spreading…

Brian: They actually happen

Me: Ok, but you feel that even though they happen, it’s still a pretty good school?

Brian: Yeah
Me: Again, tell me why it’s a good school then? If those things happen and you still feel it’s a good school why?

Brian: I mean some kids, they probably just wanted to. I mean everybody’s not doing that stuff. It’s just those students, it’s not the whole school and we got good teachers and administrators.

Although both native residents and new residents believed that there were a lot of fights at Walker Middle School, actual school discipline data reflects otherwise. The total number of fights reported for Walker Middle School for the 2013-2014 school year was twenty-nine, the second highest in the district but still a small number when compared with other schools in the state. (See Table 5.5 for a comparison of fighting incidents for all middle schools in Hawthorne County.)

**Table 5.5: Hawthorne County Middle School Discipline Data 2013-2014 School Year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Fights Reported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walker Middle School</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidson Middle School</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin Middle School</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln Middle School</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two middle schools in Thomas County reported the highest number of fights in the state, with over 400 incidents for the 2012-2013 school year. As a former administrator in the same district as the two schools mentioned above, I feel it is important to note the autonomy schools have in how they report discipline data. Although specific school codes of conduct may provide definitions for each discipline infraction, administrators may use their own discretion in
determining when, how, and for what specific infraction they will charge students when a fight occurs. In fact, there are numerous categories under which the term fighting can be described, e.g. battery, simple battery, classroom disturbance, etc. In addition, the procedures for assigning consequences are not always fair, but good administrators will try to mete out punishments in an equitable manner. For example, a student who has had numerous discipline referrals may very well be charged with a more serious infraction than another student who has no previous referrals or who fought in self-defense. I did not serve in an administrative capacity during the time of this study so I cannot speak to the actual incidents that were coded as fighting at Walker Middle School during the 2013-2014 school year. Although students and the outside community feel that a high number of fights is one of the reasons why Walker Middle is a bad school, the actual discipline data does not support this belief.

In chapter five, I have outlined the findings as they relate to my four inductive themes—student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy, student perceptions on personnel, student perceptions on tracking, and finally, student perceptions on school and surrounding community. In chapter six, I present a final summary of my study and outline the specific relevance of this study on both micro, local school level and also a broader, macro level for the field of critical pedagogy.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this criterial action study was to provide a space where students could research issues about schooling and community that were relevant to them. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How does a teacher-researcher create critical literacy opportunities that build on students’ questions about their own schooling and community?
2. How do students use research to construct perceptions of their school and its surrounding community?

The theoretical framework in which this study was grounded is critical pedagogy. As a critical pedagogue, I follow the theories of Paulo Freire (1972) whose concept of praxis, the “action and reflection of men upon their world to transform it” (p. 66), completely reformed my own teaching philosophy. In reading Freire, I discovered my true purpose was not to educate, but liberate students. Critical pedagogy is founded on Freire’s belief that education should be a liberatory action, where students are engaged in a problem posing process that encourages not only critical consciousness among students but also requires them to be conscious of their consciousness. As stated explicitly in my first research question, one primary goal of this study
was to provide a space for critical literacy opportunities. According to Ira Shor (1999), critical literacy is a “reflective and reflexive [process]; Language use and education are social practices used to critically study all social practices including language and education…Critical literacy involves questioning received knowledge and immediate experience with the goal of challenging inequality and developing an active citizenry” (Shor, 1999/2009, p. 290). I felt it important that this study be directed by my students’ own questions about schooling and community.

Critical pedagogy is an ideal theoretical pairing with action research because it calls for the participation of those who live in an oppressed circumstance to be the ones who critically analyze it and seek solutions that will help change it (Hinchey, 2008). Through their discussion and analysis of research related to their own questions about schooling and community, my students were given the power to voice their opinions about issues that directly affected them. In addition, their participation in the study revealed the various and meaningful ways I could advocate on their behalf.

Data collection methods included both individual and focus group student interviews, the collection of documents in the form of student work samples, video-taped class sessions, and an on-line anonymous survey. Much research on qualitative inquiry mentions the use of multiple data sources as a way to triangulate or account for validity of the findings (Hinchey, 2008; Maxwell, 2005). However, much more important than triangulation is the fact that the use of multiple data sources allows the qualitative researcher to present more than one way of seeing a phenomenon. Triangulation does not confine the qualitative researcher to ensuring the all data converges on one reality but rather it allows one to justify the multiple realities that the data represent.
Despite the arguments that triangulation does not necessarily result in improved accuracy, making use of multiple researchers, data sources, methods of theoretical lenses is still considered valuable by a host of researchers from different paradigms. Multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints, theoretical frames, and methods of analysis allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages re (interpretation). (Tracy, 2010, p. 843)

This concept of (re)interpretation should play an important role as the qualitative researcher embarks on the process of data analysis. Not only should research be gathered from multiple sources, but it should be analyzed from multiple perspectives as well. In her section on representation and legitimation, Donna Alvermann described the tension that comes from trying to present a true depiction of participants’ experiences while also allowing for one’s own interpretation of those experiences (Alvermann, O’Brien, & Dillon, 1996). To reduce this tension, I chose to discuss my findings in terms of the emic and etic perspectives that guided them. Like with most qualitative research, the analysis did uncover many connections between and among these perspectives (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). For the purposes of making the analysis more coherent for the reader, I tried to delineate between the emic (inductive analysis) and etic (deductive analysis) interpretations of my data. I used deductive and inductive approaches to analyze data from the study and categorize them into thematic categories that addressed both of my research questions. Using a combination of deductive and inductive analyses allowed space for multiple interpretations of the data that were supported not only by responses and actions of the participants but also by the prior experiences of the researcher. The freedom to find multiple meanings in the data is a hallmark of action research. Hinchey (2008) explained:
It is important to note that the point of theorizing is not to formulate an interpretation of the findings—not to provide a single, “correct” interpretation. Action research is, after all, interpretivist research, which assumes that all knowledge is socially constructed, and that any reading of the world (including any reading of research findings) is only one of possible readings. It is important, then, that the researcher approach this task without the burden of feeling it necessary to prove something true beyond any doubt. Instead, action researchers offer interpretations they consider mostly likely, using their own experiences and perspectives to inform their judgments. (p. 94)

The findings of my study were similar to those found in the studies mentioned in my literature review (Allen, 1992; Branscombe & Thomas, 1992; Johnston, 1992; and Morrell, 2004), which revealed that three conditions must be prevalent when students engage in critical research—1) a shift in teaching authority, 2) increased student self-efficacy, and 3) social action. It is important to understand that these factors both influence and are influenced by one another. In addition, this study demonstrates that when teachers build their lessons around students’ own questions, opportunities for critical literacy are much more likely to occur (Shor, 1999/2009). Although each theme was discussed separately to allow for a more coherent reading, I caution against focusing more attention on any one theme than the other. Privileging one condition above another might yield results not conducive to critical literacy. For example, a shift in teaching authority without increased student self-efficacy or social action would not encourage students to transfer their critical awareness to settings outside the classroom.

After sorting and categorizing my data through coding, I used thematic networks to analyze and eventually make meaning of them. As Oliveira (2010) explained, thematic networks provide a “pictorial representation of the different steps involved in the analysis of qualitative
material” (p. 20). Not only were thematic networks helpful in my own analysis of the data, but they were also a useful way to communicate and defend the findings of this study with others. Although his research dealt with business anthropology rather than education, Oliveira suggested that thematic networks “help to address validity by instigating a shift of focus from a description of the process research to a description of the analysis of the process” (p. 22). The four global themes identified through thematic network analysis were 1) Student Perceptions on Curriculum and Pedagogy, 2) Student Perceptions on School Personnel, 3) Student Perceptions on Tracking, and 4) Student Perceptions on School and Community.

**Recommendations**

Although this study was designed to equip students with the cognitive tools to critically examine their own questions, the findings hold important implications not only for me as the teacher-researcher but also for Walker Middle School, the surrounding Hawthorne County community, and the larger field of critical education research.

**Micro-Level Implications**

I feel the results of this study are particularly relevant for the students, faculty, and staff at Walker Middle School because it revealed some perhaps unrealized issues at the school. First and foremost, although discipline data does not support this perception, students feel that fighting is a major problem in the school, which could be an indicator that students do not feel safe. Coming from a district with a significantly higher number of fights per year than Walker, I was actually surprised to hear students mention fighting so often. Hawthorne County public schools will implement a behavior intervention model called PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports) next school year in all secondary schools, which will
hopefully equip students with the language and strategies to more effectively deal with conflict.

Negative image and community perceptions are also issues that need to be addressed at Walker Middle School. Although many students held overall positive perceptions about the school, not one participant stated that the community held similar positive beliefs. Increased community outreach programs, service learning projects, or parent-school partnerships might also help Walker Middle redeem its reputation and encourage both community members and students to adopt a sense of pride and loyalty to the school which bears its same name.

Although most participants still believed tracking was the preferred method of grouping students for instruction, the wide body of research on tracking, which reveal the detrimental effects of tracking for poor and minority students, suggests that the administrators at Walker Middle should reconsider how they schedule courses. The practice of assigning students to specific teams based on academic ability causes middle and low-track students to feel they are being denied access to the same quality instruction as those who students who are placed in high tracks. A more heterogeneous mixture of student ability in all classes would alleviate this perception problem. I am glad to reveal that the steps the previous principal took to create more heterogeneous course schedules have been continued by Walker’s new administrator. However, simply changing the master schedule to reflect more heterogeneity among students will not ensure that all students will receive a high quality education. Extensive professional learning in the area of differentiated instruction with follow-up support and monitoring from both school and district leaders is necessary to ensure teachers effectively teach, enrich, and motivate students of varying academic abilities.
Macro Level Implications

This study contributes to the field of critical action research in that it reveals how teachers can nurture environments ripe for critical pedagogy when students are allowed to conduct research on topics of interest to them. In addition, it proves the benefits of allowing student interest to guide instructional planning so that opportunities for students to engage in critical reflection are more meaningful, authentic and relevant.

It also adds support to the body of research on instructional practices such as student engagement, challenging/rigorous curriculum, differentiated instruction, student choice, and others by recognizing how students themselves view these strategies as useful and necessary. Providing opportunities for students to become active participants in the focus and planning of their instruction will lead to greater engagement and accountability.

Finally, this study may hold significance to the research regarding stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson 1995), which is defined as “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (p. 797). Although their study was conducted to determine to what degree negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of African Americans affect their ability to perform on perceived diagnostic tasks of cognitive ability, Steele and Aronson’s research was later used to explain poor performance in several non-dominant groups or settings such as Hispanic, low-income, and even females in math courses (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003). I wonder to what extent stereotype threat played in my students’ reticence in condemning tracking practices despite the research we discussed, which proved its harmful effects on poor minority students much like them. Did this research cause my students to “dis-identify,” thereby preventing them from seeing how they
as poor and minority students had been affected by tracking? As Steele and Aronson explain:

[As this threat persists over time, it may have the further effect of pressuring these students to protectively dis-identify with achievement in school and related intellectual domains. That is, it may pressure the person to define or redefine the self-concept such that school achievement is neither a basis of self-evaluation nor a personal identity. This protects the person against the self-evaluative threat posed by the stereotypes but may have the byproduct of diminishing interest, motivation, and ultimately, achievement in the domain. (p. 797)

Since stereotype threat was not one of the theories that informed this study, I did not include questions in the interviews that might have revealed the relationship between negative stereotypes and student performance. Yet, I feel that future studies should include this body of research, which may do much to explain why students did not respond in ways I had anticipated.
Suggestions for Further Research

The participants of this study were eighth graders at a suburban middle school outside Atlanta, Georgia. Location was central to findings of this study given the small, close-knit community in which it was nestled and also because of the drastic change in its demographics over the last ten years. However, it would be interesting to compare this study’s results with another set in a more urban school or one located in a different geographical region of the country.

Although other research studies that I reviewed and that helped me identify the deductive themes of this study were conducted in mostly high school settings, I feel a similar critical action research study could also be implemented in an elementary setting. Students could collaborate to discover questions or problems that they want to address related to their school or community. The conditions presented in this study that are necessary for students to engage in critical literacy practices could still be nurtured and implemented within an elementary school setting. Introducing the tenets of critical pedagogy even with younger students would ensure that they were well equipped to use the critical cognitive tools once they reach middle school.

Considerations in Replicating the Study

When I initially designed this study, I wanted students to engage in collaborative research with me as we used authentic critical research methods (Morell, 2004) to answer questions that students developed. My original research design was participatory action research rather than critical action research. These two approaches have very similar qualities, especially the emphasis on conducting research with participants rather than on them (Hinchey, 2008; Kincheloe, 2008). The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods defines critical
action research as “an extension of action research or participatory action research processes that combines critical theory with the action research paradigm” (Given, 2008, para. 10). However, one difference between participatory research and critical action research is the degree to which participants have control over certain aspects of the study. Bergold and Thomas (2012) wrote that participants who engage in the as true co-researchers have greater control in the decision making process of the study:

To determine whether a project fulfills the basic criterion for classification as participatory research, one must ask who controls the research in which phase of the project; whether control is exercised by the research partners; or whether they have at least the same rights as the professional researchers when it comes to making decisions.

During the first phase of my study where students researched the concept of tracking in public schools, students had very limited control in the research process. Although the research questions guiding this aspect of the study were based on issues students had raised by themselves, I did not feel they had enough knowledge of this concept nor the pre-requisite skills necessary to engage as co-researchers. In addition, as middle school students, they did not have any prior practice with conducting authentic research and were not capable at this point in their schooling career to effectively research and also analyze the complex topic of tracking without significant support from me. Although this was not my intent, I found it necessary to pre-select the various texts that were used in our discussion of tracking rather than have students search for them on their own. Bergold and Thomas (2012) explained that one dilemma researchers face with a participatory research design is how to address or compensate for the lack of experience or skills on the part of the participants/co-researchers to fully participate in the research process. Often because the goal of participatory research is to give voice to marginalized groups,
researchers find themselves working with people who because of their non-dominant status have been denied access to the type of teaching or life experiences that would prove beneficial in conducting authentic research. This was the case with my students.

I was also drawn to participatory action research because of its focus on social action. Patricia Hinchey (2008) explained that while participatory action research is certainly tied to a critical agenda when implemented within an education setting, its ultimate goal is to effect change not just in schools, but also to society at large. Engaging in social action was one of the themes identified from the studies in my literature review and subsequently became one of the deductive themes used to analyze my data. However, I was disappointed that my students were not more motivated to engage in social action either within the school or their community. Going into the study, I realized that the tracking unit would be more difficult and perhaps less engaging to students. I was not entirely surprised that this first part of the study did not lend itself to student social action. However, I thought that students would be encouraged to become more actively involved in their community once we began the unit on school and community perceptions.

During the second unit, students engaged in discussion and reflection on two separate, yet related topics—current community perceptions of the school and permanence and change in the community. Because of the intense negative press the school had received following the fight in early fall, students were excited to discuss how this incident fueled community perceptions and offer their own responses. I noticed when discussing the fight, students were more engaged in critically reflecting how the school was portrayed and could effectively articulate their own perspective. However, students were not as engaged in discussions where I asked them to offer a similar critical reflection of the community by comparing its present with its past. Guiding
questions required students to consider alternate viewpoints, silenced voices, power issues, or other aspects of critical theory, but few offered any meaningful insights or considerations during our discussions about permanence and change. In fact, very few students chose to complete their final projects on this community topic, and those who did, unfortunately, put forth little effort in creating their product. The one student who I had hoped would critically engage in the project and further research her initial theories about the relationship between the recent increase in crime with the increase of African Americans in the community ultimately decided to submit a report on the town’s depot station.

I mention my disappointments about these results from the study not to present them as limitations. Instead, I hope to offer some ideas for consideration to those who are interested in doing similar research but with a greater focus on social action. Perhaps the type of reflection and action in which I wanted students to engage was not developmentally appropriate for middle school students. All of the studies except one from my literature review involved high school students. These participants through their collaborative research became actively involved in their communities. It may have been unfair for me to expect such results from my middle school students without spending a significant amount of time orienting them with the tools of critical researchers and offering more examples of how it can lead to social action.

**Final Thoughts: From Disappointment to Celebration**

Although the study did not result in the type of student critical reflection and social action for which I initially hoped, I was very pleased with the changes the administration made in the gifted course schedule. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the principal at the time of the study decided to eliminate the homogeneous, pull-out model for the gifted Language Arts courses and instead
mainstream these students into mixed-ability classrooms. Although that principal did not return when school began the following year, the new principal opted to keep the new gifted course format for the Language Arts courses. All other core courses for that school year maintained the pull-out gifted model.

However, during an unrelated conference with the new principal about other course offerings, she revealed that she had decided to completely eliminate all homogeneous gifted courses for the 2015-2016 school year. Instead, she would place at least one gifted course on every grade level team, provided she had enough teachers with gifted certification at each grade level. In instances where she might not have even one gifted certified teacher on a team, I suggested she use this obstacle as a way to encourage more teachers to take the gifted certification class. For the teacher, it would be a chance to work with more advanced students, but the school would benefit from a slight increase in funding since the state does allow teachers currently enrolled in a gifted course to receive a provisional certificate. Courses assigned to those teachers could still be coded as gifted although the school would not receive full course funding until the teacher had successfully completed the course.

I am excited to see how I was able to use my students’ interest in their schooling as a way to implement change that will reap benefits for students, teachers, and administrators. In my current role as ELA Coordinator for Hawthorne County, I will have the opportunity to work closely with all groups at Walker Middle to support this transition and hopefully share its positive outcomes with other schools in our district.
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