

# Critical Literacy Performances in Online Literature Discussions

**Danielle E. Forest**

*University of North Georgia. Email: danielle.forest@ung.edu*

**Sue C. Kimmel**

*Old Dominion University. Email: skimmel@odu.edu*

In today's media-laden environment, the ability to read text from a critical literacy perspective is imperative, particularly for librarians who influence children's reading choices and behaviors. This study examines the critical literacy performances of students in an online, asynchronous, graduate-level children's literature course using a qualitative approach to content analysis. The findings indicate that students performed critical literacy in four ways: (1) they unpacked the social identities and norms evident in the books, (2) considered characters and events from multiple viewpoints, (3) interrogated issues of power, authority, and agency and (4) analyzed the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts of the books. While the findings reveal critical literacy can be enacted in the context of online courses, students' critically literate thinking was sometimes limited and superficial, suggesting students' understanding of critical literacy could be deepened with additional instruction and scaffolding.

**Keywords:** critical literacy, LIS education, online teaching, book discussion, children's literature

## Introduction

With the ready availability of technology and traditional media, today's society is more text-rich than it has ever been, and readers are exposed to a range of ideologies, values, and perspectives. While such exposure can broaden readers' worldviews, the ability to question and evaluate the perspectives in texts is of paramount importance for citizens in a democratic society (Campano, Ghiso, & Sanchez, 2013). A critical literacy stance is especially important for librarians who work with children because of the roles they play in helping young people develop a questioning and critical perspective toward texts. While numerous studies suggest children can successfully engage in critical literacy, librarians must be knowledgeable about critical literacy before they can support children's development

as critically literate thinkers (Harste & Albers, 2012; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b; Riley, 2015; Woodcock, 2009). Thus, library educators must take responsibility for incorporating critical literacy practices in the preparation and continuing education of school and public librarians.

Critical literacy is a sociocultural practice (Janks, 2000) that should engage learners in dialogue and collaboration (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Riley, 2015). Yet engaging students in critical literacy is challenging for library educators instructing online, asynchronous courses because possibilities for collaboration can be limited. We wondered how library educators could effectively integrate critical literacy into such courses. To explore this idea, we revised our graduate children's literature course to include explicit instruction about critical literacy and asked online student discussion groups to consider books from

a critical literacy perspective. Our analysis of this endeavor was guided by the following question: *In what ways do graduate students in an online, asynchronous children's literature course engage in critical literacy during discussions of children's books?* The purpose of our work was twofold: (1) to consider whether analyzing children's literature in online discussions is a possibility for promoting critically literate thinking in library education courses, and (2) to inform the practices of library educators interested in integrating critical literacy in their children's literature courses. Given critical literacy's increasing significance and the relative absence of studies on critical literacy pedagogy in LIS courses (see Albertson & Whitaker, 2011, for one exception), our work comes at an important time.

## Literature Review

As Gee (1996) and Luke and Freebody (1997) have contended, literacy means more than the ability to decode a text and comprehend it at a surface level. Literacy also entails going beyond a text's literal meaning and considering its implicit assumptions about the world. A text is a "loaded weapon" (Gee, 1996, p. 39) of its author's values and beliefs; no text can ever be written or read from a neutral position (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Therefore literacy, as Gee noted, necessarily involves the ability to read the implicit ideologies and values in a text and the author's purposes for producing the text. From the perspective of those who advocate for critical literacy pedagogy, to be literate in today's world means to be critically literate.

## Critical Literacy

Though critical literacy can take different forms, we describe it here as a questioning stance that readers assume when engaged in a text. Jones (2006) likened a critical literacy stance to "a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the

familiar and comfortable" (p. 67). When readers wear critical literacy "eyeglasses," they look beyond a text's face value and question its purpose and implicit meanings (Luke, 2012; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a). They consider issues such as which groups of people in a text have power, which groups of people are privileged, and whose perspectives are represented or missing (Jones, 2006; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Additionally, critically literate readers interrogate the complexity of problems presented in texts (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b) and make connections and disconnections to texts (Jones, 2006). Engaging in these practices develops readers into active thinkers and critical text consumers and empowers them to challenge and re-imagine the text.

Learning to become literate in this way—critically literate—occurs through social practice (Luke & Freebody, 1997). For example, the work of Campano *et al.* (2013), Comber, Thomson, and Wells (2001), and Jones (2006) and others suggests critical literacy can be fostered in classroom cultures where students are encouraged to engage socially through collaboration, discussion, and asking questions. This contention—that critical literacy can be fostered through social interaction—undergirds our case for developing students' critical literacy practices through participation in book discussions. Indeed, book discussions have potential for developing critical literacy skills within educational settings because they afford spaces for the dialogue and critical inquiry (Eeds & Wells, 1989) that can foster a critical literacy stance.

## Online Book Discussion

University educators have employed online book discussions for a variety of purposes (e.g., Bowers-Campbell, 2011). Online discussions may be particularly conducive to critical literacy because they can be more democratic than face-to-face discussions for two reasons. First, they

give everyone an equal chance to participate, particularly those who are shy or do not otherwise participate well in face-to-face discussions (Beeghly, 2005; Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Coffey, 2012). Second, they have potential for encouraging dialogue about personal or controversial topics (Kirk & Orr, 2003), the sort of dialogue that may arise when books are discussed through a critical literacy lens.

However, there are potential challenges to practicing critical literacy in online settings. Although online discussions can make participants feel “safer” about addressing controversial topics (Koopman, 2010/11), we wondered if there is also discomfort associated with discussing some issues, particularly when one does not know the social and cultural identities and life experiences of group members. Critical literacy can be risky business (Riley, 2015), and we were curious about whether the absence of face-to-face interaction and interpersonal relationship-building in our children’s literature course would hinder students’ willingness to discuss the sometimes sensitive topics addressed by the books they discussed online.

**Methods**

**Context and Participants**

This study took place with students

enrolled in an online master’s level children’s literature course entitled *Children’s Literature across the Curriculum* (CLATC) in summer 2014. CLATC’s main goal is to familiarize students with the selection and evaluation of literature for children. Students in CLATC are typically seeking a master’s degree in education and/or certification as a school library or elementary teacher. In summer 2014, Danielle (first author) instructed two sections of CLATC; all forty students across the two sections opted to participate in the study.

**Book Discussions**

In the summer 2014 sections of CLATC, students read and discussed four books for their literature circles. These books, shown in Table 1, were selected because they are contemporary titles representing a range of the genres studied in CLATC and are available in low-cost paperback editions.

CLATC students read these titles and discussed them in groups comprised of 4–5 students. Discussions were structured according to various roles enacted by students (see Daniels, 2002) to hold them accountable for their participation. For example, the student in the discussion director role posed questions to group members and kept the conversation going, while the connector made connections be-

Table 1. Literature Circle Books Read in Children’s Literature across the Curriculum.

Title	Genre	Summary
<i>Love That Dog</i> (Creech, 2001)	Poetry	A reluctant student grows in his confidence as a writer and his love for poetry.
<i>Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute</i> (Krosoczka, 2009)	Fantasy (graphic novel)	Three students learn that their lunch lady fights crime during her free time.
<i>The Higher Power of Lucky</i> (Patron, 2006)	Contemporary realistic fiction	A young girl fearing abandonment wishes to gain more control over her life and takes matters in her own hands.
<i>One Crazy Summer</i> (Williams-Garcia, 2010)	Historical fiction	Three Brooklyn sisters visiting their mother in Oakland in the summer of 1968 attend a summer camp run by the Black Panthers.

tween the book being discussed and other course readings. Students rotated roles within their groups throughout the semester.

The discussions occurred synchronously using the chat function of Blackboard, CLATC's course management system. Students were told each discussion should last a minimum of one hour. Groups met in a designated chat room set up by the instructor, and students typed questions and responses to one another. Students were asked to "record" their chats, which would produce a written transcript of the discussion that could be sent to the instructor for grading.

During each chat, students responded to questions they prepared and sent to the discussion director in advance. Additionally, students were asked to discuss questions designed to promote critically literate thinking about the books. At the beginning of the semester, students were given critical literacy questions to discuss in their literature circles (see Jones, 2008, p. 58 for the questions given to students). Sample questions included "What kind of readers might feel like 'outsiders reading this book?'" and "Does the author/illustrator use his/her power to repeat things that already happen a lot in books?" (Jones, 2008, p. 58). Early in the semester, the students read an article about critical literacy (Lewison *et al.*, 2002) and viewed an online lecture about critical literacy in which Danielle modeled how to deconstruct a children's text using the critical literacy questions from Jones (2008).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The 36 transcripts resulting from students' literature circle chats were the primary data for this study. Transcripts were analyzed in five phases using qualitative content analysis (Berg, 2001). To clarify the terms we use in our description of our analysis, "chat" means the entire conversation had by a literature circle group during the hour-long meeting. "Discussion"

refers to a strand of the chat centered on a particular question, topic, or theme. Students began new discussions when they switched topics or posed new questions to consider within the chat. "Utterance" refers to a statement made by a student during a discussion. Sometimes an utterance was a sentence fragment or brief expression, but at other times, an utterance consisted of a more complex thought.

*Phase 1: Initial Coding.* At this phase, we utilized Lewison *et al.*'s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy to identify discussions within the transcripts that demonstrated critical literacy. These four dimensions include the following:

- *Disrupting the commonplace*, or asking questions of texts, considering how language is normative, and analyzing portrayals of people in media.
- *Interrogating multiple views*, or considering multiple perspectives in a text, noticing who is privileged and marginalized, and critiquing and reconstructing dominant discourses.
- *Focusing on sociopolitical issues*, or interrogating the power of dominant groups, viewing literacy as a way of participating in the political process, and using literacy for political goals.
- *Taking action and promoting social justice*, or using literacy to create a more equitable world (Lewison *et al.*, 2002, pp. 382–384).

After we independently coded the transcripts for these four dimensions, we met to talk about our coding. In cases where we disagreed on how to code a discussion, we referred back to Lewison *et al.* (2002) and negotiated until we reached agreement.

*Phase 2: Open Coding.* Because we wanted to understand if students enacted critical literacy in ways other than those identified by Lewison *et al.* (2002), we elected to code discussions inductively in this next phase. Using the discussions we identified in Phase 1, we independently labeled utterances in order to uncover nu-

ances among students’ ideas. We labeled an utterance with a code that described the utterance’s meaning in order to begin making “analytic sense” of the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 111). After independently open coding every utterance, we started the process of comparing our open coding.

*Phase 3: Comparison Coding.* Following Phase 2, we met to discuss and compare our coding. During our discussion of open codes, we found we did not have outright disagreements about how we coded utterances. However, we did encounter some differences of interpretation. When we encountered interpretive differences, we explained our reasoning behind our open coding and negotiated a new open code name. As a result of the comparison process, we were in agreement on the open codes given to every utterance.

*Phase 4. Developing Themes.* During this phase, we worked independently to group open codes to create themes or categories, and when we finished, we met to discuss and compare our categorizations. After comparing our independent categorizations, discussing the “big themes” we observed in the data, and reviewing the

memos we wrote during/after coding and research meetings, we co-constructed a new framework comprised of four themes that is based on the Lewison *et al.* (2002) framework. These four themes are shown in Table 2.

Our framework borrows the dimension of “interrogating multiple views” from Lewison *et al.* (2002), although we prefer the term “perspectives” instead of “views.” Additionally, our dimension of “analyzing historical, economic, social, and political contexts” is similar to Lewison *et al.*’s dimension of “focusing on sociopolitical issues.” Otherwise, the themes within the framework are unique and emerged from our data, and we feel they best capture the “big themes” we noticed in the students’ discussions.

*Phase 5. Final Coding.* Once our new framework of four themes was created, we worked independently to categorize all of our open codes from Phase 3 into the new framework. Then, we met to discuss our coding. Although there were many instances of agreement, we encountered interpretive differences as we did in Phase 3. Again, we talked through our rationale

Table 2. Critical Literacy Discussion Themes.

Theme	Description
Unpacking social identities and norms	Attending to social identities like race, gender, social class, geography, and religion and stereotypes associated with these identities. Recognizing the norms and expectations associated with social identities and cultural groups. Paying attention to diversity and differences.
Interrogating multiple perspectives	Considering characters and events from multiple or alternate points of view. Considering who is positioned as an insider (privileged) and who is positioned as an outsider (marginalized).
Interrogating power relationships and agency	Considering who has power and authority and who lacks power or is vulnerable. Considering who has agency and who does not.
Analyzing historical, economic, social, and political contexts	Assuming a historical lens or perspective to understand characters or events. Connecting characters and events to social, cultural, and political forces or contexts. Relating characters and events to “official knowledge” conveyed by media and the school curriculum.

for categorizing utterances within the new framework and reconciled interpretive differences until 100% consensus was achieved. Next, we discuss our findings in relation to our research question: *In what ways do graduate students in an online, asynchronous children's literature course engage in critical literacy during discussions of children's books?* In this section, we describe each theme within our new framework with supporting examples. All student names are pseudonyms.

## Findings

### *Unpacking Social Identities and Norms*

In their discussions about the four books, students addressed social identities like gender, social class, and race and discussed norms, expectations, and stereotypes associated with these identities. Further, students talked about diversity among groups of people and observed that social and cultural norms are evolving in contemporary times. Students did not take the identities of characters in the books at face value; they connected these identities to trends and norms within the broader American culture.

*Gender.* Gender received much attention in discussion of social identities. Stereotypes related to gender were a particularly salient theme. In discussions about *Love That Dog*, students noticed the book initially reinforces the stereotype that, in Erica's words, "boys don't talk about feelings and poetry." Although students discussed the stereotype that boys are not "supposed" to express their emotions, particularly through writing poetry, they also recognized that *Love That Dog* ultimately upends this stereotype. As Lana noted, "[Jack] starts off slow to like poetry but then ends up loving it, shedding the stereotype that only girls can write and enjoy poetry."

Conversations about gender were not confined to stereotypes about males; *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute*

elicited discussions about both male and female roles and stereotypes. The heroine of this book is a crime-fighting lunch lady with high-tech gadgets, and students realized this portrayal is different from the stereotypical depiction of lunch ladies as old, lonely women. For example, Felicity described this stereotype common to lunch ladies and older women more generally: "I can totally relate to thinking older ladies are cat ladies. It's a stereotype for women who look lonely." The students also observed that *Lunch Lady* reinforced stereotypes about gender roles, particularly within school settings as the science and math teachers were portrayed as male and the secretaries and lunch ladies are female. In fact, stereotypes in *Lunch Lady* were so prevalent that Lana wondered "if the author was intentionally trying to make it seem appealing to what kids would think up of as stereotypes."

*Race.* Race was discussed less frequently than gender, and most conversations about race occurred within chats for *One Crazy Summer*, a story of three African-American sisters who visit Oakland, California in 1968 and gain political awareness through participating in a day camp run by the Black Panthers. In one scene of the book, the middle sister, Vonetta, is embarrassed by her younger sister Fern's habit of carrying around a white baby doll; Vonetta steals the doll and colors it with permanent marker to give it black skin. Although the symbolism of Vonetta's act is obvious, only one group discussed this scene in terms of racial identity. Natalie said, "I felt like [Vonetta] became a black panther. She excepted [sic] it immediately and thought Fern needed a black doll." The limited dialogue about this scene made us wonder whether race was a challenging topic to address during the literature circle discussions.

In some instances, students made personal connections about racial identity. Natalie asked her group how Hirohito, a biracial character, was similar to and different from Delphine, the protagonist of

*One Crazy Summer.* This prompted Christina to relate to Hirohito: “I am mixed and really didn’t understand where I belonged until high school.” In another discussion, Stephanie expressed her frustration with the portrayal of the Black Panthers. Stephanie said, “I was actually angered at times during the book being an AA [African American] especially when [the Black Panthers] wanted the girls to attend the riot.” She contended, “just because you are that race doesn’t mean you need to believe what they are down for.” Although most groups skirted discussions about race, the personal connections made by Christina and Stephanie suggest it was not a difficult or “taboo” topic for them.

*Reinforcing stereotypes.* Although students explicitly addressed topics like stereotypes and norms, sometimes their comments reinforced stereotypes or suggested they ascribed to stereotypical beliefs. For example, in a conversation about *Love That Dog*, Bob overgeneralized with the statement, “Guys always think poetry is for girls.” The conversations about *The Higher Power of Lucky* also revealed that students possessed stereotypes about social class. In this book, Brigitte moves from her native France to the tiny desert town of Hard Pan, California to act as guardian for her ex-husband’s daughter, Lucky. Students did not think Brigitte would remain in Hard Pan to care for Lucky because “She’s too high class” (Amanda), “definitely too classy for Hard Pan” (Felicity), and “fancy compared to the other adults” (Julie). This conversation suggests students may believe “high class” people would not belong in a small town. Although students were sometimes critical in their discussions about social identities, they did not always examine their own assumptions about topics like gender and class.

### ***Interrogating Multiple Perspectives***

This dimension of our critical literacy framework is borrowed from Lewison *et*

*al.* (2002), who named it “interrogating multiple views.” When students interrogated the books from multiple perspectives, they considered characters and events from several viewpoints. They examined what kinds of readers might feel like insiders or outsiders while reading the books, discussed people and situations marginalized in American culture, and asked questions about the authors’ choices.

*Insiders and outsiders.* Many groups discussed these questions from Jones (2008): “What kinds of readers might feel like ‘insiders’ reading this book? What kinds of readers might feel like ‘outsiders’ reading this book?” (p. 58). Students took up these questions to discuss who may or may not connect with the books. For example, speaking about *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute*, Karen commented that “There isn’t really any diversity of characters, so any minority students could feel excluded.” Students also noted that while boys may connect with a book like *Love That Dog*, which has a male protagonist, girls might feel excluded from this book for the same reason.

However, the students were sometimes superficial when they talked about insiders and outsiders; they considered the likes/dislikes of readers rather than readers’ experiences and identities. For example, Erica said “those that like knots” might feel like insiders reading *The Higher Power of Lucky*, which includes a character who ties knots for a hobby. Elizabeth suggested that “some kids who don’t have pets” might feel like outsiders reading *Love That Dog*, and several students mentioned that homeschooled students would feel disconnected to the school setting and characters in *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute*.

*Invisible or silenced voices.* Students realized that some of the books gave attention to people or situations often missing or less visible in children’s literature or in American culture more broadly. When Natalie asked, “What do you think was the reason the author chose for the mother to leave her children rather than the father

in the story?" about *One Crazy Summer*, she is referring to the fact that the mother leaves her husband and young children. Christina observed, "It is something that happens that gets overlooked" indicating her awareness that abandonment by fathers is more common than abandonment by mothers, and *One Crazy Summer* interrupts this narrative. *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute* also provoked discussion about people who receive little attention socially, particularly in school settings. Stacy commented that "No one really pays attention to lunch ladies or custodians" and felt the book called attention to these less visible groups: "I sort of feel like the author wanted school staff that are underappreciated to get noticed."

*Considering characters' perspectives.* Often, students assumed the perspectives of characters, attempting to understand the reasons why some characters behaved as they did. One particularly controversial character was Cecile, the mother who abandoned her three daughters in *One Crazy Summer*. Many students expressed anger over Cecile's cold treatment of her children. Despite their feelings, students tried to understand the reasons for Cecile's actions, as Jane did: "Maybe something in her past caused her to live her life as she did." Likewise, Angela attributed Cecile's perceived deficits as a mother to forces out of her control: "She was doomed from the start . . . she didn't feel the girls were ever hers." Although some students were judgmental about characters' actions, especially Cecile's, many of them considered that characters had reasons for their behavior, even if they remained unknown to readers.

In recognizing that people are multi-dimensional, the students also realized that books make it possible to alter perspectives about people. For instance, Brooke noted, "Maybe kids would view their lunch ladies a little different after reading [*Lunch Lady*]." Debbie stated that *One Crazy Summer* changed her opinion about the Black Panthers, a group often associated with violence: "I had never heard of the

Black Panthers as a community-oriented, kid-friendly group." Students understood that viewing characters from multiple perspectives could broaden their own perspectives about other people.

### ***Interrogating Power Relationships and Agency***

Within this theme, students exercised agency by challenging and questioning the authors of the books. They also examined issues of power within the books, including how power is advanced or constrained by social identities and cultural expectations. Additionally, they recognized that language is a form of power, especially the power of names and naming.

*Challenging the author.* Students often questioned or challenged the author, exercising their own power to imagine other actions or identities for the characters. They queried each other about the author's purpose and in particular the intended audience for a book. They recognized occasions when the author exercised power to deliver a message for educators as well as students. As Marianne said in discussion about *One Crazy Summer*, "I think the author wanted to show that children have a voice too."

*Defining power and agency.* Occasionally, students directly interrogated the meaning of power. In both *One Crazy Summer* and *Lunch Lady*, students talked about people in authority such as the police and their relationships with African Americans or the power of school authorities including teachers and school boards. Amanda recollected that when Pa, an African American man, and his daughters were stopped by the police in *One Crazy Summer*, Pa later shrugs off the incident as "'you know, the usual.'" Here, Amanda seems to suggest that interactions between law-abiding African Americans and the police, a group of people with much power, may have been a commonplace occurrence in the 1960s. Several discussions surrounded the agency of characters

including children to take power for defining their own lives. *The Higher Power of Lucky* provoked comments such as this one from Rachel: “it’s about learning from your past and knowing that the people in your life that may have hurt you don’t need to be the center of your life. If they aren’t good people (like maybe her dad), you don’t have to let them define you.”

*Power and social identities and norms.* Students talked about the pressure of social norms and interrogated relationships of power to gender and class identities. For instance, they viewed the mothers in both *The Higher Power of Lucky* and *One Crazy Summer* as disempowered by the expectations of gender. As Stacy remarked about the mother in *One Crazy Summer*, “Her mom died early, her aunt used her as a maid, and she felt trapped with her kids.”

In the *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute*, students perceived Lunch Lady’s class and gender identities as an advantage and even a special power as Lucy suggested: “Yes and like a lot of superheroes, she wasn’t super wealthy or powerful. She was a lunch lady.” Lunch Lady’s status as a less visible figure in the school setting afforded her the power to fight crime while protecting unsuspecting children from the evils in their world.

### **Analyzing Historical, Economic, Social, and Political Contexts**

Within this theme, students made connections between the books and U.S. society past and present. At times, students considered the books through a historical lens, evaluating characters and events from the perspective of a particular time period. Further, they investigated the ways in which media messages influence the social and political context of the United States.

*A historical lens.* Students talked about race and gender as socially and historically situated in the historical fiction selection, *One Crazy Summer*. As Casey noted about Cecile, the African American

mother, “I think Cecile’s life was chosen for her—from the time period and her circumstances.” They also saw the historical nature of social norms, noticing differences between contemporary and historical attitudes about gender, race, and parenting. Jack pushed further to understand the actions of Cecile through a historical lens: “Whites did not consider slave families important and were usually splitting parents and kids. This notion of a traditional family is a difficult topic in African American history. I see that Cecile is questioning the need for families.” However, sometimes students did not view the books through a historical lens even when it was merited. As mentioned previously, some students argued Cecile should have never had children; they did not recognize the limited availability of birth control in the book’s 1968 setting or the widespread expectation that women should become wives and mothers.

*Media messages.* *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute* also provoked some conversation about media’s power to perpetuate stereotypes until they become part of the cultural milieu, such as negative portrayals of school lunch ladies. Penelope observed, “Most of these stereotypes are from TV, not real life.” The media also received attention in discussions of *One Crazy Summer*. Students observed the portrayal of the Black Panthers in the book was much more positive than in the mainstream media, as Angela noted, “The BPP was always portrayed as angry, gun-slingers. The news never reported that they served lunch, educated people about their rights as citizens, and gave back to their community in a positive way.” This discussion led students such as Debbie to question other things they learned in school, “Yea, but we were all taught Christopher Columbus was a good guy until we were old enough to find out for ourselves.”

### **Discussion**

This study explored how graduate stu-

dents in a children's literature course performed critical literacy within online book discussions. Our goals in undertaking this research were to explore the potential of online book discussions for developing a critical literacy stance and to inform other educators interested in promoting critical literacy. We found that online discussions can indeed facilitate the reading of children's literature from a critical literacy perspective: Students in our study paid attention to social identities like gender; considered characters and events from different perspectives; examined issues of power, authority, and agency; and analyzed characters and events within social, political, and historical contexts. These performances are consistent with the perspective of critical literacy that we have elucidated; they are also consistent with Gee's (1996) belief that literacy entails going beyond a text's literal meaning and reading its implicit meanings and values. We conclude that online discussions of children's literature can be vehicles for promoting and developing a critical literacy stance.

However, while many students in our study demonstrated their understanding of reading from a critical literacy perspective, as instructors, we recognized several missed opportunities for more critical conversations. For example, few students discussed the social and historical implications of a scene in *One Crazy Summer* in which a character colors a white baby doll with black marker. Though one student noted this act signified the character's solidarity with the Black Panthers, students did not otherwise critically engage with this significant event. We hoped students would question the lack of choices available to a young black girl in 1968 and how this connects to racial relationships and tensions in the 1960s. In some chats, students provided superficial responses when critical literacy questions were discussed or seemed to disregard how their own assumptions and values influenced their perceptions of the books. Since the

chats were student led and driven by student questions, we wondered about ways to inject critical questions and reflection into all chats perhaps with instructor created prompts for the chats or as follow-up.

Further, in analyzing students' chats, we were struck by how readily students discussed issues related to gender, particularly in relation to *Love That Dog*, *One Crazy Summer*, and *Lunch Lady*, and how wary students seemed about discussing race although it was a major theme in *One Crazy Summer*. Even though discussions about social identities were invited in this course, we wondered if race was still an uncomfortable topic for many students; we also noticed that social class received limited attention despite the context of poverty in *The Higher Power of Lucky*. While we can only speculate on the reasons why race and class were rarely discussed, we do suspect that gender may have been a more comfortable topic because traditionally, most students in the school library and teacher education programs are women, and perhaps discussing gender roles and stereotypes felt "safe" or were more relatable to the life histories of participants. Our observations about race and class suggest that even though online spaces may be conducive to discussing sensitive topics (Kirk & Orr, 2003), they are not necessarily conducive to discussing particularly sensitive or personal topics.

Another consideration for engaging students further in critical literacy could be to have asynchronous discussions rather than real-time chats. Research suggests that asynchronous discussions, which provide students ample time to formulate ideas, are more conducive to reflective thinking (Beeghly, 2005; Larson, 2009). Since reflection and deep engagement with texts are necessary for understanding through a critical literacy lens, asynchronous discussions may be better suited to discussions when the emphasis is on critically literate thinking. In the synchronous chats, students often mentioned the difficulty of

keeping up with the chat's fast pace. However, we are reluctant to give up synchronous chats entirely as our students appreciate the opportunity to interact with each other in real time, an important experience in an online class in which students cannot see or meet their peers. A hybrid discussion is one solution; students could have the synchronous chats as usual and follow up by posting additional ideas and responses on an asynchronous discussion board. Instructors could also utilize the follow up to provide probes for further discussion. This hybrid model may give students increased opportunities for extending their thinking about the books, especially from a critical literacy stance.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although our findings suggest the potential of developing a critical literacy perspective through online discussions, our study is not without limitations. First, although students were assigned to view Danielle's critical literacy lecture and read an article about critical literacy (Lewison *et al.*, 2002) during the first week of class, we did not know if all students actually completed these tasks. Perhaps having an assessment to gauge students' knowledge of critical literacy after viewing the lecture and reading the article would ensure that students had a basic understanding of critical literacy before beginning their literature circle discussions. Second, we could not be sure if students even read the assigned books; although some students' in-depth responses clearly indicated they had read the books, other students said little during discussions or made superficial remarks. Some students' limited engagement with critical literacy could have been a function of their failure to read what was assigned. Finally, although many students demonstrated their understanding of critical literacy, we do not know whether this understanding translated into their work with children.

It is our hope that our learning from this

study suggests directions for additional research about critical literacy and how a critical literacy stance can be fostered among youth services librarians. Moreover, we hope it provides ideas for library educators who wish to meaningfully integrate critical literacy in their courses. In our world of readily available print and digital text, critical literacy should be at the forefront of our research and our teaching.

### **References**

- Albertson, D., & Whitaker, M.S. (2011). A service-learning framework to support an MLIS core curriculum. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 52(2), 152–163.
- Beeghly, D.H. (2005). It's about time: Using electronic literature discussion groups with adult learners. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(1), 12–21.
- Berg, B. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bowers-Campbell, J. (2011). Take it out of class: Exploring virtual literature circles. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(8), 557–567.
- Campano, G., Ghiso, M.P., & Sanchez, L. (2013). "Nobody knows the . . . amount of a person": Elementary students critiquing dehumanization through organic critical literacies. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(1), 98–125.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Coffey, G. (2012). Literacy and technology: Integrating technology with small group, peer-led discussions of literature. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 4(2), 395–405.
- Comber, B., Thomson, P., & Wells, M. (2001). Critical literacy finds a "place": Writing and social action in a low-income Australian grade 2/3 classroom. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101(4), 451–464.
- Creech, S. (2001). *Love that dog*. New York: HarperCollins Children's Books.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2nd ed.). Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Eeds, M., & Wells, D. (1989). Grand conversations: An exploration of meaning construction in literature study. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 23(1), 4–29.
- Freire, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum.

- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.
- Gee, J.P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Harste, J.C., & Albers, P. (2012). "I'm riskin' it": Teachers take on consumerism. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 56(5), 381–390.
- Janks, H. (2000). Domination, access, diversity and design: A synthesis for critical literacy education. *Educational Review*, 52(2), 175–186.
- Jones, S. (2006). *Girls, social class & literacy: What teachers can do to make a difference*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Jones, S. (2008). Grass houses: Representations and reinventions of social class through children's literature. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 4(2), 40–58. Retrieved from <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wpcontent/uploads/?2013/03/representations.pdf>
- Kirk, J.J., & Orr, R.L. (2003). *A primer on the effective use of threaded discussion forums*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED472738). Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED472738>
- Koopman, B. L. (2010/2011). From Socrates to wikis: Using online forums to deepen discussions. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(4), 24–27.
- Krosoczka, J.J. (2009). *Lunch lady and the cyborg substitute*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Leu, D.J., Kinzer, C.K., Coiro, J., Castek, J., & Henry, L.A. (2013). New literacies: A dual-level theory of the changing nature of literacy, instruction, and assessment. In D.E. Alvermann, N.J. Unrau, & R.B. Ruddell (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (6th ed.; pp. 1150–1181). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Lewis, M., Flint, A.S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 382–392.
- Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational notes. *Theory into Practice*, 51(1), 4–11.
- McLaughlin, M., & DeVoogd, G.L. (2004a). *Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text*. New York: Scholastic.
- McLaughlin, M., & DeVoogd, G.L. (2004b). Critical literacy as comprehension: Expanding reader response. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48(1), 52–62.
- Patron, S. (2006). *The higher power of Lucky*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Riley, K. (2015). Enacting critical literacy in English classrooms: How a teacher learning community supported critical inquiry. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(5), 417–425.
- Williams-Garcia, R. (2010). *One crazy summer*. New York: Amistad.
- Woodcock, C. (2009). Fight the dragons: Using online discussion to promote critical literacy in teacher education. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 9(2), 95–116.