

**Powerful Voices and Pens: Developing Critical Stance with Adolescent Literacy in  
Content-Area Pre-Service Teacher Education**

Dr. Lina B. Soares

Georgia Southern University

**Abstract**

This practitioner-research study investigated the effect critical literacy has on content area pre-service teachers' abilities (N=14) to perceive the sociocultural influences in text. The study further investigated how content area pre-service teachers engage in critical stance during situated reading practices that centered on discussions of young adult literature. Quantitative data were collected on a pre- and post Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ). Qualitative data collection included videotaped and audiotaped recordings, interviews, and dialogue journals. Results from a paired samples *t test* found there was a statistically significant difference between the LRQ pre- and post survey. Informed by grounded theory, reading young adult literature engaged content area pre-service teachers in critical stance through powerful voices in discussion and pens through dialogue journaling.

Brown and Knowles (2007) offer that the period of adolescence is roughly defined as a period between the ages ten and twenty and is a time of rapid intellectual, psychological, and social growth in students' lives. During these years, students develop a greater sense of what is right and what is wrong, the ability to inquire, reason, and problem solve, and students begin to grapple with their feelings and identity. These developmental changes are noteworthy because each one can and does influence adolescents' literacy practices in varying degrees.

**Problem Statement**

Although the topic of adolescent literacy should be a school-wide issue in all middle schools, there is still reluctance on the part of content area teachers to endorse the literacy needs of young adolescents as a goal for their course objectives. Faced with national pressure toward standardization and constraints imposed by state and local policies, content area teachers are increasingly pressed for time to deliver instruction focused

solely on the subjects they teach. As a result, content is increasingly taught in isolation and for the most part, content has been distilled down to what students are expected to know on state-mandated tests (Au, 2007). In addition, content area teachers still place a heavy emphasis on the textbook; contemporary young adult literature is frequently not considered when content area teachers choose reading materials (Bean, 1997). A further view that is often found in content area classrooms is that the development of critical reading skills should be left to language arts teachers (Alger, 2007; Spencer, Carter, Boon, & Simpson-Garcia, 2008). However, the reluctance to address adolescent literacy in content area middle grade classrooms can be approached in teacher education courses.

As an assistant professor of education, I have restructured my curriculum to move my content area pre-service teachers' thinking beyond content to address the literacy needs of the young adolescents they will one day teach in middle school. My goal is for my students to understand that literacy for young adolescents is both pedagogy and an instrument to address relevant themes and issues found in content studies. To do so, I challenge my students to expand their thinking and to deliberately challenge their own implicit beliefs, actions, and cultural practices while reading prominent and challenging themes in young adult literature (Walker & Bean, 2005).

What follows is a report of the findings of one practitioner-research study that examined: (1) What effect does critical literacy have on content area pre-service teachers' abilities to perceive the sociocultural influences in text?; and (2) How do content area pre-service teachers engage in critical stance during situated reading practices that centered on discussions of young adult literature?

The theoretical framework that laid the foundation for this study was pragmatism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie note that pragmatism permits researchers to select methods that will address the totality of the study to arrive at the most complete answers to the research questions. Due to the mixed nature of this research study, pragmatism was an appropriate theoretical lens to support both quantitative and qualitative elements in this study.

### **Perspectives from Literature**

In recognition that adolescence is a period of rapid change, researchers and educators alike recognize the literacy needs for these students are uniquely different than the needs of very young children who are learning to read (Alvermann, 2004; Bean & Harper, 2006). While adolescent literacy is a messy and multifaceted concept to define, roughly speaking it refers to the set of skills and abilities that students need during the middle and secondary years to read, write, think, and to understand all forms of texts to succeed in school, work, and life (King-Shaver, & Hunter, 2009). These sets of skills are needed in all content area disciplines (e.g. social studies, math, science, and language arts), and all forms of texts include print, digital, informational, and communication technologies (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2010). Adolescent literacy further recognizes the sociocultural perspective that reading and writing are social activities that reflect the culture and community in which students live (Pradl, 1996). The sociocultural perspective acknowledges that literacy is not an isolated cognitive skill (Vygotsky, 1978), but rather it is influenced by the social, cultural, historical, and linguistic processes that relate to students' literacy development and life experiences (Gee, 1992; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky). As a result, adolescents need opportunities to talk about texts and to bring their own personal experiences to discussions in order to make sense of the textual world and their own world.

Moreover, adolescent literacy recognizes that students in both middle and secondary grades need to develop necessary dispositions to think as social scientists and examine all evidence, develop abilities to take a critical stance toward content by challenging the author's intent, and become discerning readers of text who examine both sides of an issue. Subsequently, adolescent literacy promotes critical literacy; reading the world in order to understand the words (Freire, 1970).

The term critical literacy describes a pedagogical approach to reading that focuses on the political, sociocultural, historical, and economic forces that shape students' lives. It is an approach that teaches readers to become critically conscious of their own values and responsibilities in society (Ciardiello, 2004). Accordingly, the goal of critical literacy is to raise students' responsiveness toward societal problems in their world and to prompt students to ask why and for what reason are things the way they are, to question who profits the most, and then to act on making the world a better place (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997; Comber & Nixon, 1999). To do so, readers assume a critical stance; they read in opposition to texts and they challenge the author's purpose for writing (Bean & Moni, 2003). Questioning the author's intent helps students understand the sociocultural influences in their lives (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991), realize their role in society and others around them, and raise questions that delineate who is not represented and who is not heard (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Furthermore, critical literacy allows students to bring their owned lived experiences into discussions, offering them the opportunity for participation, engagement in higher levels of reading and discussion, and to understand the power of language.

For young adolescents in the middle grade years to read the "world as the word" (Freire, 1970), they need opportunities to engage in critical discussions across multiple content areas that center on relevant issues in their lives, time to critique and reflect on those issues, and relate

the issues to the world at-large. Literature can be the powerful motivator to engage students in thoughtful and critical thinking. In fact, Smith and Johnson (1994) offered, “Literature can become the lens through which content is viewed. This lens holds the young reader’s attention while connecting content with the variety of human experiences” (p. 198). One such valuable lens is young adult literature.

The genre known as young adult literature supports the lives of young adolescent readers in multiple ways (Alvermann; 2004; Harper & Bean, 2007). Young adult literature enables middle school readers to relate to their immediate world as struggles with identity, peer pressure, and conflicts within the family are universal themes that appeal to these students (Walker & Ben, 2005). Through young adult literature, students build a greater understanding of an historical period, as well as the cultural and economic concepts that comprise that period of time (George & Stix, 2000). Moreover, research has shown that young adult literature is a valuable tool to teach critical literacy in all content areas in middle school (Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; Behrman, 2006; Wolk, 2009). When young adolescents are taught strategic practices in critical literacy, they know how to unpack different layers of meaning, interrogate texts to determine author biases, examine alternative perspectives, and to negotiate real-world experiences that engages response, inquiry, and social action (Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ociepka, & Vasquez, 2000).

As with middle grade students, pre-service teachers can benefit when given opportunities to analyze books that explore the social, cultural, and political dimensions that influence their lives (Bean & Harper, 2004; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). Young adult literature can offer reading alternatives for pre-service content area teachers and open the door to develop the ability

to read from a critical stance by engaging in textual criticism, inquiry and reflection, and exploring the many ways of being in the world through critical literacy (Cheu, 2011).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The study was conducted over the course of one university semester in the Southeastern region of the United States. The participants (N = 14) consisted of five males and nine females who attended the university and were enrolled in my Language Arts and Social Studies instructional methods class. The class met twice a week for a four hour period each class meeting.

### **Instruction**

Instructional time was twofold: (1) the fourteen participants received research-based methods to effectively teach Language Arts and Social Studies, and (2) literature circles were implemented to provide opportunities for the content area pre-service teachers to experience a literature-based instructional strategy to use in their own teaching. Literature-based instruction was implemented through the application of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1978) and critical literacy (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Ciardiello, 2004; Paul, 2005). Subsequently, emphasis was placed on the social context of learning (Wells, 1999) which was viewed as a space for constructing critical conversations and interpretations as it was important for my students to collaboratively work together to make meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

During literature study, I began each class period in a whole class setting to lay the groundwork for the fourteen participants to engage in criticality. I introduced the concept of critical literacy following Paul's (2005) perspective that reality and knowledge are constructed, but driven by power and power relations, and the inquirer attempts to uncover the dynamics of

the ideology and power. Correspondingly, I wanted the participants to understand that inquiry involves social and cultural criticism, as well as personal examinations into the sociocultural influences (social, cultural, historical, and political) (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) that have impacted their lives. The purpose was for the participants to begin to critically examine their own implicit beliefs, actions, and cultural practices that would be needed while reading young adult literature during literature circle activity.

To demonstrate critical literacy in practice, I introduced read aloud using diverse children's literature that focused on social issues, such as discrimination, racial and gender bias, and culture and power differentials. By modeling for the participants critical questions to be asked during read aloud (see Table 1), my students learned how to interrogate texts, to unpack different layers of meaning (Luke & Freebody, 1997), and to become critically conscious of their own sociocultural values and their responsibilities to society (Ciardiello, 2004). During the community meetings, emphasis was placed on the participants' voices as dialogue was crucial for literature circle discussions.

Literature discussions were implemented using the common procedures that are typical for literature circles (Daniels, 1994, 2002). At the beginning of the study, I explicitly taught and modeled the various literature circle roles that

Table 1. *Questions to Promote Critical Literacy*

---

- What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed this text?
- Whose view of the world is put forth?
- What kinds of social realities does the text portray?
- How far do you accept the text's/author's position?
- What other positions might there be?

- Who has a voice in the text?
  - What are the gaps and silences in the text?
  - Who benefits from the text?
  - How many interpretations of the text are possible?
  - How else could the text have been written?
- 

Note. Questions to promote critical literacy have been adapted from two sources, (Bean & Moni, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

included: *Discussion Director*, *Literary Illuminator*, *Wordsmith*, *Connector*, *Character Investigator*, and *Critical Profiler*. While the first four roles are common to literature circles (Daniels, 1994), two new roles were implemented to provide strategic practices in critical literacy. First, the role of *Character Investigator* (Author, 2010) required the participants to analyze characters' physical, intellectual, and socioeconomic profiles, and then evaluate how the author had positioned the characters in relation to their profiles. This role required the participants to analyze if the characters' profiles were related to characters that were favored, silenced, and even rejected by the author. The role of *Critical Profiler* (Author, 2010) required the participants to examine the author's version of reality, to profile the imbalance of power found in the institutions and societies in texts, and to provide an alternative reality that would better the lives of the characters in the story.

### **Data Collection**

Due to the mixed nature of this research study, I collected data through sequential explanatory procedures that included both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Quantitative data were collected to address the effect of critical literacy on content area pre-service teachers' abilities to perceive the sociocultural influences in text. In conjunction, qualitative data were collected to understand how content area pre-service teachers engage in

critical stance during situated reading practices that centered on discussion of young adult literature.

### ***Quantitative Data Collection***

Quantitative data were collected on pre- and post-study participant responses from the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) (Miall & Kuiken, 1995). The survey was administered the first and last weeks of the semester and provided a measurement of the effect of critical literacy on the fourteen participants' abilities to perceive the sociocultural influences in texts.

***Survey instrument.*** The LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) is a survey that is oriented for readers to determine their implicit sociocultural beliefs, values, and attitudes that are frequently drawn upon while reading. The survey provides Likert scale items that range from "Not at All True" to "Extremely True." For purposes of this research, the survey was modified to shorten the instrument to 20 positively worded items that required the fourteen participants to examine their own sociocultural, beliefs, values, and attitudes in relation to the sociocultural influences in texts when responding to the survey items. The internal consistency reliability for the 20 survey items was determined by computing the alpha coefficient which was found to be .714.

### ***Qualitative Data Collection***

Qualitative data were gathered in order to interpret how the fourteen participants engaged in critical stance during situated reading practices that centered on discussions of young adult literature. The qualitative data collection procedures included: (1) videotaping and audiotaping literature circle discussions, (2) student-produced artifacts, such as participant reading journals, (3) formal and informal conversations through interviews, and (4) field notes.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Quantitative Data Analysis***

Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19 to determine the effect of critical literacy on the content-area pre-service teachers' abilities to perceive the sociocultural influences in text. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the pre-and post survey on the LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995). A statistical analysis using a paired sample t test was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post survey means.

### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

To understand how the content-area pre-service teachers engaged in critical stance during situated reading practices that centered on discussions of young adult literature, I relied upon the prescribed coding methods that follow the typical protocol of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). First, the audiotaped interviews were transcribed and coded. I then met with each participant to perform a member check (Merriam, 1998) to gain clarification when responses were confusing, to probe further into the participants' responses, and to verify if the transcribed data reflected what the participants had actually said during the interview process.

Following this procedure, I then transcribed all videotaped and audiotaped literature circle discussions and began the process of generating theory from data using a three-level process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify patterns, categories, and themes of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Using transcripts from literature circle discussions and student interviews, pertinent words, phrases, and sentences were openly coded in the margins, and memos were made in reference to possible emerging categories and themes. As new data were integrated (student reading journals and field notes), I began to think comparatively in terms of properties that would permit further analysis between the data. For example, on the initial perusal of the data, various broad codes were applied to the data including

what the participants did (social interaction), what the participants said (oral responses), and what the participants produced (written responses). However, during the process of axial coding, I refined and renamed the codes and searched for possible relations among the categories and across the data sources. As patterns emerged during this phase, I scrutinized the data more closely and applied specific codes to signify how the participants assumed a critical stance. Such internal codes were not limited to but included: IDV = identified the dominant voices, GV = gave voice to the voiceless, CAP = challenged the author's position, OA = opposed the author's point-of-view, CPB = challenged personal beliefs, and QP = questioned power. By continually asking questions of the data on how the participants assumed a critical stance, the "how" became clearer and two themes emerged.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative Results**

Results from the paired samples *t test* found there was a statistically significant difference between the LRQ pre-test ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = .25$ ) and the LRQ posttest ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = .30$ );  $t(13) = -4.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -1.17$ . These results suggest that critical literacy does have an effect on content area pre-service teachers' abilities to perceive the sociocultural influences in texts. In addition, the effect size ( $d = -1.17$ ) indicates that the difference in the two means was larger than one standard deviation.

### **Qualitative Results**

From qualitative data analysis informed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), two themes emerged. The content area pre-service teachers used practices in critical literacy to assume a critical stance in two ways: (1) powerful voices in collaborative discussions and (2) powerful pens in written responses. The presentation of themes in this instance uses *The Hunger*

*Games* (Collins, 2008) and *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) to illustrate how the fourteen participants engaged in critical stance while reading young adult literature. A composite of student responses have been taken from transcripts to highlight the findings. Student responses are labeled Student 1 (S1), Student 2 (S2), and Student 3 (S3).

***Theme 1: Powerful voices.*** From data analysis, the findings consistently showed that verbal participation was significant in the context of social interaction, since the social interaction put into use the critical literacy practices associated with reading from a critical stance. For example, the fourteen participants' responses often challenged the author's purpose for writing, identified voices that had been silenced, and questioned the balance of power when power benefitted the dominant voices and points-of-view. Further, the findings show the participants recognized that books often position readers in relation to their own social and cultural beliefs such that some of the participants were observed to reposition to accept or reject the author's point-of-view as they grappled to understand the textual world in relation to their world. This required the participants to suspend and even challenge their own sociocultural beliefs and assumptions while reading and discussing the texts. In these instances, data analysis determined that reading young adult literature situated the participants in both implicit and explicit ideologies, such that connections were made and feelings such as sympathy were evoked. Based on this finding, I was able to conclude that a combination of the social learning environment and young adult literature promoted inquiry and critical discussions as the content area pre-service teachers continually used practices in critical literacy to assume a critical stance. By using their voices through the power of discussion, three domains or categories emerged: (1) positioning, (2) power and its effect on citizens, and (3) the nature of agency.

Following a brief synopsis of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), the three categories are explicitly represented in three supporting episodes.

*Sixteen year old Katniss lives in the poorest district of Panem; a district located in the former United States. When the districts tried to overthrow the Capitol and were defeated, the terms of surrender required each district to send one boy and one girl once a year to compete in “The Hunger Games;” a competition where the rules were kill or be killed. When her younger sister is chosen to compete, Katniss goes in her place.*

### Episode 1: Positioning in *The Hunger Games*

S1: The author has presumably chosen to tell this story from an impoverished people’s point-of-view, possibly to exaggerate what happens when the government turns on its people. The author’s interest in this story is to lead readers to view the social class stratification that exist in the text world is similar to the real world. Society consists of the haves and the have-nots. I believe the author wanted us to sympathize with the have-nots to understand their daily struggles to survive. The fact that Panem is divided into districts by class is to remind readers that our neighborhoods are divided by social class much the same way. The author has positioned readers to accept that society is distorted when members of the lower class are weak and when they disobey, they can be destroyed through competitive games.

S2: The author has also positioned men to be strong and aggressive and women are positioned to be weak in this book. I reject this assumption. Like Katniss, I would make same the decision to fight for her younger sister. She put herself in a dangerous battle in order for her younger sister to survive. Katniss represents a girl who will fight for her own survival against many obstacles that stand in her way. She represents many women and girls in the real world who are underestimated. I have a hard time with the mental image of children killing each other. I prefer to think of the children as the ones who are innocent to believe that their society can be changed.

S3: As a reader, I have learned to sympathize with Katniss, Peeta, and Rue; all characters from the very poor districts and whose lives are controlled by the Capitol. In the games, you win, you live . . . you lose; you die. If I were in the games, I would be conflicted, but I would certainly want to win, and if I did win and live, I would have to learn to live with myself the rest of my life. In today’s world, the same standard would and should exist and might be expected. I would definitely feel obligated to take someone’s place for whom I cared in such an evil event. We have all been there when we have to make a choice, a choice that means we may lose or we may gain; a choice that has both wrong and right outcomes, such as killing to live or be killed.

Positioning is referred to the manner from which authors purposely frame the content from a certain point-of-view and represent characters in such a way in order to put forth their intended point-of-view (Bean & Harper, 2006). The composite of the fourteen participants’

responses in Episode 1 serve to illustrate how the content area pre-service teachers used the power of discussion to critically voice their positions from which they made sense of the dysfunctional world in the text. For example composites of S1 state, “The author has presumably chosen to tell this story from an impoverished people’s point-of-view . . .” and “The author’s interest in this story is to lead readers to view the social class stratification that exist in the text world . . .” demonstrate an understanding that the participants acknowledge the author’s message and the author’s view of the world is influenced by political, social, and economic factors. The composites further illustrate the participants’ abilities to analyze how the characters are positioned based on the author’s representation. For example composites in S2 state, “The author has also positioned men to be strong and aggressive and women are positioned to be weak in this book. I reject this position.” These remarks indicate that some of the content area pre-service teachers resisted the author’s positioning of characters. It is noteworthy to mention that a review of the transcripts found all female participants in this study rejected the author’s representation of women. However, a further scrutiny of the transcripts revealed that all fourteen participants did sympathize with characters from the marginalized districts in the book, indicating the content area pre-service teachers positioned themselves to agree with the author’s intended purpose. An example in composite S3 is “As a reader, I have learned to sympathize with Katniss, Peeta, and Rue; all characters from the very poor districts and whose lives are controlled by the Capitol.”

### Episode 2: Power and Its Effect on People

S1: The Capitol in this book has the power, the ultimate control and uses its power to inflict unfair practices on its people. People on the outside of the Capitol and who are outside the power are poor, unrepresented, and their lives are impoverished. They are silenced and have no voice in decisions that affect their daily lives. Instead, their lives are manipulated by those in power.

S2: As an American, I do see some similarities in our society and the book’s society that are cause for concern. Much of our history has dealt with the class system and slavery, hunger, famine, the rich and their extravagant lifestyles vs. the poor and their deplorable living

conditions that have all been permitted by our government. The very existence of poverty in America is real and cannot be ignored. I, myself, am slightly empowered by the idea of rebellion against those forces that control some of my actions.

S3: The Capitol in this book is reminiscent of the many authoritarian governments of the past, and the dictatorships of today. In both examples, the power is in the hands of a very few, while the masses of people live in squalor, have no sense of self, have no voice in decision making, and are often abused or killed for speaking out against the government.

Ciardiello (2004) posits that critical literacy is a “set of practices and civic competencies that help the learner develop a critical awareness that texts represent particular points of view while often silencing others” (p.138). In this study, the process of recognizing that not all voices are heard or accepted and that some voices are more privileged than others, required the content area pre-service student teachers to examine the question of power in relation to voice and to critically examine their texts to understand how the language of power benefits dominant voices and points-of-view, while silencing others. The fourteen participants learned that while characters and people are individually different, each is also part of a society and membership in that society often defines opportunities or a lack thereof. For example the composites in Episode 2 reveal how critical literacy enabled the participants to explore the ideological and power relationships that exist in texts, to tie the power differentials in texts to the real world, and then determine that power in the hands of a very few often results in unfair and inhumane practices. This finding is made explicitly clear in composite S3 which states, “. . . the power is in the hands of a very few, while the masses of people live in squalor, have no sense of self, have no voice in decision making, and are often abused or killed for speaking out against the government.”

### Episode 3: The Nature of Agency

S1: The mocking jay in this book is the symbol of rebellion. The bird represents the inability of the Capitol to enforce their power over all living things. The mocking jay represents a government project that failed and was weakened, and the bird empowers others to take a stand against the power and control. The true voice in the story is Katniss. Having the “voice to make

change” and oppose those in power is difficult, but it began with bravery, determination, and her passion for the cause.

S2: Katniss finds her voice from being the leader, for fighting for her life, and for starting to change her poor conditions. Katniss is like the 800 pound gorilla in the room that cannot be ignored. While her voice is the one that is finally heard, her voice represents the many who have been marginalized and silenced in this story.

S3: Making a change is rarely an easy feat and does impose danger. In our own American history, many voices have stood up to power to bring about change, such as the Civil Rights movement. As a student, I know it takes all of our voices to bring about changes that we see are unfair and bring attention to those who have power. I know through student protest, our voices can be heard, but it begins with one voice connecting to many. As a future teacher, I see the power of voice now to give to my future students. Each voice in the classroom must be heard and each student must be recognized as a valuable member of the classroom.

According to Freire (1970), agency refers to people or individuals who intentionally act on the world to bring about social change. From data analysis, the fourteen participants’ responses in this category signify an understanding that agency centers on who can and does take action, the nature and consequence of that action, and what that means in relation to the imbalance of power in society.

For example, the composites in S1 recognize that Katniss finds her voice and her voice allows her to “. . . oppose those in power. . .”. Composites in S2 take it a step further by stating, “Katniss finds her voice from being the leader, for fighting for her life, and for starting to change her poor conditions,” and “her voice represents the many who have been marginalized and silenced in this story.” These composite responses imply the content area pre-service teachers have developed an understanding that voice is a manifestation of agency, specifically when voice represents opposition to a system that defines some members as inferior. From data analysis, the findings consistently showed that as the fourteen participants begin to question who has power and who benefits from the power in a socially stratified world, they learned to understand the

nature of agency in relation to the imbalance of power in both the textual world and the real world.

**Theme 2: Powerful pens.** From data analysis, I found that dialogue journaling was a continuum of the type of talk that emerged from literature circle interactions and paralleled the developing critical stance over the course of the study that permitted the fourteen participants to examine their own sociocultural, beliefs, values, and attitudes in relation to the sociocultural influences in texts. As a result of this process, analysis of the dialogue journals revealed how critical literacy further enabled the participants to examine the power differential between the dominant and non-dominant groups and then position to accept or reject how both groups were situated within the text's power structure. In addition, the findings consistently showed that as the participants read and discussed their texts through different points-of-view, they positioned to resist the dominant voices and recognize the voiceless, and they gave agency to the characters who intentionally acted on their world to fight the social injustices in the textual world.

Following a brief synopsis of *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000), the manner in which the fourteen participants positioned while writing, recorded power and its effect on citizens, and described the nature of agency are represented in one episode.

#### Episode 4: Positioning, Power, and Agency in *The Breadwinner*

*Parvana is a young Afghan girl who lives her family during the Taliban rule of Afghanistan. Her parents were once rich and highly educated but under the Taliban regime, all that was taken away from her, including her father who was taken to jail. Because girls were not allowed to go to school or even outside without wearing a burqa and having a male escort, Parvana cut her hair and wore her deceased brother's clothes to sell goods in the market in order to help her family survive.*

S1: Parvana's mother continues to write the underground newspaper. An underground newspaper defies the Taliban law, and this perspective cannot be overlooked because there were instances in

this book where women would not be silenced. Women are often portrayed to be the weaker sex, but from reading the book, I find it was the women and girls who fought the power of the Taliban in their own way, such as Parvana cutting her hair and dressing as a boy, the mother and her newspaper, and the sister and her school. Parvana's sister deliberately holds school for girls and her action reveals there were people who individually went against the rule of the Taliban. I applaud what the women and girls did behind-the-scenes to fight the oppression. I have never sold bones to survive, but I see Parvana's fight for survival as her means to fight for freedom. Freedom is a human right.

The composites in Episode 4 further reveal how the fourteen participants engaged in critical stance through journal writing. For example, written composites from S1 state, “. . . I find it was the women and girls who fought the power of the Taliban. . .” and “Parvana's sister deliberately holds school for girls and her action reveals there were people who individually went against the rule of the Taliban.” Implicitly stated in these two examples is an understanding that membership in a non-dominant group often translates into a lack of privilege. From this stance, the composites reveal the fourteen participants positioned to promote non-dominant characters, honor their voices, and to foreground agentic behavior for social change. In addition, data analysis found the participants frequently took on the characters' experiences and feelings such that empathy was endorsed but the imbalance of power in the text was not diminished. For example, the example from composite S1 states, “I have never sold bones to survive, but I see Parvana's fight for survival as her means to fight for freedom.”

### **Discussion of Findings**

The fact that the fourteen participants came into this study to acquire effective methods for teaching content required a different approach if I was to move my content area pre-service teachers' thinking beyond content to address the literacy needs of the young adolescents they will one day teach. None of the fourteen participants thought of themselves as literacy teachers. Literacy was second to the needs of content instruction. However, all fourteen of my students were committed to the social, psychological, and academic development of middle grade

students. With a focus on adolescent literacy, I engaged my content area pre-service teachers in a literature-based instructional strategy that used a sociocultural and critical approach to reading. To bring awareness to the sociocultural influences found in text, I introduced my students to young adult literature and the important themes that cross many content areas (Walker & Ben, 2005). I taught my students to engage in critical response and inquiry by developing critical literacy practices that would permit my students to challenge and question the author's purpose, to read in opposition to texts, and to strip away the different layers of power found in the textual world (Bean & Moni, 2003). These were the tools needed to read from a critical stance. This decision to do so was significant as research has shown that pre-service content area student teachers need to understand strategic practices in critical literacy before implementing critical literacy approaches to learning in their classrooms (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Leland & Harste, 2005).

First, the findings suggest that critical literacy does have an effect on content area pre-service teachers' abilities to perceive the sociocultural influences in texts. This finding parallels other research that found the implementation of critical literacy in a social studies classroom provided pre-service teachers a greater understanding of the social, cultural, and historical context of a particular time period (Marshall & Klein, 2009). Secondly, the findings of this study imply that discussion that centered on young adult literature became a powerful tool for pre-service teachers to assume a critical stance. As the pre-service teachers engaged in reading, discussing, and writing about texts that were heavily-laden with issues of power, gender inequity, poverty, and death, critical conversations were voiced and captured in dialogue journals. This finding is in keeping with other research that found young adult literature can open the door for content area pre-service teachers to develop the ability to read from a

critical stance by engaging in textual criticism, inquiry and reflection, and exploring the many ways of being in the world (Cheu, 2011).

As with all practitioner research, this study was subject to limitations. First, the fact that only one cohort of fourteen content area pre-service teachers relates to any appeal of trying to generalize from the experiences of one cohort. In addition, my dual role as the practitioner and researcher presented the potential of bias and required me to confront the question of objective distance. Guba and Lincoln (1989) offer that objective distance is considered to be a safeguard against bias by acknowledging the assumption that in a classroom environment there is an “. . . intrinsic and ineluctable interconnectedness of all phenomena, human or otherwise” (p. 66). In this study, my immediacy and interconnectedness to the fourteen participants was unavoidable; therefore, it is important to acknowledge the potential for bias. However, the findings of this study increase an awareness level that teacher preparation programs can infuse adolescent literacy with content area instruction to stimulate critical thinking and invite content area pre-service teachers to question, dispute, and take a stance on important issues and themes they will one day teach in their content disciplines. It is my hope that further research be conducted to increase content area pre-service teachers’ understanding of adolescent literacy development.

## References

- Alger, C. (2007). Engaging student teachers' hearts and minds in the struggle to address (II)literacy in content area classrooms. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(8), 620-630.
- Alvermann, D. E. (2004). Adolescent aliteracy: Are schools causing it? *Voices in Urban Education*, 3, 26-35.
- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36(5), 258-267.
- Bean, T.W. (1997). Preservice teachers' selection and use of content area literacy strategies. *Journal of Educational Research*, 90, 154-163.
- Bean, T. W., & Harper, H. J. (2004). Teacher education and adolescent literacy. In T. Jetton, & J. Dole (Eds.), *Adolescent literacy research and practice* (pp. 392-411). New York: Guildford Publications.
- Bean, T. W., & Harper, H. J. (2006). Exploring notions of freedom in and through young adult literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(2), 96-104.
- Bean, T. W., & Moni, K. (2003). Developing students' critical literacy: Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 6(8), 638-648.
- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Hamilton, R. L., & Kucan, L. (1997). *Questioning the Author: An approach for enhancing student engagement with text*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Behrman, E. H. (2006). Teaching about language, power, and text: A review of classroom practices that support critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(6), 490-498.
- Brown, D. F., & Knowles, T. (2007). *What every middle school teacher should know*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cheu, J. L. (2011). How can white teachers experience the power of literacy? *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. 27(1), 117-128.
- Ciardello, A. V. (2004). Democracy's young heroes: An instructional model of critical literacy practices. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(2), 138-147.
- Collins, S. (2008). *The hunger games*. New York: Scholastic.
- Comber, B., & Nixon, H. (Eds.) (1999). *Literacy education as a site for social justice: What do our practices do?* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

- Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Dozier, C., Johnston, P., & Rogers, R. (2006). *Critical literacy/critical teaching: Tools for preparing responsive teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ellis, D. (2000). *The breadwinner*. Toronto: House of Anasi Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gee, J. P. (1992). *The social mind*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- George, M. A., & Stix, A. (2000). Using multilevel young adult literature in middle school American studies. *The Social Studies*, 91(1), 25-31.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Harper, H., & Bean, T. W. (2007). Literacy education in democratic life: The promise of adolescent literacy. In J. Lewis & G. Moorman (Eds.), *Adolescent literacy instruction: Policies and promising practices* (pp. 319-335). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Harste, J. C., Breau, A., Leland, C., Lewison, M., Ociepka, A., & Vasquez, V. (2000). Supporting critical conversations in classrooms. In K. M. Pierce (Ed.), *Adventuring with books* (12<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 507-554). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Johnson, R., & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14-26.
- King-Shaver, B., & Hunter, A. (2009). *Adolescent literacy and differentiated instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Leland, C. H., & Harste, J. C. (2005). Doing what we want to become: Preparing new urban teachers. *Urban Education*, 40(1), 60-77.
- Lewison, M., Leland, C., & Harste, J. (2008). *Creating critical classrooms: K-8 reading and writing with an edge*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1997). The social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke & P. Freebody (Eds.). *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practices* (pp. 185-225), Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Marshall, J., & Klein, A. M. (2009). Lessons in social action: Equipping and inspiring students to improve their world. *The Social Studies, 100*(5), 218-221.
- McLaughlin, M., & DeVoogd, G. (2004). Critical literacy as comprehension: Expanding reader response. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 48*(1), 52-62.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Miall, D. S., & Kuiken, D. (1995). Aspects of literary response: A new questionnaire. *Research in the Teaching of English, 29*, 37-58.
- Paul, J. (2005). *Introduction to the philosophies of research and criticism in education and the social sciences*. Columbus, OH: Pearson.
- Pradl, G. M. (1996). *Literacy for democracy; reading as a social act*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem*. Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard
- Smith, J. L., & Johnson, H. (1994). Models for implementing literature in content studies. *The Reading Teacher, 3*(48), 198-209.
- Soares, L. B. (2010). An investigation of literature circles and critical literacy: Five zones of opportunity for high-ability learners. *Association of literacy educators & researchers, 32*, 169-190.
- Spencer, V. G., Carter, B. B., Boon, R. T., & Simpson-Garcia, C. (2008). If you teach—you teach reading. *International Journal of Special Education, 23*(2), 1-7.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (Eds.). (1997). *Grounded theory in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, California.
- Vacca, R. T., Vacca, J. A., & Mraz, M. C. (2010). *Content area reading: Literacy and learning across the curriculum* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological process*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walker, N., & Bean, T. W. (2005). Sociocultural influences in content teachers selection and use of multiple texts. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 44, 61-77.

Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (1991) *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wolk, S. (2009). Reading for a better world: Teaching for social responsibility with young adult literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(8),664-673.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:

Dr. Lina B. Soares, Georgia Southern University, Department of Teaching and Learning, 275 Forest Drive, PO Box 8134, Statesboro, Georgia 30460, 912-478-7644,

[lboares@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:lboares@georgiasouthern.edu)