

“WHAT IF THIS REALLY HAPPENED?” USING CRITICAL LITERACY  
PRACTICES AND DYSTOPIAN FICTION TO MEDIATE  
SELF-EFFICACY WITH AT-RISK READERS

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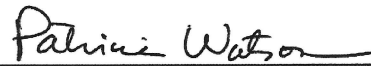
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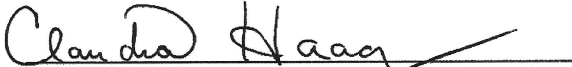
To the Dean of the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Sherri Kirkland Wilcox entitled "“What if This Really Happened?” Using Critical Literacy Practices and Dystopian Fiction to Mediate Self-Efficacy with At-Risk Readers.” I have examined this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Reading Education.



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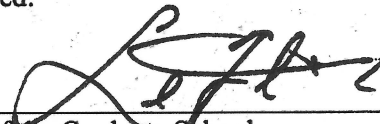


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## DEDICATION

For my high school kids who got me thinking, “There has to be a better way!”

I am happy to have been part of their lives and blessed to have had them be part of mine.

## IN MEMORIAM

Dr. Lettie Albright and Dr. Nora White

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## ABSTRACT

SHERRI KIRKLAND WILCOX

### “WHAT IF THIS REALLY HAPPENED?” USING CRITICAL LITERACY PRACTICES AND DYSTOPIAN FICTION TO MEDIATE SELF-EFFICACY WITH AT-RISK READERS

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At-risk students are often unmotivated and disengaged from literacy activities. They are sometimes below grade level and feel inadequate to accomplish the complex reading tasks with which they are confronted in high school; therefore, they often will not even attempt to do the work (Bandura, 1986). Students who are assigned to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) are at-risk not only due to the commonly cited factors such as being a member of a minority culture, being Limited English Proficient, or having low socioeconomic status, but also for behavior issues which require their removal from their home campus. This action research study was conducted in order to determine what happens to these students' self-efficacy for reading and their identity as readers when critical literacy practices were used in combination with dystopian fiction.

Two published tools were used to gather information regarding students' self-efficacy and identity as readers at the beginning of the study, student artifacts were collected and analyzed throughout the study, interviews with small groups were recorded and transcribed, and notes were collected during individual conversations with students.

Field notes were kept of observations during the study. A reflexive research diary was kept during the planning of the research project and to maintain records of my thinking as a researcher. Also a daily journal was maintained during the classroom teaching phase of the research project. The data were coded using the elements of critical literacy as outlined by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) as well as for self-efficacy, identity, engagement, and motivation as readers. Open coding was used to identify additional trends and patterns.

Themes of the findings are as follows: high school students who are at-risk in two or more areas are often behind in skill level from their peers, but want to feel like a successful part of a community of readers; these at-risk students need reading tasks that are relevant, interesting, and important in order for them to be motivated to attempt the tasks; and these students are motivated to try again once they have experienced real success at literacy tasks that are appropriate to their age and grade level.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                 | Page |
|---------------------------------|------|
| DEDICATION .....                | iii  |
| IN MEMORIAM .....               | iii  |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....          | iv   |
| ABSTRACT .....                  | vii  |
| LIST OF TABLES .....            | xv   |
| LIST OF FIGURES .....           | xvi  |
| Chapter                         |      |
| I. INTRODUCTION .....           | 1    |
| Background of Problem .....     | 3    |
| Statement of Problem .....      | 7    |
| Theoretical Framework .....     | 9    |
| Purpose of Study .....          | 12   |
| Research Questions .....        | 12   |
| Role of the Researcher .....    | 13   |
| Significance of the Study ..... | 13   |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Defining the Adolescent and the At-Risk Learner.....    | 15 |
| Additional Terms .....                                  | 17 |
| Limitations .....                                       | 18 |
| Conclusion .....  | 21 |
| II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....                              | 23 |
| At-Risk Students .....                                  | 24 |
| Cultural Minorities and English Language Learners ..... | 25 |
| Low Socioeconomic Status.....                           | 29 |
| Behavioral Issues .....                                 | 30 |
| Identity .....  | 32 |
| Self-Efficacy, Motivation, and Engagement.....          | 35 |
| Self-Efficacy .....                                     | 35 |
| Motivation and Engagement.....                          | 40 |
| Critical Literacy .....                                 | 47 |
| Dystopian Young Adult Literature .....                  | 51 |
| III. METHODOLOGY .....                                  | 56 |
| Methodological Framework.....                           | 57 |
| Participants.....                                       | 59 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Data Sources and Collection Procedures ..... | 61 |
| Assessment Tools.....                        | 62 |
| Student Artifacts .....                      | 63 |
| Audio Transcripts.....                       | 65 |
| Field Notes .....                            | 65 |
| Research Journals.....                       | 66 |
| Data Analysis .....                          | 67 |
| Trustworthiness.....                         | 68 |
| Credibility .....                            | 68 |
| Transferability.....                         | 69 |
| Dependability.....                           | 69 |
| Confirmability.....                          | 69 |
| Conclusion .....                             | 70 |
| IV. FINDINGS.....                            | 72 |
| Outline of Findings .....                    | 72 |
| Data Analysis Procedures .....               | 73 |
| Context of the Study .....                   | 74 |
| Student Participants .....                   | 78 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Getting Started - Students Perceptions of Themselves .....  | 79  |
| Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS).....  | 80  |
| Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP).....   | 83  |
| The Lessons .....   | 87  |
| Week One – Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues.....   | 88  |
| Week Two – Disrupting the Commonplace.....  | 100 |
| Week Three – Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice .....   | 114 |
| Week Four – Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints.....  | 126 |
| Week Five – Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues and Interrogating Multiple<br>Viewpoints – Technology ..... | 132 |
| Critical Literacy Elements .....  | 138 |
| Action Research as Observed Through the Focus Students .....  | 140 |
| Jesus .....   | 142 |
| Juanita .....   | 146 |
| Gilberto .....  | 148 |
| Summary of the Findings.....  | 153 |
| V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .....  | 155 |
| Purpose of the Research.....  | 155 |
| Research Questions.....   | 155 |



|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Review of the Methodology.....                                      | 156 |
| Discussion of Findings.....   | 157 |
| Critical Literacy and Identity .....                                | 157 |
| Critical Literacy and Self-Efficacy, Motivation and Engagement..... | 161 |
| Impact of Critical Literacy .....                                   | 167 |
| Dystopian Literature .....  | 175 |
| Implications.....   | 178 |
| Future Practice .....   | 178 |
| My DAEP classroom. ....   | 178 |
| Traditional classrooms.....   | 182 |
| Future Research .....   | 186 |
| My DAEP classroom. ....   | 186 |
| Traditional classrooms .....  | 187 |
| Summary .....   | 188 |
| REFERENCES .....  | 190 |
| APPENDICES  |     |
| A. Book Talk PowerPoint and Student Book Pass Sheet .....           | 204 |
| B. Reading Guide.....   | 211 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| C. Articles .....                                  | 224 |
| D. Samples of Data Spreadsheets and Journals ..... | 228 |
| E. IRB Approval Letter.....                        | 235 |

## LIST OF TABLES

| Table   | Page |
|---|------|
| 4.1 Distribution of Students Who Took the RSPS..... | 81   |
| 4.2 Distribution of Students Who Took the AMRP..... | 85   |
| 4.3 Outline of Weeks .....                          | 88   |
| 4.4 Participating Students .....                    | 93   |
| 4.5 Distribution of Novel Selection .....           | 99   |
| 4.6 Completed Assignments .....                     | 132  |

## LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure  | Page |
|---|------|
| 2.1 Relationship of Agency, Self-Efficacy, and Motivation/Engagement..... | 47   |
| 3.1 Action Research Cycle.....  | 59   |
| 4.1 Data Analysis Spreadsheet Sample.....                                 | 74   |
| 4.2 Recursive Nature of Self-Efficacy and Motivation/Engagement .....     | 87   |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“I don’t like to read, Miss. It’s boring.” As an English and reading teacher, every new school year I brace myself for the onslaught of comments on the first day from my high school students about how they do not like to read. What many of my fellow veteran teachers now know is that, “I don’t like to read because it’s boring” often actually means, “I’m not good at reading, so I’m not even going to try.” Adolescents’ ability to read effectively has been of concern to secondary educators since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Russell, 1961). As a reading specialist with 26 years of experience teaching adolescents and working with content-area teachers, I have noticed that the issue of motivation is one of the top concerns for educators and administrators at the high school level. Many adolescents frequently complain that they do not like to read, with their primary objection being that reading is boring. Their content area teachers lament the fact that they cannot get students to read assignments in class or for homework. English teachers are frustrated with the fact that their students will neither read assigned texts, nor will they read for pleasure. Additionally, many educators are faced with increasing numbers of at-risk students who seem ill-equipped to effectively read any academic materials written at their grade level.

Unfortunately, many of my students have expressed the notion that they either do not believe they are good readers, or they are not good enough at reading school texts to

read what is required. Those comments increased in frequency and intensity when I moved from a comprehensive high school to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program. My at-risk students had come to believe that by the time they got to high school, they read as well as they were ever going to read because “reading is something you learn in elementary school,” as one of my students explained to me one day. In other words, they communicated the message in one way or another that this was as good as they were going to get, and it was not good enough, so too bad, but that was just the way it was. Reading had become too difficult, and the pleasure of any type of reading at all had disappeared in the frustration of trying to read the required assignments. However, every English and reading teacher I have ever known personally wants not only to help his or her students improve their literacy skills, but to also help them believe they actually can be better readers. How do we as teachers get them there? Action research allows teacher researchers to systematically inquire into the nature of teaching with the goal of gaining insight and effecting positive change in the classroom. In this qualitative study, I used action research in order to explore this question from the practitioner’s point of view with the goal of discovering ways to positively influence students’ self-efficacy for reading and their perceptions of themselves as readers and participants in literacy activities.

This chapter explores the background of the problem followed by a statement of the problem. The theoretical framework will then be explained, followed by the purpose of the study, the research questions, my role as the researcher, and the significance of the

study. I will then define terms and describe the limitations, ending with a conclusion summarizing the chapter.

### **Background of Problem**

Although many students and educators alike believe that reading is a skill learned in elementary school, Russell (1961) noted that as early as 1937, Ruth Strang, a noted professor of education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, realized the need for developmental reading in high schools and colleges. Educators have learned that secondary students must navigate a multitude of literacies in order to successfully complete the requirements in most middle and high school curricula (Lewis & Dahbany, 2008). Reading needs to continue to develop even after students leave elementary school; however, in my experience as a reading specialist in a large urban district, students are rarely explicitly taught to learn how to read the increasingly complex material that they encounter in secondary school. Consequently, they begin to believe that they either have the skills or they do not when it comes to reading. Many teachers see this as a motivation and engagement problem. While a worthy goal of high school teachers is to motivate their students and try to engage them in reading, I have come to believe through conversations with my students throughout the years that an underlying issue is perceived self-efficacy, which is defined as the “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997). In other words, an underlying issue of motivation and engagement is whether the student believes he or she can successfully read the text presented, and according to many of my students, they do not believe that they can. If they do not believe they can successfully read a particular

text, then they are not going to be motivated to try, and getting them engaged in the text may be impossible. From a student's point of view, why would she want to expend the energy or waste time trying to do something that she believes she cannot do in the first place?

The problem is worse in students who are assigned to the district's Disciplinary Alternative Education Program campus (DAEP). DAEP students have not only academic issues, but behavioral issues as well. Van Acker (2007) points out that students who are assigned to a DAEP often exhibit anti-social behavior, including "aggression, vandalism, rule infractions, defiance of adult authority, and violation of social norms and mores" (p. 5). Mullen and Lambie (2013) list factors that often affect students in DAEPs. They have a higher likelihood of abusing substances, exhibiting violent and other inappropriate behaviors, having academic skill deficiencies, poor grades, suspension from school, and social isolation. Many of these students have had multiple encounters with law enforcement. They bounce around among their regular, comprehensive high school, the DAEP campus, and the juvenile justice system. Their education has been piecemeal, at best, due to their inconsistent attendance histories. They may have multiple teachers in each content area each year, with long stretches of nonattendance in between. Student mobility causes disruption in the students' educational services.

These students arrive in my classroom seeing themselves as failures in every aspect of their lives. Their parents are afraid for them and are frustrated and angry with them because of all the trouble they cause and the consequences and costs to both the parents and students. Their teachers are tired of the trouble they cause when they are in



attendance and also when they are not. If they have behavior issues in class, teachers may leave them alone when they decide to sleep during class – it is one less headache to deal with during a period cram-packed with 36 students in a room designed for 24. Teachers may breathe a sigh of relief when the students are absent or when they are in In School Suspension (ISS) while simultaneously cursing the fact that they will have to provide assignments to them while they are in ISS or help them catch up once they return to class. School Resource Officers know them by first name, and other city police officers are constantly on the lookout for them when they are patrolling the streets.

When asked to attend to academic issues, these students often feel incapable of doing so. They have failing grades and a poor academic history that often includes disruption of their educational services (Mullen & Lambie, 2013). I have had students arrive at my door six weeks into a nine week grading period with an overall average in English class in the single digits. Students know they cannot recover from an average grade of eight. They often arrive at my door knowing that not only is it impossible to pass the nine week grading period, but the semester, and possibly the year as well. So when I ask them to read something, they do not see the point. They do not believe they can do it, and furthermore, they do not see a reason to even try. Their self-efficacy for reading is very low, they do not perceive themselves as readers at all, and therefore, they are not motivated to participate in literacy activities.

As a high school English teacher, I have believed for a long time that teaching the traditional canon of literature in high school English classes only makes the self-efficacy issue worse, especially for at-risk high school students such as the ones I encounter in my

DAEP classes. While the debate about using the traditional canon of literature versus contemporary, popular fiction raged in the background (Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009), I chose to focus on trying to engage my students in reading a variety of genres of popular, young adult novels, hoping that the interesting styles and topics of popular young adult fiction would catch their attention and help them engage in reading which they needed in order to improve as readers (Krashen, 2004). One genre had jumped to the forefront when it came to novels my students were interested in: dystopian fiction. The opposite of a utopia in which the world is perfect and all societal problems have been solved, dystopias “warn us of society’s drift toward a particularly horrifying or sick world lying just over the horizon” (Nilson & Donelson, 2009). Set in the future but based on current social issues such as abortion, dwindling resources, rapidly changing technology, and excessive government control, dystopian novels propel the reader into thinking, What if it really got this far? With the release of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) movie in March, 2012, dystopian fiction became “the hottest genre in publishing and film on both sides of the Atlantic” (Craig, 2012).

In trying to find ways to motivate and engage students in order to mediate their self-efficacy for reading and their identity as readers, a new teaching direction seemed to be in order. My at-risk students needed not only to see relevance in what they were reading, but they also needed to be interested in it. While high-interest/low-level books had been around for quite some time, high school students could clearly see when teachers believed they could not handle grade-level work. Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006) discussed the need for “an appropriate challenge” (2006, p. 6). I had begun to

notice what Smith and Wilhelm noted in their study *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* (2002). The work had to be at an appropriate level – not too hard and not too easy. Students realized that teachers were often giving them work that was too easy in order to help them feel successful as well as to help them learn some of the skills they were lacking. Unfortunately, this had the reverse effect. Students felt defeated. They saw themselves as incapable of doing “real” work because their teachers seemed to see them as incapable. Not only did they feel defeated before they had started, they also saw the work as unimportant. Smith and Wilhelm stated that students wanted to do real work that challenged them and stretched their limits. Work that was not watered down or simplified. Work that students their age should truly be engaged in.

With these thoughts in mind, I set out to find a better way to reach my students – the ones who had given up on themselves because so many others had given up on them as well.

### **Statement of Problem**

Reading is a cycle – the more someone reads, the better he is at reading and the more he is likely to enjoy reading; the more he enjoys reading, the more he is apt to read, and the better he gets. The cycle continues. Known as the “Matthew Effect” (Stanovich, 1986), students who read more have larger vocabularies, which enhances their reading experiences. They enjoy reading, and thus read more, which enhances their vocabularies. Unfortunately, the cycle works in reverse. The less a person reads, the less skilled he is at reading. He does not enjoy reading, so he does not read, and his skills do not improve. The problem is getting students to read more so that they continue to grow as skilled

readers in order to perpetuate the positive cycle. However, while many studies had been conducted regarding how to motivate and engage adolescent readers, there had not been as much research on how to positively affect the self-efficacy of adolescents when it comes to reading, especially at-risk adolescents.

Additionally, some of my high school students believed they could read, but they did not identify as readers. In discussing reading with my students, some said that they could not read well and so it was hard. They were often correct – they could not read well. However, when I tried to encourage them to practice their skills, many had responded in ways that indicated they did not believe they could read any better than they already did. This was a self-efficacy issue for those students. Others said they could do it, but they just did not want to. They did not like to read; it was boring and not what they did or who they were. This was an identity issue. Students who did not identify themselves as readers did not read. The Matthew Effect impacted these students as well. They chose not to read, so their reading skills did not develop as well as they could.

The majority of my students exhibited both of these reading responses. They felt they were not good at reading, so they were afraid to try. Plus, they did not see themselves as readers, so they did not have any motivation to attempt something that did not fit in with their personal identity. This combination left many of my students unprepared to be successful and unlikely to try to become more so (Dweck, 2006).

Traditional teaching routines in a high school English class did not help these failing students mediate either of these situations. Traditional materials seemed both out of reach of their ability level and out of touch with what their lives were really like.

Curricula may not have changed in order to address the needs of students who are at-risk due to multiple factors, or teachers may be unwilling or unable to adjust their lessons in order to help these students succeed. How could English classrooms meet the needs of the rapidly growing diverse population of our schools? In particular, how could I, as a teacher dedicated to students who are at-risk in multiple areas, help my students start to see themselves as capable readers?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This qualitative action research study explored the relationships between students' perceptions of themselves as readers and the use of critical literacy practices combined with dystopian fiction. As a secondary teacher of 26 years, I had spent time with thousands of students. During that time, I became concerned with the lack of engagement in literacy activities by my students. In more recent years, as I came to work specifically with students who were having difficulty passing the state's high stakes tests, I began to realize that students' efforts were tied to their perceptions of themselves as readers. Students made comments suggesting that they believed their reading skills were set and they had reached the peak of their ability. They saw reading as an elementary school endeavor, and espoused the belief that if they could not read well by high school, that meant they simply were not good at reading. Over the years, students had used phrases to describe their reading such as, "I'm just not talented at reading," or "I guess it's just not in my genes," which caused me to think about the reasons students were not motivated to try the academic reading they were expected to do in high school. They did not see reading as a skill that can be improved over a lifetime but rather saw reading as a

skill for which they had a finite ability. By high school, they believed they had reached that upper limit and did not believe they could be better.

Critical literacy theory (Freire, 1970) provided the theoretical framework for the study. Critical literacy practices were the guiding principles for the assignments, and provided the lens for looking at student attitudes and responses. By focusing lesson objectives and outcomes using critical literacy dimensions (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002), I hoped to influence how students saw themselves as readers and reframe their attitudes toward reading. The four dimensions of critical literacy include:

1. Disrupting the commonplace
2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints
3. Focusing on sociopolitical issues
4. Taking action and promoting social justice

My students verbalized their views of English class assignments as being hard as well as boring. High stakes tests in reading and writing in our state have a heavy focus on literary devices and how authors use them to fulfill their purposes for writing. While the tests were shifting to more contemporary works, teachers often were not. Students were accustomed to reading classic works from the past, particularly fiction and poetry, and having to analyze the writing through a literary lens. In spite of years of work with figurative language and other literary devices, they were often unable to work with these literary constructs successfully. I had students who often questioned the need to be able to identify literary devices and state the authors' purposes for using them. While I worked in a progressive district where the English curriculum allowed teachers to select

more contemporary works and encouraged teachers to shift focus toward more contemporary literature and current nonfiction, the assignments focused on the questions asked in the tests, and the students saw their English classes in a “business as usual” sense. Many teachers were still focusing on whole pieces of lengthy literature from the distant past, such as Shakespeare and Homer. Using dystopian literature along with the critical literacy dimensions as defined by Lewison et al. (2002) allowed me to shift the focus away from tests to the literature itself, and how the literature could be meaningful to the students in the world outside of school. Presenting students with new ways to look at what they read, I could explore student engagement and motivation by making reading more relevant to the students. If students were able to more fully engage in literacy activities, they might also feel differently about themselves as readers. Critical literacy practices provided a more meaningful way to construct lessons for my students who felt intimidated by reading more complex texts. Critical literacy theory provided the theoretical basis for many of the literacy activities that were constructed to accompany the reading of the dystopian fiction. Dystopian fiction is based on current social issues, so using critical literacy allowed students to explore these issues and develop their beliefs and reactions to the issues as citizens of a society experiencing these issues. Therefore, assignments were based on the four dimensions of critical literacy.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) also provided a theoretical basis for the research as I considered my adolescent students’ self-efficacy. Through many conversations with secondary students over the last two decades, I believed that a lack of motivation was much less about the students simply not caring or being lazy or distracted

and much more about students believing they could not do the reading and assignments associated with complex texts. A focus on Bandura's theory of the important role of self-efficacy in accomplishing any type of activity allowed me to explore what happens with student self-perceptions and identity when critical literacy practices coupled with a popular genre of young adult fiction was used as the basis for literacy activities in a high school classroom. Aside from simply trying to motivate and engage students, I was interested in exploring the self-efficacy of the student participants in the study, and social cognitive theory provided the basis for that part of the research.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of instruction using critical literacy practices and dystopian fiction on the self-efficacy and self-perception of at-risk adolescents in a disciplinary alternative education program. I used action research to accomplish the purpose using the process described by Mills (2011). Mills's reprinting of Kemmis's graphic (p. 15) provided the overall plan for the research, with this project starting on the second part of the spiral.

### **Research Questions**

With Bandura's (1986, 1993, 2001, 2006) work in social cognitive theory and Freire's (1970) work in critical literacy in mind, the following questions guided the research for this study:

- What happens when students who do not identify themselves as readers are taught with critical literacy practices?



- What happens when students who have low self-efficacy for reading are taught with critical literacy practices?
- What happens when dystopian fiction is used with students who are not usually engaged in reading and other literacy activities?

### **Role of the Researcher**

Because this study was conducted using action research, I was integrally involved with the students who participated in the study. My goal was to find ways to become a better teacher for the population I serve. Thus I considered the steps I had previously taken with the students I worked with, planned and executed the lessons with my classes, and graded the assignments. All data was collected and analyzed directly by me. These were students in my own classes whom I knew fairly well, some of whom I had worked with when they were previously assigned to our DAEP campus.

### **Significance of the Study**

Practitioners are constantly searching for ways to help at-risk high school students become motivated and engaged (Casey, 2008; Curran & Smith, 2005; Desmet, 2009; Trier, 2006). However, motivation is based on self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006; Pajares, 2006), so improving a student's self-efficacy as a reader should help improve general motivation in all reading tasks. While researchers such as Guthrie (2008) and Gallagher (2009) have been studying how teachers can help disengaged and unmotivated adolescents become more involved in literacy events, less research has been done regarding how teachers can affect adolescents' underlying lack of self-efficacy for reading and self-identification as readers. Additionally, the students in the study were

from a specific sub-group of at-risk students: those who have behavioral issues. DAEP students have been studied regarding behavior and long-term effects of participating in a disciplinary alternative education program, but I have found no research regarding literacy with these students. If teachers can find ways to work with these students in this specific situation, then there is the possibility of transferring this knowledge into the traditional school where many students struggle and are not connected to literacy.

Given the rising popularity of dystopian fiction, a genre that looks at the future where utopian societies are grappling with social issues and are maintained through rigid governmental control, dystopian novels may have promise for providing the hook necessary to draw reluctant, at-risk readers into a positive reading experience, thus giving them the desire to read more. Dystopian fiction also provides promising possibilities for helping young adult readers explore their position in a society that is constantly changing, not always for the better. When faced with current issues which give inspiration to the dystopian plot lines and settings, students may be able to see a relevant purpose for reading as they strive to develop responses to essential questions about the issues (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006) – complex questions that do not have right or wrong answers. A unit based on dystopian fiction should give them the opportunities to formulate and substantiate opinions about meaningful topics. If using dystopian fiction as the basis for a unit of reading can impact these at-risk high school readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the potential for improving instruction in the high school English class is significant. Critical literacy practices will provide a way to teach dystopian fiction in a way that makes the reading interesting and relevant to the adolescent reader. Critical

literacy practices disrupt the commonplace found in classrooms, look at issues from multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, and take action to promote social justice. (Lewison et al., 2002). These procedures give adolescents the opportunity to see where they fit in society and how they can participate in it. This type of applicable reading is something many high school students have not experienced. While there are better ways to present a traditional, classical canon of literature (Wilhelm, 2008; Gallagher, 2009), students who are at an especially high risk of not completing high school may need something different altogether. This study finds a possible solution to the question of materials that are effective with at-risk students.

Choice in reading has been proven to be effective in helping adolescents connect to reading and grow in their reading skills (Krashen, 2004). While the idea of choice is no longer a new idea, and many schools are working to give students more choices in their reading, as well as time to read self-selected materials, students who do not have someone to point them toward specific books which might prove interesting and engaging while also being appropriate for their abilities have less chance of becoming engaged. Dystopian fiction, with the right guidance from a teacher who knows the novels and the students who will be reading them, has the potential for helping students with little or no self-efficacy and self-identification as readers see the potential in themselves for becoming better readers as well as people who are readers.

### **Defining the Adolescent and the At-Risk Learner**

*Adolescence* is a term that has been defined several ways. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary ("Adolescence," n.d.) defines adolescence as "the period of life from

puberty to maturity terminating legally at the age of majority.” Lewis and Jones (2009) narrowed this definition down to the numbers lying approximately between the ages of 11 and 21. However, they also noted that adolescence is much more than an age. It is a time when children not only change physically, but they change psychologically in the way they perceive themselves, and they develop other identities such as ethnic and gender identities. Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky (2009) defined what adolescence is not: it is not just a chronological age span which is often reduced to the teenage years of 13 through 19; it is not just a developmental stage; and it is not just the stressful period of time between childhood and adulthood. Instead, adolescence is “a legitimate and vital stage of human development that deserves our attention and our respect” (p. 4). They stated that today’s adolescents face challenges that were not part of life for previous generations of adolescents. Today’s middle and high school students are tested more than any other group in the history of public education. Middle class teens are more regulated and scheduled than ever before. They face insecurities regarding societal stability and expectations. While these characteristics apply to most middle and high school students, for the purposes of this study, “adolescent” and “adolescence” will be referring strictly to high school students in grades 9 through 12 since these are the students who participated in the study.

Many adolescent students today are considered at-risk for not graduating from high school. At-risk students are often immigrants, people of color, and/or from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These minority students continue to struggle against a society that does not treat everyone fairly or respectfully (Christenbury et al., 2009).

However, for the purposes of this study, “at-risk” students will refer to students required to attend the state-mandated district alternative education program (DAEP) required for students whose behavior has created an unsafe or disruptive environment on their home campus falling under the categories of persistent misbehavior or breaking a rule that falls under the zero tolerance policy. Not all at-risk students attend a DAEP campus.

However, in this study, all students are located on a DAEP campus which automatically creates the “at-risk” situation for these students. They are at-risk for not graduating due to behavioral issues that remove them from the regular classroom setting. Students from minority cultures and low socioeconomic status are a large subset of the DAEP population; however, not all students at the DAEP are minority or low SES. They are all, however, at risk of failing to graduate from high school due to their placement in a DAEP.

### **Additional Terms**

*Dystopian fiction.* Novels for this study all fell into the genre of dystopian fiction. While this term has varying definitions, for the purposes of this study, dystopian novels were selected based on the following criteria: they are set in the future, social issues and survival play a large part in the plot, and society is governed by a small group of people. Titles were selected based on availability, diversity of plot premises, and the absence of movies at the time of the study. Titles for this study included *House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002), *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007), *Feed* (Anderson, 2002), *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005), and *Exodus* (Bertagna, 2002).

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Almost all the students participating in the study were labeled at-risk due to minority ethnicity, English Language Learners, low socioeconomic status, or a combination of these factors. These at-risk factors are common in schools across the state; however, all of the students in the study also belonged to another group considered at-risk – they were all students who had engaged in misbehavior severe enough to have caused them to be placed at the district’s disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP) campus. Therefore, due to the student population and the fact that DAEP classes are very small (15 or less), results may not be generalizable to at-risk students on traditional campuses. While the results should provide interesting insights into students on any campus who are at-risk due to various factors, there is no way to know if the behavior issues influenced student perceptions in a way that would not be the case for at-risk students who have not engaged in such extremely inappropriate behaviors.

The fact that the students were in attendance on the DAEP campus for approximately six to eight weeks may also have affected student engagement. For some, if they saw this stage of their education as a temporary, and thus unimportant, step in their educational process, engagement may be hindered. By the time some students entered the DAEP program, they were already hopelessly behind and had no plans to graduate from high school. One student, for example, was in his third year in high school, but only had one credit and was still classified as a freshman. (Thirteen credits were required to be classified as a junior). They were biding their time until they could

drop out or participate in a General Equivalency Diploma training program, and therefore may have been less motivated to participate in literacy activities than at-risk students who were on a regular campus. Some of the students who were one or two grade levels behind their peers of the same age still wanted to graduate, but they were feeling pessimistic about the chances of that happening. Conversely, some students found the small class sizes and structured environment to their liking. In fact, some of the students who participated in this study had verbalized that they orchestrated returning to DAEP by committing an offense they knew would result in their return. The more personalized attention students received at DAEP may in itself have been a motivator to participate in academic activities in general. Multiple students had stated that they enjoyed the focus they could put on their school work due to the structured environment. They said they were unable to maintain the same focus on their large comprehensive high school campuses where the structure was so much more relaxed, and it was easier to be invisible in the large class sizes.

The strict structure in place on the DAEP campus as mentioned above limited what could be done during class. Students were not allowed to talk with each other most of the time, including in their classes. Exceptions were made in some classes at some times; however, many students were on campus with students who were their co-offenders. When students fought each other or were involved in alcohol or drug incidents together, all participants were then usually enrolled at DAEP at the same time. We frequently had students from rival gangs on our campus at the same time. Our top priority was to keep the students and staff safe. One of the easiest ways to do this was to

disallow contact between students. Most conflicts started when students communicated with each other. Communications often resulted in students antagonizing their enemies, bullying or insulting others, or encouraging each other to participate in inappropriate behavior both in school and off campus. Due to the restrictions on student behavior, group/partner work was not an acceptable teaching strategy most of the time. Each student sat in a study carrel and was generally isolated from others in the class. Large group discussions were allowed by having students turn around and face the middle of the room without moving closer to each other, but if the conversation got off topic and students refused to follow teacher instructions to stop the off-topic comments being made, then the group was immediately required to turn back into their carrels to work individually. Thus, activities considered best practices in an English class such as literature circle discussions and Socratic seminars could not be conducted. Therefore, much of the work had to be done individually, requiring the work to be written. This restriction resulted in the use of the “reading guides” used while the students progressed through the unit. It also meant that most conversations were either whole group discussions for short periods of time or were one-on-one between student and teacher. On occasion, students worked with a partner. This was decided on a day-by-day basis, usually depending on who was in attendance that day and who was absent, but activities requiring partners or small groups could not usually be planned ahead of time.

Another limitation that I had not anticipated was the lack of access to technology. Originally, my lesson plans had included more students discussions to be conducted on Moodle so that students reading the same novel could be grouped together to have on-line



conversations. Unfortunately, our district opted to use on-line testing for all the state's high stakes tests the year of this study, and our campus only had one laptop cart, and no computer labs. All laptops were allocated to be used for testing for approximately four weeks, which coincided with this research project. Since our campus housed kindergarten through twelfth grade, all tests from elementary through high school impacted our campus. Due to this scheduling conflict, computers were not available to classrooms for most of the time covered by the research project.

### **Conclusion**

Many of my at-risk students' test results showed they were below grade level in reading when they entered my classroom on the DAEP campus. These students often saw themselves as unable to read. They did not have the self-efficacy they needed to attempt reading tasks. However, the students were not all "low readers." Some of them read quite well. However, they did not see relevant purpose for reading, so they did not read. They did not identify themselves as readers, so they were not motivated to read.

To borrow from Charles Dickens's great opening line, it is the best of times and worst of times. As a woman who has raised two daughters and taught hundreds of middle school and high school students over the last two and a half decades, experience has shown me that life is exciting and terrifying all at the same time for the adolescent. Everything seems to be one extreme or the other with very few things falling in between. For many adolescents, activities are either fun or boring, totally worth it or totally a waste of time. Adolescents feel their friends understand them, but their parents do not, and they see circumstances as either terrific or tragic. Faced with these challenges, plus issues that

put them at-risk for not graduating from high school, it is no wonder that these diverse adolescent learners struggle to focus on academics. When it comes to literacy, they are often left feeling that they cannot be better at reading than they already are. And they are not very good, so they wonder why they should even bother. The focus of this research was to see how dystopian fiction, when taught with critical literacy practices, could affect at-risk high school students' sense of self-efficacy and identification when it comes to reading, and consequently their motivation and engagement in literacy activities.

In order to conduct the research project effectively, I researched the literature relevant to the purpose of the study – critical literacy, dystopian literature, self-efficacy, motivation and engagement, and identity or self-perception as a reader. The results of that literature review are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Students who attend school on a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) campus face many obstacles, both in school and in their personal lives. Because of these obstacles, they are often disengaged from school and have little self-efficacy for reading. As I have worked with these students for the last several years, my greatest concern for them as a teacher has been to find ways to help them become motivated and engaged so that they are able find academic success which can hopefully help them continue to participate in literacy activities and improve their skills. This research project was constructed in order to help me find a better way to teach these disengaged high school students. The purpose of the research project was to determine what happens when students who have low self-efficacy for reading and who do not identify themselves as readers are taught with critical literacy practices using dystopian fiction. The following questions guided the research for this study:

- What happens when students who do not identify themselves as readers are taught with critical literacy practices?
- What happens when students who have low self-efficacy for reading are taught with critical literacy practices?
- What happens when dystopian fiction is used with students who are not usually engaged in reading and other literacy activities?

This literature review will examine the major components of the research questions, beginning with a brief overview of studies done relating to students who are the focus of this study – those who are at-risk for reasons including minority status and English language acquisition, low socioeconomic status, and inappropriate behavior. Then the review will examine student identity followed by self-efficacy, motivation and engagement. These areas seemed to be at the crux of the issues my students were having with participating in reading assignments. Then I will finish with critical literacy and dystopian fiction, where I hoped to help remedy some of the issues. While critical literacy practices are the theoretical framework of the study, an understanding of the students involved in the study will help make clear why critical literacy practices were chosen as the basis for working with the students. Thus, it will fall at the end of the literature review.

### **At-Risk Students**

What does the term “at-risk” mean? While there is no consistent definition, at-risk tends to refer to long-term deficits in terms of outcomes for children (Moore, 2008). The U. S. Government (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1997) states that at-risk children are “at risk of problems ranging from hyperactivity to dropping out of school to becoming involved in crime” (p. 1). For the purposes of this study, at-risk is defined by the school district where this study took place as a student who is at-risk for not graduating due to one or more factors; these students not only have the same issues as all adolescents have when going to school, but they also have the additional issues associated with being members of a minority culture, being an English language learner,

coming from a low socioeconomic family, and/or having behavioral issues that are more severe than their peers which cause removal from their regular campus. This literature review explores what we know about each of these groups and how the issues faced by these students can impede their literacy development.

### **Cultural Minorities and English Language Learners**

Cultural minorities, especially those in urban environments, fall behind their suburban counterparts in multiple areas, including suspension rates, standardized test scores, and dropout rates. These problems can be attributed to “students’ feelings of alienation and disempowerment due to traditional curricula, pedagogical practices, and culturally irrelevant texts” (Polleck, 2010, p. 51). Haddix (2009) noted that African American students, particularly males, are disproportionately displaced in special education programs, and are over-represented in disciplinary programs, a fact which bears itself out in the population of the District Alternative Education Program in which this research study took place. These students did not see themselves as readers and writers due to the fact that they did not identify with school-sanctioned literacy tasks. Haddix asked the question, “Is it that African American boys are failing in our schools or that our schools are failing African American boys?” (p. 343). The behaviors of African American males are often misunderstood, misinterpreted, and seen as offensive. The fact that they often respond with toughness, are unwilling to back down from violence, and do not associate with school results in disciplinary and academic consequences that contribute to failure (Tatum, 2006). Sleeter and Grant (1985, 1986) did extensive research into why minority students fail. They noted primarily that schools tended to

“convey messages about which groups have the most status by favoring the knowledge of certain cultural groups in the curriculum” (p. 51). Schools differentiated between social studies and multicultural studies. Everyone was required to take social studies, which privileged the white male experience, while multicultural studies could be chosen as an elective or was a special event during certain months of the year. Grant and Sleeter (1988) also found that teachers tended not only to expect less of their black students than their white students, but also to assume their parents were less educated. While they made efforts to involve parents of their white students, black parents had to initiate and maintain contact with the school in order to have a voice in their students’ educations, making sure they were placed in rigorous classes that were taught well.

Scant research exists regarding how being a second (or third) language learner affects students’ self-perceptions of their academic work or their reading at the secondary level. However, there are statistics that attest to the fact that minorities and English language learners (ELLs) do not succeed at the same rate their nonELL counterparts do. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition states that 2008-2009 data showed there were approximately 5,346,673 ELLs in pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the United States. (National Clearinghouse, 2011). However, the graduation rate for ELLs was much lower than the graduation rate for the entire population. In 2008, only 22.6% of the ELL population in Houston, Texas, graduated from high school, while the rate in New York City was 35.8%. The state in which this research study took place had an overall graduation rate of 39.3% for ELLs while the rate for all students was 78.0% (Zehr, 2009). While focus is on how to get ELL students graduated from high school and

into college, most research focuses on how to assist English language learners in becoming academically literate (Cummins, 1979, 1999). Research that had been done with ELL adolescents (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007; Jimenez, 2001) found that some students with second language development issues were viewed as learning disabled by schools. Perhaps because most research had been done with early ELL readers in first or second grades, by the time students got to middle and high school, they were viewed as having special education needs if they could not read proficiently, when actually, they may not have mastered English yet, especially the academic language necessary to read the more complex materials required in secondary school. Cummins (1999) differentiated the types of language development students have into two categories – basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Unfortunately, once students are proficient in basic communication, they are often placed in all-English classrooms without support for their continuing academic language development. Students who exit from English as a Second Language (ESL) programs or bilingual programs often do not receive any additional support for learning the academic language necessary for success in more complex reading tasks required in school. Students' language development should continue well into their upper grades in order for them to continue to grow as literate students. Additionally, that development should continue in both their native language as well as in English. Strong skills in their native language can assist students in further developing their English language skills. Vocabulary development is key to academic development as well. Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, and Kelley (2010) note that “many struggling readers in mainstream classrooms –

whether language minority or not – lack the specialized academic language of text needed for school success” (p. 45). However, they are unlikely to find the instruction needed to assist them with this type of language development.

Krashen (2004) observed through his research that what English language learners needed most was what they received least when they reached middle and high school, that being what he called “free voluntary reading” (p. 1). People of all ages, when allowed to read what they want when they want, advanced as readers more quickly than when they only read required materials which may be too difficult for them to manage. Unfortunately, secondary schools only provided for academic required reading. Students felt unsuccessful, so they stopped reading, and the cycle discussed earlier began to spiral downward. Teachers who worried that light reading may not be enough did not allow for it at all, missing the opportunity to help students become better readers of more complex texts by ignoring the bridge that might have helped them to get to heavier reading. As Krashen stated, light reading “provides both the motivation for more reading and the linguistic competence that makes harder reading possible” (p. 116). Without some type of scaffolding of learning, ELLs experience a rise in their affective filter, which causes anxiety (Krashen, 1982) and a loss of learning. Students lose confidence and motivation. Cohen (2007) noted in his work with strategy instruction that students in a summer literacy program “had apparently not found an internal purpose for reading” (p. 167). Students perceive reading as something done to answer questions by the teacher. Without instruction that helps students develop their academic reading skills, ELL students begin to fall behind in their literacy skills and find it difficult to catch up.



## **Low Socioeconomic Status**

Ravitch (2015) has spoken and written about the effects of poverty on school children. She argues that the problem is not with schools but with poverty, and until the government is willing to intervene to alleviate poverty, schools will have a difficult time closing the achievement gap. Great teachers can make a difference in student achievement in schools serving low income students (Beers, 2007; Rosenberg, 2012). Several researchers have written about ways schools can assist students in poverty to improve their literacy skills. Krashen (2004, 2005, 2009) has perhaps written more extensively than any other researcher regarding how schools can support students who live in poverty. In a speech he delivered at a commencement for the Graduate School of Education and Counseling at Lewis and Clark College (personal communication, June 5, 2011), he emphasized that the problem is not school, but rather the impact of poverty. While children living in poverty need access to food and medical care, they also need access to reading materials. Unfortunately, schools in high poverty areas frequently do not have libraries. In synthesizing research that has been done on what increases reading scores for students from low SES homes, students who had access to books and were allowed to make their own choices in reading showed significant improvement in reading. Not only were their scores higher, but their attitudes toward reading also improved dramatically. Interventions such as participating in activities touted to increase skills needed for reading such as chess, Latin, or roller skating (Krashen, 2009) or increasing time spent on homework (Krashen, 2005) showed no significant increase in students' scores or attitudes. Schmoker (2012) concurred with Krashen's assertions that

reading is critical to student growth in literacy. He found that students' dearth of reading during the school day was a problem. He suggested that schools need to dramatically increase the amount of reading students do in all disciplines. Grant and Sleeter (1988) found in their research that schools privileged the knowledge of upper class students and worked toward empowering those students while neglecting the students in lower class groups.

Wealth can be used as social capital, helping parents purchase educational resources that students without wealth cannot afford (Orr, 2003). Quality of schools, college expectations, and academic materials in the home were all higher for those students from families of wealth than for those from lower socioeconomic status families. Wealthy families also provided their children with cultural capital as well – museums, concerts, performances, and exhibitions which contributed to their background knowledge and experiences which assisted them in school as well. An international study by Nonoyama-Tarumi and Willms (2010) determined that lack of resources in the home has a larger effect on student literacy than lack of resources in the school. While many issues contribute to lower literacy skills, students who are from low-income homes tended to be at a higher risk of lacking literacy skills.

### **Behavioral Issues**

Of particular interest to my study were students who are at-risk not only because they are from minority cultures, speak English as their second language, or are from low SES backgrounds, but because their behavior created the need for them to be removed from their home campuses and placed in a disciplinary alternative education program.

Multiple studies have been conducted regarding the reasons for placement in a disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP), which include violation of zero tolerance policies resulting in mandatory placement as well as general behavioral issues resulting in discretionary placement (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). These studies report on the relationships between gender, race, age, and special education status and placements in DAEPs. Booker and Mitchell (2011) noted that boys were more likely to be referred to DAEPs than girls, African-American and Hispanics more often than Caucasians and Asians, and that a high percentage of these students were also economically disadvantaged. Thus, the majority of students placed in DAEPs were at-risk for not completing high school based on a number of factors including race, socioeconomic status, and behavioral issues. Additionally, “students in alternative programs are believed to be at risk of educational failure, as suggested by various risk factors including disruptive behavior, poor grades, suspension, and truancy” (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). While research has shown that students who are in DAEPs are at-risk for academic failure, there do not appear to be any studies that seek to determine the relationship between literacy skills (or other academic considerations) and placement in DAEPs. The Intercultural Development Research Association (Cortez & Cortez, 2009) reported in their 2009 update of the state’s DAEP programs that students in the state DAEPs scored 13 points below the state average for all students in the state’s assessments in reading, but they do not make suggestions regarding the reason students are likely to be behind other than a possible failure of the system to provide an adequate education to students who have difficulty on traditional campuses.

Being at-risk of failure and dropping out due to membership in a high risk group affects the students' academic futures as well as how they perceive themselves as students and readers. The next section discusses how students view themselves and how school contributes to those identities which often are framed in students' minds as what they are *not* – I am not a good student; I am not a good reader; I am not very successful.

### **Identity**

Identity is defined in multiple ways. Gee (2001a), who has written extensively about identity and how it is constructed, defines identity as the kind of person one is. Identity, as he defined it in terms of a lens for education research, is something constructed from the outside in. He describes four types of identity, two of which were especially relevant to this study. Discourse (with a capital D) identity is one in which people are part of various groups which interact with each other as members of that group. In this sense, a person can have multiple identities – mother, teacher, wife, and musician, for example. Gee (2001b) stated that being a member of a Discourse involves language as well as behaviors. Using Gee's work, Allie et al. (2009) described identity as becoming a member of a specific community and that "to use a discourse is to own an identity" (p. 5). Additionally, with regard to learning, students must have some type of community in which to exercise and develop the discourse until one is literate, or proficient, in the discourse. This is critical to the development of an identity. A second identity is the Institution-identity (Gee, 2001a). The power to be part of this community is controlled by authorities within an institution. This type of identity cannot be obtained by oneself, but must be given authorization by a person or group who has the ability to

bestow membership. Sometimes this identity is welcomed by the person on whom the identity is being placed, and sometimes it is imposed on him. For example, a student may seek membership in a group known as “football players” while another student may be forced to assume the identity of a student with ADHD. However, in contrast, membership in a Discourse-identity is based on the dialogue of other people. As with the Institution-identity, membership in a community may be welcomed by the participant or ascribed by a group onto the person. For example, a student may be seen as popular if she behaves in a certain manner that is consistent with what others within and outside the group expect. Those within the group welcome her and treat her as a popular student. However, membership in a Discourse-identity may also be ascribed to a student because of certain characteristics. For example, a student may be seen as learning disabled if she is from an at-risk group whereas the same behaviors would not bring the same ascription if the student were more privileged. In this sense, the way students are identified as being readers is often decided for them (Alvermann, 2001). And once these identities have been applied by outside sources, they often remain the students’ identities throughout their education. These same students’ identities will be passed from one teacher to the next as groups move up the grade levels. Teachers’ lounges are frequently filled with the conversations about certain students who will be delightful to have this next year or who will be the terrors; one child is extremely smart while another is so far behind it is unlikely he will ever catch up.

These external designations into various identities eventually become how the student sees himself. McCarthy and Moje (2002) noted that “many people are searching

for ways to construct or represent identities and stories that allow them to belong” (p. 232). In a discussion the two researchers had via electronic mail, Moje stated that Heath had argued that students who are marginalized in society may not have much hope for developing positive identities in traditional schools. This idea was confirmed over a decade later in a study conducted by Hall (2010). She stated that students’ identities are developing, and many factors play a part in how they will decide which identities they will choose to develop when it comes to reading tasks. In a study conducted with three middle school students over the course of a school year, Hall noted that the girls in the study admitted to making choices regarding their reading improvement based on which identity was more important to them. Students realize which discursive identities are valued and which are not. These students chose not to participate in behaviors which would cause them to be identified as poor readers, which subsequently meant they were not able to improve their reading skills. The need to prevent their peers from ascribing a negative discursive identity took precedence over the desire to improve their reading abilities. Unfortunately, the teachers misunderstood what the girls were thinking and perceived them as lazy, disinterested, or unmotivated. Only when Hall interviewed the girls throughout the research period did she discover that the girls were making specific choices regarding their identities. They would rather be seen poorly by their teachers than their peers. Alvermann (2001) emphasized that the educational culture influences a reader’s identity. Schools often create the identities of disabled student or struggling reader when cultures are created where certain reading tasks are deemed important while others are not, marginalizing students who do not have the skills necessary to participate

in the privileged literacy tasks. Teachers may neglect them once they deem the students uninterested or lazy, and the students, in protecting their identities from being ascribed negatively by their peers, make choices that perpetuate the cycle (Hall, 2010). Students must be afforded the opportunity to develop the identity in all aspects of the educational experience in order to be recognized as a competent member of the community (Allie et al., 2009).

When students do not have an identity as a reader or a good student, they have fewer and fewer successes. They begin to believe they cannot do certain tasks. When their self-efficacy suffers, their motivation and engagement decrease. The next section explores what we know about adolescents and their self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement.

### **Self-Efficacy, Motivation, and Engagement**

#### **Self-Efficacy**

Adolescence is often considered by adults to be a turbulent time of raging hormones that cause unusual behaviors and impede academic success (Bandura, 2006). However, the extensive work in social cognitive theory of Bandura (1986, 1993, 1996, 2006) demonstrated the prominent role played by agency and self-efficacy. Bandura (2006) noted that studies showed that most adolescents navigated this time in their lives successfully and without inordinate disruption. Rather than biological functions being the major consideration, adolescent self-efficacy and agency, which was situated in a cognitive social context, was extremely influential in adolescents' ability to successfully navigate the trying times which included the confluence of biological changes, emotional

changes, and social changes leading to adulthood. Unfortunately, society gave them little opportunity to prepare for becoming an adult; however, self-efficacy played an important part in helping them navigate the choppy waters they faced through their adolescent years. Agency is the belief that personal actions will produce results. Self-efficacy is a core mechanism of agency. Self-efficacy is “a person’s belief that she or he has the capability to organize and execute the procedures required to control or manage prospective situations” (Johnson, Freedman, & Theo, 2008, p. 2). With regard to reading, this includes the reader’s belief that he or she can “(1) access the appropriate schema; (2) adjust his or her stance toward the text; (3) recognize the purpose for the reading; and then (4) proceed by decoding, comprehending, and using appropriate fix-it strategies” (p. 3). According to Bandura (2006), self-efficacy was key to adolescents’ academic success because it was the foundation for motivation. As he stated in a paper he wrote for the *Educational Psychologist* in 1993, “Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives. . . .The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves and the firmer is their commitment to them” (p. 118).

Self-efficacy is not self-confidence, however, and it is important to understand the difference. Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) stated clearly the characteristics of self-efficacy when they said, “self-efficacy precepts are distinctive because they are not only domain-specific but are also context- and task-specific” (p. 47). Self-confidence, on the other hand, was a more “generalized self-assessment incorporating a variety of self-



reactions and beliefs such as feelings of self-worth and general beliefs of competence” (p. 48). For example, students may feel higher self-efficacy toward reading and writing tasks than mathematical tasks. Self-efficacy may even be as specific as to feel more self-efficacious when writing fictional stories and less so when writing essays. Self-confidence is more of a global feeling of ability and competence.

Neither is self-efficacy the same as motivation or engagement. If adolescents believe that their personal actions result in positive outcomes, and they believe that they can accomplish a particular task, then they are likely to be motivated to fully engage in the task. Underlying the idea of motivation, self-efficacy is key to endurance and perseverance in the face of adversity (Bandura, 2006). However, low self-efficacy works negatively as well. Adolescents with low efficacy do not expect favorable outcomes; thus they quickly give up trying when faced with difficulties, unlike their counterparts who have high efficacy and continue their efforts when faced with adversities.

In a related study Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) conducted with ninth and tenth graders, efficacy for self-regulated learning and self-efficacy for academic achievement were measured to see if students’ setting of grade goals and actual class grades could be predicted. As hypothesized, a causal relationship existed between efficacy for self-regulated learning and self-efficacy for academic achievement. Students who believed they could regulate their learning by managing their time, organizing their schoolwork, finishing assignments by deadlines, choosing homework over other more interesting activities when necessary, and other behaviors related to academic success also believed in their ability to succeed in their classes. Their level of efficacy predicted

both their academic goals and their final grade in the class. In relation to predicting literacy choices specifically, Durik, Vida, and Eccles (2006) found that high school students who had higher “self-concepts of ability” (self-efficacy) in English were more likely to spend time reading for leisure, choose to take more English classes beyond those required, and select careers that had higher literacy demands than students who did not. Along with self-concept of ability, they also tested the predictability of the importance students placed on English class, and the intrinsic value they placed in reading on literacy choices. Self-concept of ability was the only factor that predicted all three literacy choices.

Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck, in a study published in 2007, conducted similar research to see if there was a causal relationship among four motivational factors. Those factors included the students’ theory of intelligence, learning goal setting orientation, beliefs about effort, and response to failure. Their research questions asked whether or not a student’s theory of intelligence was related to his achievement trajectory, why the theory of intelligence was related to grades, and how teaching a student about intelligence theory could benefit him as an intervention. The study was a five year longitudinal study of junior high students, following four incoming sets of seventh grade students in one school through their seventh and eighth grade years. They found that students had a fairly crystallized theory of intelligence when they entered junior high. The students believed intelligence was either an unchangeable fixed entity, which the researchers called an entity theory or “fixed” mindset; or it was a quality that could be developed, which the researchers called an incremental theory or “growth”

mindset. (See Dweck, 2006, for a complete discussion of “mindset”). They found that an incremental theory of intelligence was positively correlated with having positive beliefs about effort, positive attitudes about setting learning goals, and use of positive strategies when students faced difficult tasks. In other words, students who believed they could improve their intelligence also had a sense of agency. They set goals, believed they could attain them, and persevered when learning became difficult. They had a strong sense of self-efficacy in math, an area that typically was difficult for junior high students, and their grades in math were better. The good news is that the researchers discovered through an abbreviated repetition of the study that students with an entity theory of intelligence could be taught to have an incremental theory, thus positively affecting their level of effort and their willingness to set more challenging goals for themselves, which has exciting implications for the classroom.

From the practitioner point of view, the question is whether an instructor can teach strategies which will help increase motivation. This is a question that is of direct concern to this research project. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) made the assertion that strategy instruction at the elementary and middle school level in strategies such as activating prior knowledge, self-monitoring, comprehending informational text, and searching for information could improve self-efficacy. Studies suggest that coaching students in these strategies may increase reading self-efficacy. I have not been able to find any research on strategy instruction and its effects on high school students.

## **Motivation and Engagement**

Since Bandura's ground-breaking text on social cognitive theory was published in 1986, self-efficacy has been a topic that has grown in staggering proportions. A Google search of the term "self-efficacy" at the beginning of this research project brought up approximately 5,300,000 web page links, with the number being 9,890,000 three years later at the time of this writing. However, at the intersection of self-efficacy, adolescence, and literacy, the topic of concern is most often motivation and engagement, and research indicated that many high school students had already spent several years in a downward spiral that involved encountering a text only to feel confused and lost as they attempted to read it (Yudowitch, Henry, & Guthrie, 2008). They disengaged from reading that text, and then when the next one came around, they doubted their ability to read it successfully, so they disengaged more quickly this time, maybe even before they started. The more students avoided text, the harder it became for them to learn and improve in reading.

The behavior that results from this downward spiral is interpreted as a lack of motivation by many educators. Secondary teachers struggle with finding ways to motivate and engage their adolescent students who have by now perfected their ability to pretend they are "too cool" to care as a cover-up for their fear of failure. Most teachers use texts as a source of information during the teaching of their course. "Unfortunately, the majority of high school students are not proficient readers" (Yudowitch et al., 2008, p. 67). This creates another cycle that secondary teachers often observe in high school classrooms. Related to the Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986), motivation results in

increasing competence and therefore more reading. Increased reading results in reading achievement which in turn increases motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). However, some students will not – because they cannot – read the assigned texts, teachers get frustrated, and finally the teachers give up and quit assigning readings since the students will not do them anyway. Thus students continue to receive little or no opportunities to read successfully, and everyone is frustrated. So, the central question is often, “How can teachers motivate their students to read?”

Many studies and reports address motivation from the point of view of the practitioner (Casey, 2008; Curran & Smith, 2005; Desmet, 2009; Trier, 2006), looking at how teachers can increase motivation and thus engagement in literacy activities. Yet how does motivation and engagement relate to self-efficacy? Pitcher et al. (2007) revised the Motivation to Read Profile to be used with adolescents, creating the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP). Through surveys and conversational interviews, the researchers found that adolescents often did not see themselves as readers. Adolescents defined “reading” to mean the type of reading that was expected in school such as textbooks and classic novels, and they did not feel successful in this type of reading. Most of the participants labeled themselves as nonreaders and checked the option on the survey that indicated they did not like to read. However, interviews revealed that these same students were reading novels, magazines, newspapers, and other texts outside of school, could articulate well what they were reading and why, and were engaged with their peers in discussions of what they were reading. Some of these students were seen as poor readers by their English teachers and had failed their high school English class the

previous year. The disconnect between in-school literacy and out-of-school literacy events caused many of the adolescents to doubt their ability to read. The descriptors these students assigned themselves as people did not include “reader.”

Similarly, Alvermann et al. (2007) conducted a study of 60 seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students labeled as “struggling readers” by their teachers, 90% of whom had scored in the lowest quartile on a district standardized reading test, and all but two of whom said they were uninterested in reading. In this study, researchers found that students were spending an average of 30 minutes per day outside of school reading. Students who were participating in reading clubs were influenced by their club members who recommended good books and other reading materials. Although these students who labeled themselves as nonreaders were not as inclined to identify themselves with the school’s label of “struggling reader,” their perceptions of themselves became “reader” once they discovered through the logs they kept how much reading they were, in fact, doing. Their confidence rose in their competence as readers in general; however, their self-efficacy in reading academic texts did not seem affected. In these studies and others (Hufton, Elliott, & Illushin, 2003; Lenters, 2006), researchers found that the disconnect between in-school literacies and out-of-school literacies contributed to students’ views of themselves as either poor readers or nonreaders regardless of their cultural background.

Lapp and Fisher (2009) experimented with their junior class of at-risk students to determine what influenced engagement positively. While working within the requirements of the curriculum standards, they created theme questions and selected a variety of types of texts for students to choose from that would allow them to address the

question and meet the cluster of standards they incorporated. Multiple literacy opportunities, teacher modeling with read alouds and think-alouds, self-selection of texts with independent reading time built into the schedule, and book clubs which provided a social aspect of literacy, gave these struggling students the engagement they needed to start to see themselves as readers who would hopefully read even after they had left their classroom. Believing they could do it was a necessary ingredient in the students' academic literacy improvement.

Pitcher et al. (2010) noticed an increase in the number of adolescents who were seeking help in the university's reading clinic. They sought to determine what type of literacy instruction adolescents were receiving and whether or not it met their needs. Using seven case studies of students who came through their clinic, the researchers thoroughly examined the reading needs of these students. They found that none of the students were receiving any type of instruction to meet their needs. None of their strengths and weaknesses were being addressed. In their recommendations, the researchers included focusing individually on students' needs as opposed to "just putting them in a program" (p. 643); this focus included helping students think cognitively about reading and helping them improve their perceptions of themselves as competent readers.

Engaged readers "believe in their reading abilities. . . . and have self-efficacy" (Guthrie, 2001, p. 1). Instructional programs which do not take the self-efficacy component into account are leaving some students behind. Unfortunately, most motivation in secondary classrooms is done without regard for the students' efficacy. Perhaps teachers are not even aware of the important role that self-efficacy plays in the

adolescent's willingness to attempt academic literacy tasks. Without that knowledge, the effectiveness of motivational and engagement strategies will be missing a serious component for many of their adolescent students. Strategies need to include ways to help secondary students believe in their ability to complete academic tasks successfully. If they have neither agency nor self-efficacy, there can be no motivation.

Perhaps the research that most informed my research project was done by Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006) and Gallagher (2009). As practitioners in high school English classes, Smith, Wilhelm, and Gallagher bring experience as educators of struggling adolescent readers to their work. Smith and Wilhelm, in working predominantly with boys, many who did not find success in academic settings, found that flow experiences and appropriate challenges were required in order for less engaged and less proficient readers to become engaged in literacy activities. They described flow experiences as those which “occur when they provide a sense of control and competence, a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill, clear goals and feedback, and a focus on the immediate experience” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006, p. 3). In other words, flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 28). Readers experience flow when they are so engaged in a novel or piece of nonfiction that they become oblivious to what is going on around them and time seems to pass at an astonishing speed. One of the ways to engage reluctant readers is by presenting them with appropriate challenges. Many of the boys in their studies stated that the tasks they were presented with were insufficiently challenging. They spoke of teachers who seemed to believe that the students could not do challenging work



and so made assignments easier and summarized texts for them. Challenges that provided an appropriate level of skill and that allowed them to see if they achieved success were important to the students. What they chose to read on their own always had a purpose beyond grades; however, academic reading was measured in what grade they received on a related assignment. Academic reading had no intrinsic value, and without an immediate function, such as instructions on how to fix things or make things or keep track of things, it seemed to have no relevancy. The boys enjoyed participating in literacy activities if there was an immediate payoff and obvious purpose. Gallagher (2009) echoed these findings when he examined how traditional teaching in English classes was “killing reading” (subtitle). When teachers exposed students to the wisdom found in classic pieces of literature that are often taught in high school classrooms, the students were able to see the value in reading it. The piece was not just a story, but “it’s an imaginative rehearsal for living a productive life as an adult” (p. 79).

Guthrie and Wigfield, (2000) define motivation as “the individual’s personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading” (p. 405), and go on to define engagement as “the motivated use of strategies to gain conceptual knowledge during readings.” However, students will be neither motivated nor engaged if they do not believe they have the capability to read a text. Self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement are linked in a cycle, and practitioners need to find a way to begin the spin of the cycle. The literature that is selected to use with unmotivated, disengaged students may be the key to getting students motivated and engaged. The literature chosen for this task, dystopian fiction, will be addressed later in the chapter.

In synthesizing the research regarding agency, self-efficacy, and motivation/engagement, I believe they create a pyramid effect with agency being the foundation upon which self-efficacy and motivation can be built, as shown in Figure 2.1. First, a person must have agency, the belief that generally his personal actions will produce desired results. This is the foundation upon which the other two are built.

Without agency, one does not believe his actions matter. Then built upon agency, he must believe he can be successful in each individual endeavor. This is belief in one's ability to successfully complete a specific task is known as self-efficacy. So first of all, a person believes that his actions produce desired outcomes in general, but he knows he is good at some tasks, but not at others. For example, a person may have total belief that she can successfully write an academic paper on a historical topic; however, she may have little self-efficacy when it comes to performing complex mathematical concepts such as those involved in the study of calculus or physics. Finally, at the top of the pyramid, built upon self-efficacy, is motivation and engagement. Logically, a person will only be motivated to engage in a task if he believes he has the ability and skill to successfully complete the task.



*Figure 2.1. Relationship of agency, self-efficacy, and motivation/engagement*

The question then becomes how to help students build their self-efficacy.

Without it, they will not believe they have the ability to complete certain tasks with which they have had trouble in the past. Without self-efficacy, they will have little motivation to try new things. For at-risk students who have diminished self-efficacy for reading, critical literacy may provide a way for teachers to encourage students to take the risk involved in trying something in which they have not been successful before. Critical literacy is discussed in the next section.

### **Critical Literacy**

In the *Handbook of Reading Research, Vol. IV*, Freebody and Freiberg (2011) explore critical literacy and how ideas about critical literacy have developed since as far back as the time of Socrates. They take the position that critical literacy is a “distinct and growing body of technical knowledge about textuality” (p. 432) which includes understanding the reflexivity between interpreting texts in a range of modalities and social structures. Critical literacy takes note of the fact that students are usually not asked

to question the text, even when the text is questionable. Generally, students are not encouraged to interpret texts in different ways. The work of Freebody and Freiberg (2011) describes the key features of critical literacy as going beneath the surface meaning of text into the social contexts and personal ideology. They state that critical literacy emphasizes developing tendencies and habits as readers, offering pedagogical practice, encouraging readers to critique, and developing knowledge about how to interpret texts. It is with the second point – pedagogical practice - that this research is most concerned.

The theoretical framework of this study is critical literacy as found in the research of Paulo Freire who believed that people should be able to read the word in order to be able to read the world (1970). Mendoza (2009) defined reading the world this way: “Reading the world means to understand how human practices and social, political and economic systems influence and manipulate history, language, culture, and society to accentuate privilege for some and take away the humanity of many” (p. 40). Freire’s work focused on teaching illiterate peasants how to read in order that they could participate in the world around them, for those who cannot, or do not, read are powerless to challenge the status quo. He continued in an interview with Macedo (Freire & Macedo, 1995) to explain that it is not enough to teach peasants how to read the word “hunger”; rather they need to know the reasons and ideologies behind their experience of hunger. Additionally, he stated in the same interview that “it is an ethical duty for educators to intervene in challenging students to critically engage with their world so they can act upon it and on it” (p. 391). Critical literacy allows students to connect literacy with civic engagement. Critical literacy as a pedagogical tool allows students

from oppressed backgrounds to find their voice and believe that they have power to change an unjust world. Additionally, and critically important, is the dialogue that needs to exist between student and teacher. The teacher's role is not to impose learning upon the student, but instead teachers and students learn with each other through dialogue. Authentic education exists when teachers and students have authentic discussions which challenge both parties and allow both to develop opinions (Freire, 1970).

In his book *Reading Against Democracy: The Broken Promises of Reading Instruction*, Shannon (2007) chronicles how reading instruction in the United States has changed from promising to make the public strong and wise to looking at literacy strictly from an economic point of view. Shannon argues that in either scenario, the promises of reading instruction have been problematic for women, minorities, and the poor. Students were either excluded from literacy education altogether as they were viewed as a threat to the economic, political, or social status quo, or they were included in education through compulsory attendance laws in order to learn the skills necessary to raise their human capital and make them marketable to employers. Unfortunately, these three groups lagged behind in the literacy skills that would allow them to participate in scientific and technical literacies that are required to access power in the work world. They did not receive equal wages, nor did they have equal representation in the government beyond the local level. As the federal government has become more directive in reading education, the teaching of reading has moved from a model of teachers who were well-educated and could make sound decisions, to a system of "commercially scripted lessons and standardized assessments" (Shannon, 2007, p. 124) which demotivate students and

teachers and increase the achievement gap which is reflected in social gaps for women, minority students, and those from poverty. Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008), in their work criticizing the content of Ruby Payne's work regarding poverty, suggest that schools should teach students to "question the structures that oppress them and others like them" and that schools construct curriculums that use class structures as a "significant conceptual lens through which to view people's lives" and thus the constructs that would oppress or elevate various groups of people (p. 2525).

Critical literacy practices seek to move reading education from the philosophy that meaning is delivered to the reader by the author through the text, to the idea that the meaning rests in the reader himself (Shanklin, 2009). Students who are taught using critical literacy learn that the author has written from his view of reality, but the reader brings his own view to the interpretation of the text which gives rise to multiple perspectives. Students can then use their perspective to make decisions about how to respond. To become critically literate within a school setting means that students engage in rigorous academic work that is connected to students' lives as well as to a larger context. The work encourages students to "work toward creating the world in which they want to live" (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006, p. 199).

Students are interested in what is happening in the global community. In a project that included Canadian and Japanese students, 90% of the almost 400 participating students believed that it was more important to be part of global community than to see themselves as members of a particular country (Dunkerly-Bean, Bean, & Alnajjar, 2014). Students are interested in what is happening in the global community, and viewing

literacy as indivisible from human rights gives them the opportunity to participate in the world. Because young people are interested in what happens outside the walls of school or their home, critical literacy has the capacity to engage students in literacy activities which “prepare young people for societies that conduct much of their daily business via texts . . . societies [that] rely on texts and widespread literacy capabilities to liberate and oppress, to inform and obscure” (Freebody & Frieberg, 2011). Using critical literacy models allows students to use text to transform the power structures of the world.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) synthesized critical literacy pedagogy into “four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382). If teachers plan their literacy lessons around these dimensions, students will have an opportunity to explore the world outside of school in a way that allows them to think and act on what they read. One of the first decisions that must be made when teaching with critical literacy practices is the selection of reading materials to be used. The reading materials must encourage the adolescent reader to engage with the text, think about multiple points of view on a topic, focus on sociopolitical issues, and consider ways to take action in order to promote social justice. For this research project, dystopian literature was selected. Its potential for being the appropriate material for use with critical literacy practices is discussed in the next section.

### **Dystopian Young Adult Literature**

So how can teachers make meaningful and appropriate selections in reading texts that will motivate and engage students in ways that encourage them to think about

sociopolitical issues? Benton (2000), in his discussion of the canon of literature that is taught in school, notes that control of the canon is an expression of political power and is subject to the special pressures of its function and readership. What comprises “an appropriate canon of quality literature for adolescents in the twenty first century is one which we appear to be far from resolving” (Hopper, 2006, p. 57); however, to incorporate critical literacy practices, what students are asked to read must connect them to topics that are meaningful and connected to the world outside of school. In this regard, dystopian fiction, while not often being considered as part of the literature canon for English classrooms, is ideally suited to critical literacy practices.

What comprises dystopian fiction has been debated, and there no one definition that everyone agrees with (Datlow & Windling, 2012). However, generally speaking, dystopian fiction focuses on “a futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system” (NCTE/IRA, 2006). In other words, dystopian fiction takes a current social issue and asks the question, “What if?” in regard to what the future might look like if the issue is not resolved in a way that benefits all people. Touted as being “the hottest genre in publishing and film on both sides of the Atlantic” by reporter Amanda Craig (2012), dystopian fiction is attractive to young adult readers for many reasons, including the fact that the books “grapple with the meaning and ethics of the technology” and incorporate “larger-than-life struggles in flawed societies, vicarious teenage freedom and



responsibility, and detailed world-building” (p. 4). While literary agents say that dystopian fiction is dead (Corbett, 2013), the fact that dystopian novels continue to be made into major motion pictures belies that statement. With movie adaptations of dystopian novels set to release as late as 2017, (*Allegiant*, part 2, adaptation of the novel by Veronica Roth, 2013), dystopian fiction seems to be alive and well. Students continue to ask for copies of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) as these and other dystopian storylines find their way in movie theaters. This makes them a likely candidate for catching adolescent readers’ attention. Additionally, because dystopian fiction centers on current social issues, finding relevant nonfiction companion pieces is only a Google search away.

Dystopian fiction also fits the criteria set forth by Lewison et al. (2002). The use of dystopian fiction disrupts the commonplace by allowing students to read materials, both fiction and related nonfiction, that they would not often read as an actual part of the curriculum. Dystopian fiction necessarily interrogates multiple viewpoints, often those of the elite power group and the struggling general population. Perhaps most importantly, dystopian fiction connects to current sociopolitical issues, allowing for current nonfiction on those issues to be explored in conjunction with reading the futuristic fiction which demonstrates where society could go if certain issues are not addressed in the here and now. And it is this examination of society now and in the future that promotes thinking and action toward social justice.

Dystopian fiction may provide what teachers need in order to coax reluctant students to read as it may be enticing enough to help students overcome obstacles which

may stand in the way of their willingness to attempt the reading assignment by encouraging self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement.

Mendoza (2009) states that marginalized students have the opportunity of breaking free of internal oppression when presented with powerful literature coupled with dialogue and reflection. Providing students with controversial books provides the intellectual stimulation that these students who are frequently relegated to remedial classes rarely see (Lewison, Leland, & Flint, 2002). “There is a remarkable vitality, an aliveness, a level of intellectual engagement that occurs when kids have the opportunity to read about and discuss important, controversial topics that intersect their lives” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 216). Dystopian fiction has the power to provide the avenue for students and teacher to learn together by posing those controversial topics and presenting problems rather than solutions for teacher and students alike to think about, as advocated by Freire (1970). “Curriculum should [challenge] both parties” (Freire, 1970, p. 93). Dystopian fiction is inspired by possible social consequences of issues we are dealing with today, and these problems present teenagers with the opportunity to think about the issues (Craig, 2012). In direct contrast to the escapism offered through many young adult novels, dystopian novels are “edgy, thought-provoking books which raise questions about what we’re doing to our society and planet. . . . The best dystopia is a lens for looking at contemporary society” (Cooper, 2011, p. 2).

By using critical literacy practices that incorporate dystopian fiction and related nonfiction, at-risk students have the opportunity to participate in meaningful literacy activities which may help them to overcome self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement

issues so they can successfully participate as literate citizens in a global community. The following chapter describes the methods that will be used to accomplish this task.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this action research study was to explore the influence of instruction using critical literacy practices and dystopian fiction on the self-efficacy and self-perception of at-risk adolescents in a disciplinary alternative education program. The following questions guided the research for this study:

- What happens when students who do not identify themselves as readers are taught with critical literacy practices?
- What happens when students who have low self-efficacy for reading are taught with critical literacy practices?
- What happens when dystopian fiction is used with students who are not usually engaged in reading and other literacy activities?

After reading research about the various aspects of the purpose of the study, I began designing a research project in which I, as a scholar practitioner (McClintock, 2004), could explore ways in which I could positively influence my students' self-efficacy for reading and their identity as readers. This chapter outlines the methodological framework for the study; describes the participants in the study; explains the data sources, collection procedures, and analysis used in the study; explores the trustworthiness of the study; and concludes with a summary of the chapter.

## **Methodological Framework**

Because my passion is as a classroom teacher of young adults, I am most concerned with how I and other teachers can improve classroom practice for the students we work with each day. To that end, I used action research (Mills, 2011) as the methodology. Action research takes place in the context of a real classroom, and allows teachers to examine how daily routines, activities, and the environment affect their students. Action research works well for the scholar practitioner (McClintock, 2004) who is concerned with improving the learning of her students, and since the teacher is the one making the decisions and reflecting on the practices, she can learn about the craft of teaching while attempting to improve the learning of her students. The research is immediately applicable to the classroom. Action research pairs beautifully with critical literacy theory in that action research contains an element of research intended to liberate “individuals from the dictates of tradition, habit, and bureaucracy” (Mills, 2011, p. 6). Since I conducted the research in my own classroom with my students in order to find ways to positively mediate students’ self-perceptions and motivation through exploring social issues and their ramifications, action research was an appropriate methodology to use.

Mills cited several representations of the action research cycle. The one which I had been following prior to this dissertation research project was Mills’ reprinting of Steven Kemmis’s graphic representation which is shown in Figure 3.1 (Kemmis’s graphic as cited in Mills, 2011, p. 15). I had already informally done a complete cycle the year before this research project began. By creating a general plan to help my

students improve their perceptions of themselves as readers, I had put into place the first action step the year before by using dystopian fiction as a basis for literacy activities. I was now continuing through the second cycle beginning with revising the general plan by implementing the second action step which would be the research project for this dissertation. The second step involved systematically planning literacy activities based on critical literacy practices using specific dystopian novels as the basis for those activities. Once this research project was complete, I used the outcomes to make instructional decisions for future classes of similar students, thus continuing the cycle of revising acting, monitoring, and evaluating how the general plan is working. Through continued action research, I hope to find ways in which to help students see themselves as capable readers, readers whose skills can continually improve, and readers who enjoy and see purpose in reading.

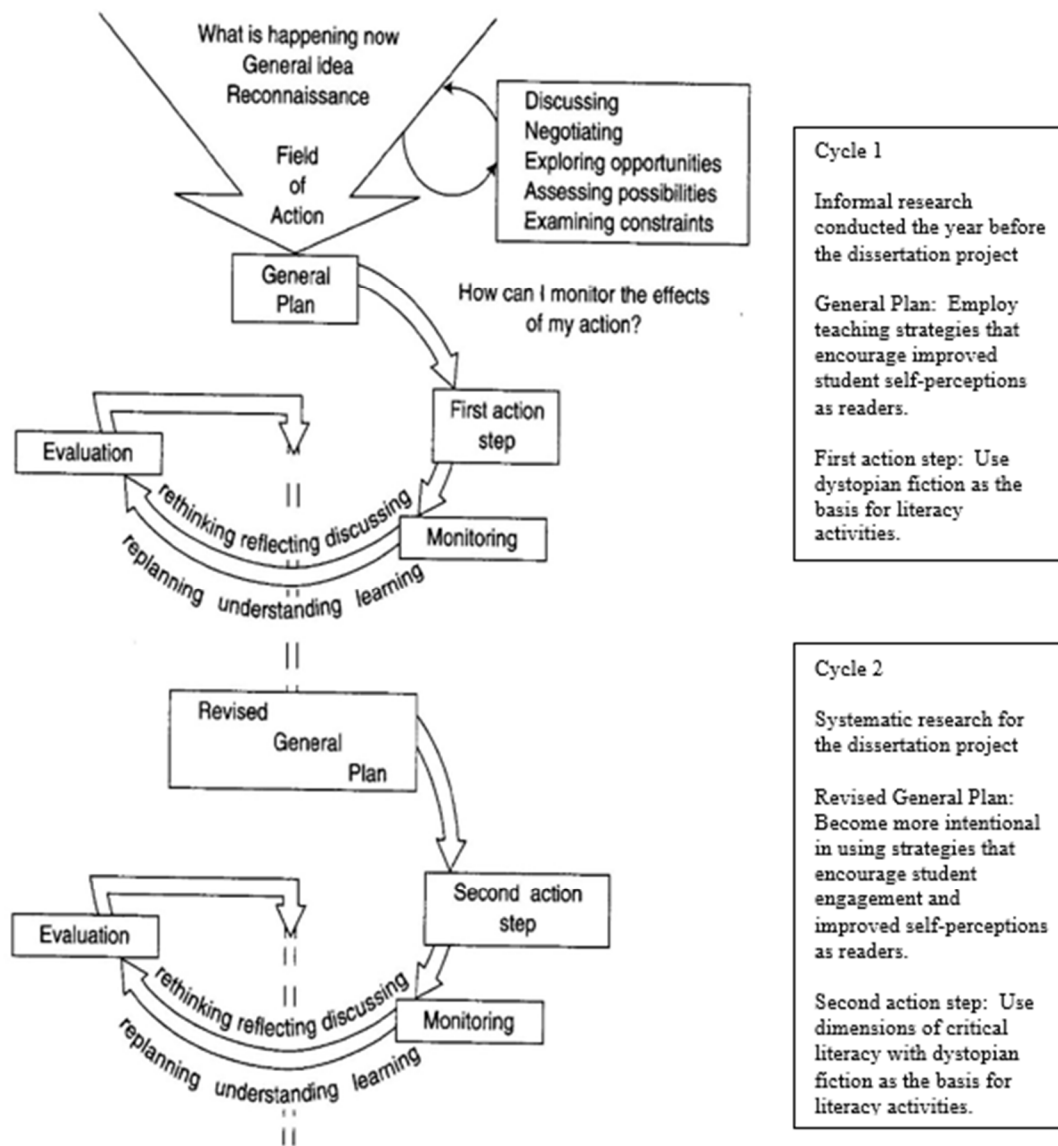


Figure 3.1. Action research cycle

## Participants

The participants in the study were all the high school students enrolled in the disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP) of a large, urban school district in the southwest where I was the only high school English teacher. Students may be assigned to

the DAEP campus under two headings: mandatory placement and discretionary placement. Mandatory placements are made when students commit offenses that require they be removed from their home campus and placed in an alternative education program for a specified amount of time. These behaviors include assault, possession of a weapon, possession/distribution/use of a controlled substance or alcohol, terroristic threats or acts, and certain felonies committed off campus. Discretionary placements include persistent disruption of class or violation of locally-adopted student codes of conduct. The students in the program included both mandatory and discretionary placements at the time of the study. Students in the program were assigned to a certain amount of time, generally 30-45 days, and because the misbehavior and DAEP assignment can come any time during the school year, students were enrolled while others exited, causing a revolving door process as students came and went on a weekly basis. The students were ninth through twelfth graders. At the time of the study, the school segregated students by gender whenever possible, so the study included four sections of boys and one section of girls, with each section containing twelve or fewer students at any given time throughout the study. The students were a mix of ethnic backgrounds including predominantly African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian. A small percent were Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. Approximately 76% of the population were classified as low socioeconomic status as reflected in free and reduced lunch participation. While all students were invited to participate in the study, not all returned consent forms. At the time the study began, I had 51 total students in the five sections. Of those 51, 19 returned consent forms. Therefore, while all students enrolled in my classes participated in the



assignments and received grades as they normally would, data were analyzed for only those 19 students whose parents consented to allow them to participate in the study.

Three of those 19 students were chosen as focus students in order to illustrate student thinking throughout the unit. These students were all students whom I had taught before on the DAEP campus. I was familiar with these students and their work habits, attitudes, and dispositions. Because I already knew these students, I would be able to observe and identify changes in behavior more easily. Because the students already knew me, trust had already been built which allowed them to feel they could be more open and honest in their responses. These students were also the focus of additional interviews and conversations regarding the assignments. All three of the students were exited from the DAEP program after the study, but they were all re-enrolled on our campus within six months after the lesson activities were completed. Additional conversations were held when they returned and those conversations were included as part of the data.

### **Data Sources and Collection Procedures**

Students participating in the study were involved in activities that are normally part of the classroom routine. That routine included pre- and post assessments that are normally included to help both the teacher and students see the students' strengths and weaknesses before beginning a unit of study as well as progress at the completion of a unit. These assessments were not only content specific but also included tools used to gather information regarding students' self-perceptions and motivation as readers.

Assignments during the course of study were also collected for analysis. Data sources included the following.

### **Assessment Tools**

Two assessments were administered on the first day of the research unit. Once the assessments were administered, students turned them in and I scored them using the scoring guides included with the instruments. Only instruments completed by students who had consent forms on file were included in this report; however, all students' scores were used to plan lessons and assist students individually as appropriate.

- The Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS) (Henk & Melnick, 1995). The Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS) is a tool which measures how students view themselves as readers using four components: (a) progress – how current performance compares with past performance; (b) observational comparison – how personal performance compares with that of peers; (c) social feedback – input received from family, teachers, and classmates regarding reading, and; (d) physiological state – feelings experienced while reading. I had been using the RSPS for the previous two years with my students. As they enrolled on our campus and joined my class, I had them complete the RSPS on their first class day in order to gain a sense for how they felt about themselves as readers.
- The Adolescents' Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) (Pitcher et al., 2007). The Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) contains two sections – a multiple choice reading survey of 20 questions, and a conversational interview component (Pitcher et al., 2007). The multiple choice section measures a

student's self-concept as a reader and the value he places on reading. This portion of the AMRP was given to each student on the day we began the research study and was also given to students on their first day of class if they enrolled after the study began. The conversational interview portion was used informally in class or small group discussions at the beginning of the research project. I had not previously been using the AMRP with my students, but felt information gained from the instrument would help round out my understanding of my students' perceptions of themselves as readers as well as their attitudes toward reading.

### **Student Artifacts**

Student artifacts consisted mainly of assignments the students did for grades throughout the unit. These assignments included formative and summative assignments. Assignments were turned in throughout the unit and I graded them as I would grade any work completed throughout the school year. Once students saw the grades and discussed any questions or concerns, the assignments were returned to me for my records at which time I sorted the students who had consent forms on file from those who did not. Only the assignments completed by students with consent forms were retained for analysis.

- Moodle (the school district's online learning platform). Moodle included a discussion board on a question regarding technology's impact on social interactions. Since Moodle is an online learning platform, I was able to set up discussion boards so that students could converse with each other across class periods. Because the number of students was small, using Moodle to discuss

topics provided a larger audience and allowed for more feedback from student to student.

- Essential questions (Smith and Wilhelm, 2006). Smith and Wilhelm define essential questions as guiding questions that are developed to help students focus on what matters. They are rich and complex, meant to engage students and lead to learning big ideas. The essential questions I devised were presented in a reading guide and were divided into four categories: (a) Focusing on the Players – looking at the characters in the novels, (b) Focusing on the Social Issues – exploring the social issues on which each novel was based, (c) Focusing on the Author’s Craft – analyzing how the author used various techniques to write a meaningful and engaging story, and (d) Focusing on Personal Connections – noticing how the characters’ experiences with the social issues in the novel related to us as readers personally. The categories were contained in a reading guide titled “How Did It Come to This?” The reading guide was required due to the structures of the campus which severely limited the interactions students could have with each other during class. These structures were discussed in detail in the limitations of the study in Chapter I.
- Additional written assignments. Students completed various assignments during the research unit other than those mentioned previously, including written and oral discussions of related nonfiction articles, reflections on and reactions to related nonfiction readings, and a summative assessment given at the end of the dystopian novel. These assignments provided activities based on the dimensions

of critical literacy as outlined by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002), and also provided the required formative and summative activity grades as required by the district.

### **Audio Transcripts**

Digital recordings were used only at the end of the unit to record students' comments during whole-class interviews. Class interviews were held with each group after most of the students were finished with their dystopian novels and had completed their summative assignment. The class interviews were audio recorded and most questions were constructed by me before the interviews were conducted. Questions were based on the dimensions of critical literacy, the constructs assessed in the RSPS and the AMRP, and my observations of their work. Other questions were constructed on the spot as the interviews progressed. While all students participated in the interviews, the transcripts were coded with names of students and marked so that comments made from students who had returned consent forms were the only comments used during data analysis.

### **Field Notes**

Field notes were collected throughout the day on a clipboard I kept with me during class times. Those notes included observations of student behavior and quick capturing of comments made during whole-class, small group, and individual teacher/student discussions held during the unit. Questions students had during the day, thoughts they expressed, and ideas they proposed were kept in the field notes. On days we were out of class in the library, I observed student behaviors and noted their choices

and progress. Also on the clipboard, I kept notes during conversations held throughout the unit with the focus students. Follow-up conversations were also held with the students when they returned to the DAEP campus after exiting and then committing another infraction which required them to be returned to our campus again later. All three of the focus students returned to the DAEP campus within six months of completing the lesson part of the research.

### **Research Journals**

Two journals were used from the beginning of the planning of the research project through the data analysis and write-up at the end.

- Reflexive research journal. I kept a journal throughout the process of the research. The journal included thoughts I had about what work I had already done in the action research spiral and how I wanted to proceed with conducting the research, notes from the planning of the research project, and thoughts I had after the class part of the project was completed as I analyzed and wrote up the data.
- Daily diary. I kept reflections made at the end of each class day during the weeks of the research project in a daily diary. Entries were made each afternoon describing exactly what assignments had been done that day, recollections about student reactions, and anything else which I had not recorded on the field notes during the day. The diary also included my feelings and reactions about the day and things I would change next time in doing the daily assignments as I considered the action research implications of the project.

## **Data Analysis**

The primary tool used for analyzing data was a workbook constructed using Microsoft Excel 2010. Students were typed into the program, and multiple pages were set up for each part of the research project. The pages allowed me to create columns, thus making it possible to sort and resort the data in multiple ways.

The RSPS and the AMRP were used only as pre-assessments. Because the research unit was approximately six weeks overall, not enough time passed to administer the instruments at the end as a posttest and expect to see any changes. However, the instruments allowed me to construct a picture of my students at the beginning of the research unit. I could get a solid feel for how my students felt about themselves as readers, how well they believed they could read, and what their attitudes were regarding reading as an activity. The interviews and responses during and after the unit would allow me to see shifts in these areas the students experienced as a result of the project. The RSPS scores were reported as numbers ranging from a low of 9 to a high of 45 for each section. These scores helped me plan for individual areas of strengths and weaknesses as I planned lesson adaptations for students. Because they provided information on how my students felt about themselves as readers, they were integral in the action research part of the project.

All student transcripts, researcher journal and diary entries, and field notes were entered into Excel, and I began coding first by using the four dimensions of critical literacy according to Lewison et al. (2002): disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote

social justice. I then began coding for concepts from the research questions: self-efficacy, engagement, motivation, identity. Open coding identified additional themes that were recurring in the data: student choice, instructional strategies, social literacy, and teacher attitude. Additionally, I coded student artifacts using the critical literacy elements, the research question concepts, and open coding.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985, 2007) identified multiple criteria for designing rigorous qualitative research. They state that trustworthy research involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This research project used these guidelines to maintain trustworthiness of the research. Cohen and Crabtree's (2006) summaries of Lincoln and Guba's work were used to maintain the rigors of qualitative research.

### **Credibility**

Credibility establishes confidence in the findings as true. In this study, credibility was insured through prolonged engagement, persistent observation and negative case analysis. Prolonged engagement involves "lengthy and intensive contact with the phenomena (or respondents) in the field" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, p. 18). While my students come and go from the DAEP program, I had had three years' experience on the DAEP campus, with 22 previous years of working in the same district with students who were struggling academically, many of whom ended up assigned to DAEP during their year with me at their home campus. Additionally, the teachers with whom I worked did not change during the three years that I had been on this campus. Four core teachers and



three electives teachers taught all the high school students and worked as a team to problem-solve behavior issues that affected academic success. This team of teachers, along with three instructional aides, knew each other well, trusted each other, and therefore worked very well together.

### **Transferability**

Transferability relies on thick description, a “narrative developed about the context so that judgments about the degree of fit or similarity may be made by others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, p. 19). While this school situation was different from a traditional school, we still had a wide range of students academically, socioeconomically, and behaviorally. The description of the context of the study should make transfer of the research applicable to other classrooms with at-risk students or students who are disengaged from the reading in their English classes.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is established when an external auditor examines the process. While this study did not have an external auditor, I frequently conferred with colleagues on the DAEP campus as well as cohorts and professors from the university in order to get feedback during both the planning and execution of the research project.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is established when the researcher keeps a detailed audit trail. I kept extensive records in the form of raw data such as the instruments administered to the participants, assignments and activities completed by the participants throughout the

research, field notes, a daily journal during the research, and a reflexive journal with notes about my observations, adjustments made throughout the research process, notes to be discussed in the dissertation, and thoughts that lead to categories when open coding was in process.

### **Conclusion**

In planning my research project for this study, I knew I was using action research in order to find better ways to teach my students – ways in which they could learn more easily. By designing a literacy unit around dystopian literature and using critical literacy practices, I hoped to help my student be more motivated and engaged so that they would see themselves as capable readers. If they felt they were successful at reading and working with texts and assignments that were at the high school level, I hoped this would encourage them to continue to engage in reading and writing activities that would help them continue to grow and improve as readers.

The concern for me was how I could mediate a high school student's self-efficacy and identity as a reader. What kind of experiences could I provide that would engage him enough that he was willing to risk the effort and the potential humiliation of yet another unsuccessful literacy encounter, and that would ensure that he had legitimate success if he did decide to engage? How could I help my students see themselves as capable readers? Through classroom observations, I believed contemporary young adult dystopian fiction held the power to draw at-risk students into thoughts and discussions that were meaningful and important – adult types of discussion on topics that had no easy answers and were certainly not black and white. Combining this type of literature with

activities grounded in critical literacy theory, I hoped to find a way to engage and motivate students to participate in literacy activities and feel successful while doing challenging work that was not watered down or insignificant. This theoretical and methodological framework was chosen in an attempt to accomplish that goal. In the next chapter, I will explore the findings of this research which would inform my ongoing work in the spiral of action research.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This action research study explored the relationships between the teacher researcher's use of critical literacy practices with dystopian fiction, and students' self-efficacy and perceptions of themselves as readers. Critical literacy theory (Freire, 1970; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) provided the theoretical framework for the study. Critical literacy practices were the guiding principles for the assignments, and provided the lens for looking at student attitudes and responses. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) also provided a theoretical basis as the study looked at the adolescents' self-efficacy. Aside from simply trying to motivate and engage students, this study sought to inquire deeply into how students felt about their abilities to read and their perceptions of themselves as readers. When I read the four elements of critical literacy as defined by Lewison et al. (2002), they seemed to mesh perfectly with dystopian fiction. By using critical literacy practices paired with dystopian novels as the basis for the lessons, I was able to see not only how students' self-efficacy and perceptions were affected, but I was able to observe their engagement and motivation as well.

#### **Outline of Findings**

This chapter begins with an explanation of the data analysis procedures, an overview of the context of the study, and a brief reminder of who the participating students were. Following the teacher and student descriptions, the results of the Reader

Self-Perception Scale (Henk & Melnick, 1995) and the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (Pitcher et al., 2007) are given. These instruments were used at the beginning of the study in order to gauge the students' views of themselves as readers and participants in literacy activities. A chronological discussion of the days of the study and how they fit into the elements of critical literacy follow, with a description of the activities and observations of students' behaviors and comments. Next, the elements of critical literacy will be reviewed with a summary of how assignments were constructed to follow critical literacy practices and comments students made during interviews near the end of the unit. Finally, three focus students will be discussed in order to evaluate the impact this action research study may have had on the students overall. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data was analyzed by placing most data into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The results of the Reader Self-Perception Scale and the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile were placed in one spreadsheet so that the scores could be sorted and resorted in order to determine which students were scoring in the low, medium, and high ranges in each category. Additionally, each line of data from the interview transcripts, reflexive journal, and daily diary were entered into a spreadsheet and coded for the elements of critical literacy (disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice) as well as being coded for key words in the research questions (self-efficacy, engagement, motivation, and identity). Student artifacts were also coded for the above by hand. Open coding of all

data revealed five additional recurring themes – time to read, choice of reading materials, instructional strategies, social aspects of literacy, and teacher attitudes. Each line of text in the spreadsheets was marked according to the appropriate codes. Then the spreadsheet could be manipulated in order to see what information fell into each category. As data were analyzed, patterns emerged which will be discussed in this chapter. Figure 4.1 shows an example of the spreadsheet used to analyze the data. See additional examples of spreadsheets in Appendix D.

| Date     | Type of Data | Period | Topic/?                                      | Text   | Disrupting Common Place | Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints | Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues | Action Promoting Social Justice | Self-efficacy |
|----------|--------------|--------|--|--|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 2      | did you like dys novels                      | Like it makes you think if I lived like that   | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 2      | what did you think/ feel                     | It made me nervous.  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 2      | what did you think/ feel                     | It made me think what if this really happened.   | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 2      | what about library day                       | It's nice to get to sit in a different place.  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 2      | what about library day                       | It's more open. We aren't stuck in the carrels.  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 2      | any other thoughts                           | I thought about how we didn't do all that English stuff.   | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 3      | did you like current events                  | Yeah, like how living in 1984 really related to <i>Feed</i> . Usually our assignments don't  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 3      | why did you like this unit better            | all connect together like that.  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 3      |  | More entertaining  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 4      | would you take book home                     | How many of you would have taken your book home to read it if you could have?  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 4      | did you like the reading guide               | Let's shift slightly to the assignments. They're listed on the board. Let's talk about the reading guide. I didn't use chapter-by-chapter questions or quizzes. I don't want to kill the book, and I don't think that's what books should be for. I even told you if you didn't finish you could still take the test. So it kind of took the pressure off. It wasn't required that you finish. It was just a tool for us to do some thinking and discussion and writing. Has anyone else ever done that with you before? | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 4      | have you ever not needed to finish the novel | [Multiple Nos]   | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 4      | what about this still "felt like school"     | But you just said you read the book. So you really read the book?  | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 4      | home school assigns are a problem            | I think these assignments that are here are better than those that are over there because they don't really help you a lot. This had stuff to think about. I kinda got worried like maybe I should do something.   | X                       |                                   |                                   | X                               |               |
| 5/9/2014 | Interview    | 4      | home school assigns are a problem            | I liked real life things that are really going on.   | X                       |                                   | X                                 |                                 |               |

*Figure 4.1.* Data analysis spreadsheet sample

## Context of the Study

I had worked with struggling adolescents for 26 years at the writing of this paragraph. I had been aware for many of those years that struggling teenaged readers often do not do well in a traditional comprehensive high school where the English classes

focus on an approach to teaching using a traditional canon of literature and literary analysis. While I had already adjusted my teaching style to include nontraditional approaches to traditional literature (Gallagher, 2009; Wilhelm & Smith, 2002), I felt that more needed to be done to address the needs of these particular students who neither identified themselves as readers nor thought they were good at reading. I knew that if I wanted my students to shift their focus, I needed to do so as well.

Chapter 1 of Geoffrey E. Mills's (2011) book *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher* begins with "What Motivates Unmotivated Students?" This first subtitle immediately caught my attention as I pondered how I wanted to structure my research project. I am a classroom teacher, and theoretical questions that do not seem to have a strong application to what teachers can do in the classroom to help their students are not the kinds of questions that are pressing for me. Mills defines action research as systematic inquiry conducted by teachers into how they teach and how their students learn with the goal of improving student outcome. "Action research is research done *by* teachers *for* themselves" (p. 5). A critical step in action research is developing a plan after the data are analyzed. This is the step I, as a classroom educator, am most interested in. How can I be a better teacher? What can I do differently that will lead my students to learn more effectively? McClintock (2004) uses the term *scholar practitioner* to describe someone who uses "varied theoretical and practice perspectives. . . . to examine the effectiveness of professional interventions" (pp. 395-396). This term, and Mills' definition, described exactly what I want to research. The bottom line was, how could I be a better teacher for the students I teach? I have chosen to work with students who

have multiple issues that impede their academic progress. After being at an alternative school for three years, I had seen a large number of students come and go multiple times, some making the comment that when they left that they would be back, and some when they returned making the comment that they were glad to be back. I was curious about these students. What was it about our campus that had some students purposefully getting in trouble in order to make return visits? How could I capitalize on those students' desire to be in my classroom? What could I do in the short time that they were in my classroom that would maximize their growth in literacy? How could I do a better job of being a teacher of these challenging students who struggled with academic success and help them see themselves as competent readers? At the time of the study, I had several students whom I could interview to get an in-depth look at their feelings about the research project and their insights into school and their literacy experiences.

Mills presents action research as a continuous process of reflecting, acting, and evaluating. Mills' presentation of the Stephen Kemmis's representation of the process as a spiral fit particularly well with my vision. With a general plan in mind, the researcher begins a first action step, monitors student learning, and evaluates the results of the first step. The general plan is revised, and a second step is begun, and the monitoring and evaluating continue. Each loop through the spiral refines the action steps based on the observations and evaluations.

I had already begun this process the year before my formal research for this dissertation had begun. I noticed that my students were not motivated, but it also seemed to go deeper than simply being bored or lazy. I had begun to ask questions over the past



several years to diagnose the problem, and discovered that many of my students verbalized the idea that they just were not that good at reading. They thought that since reading was something students learn in elementary school, their reading was as good as it could be. They believed they simply did not have the ability to do any better than their current level. They did not see reading as a skill that could be improved with practice and experience. I had been reading about self-efficacy and critical literacy practices, and I knew that using traditional methods in my classroom – such as reading long works, short stories, and poetry from the distant past, coupled with assignments that focused on literary analysis – was not working well for my students who were struggling. I began to wonder if using critical literacy practices could mediate high school students' self-efficacy. So the general plan was to use critical literacy and contemporary fiction to try to be more effective in helping my students engage in literacy activities that would help them practice and experience literacy, which would give them a chance to begin to improve their skills. The first action step, which was done the year before the dissertation research project began, was to find contemporary young adult fiction that would capture the interest of my students while providing me with multiple avenues for thinking and engaging with the literature. I had already discovered by effectively using book talks that students were willing to give a book a try if someone enthusiastically recommended it to them and if it seemed like a good story. Dystopian novels had become the leading genre for my students, as was evidenced through the numbers of dystopian novels the students were reading after each time I presented the book talk on that genre. So the year prior to the dissertation research project, I gathered a large set of

dystopian novels of any and every title I could find, and I did a book talk on dystopian fiction. I then allowed students to look through the large pile of books, select one, and I began asking more questions based on critical literacy practices. Each day, students wrote in a response journal using their novels and a list of questions I had devised based on social issues. As I monitored, I was pleased to find that more students participated in the assignments during the unit. I noticed that more students were willing to discuss what they were reading. I saw that more students were completing the written assignments when the assignments focused on questions that connected their reading to the outside world. The students were excited about the unit, and I was excited! However, when I evaluated the action step, I noticed that while the overall unit was more fun for all of us, I needed to be more intentional about helping students think deeply about their reading and the world on which their readings were based. I also knew I needed to keep more formal records in order to more effectively evaluate what was happening. Those thoughts were the basis for this dissertation project.

### **Student Participants**

Fifty-one students were enrolled at the Disciplinary Alternative Education Placement campus (DAEP) during the six weeks that this dystopian unit covered. At the time of the study, students were segregated by gender. I had four class sections of boys and one class section of girls. Three girls were placed into the boys' sections because of issues with the master schedule. Of the 51 total students, 19 of their parents signed consent forms. All students participated in all aspects of the unit since these were the lessons for their English class. While all students participated in the assignments,

specific findings for this chapter will focus only on the 19 students who had consent forms on file. Three of those 19 students served as focus students. The fact that I had already been their teacher in at least one previous placement in the Disciplinary Alternative Education Program provided a level of familiarity for both me and the students that helped them feel comfortable in participating with me on this project. Their willingness to verbalize their feelings and dig into their thought processes provided additional insight into the minds of students while engaging in the activities.

### **Getting Started - Students Perceptions of Themselves**

As a teacher of literacy, I have been interested for a long time in how my students perceive themselves as readers. As I came to believe that there were underlying issues with their motivation, including how they saw themselves as readers and whether they believed they could do the reading required for their academic work, I looked for ways to measure these areas. I found two instruments that I began to use in 2013 – the Reader Self-Perception Scale (Henk & Melnick, 1995), and the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (Pitcher et al., 2007). The RSPS and the AMRP were administered on the same day, April 9, 2014, the Wednesday before the lessons started on Monday of the next week. I explained the purpose of administering the instruments, and showed students that this process was not new for my classes by showing them a stack of instruments taken by students earlier in the year. The students seemed interested in the instruments and what they would learn about themselves.

### **Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS)**

The Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS) was developed in 1995 by Henk and Melnick in order to provide an instrument that would assist educators in measuring students' self-perceptions as readers. Based on Bandura's (1986, 1997) work, the link between a reader's self-efficacy and his reading behavior, attitudes, and habits was obvious. Henk and Melnick observed that Bandura's self-efficacy model predicts that individuals take four basic factors into account when estimating their capabilities as a reader: Performance, Observational Comparison, Social Feedback, and Physiological States (p. 472); however, no instrument existed to measure these factors. While their RSPS was normed with fourth through sixth grade students, and as such is recommended for use with that intermediate level, no other instrument existed to help teachers of secondary students determine a student's self-perception. The norming data was almost the same in all three grade levels (the means were within .9 points of each other and the standard deviations were within .4 points of each other), so using the instrument at a higher grade level would likely give me reliable data for comparing students' perceptions of themselves as readers. Given no other option for observing students' self-efficacy, the RSPS was used.

The instrument was administered to 39 students, which was the total number on my rolls on the day the study began; however, only 19 students had returned consent forms. Table 4.1 shows the distribution of students' scores for each of the four factors for those 19 students. When I looked at the scores for all 39, I found that the scores of these 19 are representative of the group as a whole. High scores, according to Henk and

Melnick, include any scores that are above the mean score plus the standard deviation. Average scores are scores which fall within the standard deviation above and below the mean. Scores that are below the mean minus the standard deviation are considered low. While most students had scores that ranged across the low, average, and high scores in the four factors, one student scored low in all four factors, three students scored low in three of the factors, and eight students scored low in two of the factors.

Table 4.1

*Distribution of Students Who Took the RSPS*

| FACTOR                   | HIGH    | AVERAGE  | LOW     |
|--------------------------|---------|----------|---------|
| Progress                 | 3 (16%) | 14 (74%) | 2 (11%) |
| Observational Comparison | 2 (11%) | 15 (79%) | 2 (11%) |
| Social Feedback          | 0 (0%)  | 11 (58%) | 7 (37%) |
| Psychological State      | 0 (0%)  | 11 (58%) | 8 (42%) |

*Note: Totals do not always equal 100% due to rounding.*

Approximately 74% of the 19 students fell within the normal range regarding their progress in reading and 79% fell the normal range in comparing themselves as readers to other readers in their peer group. The number of students placing themselves in the normal range seemed surprisingly high given that I was expecting students to have low self-perceptions; however, in discussing the instruments with the students after I had the results, a student made a comment that helped clarify numbers. I asked students how they felt about their reading when compared to other students, and Juanita said, “none of us read good.” When I probed her comment, other students concurred that many high

school students had trouble reading, so they fell in line with their peers. I knew from my encounters with teachers from the traditional high school campuses in our district that there were classes specifically for students who did not do well on the state tests. Most of the students I had in my classes fell into this group. They were used to being with students who could not read well, did not test well, and had been segregated for several years into classes or tutorials that used programs or strategies that were supposed to help them with their low reading skills, so this was the peer group to which they compared themselves. Thus most considered themselves average while a few fell into the low category and even fewer into the high category. These scores and comments provided documentation that most of the students did not have perceptions of themselves as strong readers, nor did they believe others saw them as strong readers. This was of great concern for me. If they did not believe they were good readers, they were not likely to put much effort into literacy activities that could help them strengthen their skills. According to records which accompanied them, many of these students arrived from their home campus failing their classes due to failure to complete or turn in assignments. Those who would complete the assignments because they believed that was what they should do, were not likely to put in enough effort to strengthen their skills.

Another trend in the results of this assessment tool that supported my hypothesis that students had low perceptions of themselves as readers was the fact that 37% of my students scored themselves in the low range on their perceptions of others' views of them as readers and that 42% scored themselves in the low range on how they felt physiologically when they read. The direct or indirect feedback they had received from

teachers, parents, and peers regarding their reading abilities caused them to rate themselves at the low end of the scale, which indicated they did not see themselves as capable readers in the eyes of others, and they did not feel that reading was a pleasurable activity. In fact, no one scored themselves in the high range when it came to the social feedback they had received or on their internal feelings during reading. Weak skills regarding reading aloud might have played a part in more students scoring lower. I was asked more than once by students if they would be expected to read aloud. When I asked them if they wanted to, they immediately and vehemently responded with a resounding, “No!” While there were always one or two exceptions when this topic came up, most students dreaded the idea of reading aloud.

#### **Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP)**

Pitcher et al. (2007) developed the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) in order to assess secondary students’ motivation to read. An adolescent’s motivation to read is important because it “influences readers’ choices of reading material, their willingness to engage in reading, and thus their ultimate competence in reading, especially related to academic reading tasks” (Pitcher et al., 2007, p. 379). Thus, knowing students’ motivation to read in a concrete way can help teachers make academic decisions that will increase their students’ motivation and consequently positively impact their engagement and competence in reading.

The same 39 students who took the RSPS survey also took the reading survey section of the AMRP, and again the results of the 19 students who had consent forms on file were representative of the whole. The results are presented in terms of percentages in

three categories: self-concept as a reader, value of reading, and overall percentage of the full survey. The higher the percentage of a student's score, the higher his self-concept as a reader, the higher his view of the value of reading, and the higher his overall motivation to read. While the writers of the AMRP do not define the results in terms of low, average, and high, I decided to see how many students' percentages fell above 75%, between 50% and 75%, and below 50% in order to gain an understanding of how many of my students had fairly high motivation, those who were borderline motivated, and those who were least likely to be motivated. Table 4.2 shows the results of the AMRP for the 19 students who returned consent forms. I was happy to see that more than half were above 74% on their self-concept as a reader, and somewhat surprised to see that most students were in the mid-range when thinking about the value of reading. Most of the students I had worked with, including those who were part of this research, thought of reading as an academic endeavor, and they did not see much purpose in it. They equated the term *reading* with reading texts by Shakespeare, Homer, Steinbeck, and other authors from the distant past. They also believed this is what teachers mean when they use the word *reading* – reading classic works by long-dead authors. The reading they liked to do – online (social media and articles referenced in posts), comic books and graphic novels, instruction manuals for games, and other out-of-school reading did not register with them as reading important enough to consider when they thought about whether they were readers or not. The reading they did out of class was not considered important by those outside of school.



Table 4.2

*Distribution of Students Who Took the AMRP*

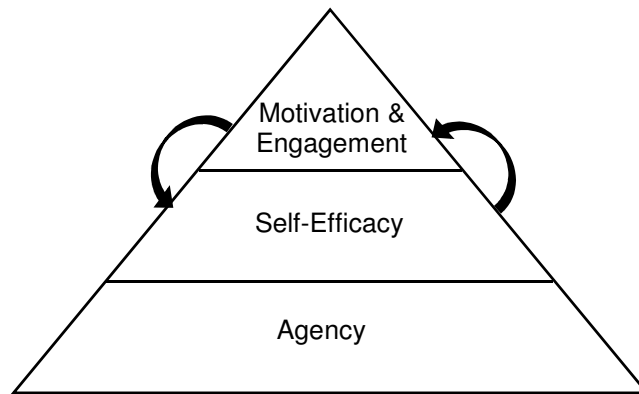
| Category                 | ABOVE 74% | 74%-50%  | BELOW 50% |
|--------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Self-Concept as a Reader | 11 (58%)  | 8 (42%)  | 0 (0%)    |
| Value of Reading         | 4 (21%)   | 13 (68%) | 2 (11%)   |
| Full Survey              | 4 (21%)   | 15 (79%) | 0 (0%)    |

In this survey, I was pleasantly surprised to see how many students ranked their self-concept as a reader at above 74%. This number caused me to ponder the self-efficacy issue that I felt many of my students had when it came to reading. This was a higher percent falling into the highest level than I expected. After thinking about this and asking students about it, I wondered if Juanita's statement applied here as well. They felt they were just as good as their peers, so their self-concepts were not severely impacted. Perhaps I was not fighting a self-efficacy issue with regard for reading in general, but maybe more specifically with academic reading. If many students believed they were fairly good at reading, then I thought they might have the motivation to read the upcoming dystopian novels if I could get them hooked. They might be able to encourage others to participate through their example, as well. Overall, in the full survey, 79% of the research participants fell in the mid-range for motivation.

In comparing the RSPS and the AMRP, it appeared that the majority of students were in the middle regarding their perceptions of themselves as readers and their

motivation to read. I hoped this would be a good sign for asking my students to participate in activities that fell into the critical literacy dimension of disrupting the common place. If I could interest them in something that was different from what they were used to, I might be able to see how the critical literacy practices associated with reading the dystopian novels affected their attitudes and perceptions. I was encouraged that I would not be starting with a majority of students who were at the low end of the scales. Based on their verbal complaints about reading, as well as scores I had seen in previous administrations of the instruments with other students, I had predicted that there would be more students at the lower end of the scales. I had always interpreted scores on the instruments on an individual basis, one student at a time. This was the first time I had looked at a set of scores for a group.

Additionally, as I began to plan, I realized that the relationships among agency, self-efficacy, and motivation and engagement were more intertwined, self-efficacy and motivation/engagement in particular. If students did not have self-efficacy for reading academic material, they would need something to motivate them to get started. However, to remain engaged, students would need to feel an increase in self-efficacy. These two parts of the pyramid were more recursive than I had at first realized. I would need to work between these two levels to keep students involved and participating. Figure 4.2 illustrates this recursive interaction.



*Figure 4.2. Recursive nature of self-efficacy and motivation/engagement.*

### **The Lessons**

The following section examines the chronological progression of the lessons through the weeks of the research project. I was surprised to find that each week included an emphasis on one of critical literacy elements from Lewison et al. (2002). While this was not planned, upon reading the notes and realizing that the weeks fell into these patterns, I wondered if this was overall the best way to think about using the elements of critical literacy to plan lessons. This idea will be revisited in the Discussion in Chapter 5. Table 4.3 gives an outline of the weeks and their emphases.

Table 4.3

*Outline of Weeks*

| WEEK | EMPHASIS   |
|------|--|
| 1    | Focus on Sociopolitical Issues   |
| 2    | Disrupting the Commonplace   |
| 3    | Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice                             |
| 4    | Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints                                      |
| 5    | Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues<br>Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints |

**Week One – Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues**

The first week addressed the critical literacy element of focusing on sociopolitical issues. In this element, students are given the opportunity to explore and understand the sociopolitical systems to which they belong, questioning and challenging unequal power relationships (Lewison et al., 2002). In order to get students motivated, I felt the best place to start was to introduce them to the idea of sociopolitical issues and what that meant. Because the plots of the dystopian novels were centered on major social issues with additional minor issues included in each story, the students needed to be able to think about social issues in a way that was clear for them. To open the unit, we read two pieces. The first was a blog post titled “Grandparents Help Kids Develop Good Eating Habits” accompanied by the USDA “My Plate” graphic showing the current governmental guidelines regarding good nutrition. The blog had been posted by Trish

(Oma) Britten, Nutritionist, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, a division of the U. S. Department of Agriculture on March 31, 2014 at 10:00 AM. After making sure all students understood what a “blog” is, and how the formatting of a blog works (a short article about a topic, followed by public discussion in the comments section), a brief and uninspired discussion of the content of the blog followed. Students were not surprised by any of the content, and as Alexis said, “So what’s to discuss? Isn’t this the usual stuff we learn?” This graphic was what they studied in health class, and they were used to seeing articles about nutrition. Amanda said that she knew that Mrs. Obama is the reason school lunches had gotten so bad, so telling grandparents how to feed their grandkids did not seem like a very big deal. After the quick discussion, I handed students a copy of the comments. If all comments had been printed out, they would have taken 17 pages of space, so I filtered them for school appropriate language, and so that the comments reflected a variety of thoughts. I gave them as many as would fit on the front and back of two pieces of paper. After reading aloud through the comments and listening to students make note of the vehemence with which the comments were made, I had students generalize by asking, “What are these comments mainly about?” When students were slow to respond even after having a few moments to think, I asked a follow-up question, “Are these comments about the content? Do they agree or disagree with the comments the author made about nutrition?” Students immediately responded that the comments were *not* about the content of the blog, but instead were about the source of the blog. “These people are really angry,” Alexis said. “Yes they are,” I responded. “Why are they so angry?” I asked. Students then began picking back through the comments and

noticing that responders were bringing up issues such as drones, data mining, the government's ability to monitor our private conversations through social media, and the fact that the government makes rules about subjects that should be off-limits. Most of these comments had little or nothing to do with the actual content of the blog, which was nutrition. We discussed who the USDA is and students quickly noticed that the comments were about government because the author of the blog was an employee for a government agency. Finally, we discussed how this is a sociopolitical issue – something is happening in society that is related to the government.

After finishing this discussion, students were given an article by Rebecca Klein in the *Huffington Post* titled “Mom Learns the Hard Way That ‘Ritz Crackers Count as a Grain.’” This article chronicled the story of a mother who was fined by her children's daycare for not providing a nutritionally sound, well-balanced lunch. The lunch the mother had provided, which included a meat, fruit, vegetable, and milk, contained nothing from the grain category. The daycare provided Ritz crackers as the grain, and charged the mother a fee for having to supplement the lunches. Students were surprised by the case and began a heated discussion of what happened. I kept track of the comments in my field notes, but the conversation was flowing too quickly to keep track of who was saying what.

“Some people think crackers are ‘junk food’ and don’t want their kids to have them.”

“My sister is allergic to gluten – these might have sent her to the hospital! That’s why my mom always packs her lunch.”

“Did you notice that now the day care center doesn’t let parents send their kids’ lunches? They provide all the food now. What if you don’t want your kid to have something they’re serving?”

“Can the government really do that? Can they tell you what you HAVE to eat?”

“Wait, can the government *really do THAT*? Read our e-mails and stuff without telling us?”

As time began to run short, I wrapped up the discussion with the idea that sociopolitical issues are things that are happening in society, both around us and far away. If we do not know what is going on in the world around us, things are likely to happen to us without us realizing it until it may be too late. Choices can be taken away and decisions made for us, potentially and gradually taking away our freedoms.

The next day I told the students we needed to take care of some business relating to the research study I was conducting. While my current students read their self-selected novels, I had new students fill out the Reader Self-Perception Scale survey and the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile multiple choice questions. I gave the new students a copy of the Consent to Participate in Research form and cover letter and discussed it with them. I asked the classes as a whole if they had any questions about the research project. I noticed that the idea of a research project in general seemed to excite most of the classes. I was excited about how many of the students were approaching the project. They seemed to be intrigued. Those who had participated in yesterday’s discussion of the blog and the article were interested in looking at things from a different perspective by examining sociopolitical issues. However, in spite of the great beginning,

I hit a snag. In my girls' class, two of the students were angry with me for reasons related to discipline issues, and their overall responses to my class were negative. They seemed to influence the other girls in the class, and the atmosphere for these first couple of days was neutral at best, with no one showing enthusiasm for participating in the research study. Only two of the 13 girls who were in that period turned in consent forms, which made that group the lowest level of participation, as seen in Table 4.4. I realized I had expected this to be the proverbial silver bullet all educators seems to look for even though we know it does not exist. I was so excited about this dystopian unit that I assumed all students would be engaged and excited. Therefore, I was frustrated to hit this bump in the road, and I realized that I would have to focus carefully on this class to try to draw them into the project. Perhaps this was a sociopolitical issue for these girls who see school as a place where they are forced to do certain things and the only way to address it is to refuse to participate. Fortunately, another situation in a different class buoyed my enthusiasm later in the day. Josh, an AP English 4 student I had in my fourth period class, was not participating in the study at all. Because he was an AP student, his home campus teacher was sending his assignments over so that he would not fall too far behind the group at his home campus. However, he was often listening in on the conversation that was happening with the big group and wanted to know if I might want him to sign an assent form in case he said something I might want to use in my research report. He stated he wished he were doing our unit instead of what he had been assigned from his home campus. He did sign an assent form since he was over 18.



Overall, 19 out of 51 students, or 37%, formally participated in the study by returning a consent form.

Table 4.4

*Participating Students*

| <b>Period</b> | <b>Total Number of Students in the Class</b> | <b>Number of Students With Consent Forms on File</b> | <b>Percent of Students with Consent Forms on File</b> |
|---------------|--|--|---|
| 2             | 13   | 2  | 15  |
| 3             | 8  | 5  | 63  |
| 4             | 10   | 5  | 50  |
| 5             | 9  | 4  | 44  |
| 6             | 11   | 3  | 27  |
| Total         | 51   | 19   | 37  |

Now that the students were curious about the topic of social issues, I wanted to continue building momentum by getting them interested in the novels. I had been having success with helping students choose novels for their personal use through using book talks each week that focused on genre. So I prepared a book talk that included information not only on the genre of dystopian fiction, but also on each book that was included in the choices. (See Appendix A for PowerPoint slides and student Book Pass page used in this phase of the unit). I used three criteria for selecting the novels. The first was that it be available from the dystopian novel selection at one of our home high school campuses which was willing to lend me the books. I had asked to borrow five

titles from their 10 available titles, requesting 20 copies of each title. This would give me more than enough novels for students to receive their first or second choice to use during the research project. The English department manager had agreed to loan us the novels, and made all the titles available to me since they were not being used at the time by anyone on his campus. The second criterion was that the books did not yet have movies available. I did not want students to have access to movies to watch rather than reading the novel. This eliminated three of the titles available. Finally, I chose novels based on social issues, selecting a wide variety of issues aside from the excessive government control found in all the novels. The novels selected, including each one's major social issue, were:

- *Exodus* (Bertagna, 2002) – global warming
- *Feed* (Anderson, 2002) – advanced technology
- *The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002) – human cloning
- *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005) – beauty and perfection
- *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007) – abortion

On the first day of the novel selection phase, students had a chance to hear about all five selections while taking notes on their “Book Pass” sheet. Each slide included a picture of the cover of the novel, the major and minor social issues contained in the novel's plot, and a quote or two illustrating a major theme of each novel. Commentary about how each social issue was affecting society today was added verbally. Other information shared with the students included brief descriptions of the main characters so the students knew whether the main characters were male or female. Personal anecdotes

were shared, letting students know what I thought about the novels, and what other students had shared with me in the past about the novels. Students were allowed to ask questions and make comments as we proceeded. A few students were able to say that they had read one or two of the books as we got to each title. Josh, my AP student, shared that *Uglies* was one of the best books he had ever read. Two students asked at the end of fifth period if they could see a particular book. I let them hold the book and look it over with the couple of minutes we had remaining in the period. In sixth period, a student wanted to look at a book, and when I told her we did not have time, she made a friendly pouty face. This day was one of the days that I felt we were on the right track. With the exception of the second period girls' class, who continued to display apathy as a whole toward the project, the students were enthusiastic and engaged.

Continuous comments and questions from each group suggested that students enjoyed conversations around books. This is something I had noticed before. Students who participated in conversations around novels were energetic and engaged. In the past, I had observed students who were not interested in reading self-selected novels get involved in book discussions with me as I talked quietly with other students near them. They gave the impression of wishing they were on the inside, rather than on the outside looking in. Students who were able to participate in book discussions for the first time had shown a noticeable improvement in attitude toward reading. Even their body language reflected that they were pleased to have been able to be a person who could talk about books. Having introduced the concept of sociopolitical issues, students in the research project immediately had a foothold into the discussion. Almost all the students

were able to participate in the conversation about the books, making comments and asking solid questions about the plots and the issues involved in each book. Rather than having two or three students do most of the talking, everyone except two or three participated. The girls' class was the exception. I continued to ponder how to help them engage.

The following day was Thursday, and as was our habit, we went to the library as a class. Given that we had already done the book talk which usually happened on library day, we went straight to the library, and students were placed into groups of three or four with a stack of the five novels at each group. Students took their Book Pass sheet and were given 90 seconds with each book. During that 90 seconds, they were to look at the front cover, read the summary on the back cover, and turn to the first page and begin reading until the timer sounded. At that point, they made notes on their Book Pass sheet that included their observations about the vocabulary they were encountering, whether the beginning of the novel hooked them, and what their overall feeling about the book was, in terms of giving it a grade of A, B, C, or F. They then passed the books clockwise until each person had spent time with all five books. Finally, students were to rank the books from one through five, with one being the book they wanted most and five being the book they wanted least. I stressed that my goal would be to give everyone his or her first choice, but that since there was a limited number of each novel, I might have to go to a second choice. When the books had all been shared and the Book Pass sheets had been turned in, students were allowed to leave their seats to find self-selected novels. I noticed in my field notes that in every period, at least three students continued reading one of the

dystopian novels on their table. Amanda waved me over after she had read *Feed* for about 15 minutes and asked about a word that was being used repeatedly – *lesion*. I explained to her what a lesion was, and she said, “You need to make sure I get this book, Miss.” I asked her if she put a one by it on her selection sheet. She nodded and pointed to the papers in my hand. “Done,” I replied. By the end of the period, she was on page 36. Trip wanted to know if he could go ahead and check out the library copy of his first choice. I told him that would be fine, but he might have to do a little rereading in order to complete the reading guide we would start the next week. If he was alright with that, then it was fine with me. He checked out the book, and continued reading. We were on day four of the research project, and I was very pleased with the excitement the students were showing. I had not seen this level of engagement before. Unfortunately, the girls’ class had still not shown any motivation. Juanita, one of those second period girls, sat for a while staring at her paper without writing on it. She had not written anything during the book pass, and her page was blank. Her head had been on the table most of the period. “Think about which one you like best, the one that seems most interesting to you,” I said in an attempt to guide her to make a decision. “None of them,” she said and made a face. I reminded her that she had the power to choose, and if she decided to give that power to me, I would make the decision for her, which I preferred not to do. As I walked away, one of her table-mates leaned over and whispered to her, and a few seconds later, Juanita ranked the books. Interestingly, Juanita’s first choice was *not* the same as the other young lady’s. I would like to have heard what the conversation involved. I could tell it was about the books, because they continued to shuffle the books around as they talked,

looking at the covers. Perhaps the rest of the girls' group was more mentally engaged than I had thought. While it was frustrating to have this group of 13 girls generally refuse to participate outwardly, I knew I would continue to observe them to see how well they participated in the assignments.

As the week ended and I helped students who had missed a day during the week catch up, I noticed that six students had checked out the library copy of their first choice or had taken my classroom library copy and were already well into reading the novel. I made a note about those students to make sure they were able to receive their first choice. In making novel assignments, I also wanted at least three or four students to be reading the same novel across classes so that future Moodle discussions would have several students participating in each novel thread. Fortunately, it worked out that all students received their first choice. I had 20 copies of each title, and the choices were spread out fairly nicely among four of the titles, as presented in Table 4.5. The fifth title, *Exodus*, had only one student who selected it as his first choice; however, he was exiting the school that next week, so I pulled that novel from the line-up so that students entering the next week would have one of the four remaining novels to choose from. I allowed the student who had chosen *Exodus* to continue reading it since he would be leaving my class before we got to the discussions of the novels.

Table 4.5

*Distribution of Novel Selection*

| <b>Title of Novel (Author)</b>            | <b>Number of Students Who Made it Their First Choice</b> |
|---|--|
| <i>Exodus</i> (Bertagna)                  | 1  |
| <i>Feed</i> (Anderson)                    | 10   |
| <i>The House of the Scorpion</i> (Farmer) | 18   |
| <i>Uglies</i> (Westerfeld)                | 8  |
| <i>Unwind</i> (Shusterman)                | 14   |

The two days involving book selections were particularly exciting for me because I was able to enthusiastically present books that I knew students in the past had loved, and that I liked as well. My knowledge of the books was essential to presenting the books to the students, and my energy in discussing the books played a role in helping students receive the books well and be interested in reading them. Students were quite used to being assigned a book to read, often as a whole class, and being sent off to read it; however, they were not as used to being given a choice and being able to select their own books. Nor were they used to being given so much information about a book ahead of time and being given the chance to build interest in the book. I had several students comment favorably about being allowed to select a book after receiving extensive knowledge of the book. Luis commented that usually “they just give you a book and say, ‘read this book.’” Jesus concurred and stated, “They should give you like options of books, but they don’t usually. They just hand it to you.”

Overall, the novels were received enthusiastically. Two reasons repeatedly presented themselves as to why the students were more excited to start this assignment than most: they had a choice as to what to read, and they were interested in the topics that were presented, particularly the sociopolitical issues. As we finished the week, Jesus brought the discussion back to the idea of social issues. "I like books that make you think. This one has stuff, like, what if this really happened? And then how could we make it stop?" Luis commented, "It seems like you picked the most interesting books for us to read." I was encouraged by the students' reactions this week and excited about their enthusiasm to think about the sociopolitical issues. While I did not intentionally plan to spend the whole week focused on the critical literacy element of sociopolitical issues, this focus turned out to be what was necessary to introducing the students to the novels and what they could expect to find in the novels. I prayed that their enthusiasm would continue once we began doing the work with the novels.

### **Week Two – Disrupting the Commonplace**

As the second week began, the critical literacy element of disrupting the commonplace quickly became the focus. Disrupting the commonplace includes disrupting the status quo and studying language and texts to identify how it shapes identity and constructs social discourses (Lewison et al., 2002). While we looked at the text through different lenses which allowed us to analyze experiences in different ways, I found that critical literacy disrupted the commonplace in yet a different way – by creating a completely different environment for reading than students were used to having in their traditional classrooms. Disrupting the commonplace began with students having choice



of the novel they would read and receiving a reading guide that was not what they were used to receiving. Students were excited to see they each received their first choice, and after books were issued and reading guides were distributed, we discussed the reading guide and what would be expected (See Appendix B for a copy of the Reading Guide). As I had hoped, students were surprised at the content of the reading guide and what they were being asked to do. I asked them what they were expecting, and the most common response was “questions and vocabulary for each chapter.” They were used to seeing a reading guide divided by chapters, with approximately 10 questions per chapter which they had to answer as they progressed through the novel along with words they had to look up that were contained in each chapter. This reading guide was quite different, and the questions allowed students to analyze how the characters were positioned within groups who had power and authority and those who did not. The guide had a catchy title “How Did It Come to This?” The cover sheet asked students to give the title of the book they were reading, list the major and secondary social issues that were discussed in the novel (these came from the PowerPoint used in the book talk), explain why they chose this particular novel from the five offered, and state some initial thoughts about the social issue. The rest of the reading guide focused on four aspects:

The first aspect was *Focusing on the ‘Players.’* Questions on this page asked students to think about the characters in a way that addressed two of the dimensions in the Lewison et al. (2002) pedagogical structure: interrogating multiple viewpoints, and focusing on sociopolitical issues. Questions included

1. Who has the power?

2. What do the people with the power do to keep that power?
3. How do those in power abuse their power?
4. Who are the victims?
5. How do most of the victims respond to the problem?
6. Who is in the “middle” and how do they respond?

Students were to make notes regarding the characters and how they fit into these questions relating to roles. Some of these questions were difficult for students to answer at first. They were used to thinking of characters as protagonists, and looking traditionally at how characterization was built through what the characters said and did, and what other characters said about them. This section disrupted the commonplace by asking them to mentally shift gears to think about which characters had the power and which characters were victims of those with the power. Identifying characters who were caught in the middle was hardest of all. I encouraged students to read so they could get the plot going and assured them we would discuss these questions as they went. While students had to do much of the work independently due to our campus structure that allowed for minimal student interaction, they seemed encouraged by the fact that this was not the typical reading guide they were used to using. Many indicated that the characters were their favorite part of a story, but they did not like having to talk about them the same way every time by analyzing the characterization traditionally. “Wow,” said Amanda as I recorded in my field notes for the day, “this should be a fun way to think about characters for a change.” I was as excited as she was!

The second aspect of the reading guide was *Focusing on the Social Issues*. Students wrote the primary social issue from the novel at the top of the page. Then in a T-chart labeled “PROS” and “CONS,” students kept track of the positive and negative ways the social issue was addressed in the novels. For example, in *The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002), human cloning had a positive side and a negative side. Clones provided the transplants needed for the rich as they aged without the rejection issues caused by transplants from a donor. However, the novel also presented the clones as separate people who had feelings and thoughts. “Creating and using clones for transplants seemed like a good idea until I realized that a clone is actually a separate being – that they would be humans who were separate people,” Braylon noted in his reading guide after he had gotten far enough into the novel to realize what the clones were being used for. As students were encouraged to think about multiple sides of an issue, they were able to see that people think about things differently. This section helped students interrogate multiple viewpoints to an issue, something some had not done before. This critical literacy element had students thinking more deeply about issues, and the fact that it disrupted the commonplace helped increase their motivation to read.

The third aspect was *Focusing on the Author’s Craft*. Students were asked to think about six areas with relation to how the author wrote the story in order to draw the reader in. This page was geared toward directing students’ thoughts into all four critical literacy dimensions of disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints,

focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice.

Students were asked to respond to the following:

- Discussion Points (things that make you go “OMG!”)
- Connections (how this relates to now)
- Visualize (some scenes you found particularly interesting to picture in your head)
- Word Choice (words the author used that were especially interesting or good)
- Predict (what will happen as a result of the characters’ actions)
- Questions (about anything)

Students were asked to look over this sheet at least once a day, particularly after reading for any period of time over ten minutes.

Students found many moments where they were taken aback by what happened in their novels. In the *Discussion Points* section of his reading guide, Emilio had written that he was repulsed by how Matt, in *House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002), was treated when people found out he was a clone. “When Matt was put in the barn and treated like an animal, I couldn’t believe they would treat him that way. He was the same person he had been the day before, but suddenly they saw him as something completely different when really nothing had changed. That’s not right.” Amanda was surprised to see the teens in her novel *Feed* (Anderson, 2002) trying to turn the ugly lesions they were developing into some sort of fashion statement. She noted in her reading guide, “I guess that’s better than making them move to separate places and leaving them to die, like they used to do with the lepers’ colonies.”

As student focused on connections, they began to realize that the teens in their novels faced many of the same issues as some teens today. The following comments were also made in the students' reading guides. "Some kids are treated like Matt all over the world," Emilio noted. Luis questioned whether human cloning was being experimented with today. "Since we know animals are being cloned, it makes sense that they are trying that with human clones somewhere, even if the international community is against the idea as a whole." Jesus noted in his section that he had run away from home once, so he could empathize with the runaways in *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007). "I think it would be ten times harder to run away from home if everyone was hunting for you. But trying to find a place to stay and stuff to eat gets exhausting."

The artists in the group enjoyed trying to visualize some of the scenes in their novels through pictures. Matt sleeping in the barn in *The House of the Scorpion*, and Roland being surgically divided in the "Chop Shop" in *Unwind*, were some of the scenes the students tried to imagine. Students had often been encouraged to picture their novels. Students reported being told repeatedly to make a movie in their heads over the years. However, until now, students had not had scenes as gripping as some of the ones in these novels to visualize. Not only did I encourage them to see the scene in their mind's eye, but to imagine what the people in those scenes were feeling and thinking. This helped students to continue to look at multiple viewpoints, and the combination of seeing, feeling, and thinking were not commonplace for them

Looking at word choices disrupted the commonplace for many students. In the past, they had been asked to keep track of words they did not know in order to create

personal dictionaries or glossaries. That assignment was often difficult for students who truly did not encounter words they did not know. It was also difficult for students who encountered many words they did not know. Instead, this section asked students to look at word choices that seemed interesting and helped the author create the visual pictures and emotions of the story. It helped students see how the author used words to create and disrupt the status quo. Students almost immediately started reflecting on words like “eejit” from *The House of the Scorpion* and “unwind” from *Unwind*. Rather than looking for unknown words, students were actually able to focus on words that were part of the author’s craft. This allowed students to delve into multiple viewpoints by thinking about why certain words were positive or negative. They were able to connect these words to the way characters were developed as those with power, those without, and those in the middle.

In the predicting section, students were encouraged to stop periodically and predict what might happen in the future. While this is a commonplace activity, students were now thinking more about how events would affect those with power and those without. They began to wonder aloud whether their novels would end happily or tragically. Many students had read enough contemporary young adult fiction to realize that there was a trend in the novels to have bad things happen to the main characters. Since many of the main characters were the victims in the novels we were reading, many of the predictions began to focus on who would live and who would die. In looking at the sociopolitical issues, students began to wonder if the victims would be able to effect change in their settings and whether the powerful would always remain in control. This

section led them back to the connections section where they noted that there were issues today where victims or minorities were fighting for equal rights – issues such as racism, rights of gays and lesbians, and refugees around the world fighting to survive, for example. Seeing the world from multiple viewpoints started allowing them as readers to sympathize with what was happening in the real world around them.

Rather than simply predicting what might come next in the novel, the questions in this section led to thinking about solving problems presented in the novels. This section helped students think about actions the characters could have taken to promote social justice, which led to thinking about what needed to be done now to ensure that social justice occurred for all. Students reading *The House of the Scorpion* wondered why the people did not try to murder El Patron, and predicted what the consequences could be for someone who was instructed by those with power to do the wrong thing but chose to do right. “Why do some people have courage and others do not?” Marty wondered in his reading guide. He continued by predicting that he may not have had the courage to fight back either. “Why didn’t Titus help Violet since he had all kinds of money? Maybe he didn’t have access to his family’s money and they weren’t willing to help,” Amanda questioned and predicted as she read *Feed*. The predictions included thoughts that had no answers, but they led to further thinking.

This section on the reading guide helped students think about their novels in a deeper way than they had done before. This deep thinking was enjoyable for them! “This is way more interesting than usual,” Antonio said one day as he noticed the disruption of the commonplace. “But I have a headache,” Santiago added with a smile.

The final aspect of the reading guide was *Focusing on Personal Connections*. On this final page, students were asked to look for three quotes that were meaningful to them, writing down the quote and the page number and explaining why the quotes were meaningful to them. Students were able to identify many meaningful passages that spoke to them personally. This section also allowed students to explore feelings from multiple viewpoints and focus on the sociopolitical issues. This section provided another way for students to think about author's craft without looking for specific literary devices, which also disrupted the commonplace. Students took lines such as "I felt like I was singing a hit single but in hell" (Farmer, 2002, p. 218) and "You don't change laws without first changing human nature" (Shusterman, 2007, p. 115) and analyzed what they thought as they read them. They recognized themselves in lines spoken by characters such as Violet who quietly and calmly noted that Titus would come to visit her as she died, "standing there waiting to feel like you've stayed long enough so that you're a good person and you're allowed to leave" (Anderson, 2002, pp. 233). The day my student Amanda read that line in class, she said in her reading guide that it made her want to cry. "He should care more than that. But I guess we all do that – pretend to care more than we do; do enough to look like we've done the right thing."

At the end of the reading guide, after finishing their novels, students were asked to tell what their favorite part of the novel was and whether or not they would recommend the novel to a peer to read. All the students who answered the question of whether or not they would recommend the novel said yes. Some were enthusiastic. Maria, one of the girls from the class which had been so difficult to engage, stated in her



reading guide that she would recommend the novel because it “has to do with something about what kind of society we live in. If we don’t stop it, who will?” Some were more neutral. Theo stated in his reading guide, “It’s a decent book, so probably.”

At the beginning of this week, the annual state standards-based achievement test was happening over the next two school days after the reading guides were given to students and explained, so students were sent on their way with instructions to read and work on their reading guides. I was not going to see my students for the next two days, so I asked them to read their novels a chapter at a time and stop and make notes in their reading guides. I set a goal of being half finished with their novels by the end of the period on Friday. Students were incredulous that I would set such an ambitious goal, and all stated they would not be able to finish that much reading by Friday. I encouraged them to do the best they could and we would see where they were by Friday, but the expectation was to be approximately half finished. Over the next two days, instructional aides were monitoring classrooms with students who did not have to take any tests while certified teachers were proctoring the assessments. I noted in my field notes that one of the aides, Mrs. Jones, commented to me that Gilberto would not put his book down in order to work on social studies during the hour dedicated to social studies. She asked me to tell her about the book he was reading, *House of the Scorpion*, because he was adamant that he needed to read his book for English rather than do his other classwork. Being an avid reader herself, Mrs. Jones wanted to know about a book that was so engaging that a student, known for being generally uncooperative when it came to doing any work, refused to put it down. My field notes for these two testing days also included remarks

from two other instructional aides that students were reading their novels when they were between assignments, or seemed to rush through other assignments in order to get back to their novels. Comments from staff members made it clear that the student behavior for this assignment was not that which was usually observed. Curiosity began to abound with regard to the assignments and the novels being used. Three teachers said they had conversations with students about the books the students were reading when the students brought up the topic and asked if the teacher had read the novel the student was reading. Two teachers and one instructional aide came to me that week to ask me for a list of the titles and authors we were using as they intended to go get copies of the books. These comments from staff were amazing to me. While I had had lots of conversations myself with students about the books they were reading, I could not recall having ever heard a staff member make a comment about conversations they had had with students about their reading. Certainly no one had ever come to me for a list of the books we were using because they had gotten interested due to conversations with students. I was thrilled with how the reading guides were helping students think about their reading and provided them with topics for conversation with others. These novels and the assignments they were being asked to complete were disrupting the commonplace for all of us.

This week included our usual trip to the library on Thursday. As students entered the classroom, they asked their usual question, “Are we going to the library today?” This question is usually asked with interest because the students enjoy going to the library. Because of the layout of most classrooms where students often sit in study carrels, library day affords us the opportunity to sit in an open, inviting space where we can ignore that

we are in an alternative school for an hour each week. As noted in my field notes, as the fourth period boys came in on this day, after one student asked the question of whether or not we were going to the library, Jesus followed up with the comment, “I don’t like to read, Miss, but I really like this book.” Luis added, “This book is addicting! I want to see what happens next.” Darion finished with “Yeah, I love this book; it’s a really good book. Are we reading today?” While I have found good success with book talks and library day, this response to library day was even better than usual! In fact, Darion expectantly asking if we were going to read was a minor miracle. I gave students their choice of reading their dystopian novel or reading their self-selected book. I reminded them that the goal was to be half finished with their dystopian novel by the next day, but also that I considered Thursdays to be their reading day, so either way was fine. We talked about reading two novels simultaneously, and I told them they would probably find that it is not as difficult as they thought. Several students noted that reading novels in different genres made reading multiple books easier.

In observing students after they began reading, I noted in the field notes that 23 out of 29 students in attendance that day chose to continue reading their dystopian novels; however, all students had their dystopian novels out on the table. Because we require the use of bookmarks rather than turning down pages, it was easy to see where everyone was in their reading. Of these 29 students, I estimated that 13 of the students were less than 20% finished with their dystopian novels, 12 students were between 20% and 50% finished, and four were over 50% finished. Amanda, who had been so enthusiastic about

reading *Feed* had already finished with her book and had begun reading one of the other dystopian novels.

Overall, I enjoyed this day with the exception of two periods. Using my field notes and my memories of the day, I reflected that afternoon in my daily diary on the following. The girls' group was not interested in participating, and despite my efforts to encourage, cajole, and finally threaten, four of the girls refused to read at all and kept their heads down on their tables, resulting in having to mark their behavior plan with unsatisfactory ratings for the period. Three others received similar marks on their plans because they continued to whisper and talk during the period. When redirected, they were disrespectful in multiple ways – rolling their eyes, arguing they were not doing anything wrong, stating I was making them lose credit for their day, etc. One of the boys' groups at the end of the day was more sleepy and subdued than usual. Several had trouble keeping their eyes open. However, the other three groups were engaged and enthusiastic about their novels. They enjoyed talking about their stories for a few minutes, and often could be heard pitching their novels and why others should read them. We had trouble getting to quiet reading, not because they did not want to read, but because they did not want to stop talking about their books. While our campus has tight restrictions on students' conversations with each other, I found myself unwilling to stop conversations that revolved around the novels the students were reading. So many of my students seemed excited to feel like part of a community that focused on literacy. Again, this was a disruption of the commonplace for me as the teacher as well as it being a different experience for the students.

The second week ended with time to read and work on the notes in the reading guide, which was due at the end of the period on Friday. Students were placed in groups with others reading the same novel. If there were any students who did not have peers reading the same novel in the class, I conversed with them, or pulled two or three individual students together to chat. They could add to their notes as they went. The conversation guidelines for today included discussing the victims in the novels and what was happening to them. They were to share one OMG with their group, and ask one question they were curious about or on which they needed clarification. The notes were turned in and graded according to completion: 100 (complete), 75 (mostly complete), 50 (minimally complete), or 0 (nothing complete). Conversations often crossed over group lines, and I allowed them to do so. The field notes and daily diary emphasized the thinking the student were doing. Students in third period tried to make generalizations asking, “Wouldn’t the victims in the books be the main characters?” Students listed the main characters from each novel and divided them into groups – the victims and the powerful. Students noted that some characters were clear victims, such as the teens slated for unwinding in *Unwind*, while others did not seem to be particularly victimized. For example, most students reading *Feed* had not yet gotten far enough into the novel to find out that Violet’s feed was deteriorating and beginning to seriously affect her health while neither health care workers nor the company who created her discount feed would help. Amanda agreed not to give away major plot points with her group since she was already finished, but helped the conversation along by commenting on how having a constant feed of advertisements and news might affect our mental states.

As the teacher, I ended the week by disrupting the commonplace once again when students noted that I had not checked to see which page they were on and whether or not they had gotten halfway. I explained that while getting halfway was the goal, it was only so because I knew they would not want anyone to give them spoilers, and if they had not read halfway, they might hear things that spoiled upcoming plot points for them. This surprised some students who were used to having to keep a log of the pages they read each day. I stated that conversations would be more interesting and they would not feel left out if they were close to the goals, but there would be no penalty for not meeting the goal. While a focus on disrupting the commonplace had not been planned as the overall focus for the week, this week experienced many disruptions of the commonplace in the way assignments were handled and what the students were expected to accomplish and why.

### **Week Three – Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice**

Taking action and promoting social justice is the critical literacy element that encourages students to think outside what they know and consider what they can and should do, based on what they know. This element encourages the reader to question practices of privilege and act on the world in order to change it (Lewison et al., 2002). This third week shifted our thinking from what was in our reading to what our reading means for us and what we should do about it. We started this week reading a CNN online commentary (Beale, 2013) which compared Orwell's (1949) novel *1984* to today. I read the commentary aloud, paragraph by paragraph, and we discussed each point. The points of comparison included

- Government monitoring of citizens through the use of television screens
- Continuous global war
- Doublethink (accepting two mutually contradictory beliefs as correct)
- Newspeak (stripped down English language used to limit free thought)
- Memory hole (machines to alter or disappear documents)
- Anti-sex league (sexual activity reduced to use for procreation only)

Students were surprised to find that Orwell wrote his novel in 1949. We discussed what had and had not been invented in 1949. Questions I asked to help get the discussion going included:

- Has the government gone too far?
- Is it too late to go back?
- What can we do to keep government encroachment and intrusiveness from going further? Should we even try? Does it matter?
- Which one of the *1984* characteristics that is happening now is most disturbing to you?

As had been the case the previous two weeks, the girls' group simply refused to participate at all. Even with uncomfortably long wait times, no one, absolutely no one, would speak at all. After several attempts at getting them to participate in a verbal discussion, I put the questions listed above on the board and asked them to write their responses instead. After they turned them in, I noticed their responses were minimal and superficial, generally one line answers for each question. One of the boys' groups was

willing to participate in the discussion, but they were not very enthusiastic and responses were superficial and did not go in depth. They answered the questions asked and did not take the conversation further, which was disappointing. This assignment, which I had been excited about, seemed to be failing. While I definitely knew how to monitor and adjust, I was unwilling to give up on attempting to get the students involved in comparing the classic dystopian novel to contemporary real life as I believed this would encourage them to do the same with the novels they were reading. I noted these reactions in my reflexive journal in order to ponder the issues later, then continued with the day.

My persistence and patience paid off when I got to the third group of the day. This group enthusiastically engaged in conversation about the points in the blog. I recorded the conversation in my field notes that my third period group discussed. Gilberto shared a personal anecdote about how his family had pulled into an empty parking lot to wait for his brother who was meeting them there. When his brother arrived, they continued to their destination together. A few days later, Gilberto's father got a letter in the mail. It had one photograph of their car – with some of the people visible through the windows – and another photograph of a close-up shot of their license plate. The text of the letter said that their car had been observed in the parking lot of [address given] operating in a suspicious manner. One of the other boys asked what the point of the letter was. Was there a fine? Were they asked not to return there? Gilberto said that as far as he knew, it was a letter informing them that they had been observed doing something suspicious and nothing more. The students were incredulous that this had happened. “What? So now it’s illegal to park in a public parking lot?” Antonio



asked. Emilio made the comment that he thought it was racial profiling. “The car full of Hispanics gets questioned, but if it had been a car full of white people, it wouldn’t have been an issue.” Trip, who is African American, said that he believed the same thing would happen if it had been a car full of black people.

I told my sixth period group of boys a story of traveling to Los Angeles before 9/11, and how we did not have to show any identification when we checked into our city’s international airport. We simply stated our names and picked up tickets and boarding passes, and they assumed that if we had the information to identify our names and flight numbers, we must be who we said we were. One of our party had broken her wrist the day before we were to leave, so we substituted another teacher to go in her place. To avoid paying the transfer fee, she just gave the other teacher’s name as her own and there was no problem. Unfortunately, the Unibomber struck while we were in California, and we were required to show identification when we went to the Los Angeles airport to return home. The teacher traveling under someone else’s name gave her wallet to one of the other teachers in our group, and she told the security officer that she had left home without her wallet, but she had not had time to go back home to retrieve it. Because the airport didn’t require identification, she had not worried about going back for it. If she had, she probably would have missed the flight. They took her to a back room and searched her luggage and purse thoroughly, then let her on the flight. One of the students asked, “You were all together and they could tell you were together?” I responded that yes, that was the case. “They didn’t search anyone else? Shouldn’t they have searched everyone if you were obviously a party?” I hadn’t thought of that, I

admitted. Good point! We speculated on what the consequences would have been if we had tried doing that now.

The two groups of students who were particularly engaged in the conversations generated multiple questions and insights which I recorded in the field notes:

- Is evidence from public surveillance cameras admissible in court?
- Can cops check license plate numbers when you are not doing anything wrong?
- Can the government read our social media pages and monitor our texts and phone calls without a warrant?
- What difference does it make if someone is reading our stuff? There is nothing we can do about it anyway, so there is no point in making a big deal out of it.
- Doesn't it make sense to let the government read our stuff to stop terrorism?
- People who talked about this stuff used to be called "conspiracy theorists," but now it's all true.
- This is kind of like Watergate. And Enron. They destroyed evidence left and right.
- But if we delete files, they are still on a server somewhere, aren't they? I heard posts never really go away. Someone can always find them.
- What about that program where you post pictures? They disappear after a few seconds. Are they still out there somewhere?

What I was particularly sorry about was that we could not get on computers to search for answers to all these thoughts and questions. Such rich discussion and deep thoughts would have led naturally to finding answers. For all the talk in our district about being on the front edge of technology, we still cannot do the basic function of providing students with immediate access to the internet, taking advantage of those teachable moments when students are truly engaged and motivated. Part of the problem is the specialty of our campus. At our home campuses, students are allowed to bring their own devices to be used at the teachers' discretion, so instant access to the internet and research is possible on those campuses. Because our students are not allowed to bring anything on campus except their identification cards and house keys, there are no devices in the classrooms to allow instant internet access. Each teacher has a workstation which students are not allowed to use, and we have a computer on our presentation carts, but that is all. There is not enough technology housed in our building to allow each class to have permanent access to even three or four laptops or iPads that could be used by groups. So we had to end the discussion with those questions lingering in our minds.

On the second day of the week, I introduced the thought of applying their novels to present day, just as we had done with the *1984* commentary, referring them back to their reading guide as a good place to take notes. Then the students were given 30 minutes to read silently and work on their reading guides. The third and fourth period groups – the same active participants from yesterday – spent the last 15 minutes of class talking about government. They wanted to brainstorm what we could do to influence the government because it seemed to them that we have very little power to influence the

government. However, as they started talking, several ideas of how to take action and promote social justice became evident. These themes were recorded in my daily diary after reviewing my field notes from the day.

- Talk to others about how we feel. We are almost never the only ones who feel that way. But if we never talk about it out loud because we are afraid, we start to think we *are* the only ones. That makes it scary. Amanda mentioned how the Pope – *the POPE!* [her emphasis] – had spoken out against discriminating against gays and advocating for same-sex marriage equality.
- Group together and protest. One group mentioned Tiananmen Square and the outcome of that protest. “Wouldn’t that get you in trouble and cause riots and arrests?” one student asked. Someone else mentioned how China has laws that forbid that kind of gathering. Here in the United States it should be way different because we are guaranteed that right. This discussion happened several months before the Ferguson, Missouri shooting of an unarmed black man by a white police officer and the ensuing protests which the police tried to forcibly stop. Jesus remembered this discussion and stopped me when he came back to our campus the semester following the dissertation project to bring up that discussion again. He noted that the right to protest did not seem to be a right at all. I asked him what he thought we should do about that. His response was that we should continue to do it anyway. While it is scary, it is in our constitution, and if we let incidents like this scare us away from exercising one of our rights that is guaranteed by the Constitution, then our rights are not worth much, and we are

allowing the government to have too much power. I was impressed with his thoughts, and with the fact that he remembered and referenced a discussion from a previous semester (which was also a previous school year) in order to extend the thoughts. I could not remember any other times when a student extended a conversation from one year to the next, even though I had had many students on multiple occasions throughout multiple years.

- Band together. Students wanted to know how this could work in reality. Banding together with like-minded people seemed pretty unfeasible. Someone brought up the Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and how that made a difference. Then another student brought up the marriage equality and NOH8 campaigns where gay and straight people were banding together to fight for equal rights now and how people sticking together might make a difference. At the time of this writing, the Supreme Court of the United States recently ruled in favor of gay marriage. I will be interested to see if any of my students who participated in this conversation revisit the topic when school starts again in the fall.
- Vote in every election. Students had noticed that often people vote in the major elections such as president or governor, but rarely in smaller local elections. “Voting sounds like a lame answer that isn’t really meaningful,” Peter said, “but if everyone voted every time, I bet it would make a big difference.” Emilio mentioned what had been happening in two neighboring cities with regard to immigration and how voters could have a lot of power in deciding what happens.

“If we would all vote for people who didn’t feel that way (the way the current mayors and city councils felt about immigration), the whole thing would be different. And I know there are people who run for those spots who don’t feel that way. But mostly rich white guys go vote, so it always goes the way they want it to.”

On Wednesday, students were given another half hour of reading and work time at their request. I clarified some of the questions and instructions on the reading guide as students continued to work and take notes. With 15 minutes left in the period, I asked students if they had any thoughts or questions. All but one of the students in my third period class were reading *House of the Scorpion* and Alexis wanted to know why the clones were grown in cows. I told them I was not sure. Brady speculated that if an embryo could be grown in a cow, it would be an easy, uncomplicated way to create a clone, especially if it was just for body parts. Students were doubtful that a human embryo could actually survive in a cow. Once again, I was sorry that we did not have access to student computers. Gilberto asked why human cloning is not done since cloning technology obviously exists. The students talked about the ethical issues involved in using clones for body parts when the clones would actually be individual people. Most students felt that “blunting [the clones’] intelligence” (Farmer, 2002, p. 4) the way the book described would be wrong because if the story was accurate, clones would turn out to be their own person, just like the main character Manny did.

In a later period in the day, Peter wanted to know if the government was really part of cover-ups like aliens in Roswell or the Illuminati. Santiago said that *illuminati*

spelled backward as a dot com URL would lead to the National Security Agency website, which sure enough, it did when we checked it on the presentation cart computer.

However, a quick check on SNOPEs explained the hoax which had been perpetrated by a person with very good computer skills. That person had been traced and the hoax had been verified. The discussion about cover-ups lasted several minutes, with most students believing that there were sure to be some governmental cover-ups.

As per our usual routine, Thursday was library day. Before leaving the classroom, I briefed the student on the novel test that would be next week. I informed them that there would be no multiple choice, true/false or matching questions. All questions would require written answers, and they could use their reading guides. One student wanted to know what would happen if he was not finished with the book yet. I told him that he would still be required to take the test, but that he should find that he could answer most of the questions. Two questions he might not be able to answer fully if he did not know how the story ends, but this test was not about proving whether people finished the novels or not. The book was just one of the tools for thinking about social issues and how they affect us now and possibly in the future.

Students received the remaining 45 minutes of time to read. They were given the choice of reading their dystopian novels or reading a self-selected novel. Even with the uncooperative girls' group considered in the mix, an analysis of the field notes from the day transferred into the daily diary revealed that only two students dozed off throughout the entire day. The rest were engaged in reading, and of the 32 students in attendance that day, all were reading their dystopian novels except for three who opted to read their

self-selected novels. Five students had finished their novels, and three of them had gone on to either the sequel of their novel or one of the other original choices. Nine students were two-thirds or more finished and were likely to be finished by Monday's test. Four were half finished, and 14 were less than half finished, but they were interested in continuing to read, even though they were unlikely to be finished by the test. Six of these 14 had entered one or two weeks after the first group started.

Throughout this dystopian unit, I had been so disappointed that I could not reach all the students. The girls' class who balked at every turn had me particularly frustrated with myself. I had learned over the years how to create a relaxed learning environment and how to quickly garner the trust of the students in my classes. The fact that this group stubbornly held on to their uncooperative attitudes had me frustrated with myself for not finding the key. However, on this Thursday as I observed the groups while we read in the library, realizing that all of the girls were engaged in their dystopian novels and none of this group were struggling to stay awake helped me realize that not all was a loss. These novels were interesting enough for not only the girls, but almost all of the students to stay engaged in reading for most of a class period. While they might refuse to engage in discussion, they were motivated to read the novels. On library days before the dystopian unit began, I spent more time prodding students to sit up and stay awake than I was having to do since we began the novels. Obviously, something was working here. Even the grumpy students were actually doing the reading. Students I had had before whom I knew to be academically disengaged were reading. I noted this observation in



my reflexive journal to return to later when planning a third loop through the action research spiral.

On Friday, I gave a practice novel test by asking students four questions which we discussed aloud as a whole group. Those questions were (1) How was the main character a victim? (2) What do you think was the most important scene in the story? (3) What do you think the role of the government should be in our society? and (4) What can we as citizens do when we believe something needs to be changed in society? We talked about answering questions like these thoroughly and explaining our reasoning, using examples from the novels. Over the years I had noticed that all my students, including my junior and senior students, continued to have the habit of answering an open-ended question with as few words as possible in order to answer the question; however, they do not go further to explain their thinking or reasoning. We discussed the need to not only answer the question, but explain why we said what we said. I stressed that answering the question without explaining would result in receiving only a quarter of the points. The explanation was truly the important part. Anyone can write a simple sentence that answers a question, but the thought process behind the answer is often what gives credibility and credence to the answer. The test helped students wind up this week by pondering what the world would be like if the futures of the novels actually came to pass and how we could take action in order to promote social justice so that those bleak futures would not come to pass.

## **Week Four – Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints**

The fourth week of the dystopian unit gave the students the opportunity to address the fourth element of critical literacy – interrogating multiple viewpoints. Students were encouraged to consider the perspectives of others in addition to their own viewpoints and to analyze text to see whose voices were being heard and whose are not. The novel test the students were going to take included questions that asked them to think about the different points of view expressed by the characters in their novels. This week we once again were on a different schedule than we had been on in the previous weeks. This week began additional state standardized testing in three subject areas involving my students. So we spent Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday working on the novel test in class while varying combinations of students were pulled from class for the standardized testing. The goal had been to allow students to take the test using Moodle, our online class platform. I had noticed in the past that students enjoy working on computers for writing assignments, and providing feedback and grades to students was easier for me. Unfortunately, I had not realized that the testing would require the use of all our student laptops, so no computers were available. Therefore, we were relegated back to traditional paper and pencil responses. All students were able to finish the test over the three days, even with interruptions for testing.

The novel test was geared toward having students think about the plot of the novel and our current social situation from multiple points of view. Who is the victim? Who has the power? How does the government fit into society and how does government affect our lives personally? What can we do about it if we disagree? How does the novel

fit into the idea of freedom and personal rights? What are various viewpoints regarding rights and freedom? How do you feel about it?

While students were working individually on their novel tests on Tuesday, Jesus motioned me over and asked me about one of the character's names in *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007) that he couldn't remember. I told him the kid's name was Cyfi and then walked back to my perch on a table where I was monitoring the test in case anyone had questions. I took my copy of *Unwind* and flipped to that section of the novel and reread the scene, which is my favorite scene in the book. When I finished rereading the scene and looked up, Jesus was looking at me. He snickered and said, "It's good, isn't it?" I walked back over to chat. I told him this was one of my two favorite scenes, the other being Roland's unwind, which had made me sick to my stomach the first time I read it. "I really don't care about reading much," he said, "but this [novel] has started to change my mind about books." I told him it had a sequel, and if he liked it enough to keep going when he finished, I could give him our classroom copy. I also mentioned that there are a lot of other books as good as this one is, and I would help him find one when he finished if he wanted me to. "Yeah, I might read another one after this," he replied.

As students wrote answers to the questions, they discussed the different points of view of the characters in their novels. Several students who had read *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005) noticed that different people had different ideas about what makes someone beautiful. Discussions included inner beauty versus outer beauty, and discussions varied about what really mattered – in both the novel and in real life. Maria, who read *Unwind*, discussed how using people who "didn't turn out right" for transplants would seem like a

good idea to some people, but decisions about what a person is like are often made on what is seen on the outside without knowing what is on the inside. She noted that the character Roland, while he appeared to be a big bully, was actually scared. “He had feelings just like everyone else,” Maria noted in her reading guide, “but the way he decided to show those feelings made him seem bad.” Darion noted that different characters in the novel had different feelings about unwinding. He stated that the youngest character Lev, who was being unwound as a tithe, believed being unwound was an honor as opposed to the kids who saw it as a punishment. These differing points of view were noticed by several students. Peter speculated that different points of view are often caused by how we are raised. He elaborated by using the character Lev as an example, explaining Lev was raised to believe his unwind was an honor. Another student Luis noted that in *The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002), while the main character Matt might have seemed to be the victim, he might have actually have been the one with the power because his plan was the one that worked, saving himself and others from El Patron’s destruction. Luis also noted the importance of knowledge. “Literally the most important part of the story was when Matt figured out why El Patron wanted him. . . . If Matt had not thought about why El Patron actually made him, the whole ending would have completely changed,” Luis wrote in his reading guide. Amanda noted that the characters in *Feed* who had computers implanted in their brains did not think for themselves. She wrote that “everyone was brainwashed” because of the advertisements being transmitted constantly to those with the feed, affecting what they thought about and wanted. Peter noted in his reading guide that the feed took control away from the person.

“I would like to have control over my whole body. Nothing inside me reading my thoughts.” Students reading all the novels made connections about how the government saw things differently from the people. Differing viewpoints resulted in differing actions. And as Theo noted in his reading guide, “even though some people’s thoughts are stupid, they still have the right to think them.” These comments demonstrated that the students were noticing that not everyone felt the same way about the same issues, and noticing that gave them the opportunity to question those different viewpoints and look at issues from various sides.

On Thursday, we were unable to go to the library as this is where one of the testing labs had been set up with the laptops for the state testing. So for this week, we used the projector to read and discuss an article titled “Top 10 Most Important Inventions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Technology” (Infoniac.com, 2011). All classes seemed interested in this article and in discussing it. As we looked at each invention, students were invited to tell what they knew about the technology, to compare it to something they knew, and to give their thoughts about the technology. One of the issues that quickly came to light in each group was the need to differentiate between “important” and “popular” technology. Students in each class were able to define the difference as being what we like (popular) versus that changed the course of technology overall and had the greatest impact on society. Students also approached this article a little differently than I would have expected. Instead of simply admiring and wishing they had the technology, they brought up what might be the pros and cons of some of the technology, without any guidance from me. Again, interrogating multiple viewpoints became a point to ponder.

For example, the invention that students were most interested in was Google's driverless car. Upon reflection in my daily diary that afternoon, I realized that this was the only invention not yet accessible to the public, so it was intriguing to ponder the possibilities of this invention. We spent the most time discussing this invention throughout the day, and students generated multiple questions and thoughts regarding it:

- How does it work?
- What happens if it has a wreck?
- How does the insurance work?
- Why would we need it? Brainstorming ensued: We could drive long distances and sleep on the way without having to stop; we could avoid DWI infractions (but would drunk people actually remember to put it on "autopilot"?); we could do more enjoyable things while traveling such as play video games, watch movies, and read books.
- This would be sort of like riding a bus somewhere, except you would have your own private space. It would be more comfortable than in with a bunch of people. And you could stop whenever you wanted to.
- Can it switch back and forth from manual to automatic while it is in motion?

Other discussion included students who had noticed some places that had electric car charging stations, and others were amazed that Google had spent \$1.65 billion to purchase YouTube. One class got into the discussion of how online programs such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube can be free. We discussed advertising and how it works online much like it works for television. One student mentioned the fact that many

of the programs we interact with use data mining to target the advertising. We discussed how various e-mail programs and social media sites place ads in the margins that are on topics that we have been posting and discussing. Some students had not ever noticed that, and another discussion began about how “people are watching what we are doing – nothing is private anymore. There is your proof right there!” as Gilberto put it. Fourth period wanted to discuss how these technological inventions related to their four novels. Some did not think these inventions fit what was in their novel. While I had not intended to directly link this particular article to the novels, I was happy to see that someone wanted to go back and think about the novels. We discussed how every day technological advances lead to bigger advances that can become some of the technologies seen in these futuristic novels. I assured them that next week we were going to look at biomedical technology, a technology that was an integral part of all four books, and we would discuss where we are now with cloning, transplants, implants, and plastic surgery.

We finished up the week with the group interviews on Friday. Many of the students who had been part of the dystopian unit were going to exit on this day, and I wanted to be sure to capture their thoughts. Part of the interview included discussing all the assignments we had done over the previous weeks. I listed the assignments on the board. Table 4.6 contains the list of assignments we had done over the course of the four weeks of the dystopian unit. Gilberto commented, “We did all that?” I responded affirmatively and asked him what he was thinking. “It doesn’t seem like we did that much. It went by fast. That might be the most work I’ve ever done, and it didn’t seem like work.” The groups were active in discussing the unit, and additional comments

regarding the unit will be given in the section “A Look at the Elements of Critical Literacy” which will follow the chronological description of the study.

Table 4.6

*Completed Assignments*

| Dystopian Novel Assignments | Current Event Article Assignments   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Reading Guide               | Grandparents and Nutrition for Kids <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blog Comment</li> </ul>  |
| Small Group Discussions     | Living in 1984 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Discussion</li> <li>• Think/Pair/Share</li> </ul>                               |
| In-class Reading Time       | Top 10 Inventions of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Discussion</li> <li>• Exit Ticket</li> </ul> |
| Test – Thinking/Connecting  |   |

**Week Five – Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues and Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints – Technology**

Our dystopian unit came full circle this week as we looped back into focusing on sociopolitical issues and exploring multiple viewpoints, this time with an emphasis on science fiction technology and how it might affect our lives. Many people exited on the Friday of the previous week, and now that state standardized testing was complete, many new students were enrolled at DAEP from their home campuses. With multiple new people enrolled in the class, the assignments had to be designed so as to allow students who had not participated in the reading of the novels to be able to work on the assignments. We began Week Five by introducing everyone to the idea of technology of the future by watching “Prophets of Science Fiction: George Lucas” (Science Channel,



2012) which was streamed from Discovery Education available from our regional educational service center. As students watched, they took notes by writing two or three facts from each segment of the documentary, noting particularly the futuristic technology that is actually coming true today. We watched the introduction and then viewed five of the nine segments which discussed holographic technology, mythology and technology (The Force), intelligent ground vehicles, bionic limbs, and levitating vehicles. I asked students to write about which area they would like to help develop if they were scientists. Because groups were small and I felt there would be little chance of altercations, I had students turn to the person nearest them and discuss their answer to the question. As pairs discussed, I walked through the room noting discussion points in my field notes. Later, when reviewing the field notes to enter into the daily diary, I noticed the responses centered around two of the segments – bionic limbs and levitating vehicles. As I listened to the partners discuss, and later as I reviewed the students' comments in my field notes, I was surprised to realize how many discussions focused on altruistic reasons for wanting to work on those particular inventions. Multiple students noted how working on bionic limbs such as Luke Skywalker's bionic hand could help people who were missing limbs. Some noted how levitating cars might be a solution to pollution and overcrowded highways. One student noted that if levitating vehicles could be perfected, then other levitating structures might be possible as well – again with the idea that overcrowding could be eased in many places like China.

Because we had a few minutes to spare, and students were interested in lists of inventions, we used the presentation cart and looked at "The CNN 10: Inventions" (Cable

News Network, 2013) and discussed briefly. These inventions were much more futuristic than the Infoniac.com (2011) list we had looked at the previous week and provided some exciting prospects for future technology such as humanoid robots, computer screens worn as glasses, and more advanced virtual video gaming technology.

On Tuesday, each person who had been in the dystopian unit long enough to have read one of the dystopian novels was given an article or two about the current state of biomedical technology as it related to his/her novel; however, students who had not read the novels were quickly briefed on the sociopolitical issues and were allowed to choose which article they preferred to read. The articles centered on the following topics:

- *The House of the Scorpions* (Farmer, 2002) – cloning
- *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007) – transplants
- *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005) – cosmetic surgery
- *Feed* (Anderson, 2002) – computer implants

Students marked the text, looking for surprises, concerns, and questions they had as they read. They were asked to look at the pros and cons of the technology and think about whether the technology should be pursued or not. Students who had been here to read the novels compared it to the novel by noting similarities and differences to the technology described in their novels. (See Appendix C for a complete list of the articles used during the dystopian unit).

Thursday was library day, and students were directed to find books that interested them on any topic. I gave a book talk on Realistic/Problem YA fiction, connecting the genre to dystopian fiction by explaining the problems encountered in realistic fiction, and

how the teens in the novels had to find solutions to their problems. I explained the difference was in the setting – realistic fiction is set in the present, and the technology available to the students was current at the time the novel was written with most realistic novels relying on technology very little or not at all to move the story forward. Several students who had been enrolled for the entire study requested suggestions for other dystopian novels while others decided to switch genres. The remainder of the period was spent reading their selections. I noted that while the research project was winding down and dystopian novels were no longer the focus, students seemed to be more engaged with reading in general. The tone from the previous weeks continued into reading time, and the newer students took cues from those who had been in my class for the past several weeks and found books and engaged for the period more easily than I had noticed with new students in the past. In the past, I had noticed that when we received large groups of new students, they were able to pull the students who had been there longer off track rather than the long term students influencing the new ones. This switch was noticeable, and one I needed to consider more. I noted this difference in the reflexive journal for further consideration when planning the third loop through the action research cycle.

For the first time since the dystopian unit began, our laptop cart was available for classroom use. I began a Moodle discussion with an article titled “How Technology Affects Us” (mads942, n.d.) written by a student and published on a website called *Teen Ink* about how technology is affecting teens’ personal interactions with others. Students read the article and marked the text, and then addressed the Moodle assignment which posed the question, “How does technology impact our interactions with others? Discuss

one positive and one negative way that technology affects how we relate to other people (from the article). Do you think the effects are more positive or negative? Explain.”

Students were required to post an answer before the system would allow them to see anyone else’s answers. Once they had posted their initial response, they were then required to respond to at least three other students’ responses. The question focused students to think about the sociopolitical issue of technology’s impact on our interactions with others and to think about and share various viewpoints on the topic. Students continued reading and responding to student posts through Monday and Tuesday of the next week. What I noticed about this assignment was perhaps another area where my next loop of action research will head. The students loved working on the computers. They enjoyed the ability to converse with other students through this medium, and I was honestly surprised that not one of the students made any inappropriate remarks or comments, and only one comment was off topic. (One of the students greeted another using the other student’s nickname and the question “Wuz up?”) Some of the conversation threads got sidetracked on a topic, such as this one. (Conversations below are reproduced here exactly the way the students wrote them, including grammatical and usage errors, and slang).

Darion: I think technology today has a negative effect on us, because people are not social face to face, but have alot to say on the internet. I think its getting worse cuz people spending more time on technology than going outside.

Trip: Your are right, not many people talk, go outside and I have seen many people play their video games for a long time.

Peter: I'm agree with you! People rather be on their phone all day than go outside and do some sports.

Darion: Or go out to eat/date and stuff like that

Julian: You supposed to take yo girl out to eat.

However, when the conversation slid this far out of the content of the article, the conversation thread stopped. No further comments were made that encouraged the conversation to go sideways. Some conversation threads were lively.

Darion: One good thing in this article is that they are trying to study children such as teenagers do and how there brains work. A bad thing is that girls are sending private photos to people and its causing a lot of problems throughout the enternet.

Maria: Techology is BAD!!!

Peter: I highly disagree with u because if there were no Technology in the world people would go crazy, but I don't like the fact that a cop can come on and read what you say to someone else.

Trip: How would people go crazy without technology if they never knew it existed?

Juanita: Exactly what I was thinking!

Gilberto: I can answer that because if you think back, what was the world like before technology? Now what is the world like now? You see technology changed a whole bunch of things latterly everything, so if we had no technology we most likely would still be living like they lived in the past.

Peter: Or nah.

Multiple students participated in this thread, discussing their thoughts on the positive versus the negative side of technology. The students enjoyed these conversations; however, Jesus stated later that the topic did not lend itself to much discussion. The question and the article did not provide enough fodder for conversation.

I agreed with him. Unfortunately, not having technology available during the reading of the dystopian novels was a disappointing turn of events. I would like to have seen how the discussion went if students had been able to discuss some of the topics of the reading guides with other students reading the same novels. In the next time through this unit, my goal will be to plan it for a time when computers will be readily available. One change on our campus that will assist with that has been the installation of a computer lab that has 15 hard-wired computers in it that can be used for testing. This should make laptops available most of the time. With the conclusion of this assignment focusing on the sociopolitical issue of technology's influence on society and exploring multiple viewpoints on the topic of technology, the dystopian unit ended.

### **Critical Literacy Elements**

Well in advance of working with the students on this research project, I was concerned with finding ways to engage them in meaningful interactions with various types of texts and in doing so, to help them see themselves as capable readers. When I started using dystopian fiction as the basis of some of the lessons in my classes, I knew that I wanted to continue using that genre, but I needed a better framework for creating lessons. When I came across the four elements of critical literacy as defined by Lewison et al. (2002), they seemed to mesh perfectly with dystopian fiction. I was surprised when

I started reading through the lesson plans, field notes, and daily diary entries to find that each week's activities overall fell clearly into one of the elements, with each of the elements being emphasized at least once over the five week period.

The novels were the focal point of the unit. In planning the reading guides, I used the elements of critical literacy to devise the activities. The pages of the reading guide focused on all four of the elements of critical literacy:

- the sociopolitical issues that were central to the novels' plots,
- the multiple viewpoints that were expressed by various characters in the novels,
- the ways students could participate in society now so that the events in the novels would not become reality, and
- the disruption of the commonplace found in most English classrooms by using dystopian novels and these types of questions.

Additional activities were planned around the critical literacy elements as well. While all four elements were used over and over to plan readings, and literacy activities to accompany the readings, the emphasis on one element each week took me by surprise.

Because I was constantly going back and forth among the elements during the weeks of planning, I did not expect the activities and conversations during each week to come primarily from one of the elements, with the elements switching from week to week. I kept notes in my reflexive journal in order to explore this phenomenon at a later time.

Questions I had included, does using critical literacy practices work best if one element is focused on at a time? I also wondered if the order of the emphasis of the elements could

work as effectively, or even more effectively, if they were presented in a different order. These questions will be explored and discussed further in the next chapter.

### **Action Research as Observed Through the Focus Students**

Action research is a cycle. A scholar practitioner engaged in action research systematically uses “structured empirical inquiry to examine the effectiveness of professional interventions” (McClintock, 2004). I had informally begun the use of the action research cycle the previous year. During that informal loop through the action research cycle, by focusing on one genre of literature that I had noticed was popular with my students – dystopian novels – I had created lessons using various novels to encourage students to read. This first pass through the spiral was successful in getting students engaged; however, it had some drawbacks. All students had been reading dystopian novels, but they were allowed to choose from all the dystopian novels that were available on the campus. This meant that no novel was being read by more than two students, which made conversation and discussion difficult. While we could discuss the ideas of a dystopia in general, there were too many plotlines among the students to facilitate deeper conversation between students or between students and teacher. Altogether, there were approximately 40 separate dystopian novel titles in the school library and the classroom collection from which to choose. While I had read many of the novels, I had not read all of them. One major change between the first informal loop through the spiral and this research project, which was the revised plan and second loop, was offering five novels to choose from so that students could discuss with me and each other more specifically. In preparation for continuing to yet another revised plan and a third loop through the action



research cycle in the future, I wanted to talk with students who knew me as a teacher and could compare this unit with other literacy activities I had used, and if possible, last year's use of the dystopian novels in comparison to this year's research project. In other words, I had students who had participated in both loop one and loop two in this cycle, and their opinions were important to planning for next year's lessons that would be part of loop three as I continued to look for ways to engage and motivate my at-risk students to read and think about complex texts.

Hundreds of students had come and gone in my classroom over the three years I had taught in the Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP). Three of the students were typical of the students I see every day in my classroom, and all three of the students were "repeat offenders" and had been in DAEP at least one previous time before the time of this dystopian unit. Additionally, all three had been in my class the previous year during the dystopian assignments, and all three again returned within six months after this dystopian unit was completed. Their reactions to the unit were of particular interest to me because I was more familiar with these students and they were familiar with me, which gave them an extra feeling of security in talking to me. Because we had shared classroom space before, they knew my personality and my character as a teacher, and they trusted me to be conscientious with their feelings and their thoughts. Their observations and comments were valuable to me as I pondered where the next spiral of the action research cycle would take me.

## Jesus

Jesus was 16 when this research project began. He was a second-year freshman, not having earned enough credits to become a sophomore. By the end of this school year in which the dystopian unit occurred, he unfortunately would continue to be a freshman for the third year in a row. He had quite a bit of behavior trouble at his home campus and on our DAEP campus, and I would find him in our In School Suspension room as often as I would find him in my classroom. I talked with Jesus about this dystopian unit compared with last year's, and his comments were focused on the novel selections from this year. "I liked that we got to choose, but I also liked that a bunch of people were reading the same novels. That made it easier to talk about." He could not remember the name of the novel he had chosen the previous year, but he did tell me that he finished it. He also told me that he remembered I had not read the novel he selected last year, and so while we had had some brief conversations about it, he liked the fact that I was very familiar with all of the novels this time, and he said he liked the assignments better this time as well. When I asked him what the difference was, he said that this year the assignments focused on "things that are outside of school. This one had stuff, like, what if this really happened? And then how could we make it stop? Oh, and how could people think *that* was a good idea? They were crazy." When I asked him to elaborate, he explained that it seemed to him that a lot of school work was pointless. "'Why are they making us do this?' is a question I ask myself all the time. So I just don't participate." He went on to explain that with the shift to social issues, he had something important to think about.

When I asked Jesus about his usual habits in school, he chuckled and said at first, it still just felt like an assignment and he had planned to “fake it like I always do. But then I got interested in the books because of that book talk you did, and I thought I would at least start it.” He said he kept reading because it was interesting, but a couple of days into the reading assignment, everyone was talking about the books, “and I was like, I want to know what this says so I can talk about it, too.” So he kept going and finished the novel. He said he was impressed that I would come over and talk about the novel even during the test. “I don’t think any teacher would ever come over and answer my questions and talk about the novel even during the test! I expected you to say, ‘just do the best you can’ – you know, that thing every teacher says during a test – so I was shocked when you gave me Cyfy’s name when I couldn’t remember it and then talked to me about that scene. Even though this was as test, it seemed like the test itself wasn’t the important part, but the book and thinking about it was the important part. I really liked that.”

When I asked Jesus what he would change, his immediate response was “more group work, but I know we can’t really do that here.” This comment echoed what most of the students felt. They would have liked to have more interaction with others reading their books, and with others in the class. I explained to him how I had hoped to use computers to have book discussions among classes. He thought that sounded like a great idea and was sorry we had not been able to do that. Jesus did not finish his reading guide. When I asked him about this, his response was simply, “I did the parts that were easy.” When pressed for more information about what he considered to be easy, he

indicated that he wrote enough on most of it so I would know he had read the novel, but the last page was too much to keep up with. The last page required students to note three quotes from the novel that were meaningful to them and discuss them briefly. He said, “When I’m reading, I’m just reading, you know? I can’t pay attention to that kind of stuff. Then after, I can’t remember anything to write down.” I asked him if that is what he meant by something being “too much like school” and he said yes. “It just didn’t seem that important.” We talked about why I had included that section in the reading guide – that English class is still English class and I wanted the students to pay attention to the way the author was writing. He agreed that there were things “you just gotta do, but I don’t care about the grades or the credits, so I decided not to worry about the parts I didn’t care about.” He did the same with the test. He made a 62 out of 100, mostly because he wanted me to know he understood the book, and wanted to show me he knew the answers to the questions, but he didn’t want to take the time to write in-depth answers. Generally, he would answer the question, but would not delve into explanations or examples in any detail. Once again, the grade did not matter. While he appreciated the fact that I was willing to talk to him during the test about the content of the test, writing it down was more effort than he wanted to expend. He put some effort into the questions that he was most interested in, but wrote minimal responses for the others. I asked him if there was anything I could have done that would have made that part better, and he responded, “Probably not. I liked the book and the articles and discussing them. But the other is too much like school and I don’t want or need to do it.”

Jesus was back on our campus the next semester after this research project was completed. For the entire time he was on our campus during this assigned time, he was not allowed to attend class due to the reasons he was sent to us, which included serious conflicts with other students currently on our campus. I sat and visited with him during my conference period when the principal allowed me to pick him up from an isolation classroom and take him to the library to find some books. I asked him about school in general and what he thought about it. He confirmed that while the trouble he was getting into was real (and not contrived to return to our campus), he was glad every time he was back with us. On this occasion, Jesus had a serious black eye, and he told me he had been in a fight with several other boys after school recently. I asked him why he was glad to be back with us, and he said it was because he felt safe when he was on our campus. He could spend several hours without having to worry about what was going on “out there.” He knew the teachers here liked him. I asked him how he knew that, and he said, “because they do things like this right here (motions from me to him as we sat at a library table). They talk to me like I’m a person. They care what’s going on. They wish they could fix it for me. None of my teachers at [home school name] ever came to see me when I was in DMC (Discipline Management Class, i.e. In School Suspension). You guys are coming over to see me all the time.” Then before we left the library, he reminded me about the dystopian unit from a few months before. “That gave me something to think about besides all the other stuff,” he stated. Then he asked me for “that book about the guy who was cloned.” I handed him the library’s copy of *The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002) and walked him back to his classroom. He was in a

serious altercation on our campus shortly after this conversation and was remanded into custody. I have not seen him since and am not sure what his status is at this point.

### **Juanita**

Juanita, like Jesus, was also a second-year freshman. She was 16 at the time of the study, and all her teachers had a very difficult time getting her engaged in any academic work. Much of her time was spent with her head down on her desk, often sleeping. This behavior was not allowed on our campus, and doing so resulted in the days not counting toward the total required in order to be exited back to her home campus. Juanita was nearing the maximum limit on the time we were allowed to keep her on our campus, and we knew she was going to be exited this time because she “maxed out” of the program. This behavior was very different from the Juanita we had seen the year before. Previously, she had been much more engaged and alert, participating in class assignments and following school rules. She exited the program the previous year by successfully completing the required minimum number of days and exited our program well before she approached the maximum limit.

Juanita was one of the girls in the first period class which was unengaged throughout the dystopian unit. When it was over, I asked her if she was willing to sit and chat with me for a few minutes about school and the dystopian unit. She was willing to do that, and during my conference period, I pulled her out of one of her other classes with the permission of the teacher in that class. “She’s not doing anything anyway, so there is no reason she needs to be here,” was the teacher’s comment when I asked for permission to come get her. We walked back to my empty classroom for the conversation.

I asked her what she thought about the dystopian unit. “I liked some of it,” she explained. “I liked that article about how the government is following us. That was kind of creepy.” When I asked her specifically about the novel she had chosen, *The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002), she said, “At first I didn’t get it, like the words were hard, but I just kept going and then I started getting it.” However, I noted that she had not finished the novel. She confirmed that she had not finished. I noted that on her test, I could tell where she had stopped reading because she did not talk about anything relating to the character’s escape after El Patron had died. She said that she started getting bored after the “good part where Matt found out he was going to be used to give El Patron a new heart. Once I knew he had been poisoned so that his body parts were no longer useful and El Patron died, I didn’t care about the rest.” I asked how many books she had finished during high school, and her response was none. “This is the farthest I ever got in a book.” Juanita passed the test because she went into quite a bit of detail on the questions, answering them thoroughly using the part of the book she had read. However, she finished less than half the reading guide. When I asked her about her decision not to work on the reading guide, she shrugged. When I asked her about the difference between last year’s dystopian assignments and this year’s dystopian unit, again she shrugged. She refused to answer any questions relating to her change in behavior from the previous year to now, but she did tell me she intended to graduate. When I pointed out the discrepancy between her goal to graduate and her behavior, she again shrugged and made no comment.

I spoke with our social worker about Juanita after Juanita returned the semester following our research project. The social worker informed me that she was working with the parents to try to get Juanita into a drug treatment program. The drastic difference in her behavior appeared to be drug related, and the apathy was consistently showing up at home and at school. While her parents were concerned, they had not committed to enrolling her into any type of program. She once again exited the program after reaching the maximum number of days that students could be held on our campus per district policy. She exited with grades in the single digits in all classes. She subsequently returned once again and reached the maximum number of days before exiting.

### **Gilberto**

Gilberto was a junior at the time of the study. He was 17, and this was his third time to be in my class at DAEP. He was on track to graduate, even though he spent quite a bit of time in In School Suspension at his home school and was frequently on our campus. He seemed to be a student who enjoyed the structure of our campus, and I always looked forward to having him in class each time he returned. He had a ready smile and communicated with good eye contact and a friendly, respectful demeanor. A week after the classroom portion of the research project ended, all the boys in Gilberto's class exited except for him. He had one more week to go. And during that one more week, no new students showed up who were enrolled into that period. So he had the classroom to himself for a whole week right before he left. During that week, he and I had some informal conversations about his home campus as compared to our campus.



One of the things he told me was that at his home campus he could not concentrate as well. “Things are really busy there, and it’s harder to focus on work and reading.” He told me he liked to read, but he did very little reading on his home campus and he never finished, and usually did not even start, assigned novels in his English class. When I asked him why, he had a list of reasons. “They never let us choose. They just hand out the books and tell when the chapters are due. They don’t give us choices. Here, I liked that we had options. But I get that you had to limit the options because we needed books that were similar to each other.” Another thing Gilberto did not like at his home campus was the way the teachers handled reading the books. He said sometimes they were given class time, but usually they had to do most of the reading for homework, and he just wasn’t going to do that, he said. After he made that comment, I held up my hand to stop him from continuing with his next comment and said, “Wait a minute. Weren’t you one of the students who asked if you could take home the book so you could keep reading?” He chuckled and said, “Yeah, I was one of the people who asked you.” When I asked him what would make him want to take home a book to read when it was not required – in fact it was not allowed because materials are not allowed into or out of DAEP with few exceptions – his response was simply, “The book talk helped because it got me interested when you talked about the books. Then when I started reading, I wanted to keep going. Some parts of the book were kind of boring, but I liked it mostly.” I told him it sounded like choice was a big deal for him, and he confirmed that it was probably the part that made the biggest difference in him doing the assignments. But he reiterated that the book talk was what got him interested in the first place.

I asked him if there were any other practices in class in his home school that he liked or disliked. He said when they did do some of the reading in class, it was usually audio book, and he hated audio books. “They’re too slow, and the voices are kinda boring. It would be better if we got to watch a movie.” He said every class he had been in watched a movie for whatever Shakespeare play they were reading, but they did not do movies for other novels. I asked him if he could remember any of the other novels they had read. He remembered *To Kill a Mockingbird* had been one of them, but he could not remember any others. “I never read any of them. I just remember *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one because it’s famous and people refer to it all the time, but I didn’t read it, either.” I told him that from my observations in my class every time he was here, he seemed to be reading a lot. He confirmed that he liked having time and quiet spaces to read. We talked again about how Mrs. Jones had told me Gilberto was reading in social studies class and wouldn’t put his book down during that period. I asked him if that had ever happened before when he was at DAEP – that he got in trouble for reading when he was supposed to be doing something else. “No. Usually I read until the teachers get ready to start, but then I put my book away pretty quickly.” I asked him what made this difference this time. “I was really in a good part of this book. And it was an actual assignment! So I thought, maybe if I keep going no one would say anything. But then Mrs. Jones told me I would lose my book (she would take it away) if I didn’t pay attention to [the teacher], so I put it down. I didn’t want her to take the book.”

I asked him if he could compare what we usually do in class with this unit. I wanted to know if he liked it better, or not, and why. He said he did like it better because

he liked these kind of books for the assignments. He also liked the nonfiction “current events articles” that we read to accompany them. “There were real interesting things to think about. I liked thinking about the way things could be sometime in the future, especially knowing that they were about things that are happening now. It was more interesting than the old stuff English teachers usually ask us to read.” In general, he said that he liked how I always helped them find good books. That was different from most teachers. “You know a lot of good books – like, you actually read them, so you know good ones to recommend.” Library day was his favorite day of the week because he got to choose a new book if he needed one, and we spent the whole period in the library reading. I asked him if he thought most people were reading or not during library time. He said he thought most people were actually reading because it was easier to find good books in our library and kids figured out they liked to read better than they thought they did. “When there’s nothing else to do, you can figure out that you actually like to read. That’s why going back to my home campus kind of makes me sad because I know I won’t read.”

Gilberto finished out that week reading articles about cloning, which was the issue explored in *The House of the Scorpions* (Farmer, 2002), which was his novel choice, and reading the next novel he had chosen from the library, which was also dystopian, but was not one of the five choices available for the unit. Like Juanita and Jesus, Gilberto also returned the next semester; however, he continued doing his work, and graduated at the end of the next year. He passed me in the hall of the coliseum after

graduation, and stopped to give me a big hug and told me he would miss me. I am going to miss him as well.

The additional observations of, and conversations with, these three students shined a light on two particularly important changes I had made for this loop through the action research cycle. The first positively noticeable change was how critical literacy elements allowed the students to find relevance in what we were reading. This was key to these students being engaged. Even Juanita, who slept most of the time and did not finish many of the assignments, admitted to reading more of the book than she had ever read before when assigned a novel. The social issues gave the reading purpose that extended beyond the school walls. Looking at varying points of view and thinking about action we could actually take were interesting to them and helped them see that they could be an important part of a larger community. This addition to my action research cycle paid big dividends in the motivation and engagement of the students. The second positively noticeable change was the importance of choice. Students mentioned over and over how much they enjoyed the choice that was allowed for such a major assignment. Rather than everyone doing exactly the same thing, they like that they could choose from a variety of reading materials. I knew this was important from work I had done before. My weekly book talks along with my personal attention paid to each student while in the library were obviously paying off in helping students find books in different genres they would enjoy reading. However, providing choice for the major assignments – those where teachers generally have students all doing the same thing – provided that additional way for students to feel they had some control over their learning.

### **Summary of the Findings**

After examining all the data in many configurations, I came to the general conclusion that using action research was working successfully in helping me find ways to engage and motivate my students to participate in literacy activities. Since all the students were at-risk and struggling, many had become used to the habit of refusing to do classwork. Some did not care about grades at all, and therefore were not motivated by grades, nor had they been for quite some time. Using the elements of critical literacy as a way to plan and organize activities created an environment that allowed students to see the importance of participating in those activities. By disrupting the commonplace and focusing on sociopolitical issues, students were able to see more relevancy in the assignments. The students and I both noticed increased engagement and enjoyment in completing the activities. Even the students who were not generally engaged during this research project participated to some extent, often doing more than they would have. By adding young adult contemporary fiction in the form of dystopian novels, students were able to read about topics that had multiple viewpoints. By exploring those different points of view, they could empathize with characters who felt differently about the themes in the novels, and come to identify different points of view in the current world outside of school. Many students found themselves drawn into the stories enough to think about social justice and taking political action to promote justice both now and in the future. Additionally, because they were interested enough to provide the motivation to start the reading, the students were also able to engage in a way they had not been able to enjoy before. Students were as surprised as I was to find themselves asking for more

reading time, and happy shock was the response of many when they found they could actually read a novel of significant size in the matter of two weeks. Discussions were rich and thoughtful. Written assignments were more thoroughly completed. Class time was more exciting and engaging. The students' attitudes were more positive. A discussion regarding specific observations and the implications of those observations will follow in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

At-risk students are often unmotivated and disengaged from literacy activities. They are sometimes below grade level and feel inadequate for the complex reading tasks with which they are confronted in high school; therefore, they often will not even attempt to do the work (Bandura, 1986). Students who are assigned to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) are at risk not only due to the common causes such as being a member of a minority culture, being Limited English Proficient, or having low socioeconomic status but also for behavior issues which require their removal from their home campus. This action research study was conducted in order to determine what happens to these students' self-efficacy for reading and identity as readers when critical literacy practices were used in combination with dystopian fiction.

#### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this action research study was to explore the influence of instruction using critical literacy practices and dystopian fiction on the self-efficacy and self-perception of at-risk adolescents in a disciplinary alternative education program.

#### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research for this study:

- What happens when students who have low self-efficacy for reading are taught with critical literacy practices?

- What happens when students who do not identify themselves as readers are taught with critical literacy practices?
- What happens when dystopian fiction is used with students who are not usually engaged in reading and other literacy activities?

### **Review of the Methodology**

Action research, with its power to help the scholar practitioner improve her effectiveness in the classroom, was used in this qualitative study in order to help me find a better way to teach disengaged high school students who have low self-efficacy for reading and who do not identify themselves as readers. Critical literacy practices (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) and dystopian fiction were used as alternatives to traditional teaching routines and methods. Instruments were used in order to determine the students' levels of self-efficacy and motivation. Assignments were constructed using critical literacy practices and were analyzed in order to describe student participation and engagement. During the research unit, I kept field notes, a daily diary that included lessons plans and a synthesis of the field notes, and a reflexive journal that followed my planning, revisions to the plans, notes about observations, and thoughts about next steps. At the conclusion of the research unit, I recorded group interviews with the students which were transcribed. I analyzed data across sources in order to identify patterns relating to the students' motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy. Data was analyzed through the lenses of critical literacy theory (Freire, 1970) as well as social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Focus students were selected for individual interviews in order to get additional insight into the thinking of the students.



## **Discussion of Findings**

An issue of concern for me as a scholar practitioner was the observation that many of my students were not identifying themselves as readers and did not believe they had the ability to read complex texts well. Therefore, a question I had was how to help these struggling readers identify themselves as readers and improve their self-efficacy for reading. This qualitative research project sought to answer the question of how could I as their teacher assist them in improving their identity as readers. Using critical literacy practices and dystopian fiction seemed to hold promise for mediating these struggling readers' identity and self-efficacy as readers by increasing their motivation and engagement in literacy activities.

### **Critical Literacy and Identity**

As a result of years of conversations with adolescent readers, I expected to find that my students did not identify as readers due to their constant comments about not liking to read and finding it boring. This led to my desire to find out how I could help students identify as readers. I used The Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS) in order to determine how my students' saw themselves as readers, expecting that students would rate themselves fairly low. I was surprised to find that for the RSPS, students' scores fell more in the midrange of scores on average. While there were certainly students who felt they were not good readers and scored themselves in the low range, most students scored in the middle. In discussing reading with the students at the beginning of the dystopian unit, I found that in spite of ratings on the RSPS, students did not identify themselves as

readers; however, after the dystopian unit was complete, students' perceptions of themselves as readers had begun to change after using critical literacy practices.

At the beginning of the dystopian unit, when I asked them about their perceptions of themselves as readers, their responses centered around two main ideas: (1) reading is boring, so they chose not to do it (and therefore were not readers since they did not like to read and did not read), and (2) they were not able to read the assignments teachers gave them very well; thus, since they did not feel successful at school with literacy activities in most of their classes, they did not see themselves as readers. At the end of the dystopian unit during the interviews, students were expressing a change in their view of themselves as readers. They were more willing to call themselves readers because they had been successful with the reading assignments during the unit, which enabled them to participate meaningfully in conversations about concepts in the readings. Jesus mentioned that when students started talking about what was happening in their books, he wanted to be able to participate, so it encouraged him to keep reading. Luis agreed that what everyone was saying seemed interesting and he wanted to be part of the conversation. Students enjoyed being part of literacy conversations, and being able to participate allowed them to see themselves as part of a literate community, bringing along with that membership the identity of a reader, even if only temporarily. Unfortunately, it seemed that while students enjoyed considering themselves as readers, this would change when they went back to their home campuses and it became business as usual. Without continued effort on the part of the teacher, their identity as a reader would likely slip

away. They gave some of the following reasons for their short-lived foray into being a member of a literate community.

Students mentioned that grades were used by teachers to decide who was smart. “They think you’re smart if you get good grades,” Jesus stated. He went on to explain that some students just do not like to go to school, but that does not mean they are not smart. Alexis agreed as well. Students who did not get good grades were seen as not being smart. While they disagreed with the labeling and what constitutes smart, they had taken to heart the idea that because they did not get good grades as readers, that meant they were not good at it, and consequently they did not see themselves as readers. Additionally, they were not very interested in being associated with an activity that was so heavily tied to grades. Trip stated that at their home campus, it is generally the “nerdy kids who read. Everyone else is usually on their phone.” Others agreed that those who identified themselves as readers were often the “nerdy kids” and they did not see themselves as nerdy, so they also did not identify themselves with activities that the nerdy kids generally liked or were willing to do.

When I asked them if their perceptions of themselves had changed, several agreed that it had shifted slightly. Amanda mentioned that at her home campus, while she generally would say she liked to read, she also admitted to not reading much because she used “other stuff, like SparkNotes.” I was surprised to hear her talk about how she felt she was a good reader, yet she did not identify herself as a reader because she did not choose to actually read the assigned texts. I asked her if she looked for SparkNotes on her dystopian novel. She excitedly said she did not – that she actually read the whole

book this time. Several of the students echoed her comment that they had actually read the book this time. When I asked them how that made them feel, they responded with smiles and comments that they enjoyed feeling like they actually were part of the group this time rather than trying to pretend like they had done the assignment. Gilberto said he “actually felt like a real reader.” Was that a good thing? I asked. “Yes!” he responded enthusiastically. Several others concurred. For the first time, many of the readers in my class were identifying themselves as readers based on their experiences. They were successful with literacy activities that were at an appropriately challenging level, and they were able to participate in a literate community without trying to fake their way through the conversations and assignments. Unfortunately, the students themselves were saddened by the fact that they would not be able to maintain that identity when they returned to their home campuses where the reading would once again be too hard for them to do and too boring for them to expend additional effort to be successful. Motivation and engagement played an important role in students being able to identify as being a reader, as well as feeling they could be successful in their literacy activities. This important component of self-efficacy, motivation and engagement, is discussed in the next section.

Overall, I found that my students’ identity as a reader was fragile. Without continued effort, one positive experience in which they saw themselves as readers would not sustain them into the future without additional assistance from their teachers. However, what I was interested in discovering was whether or not teachers could impact a student’s identity as a reader once he was in high school, and if so, how much effort

would be required. Over the course of the five week dystopian unit, students were already beginning to identify as readers. This was positive news for my students and me as their teacher. In order to identify as readers, they needed to participate in all areas of the assignments – reading, writing, and discussion. The critical literacy practices allowed them to think of reading, writing, and discussing as the focus of their efforts rather than grades. The purpose for reading, writing, and discussing was to understand the concepts in their reading and apply them to the world outside of school. Relevancy was a key component to this approach. Once students were able to shift that focus away from grades and toward why the literacy activities were actually meaningful to them as individuals, their identity as a reader began to emerge. This change began to affect their self-efficacy as a reader as well, as is discussed in the next section.

### **Critical Literacy and Self-Efficacy, Motivation, and Engagement**

Self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement were also key factors in students' ability to participate in literacy activities. Along with using an instrument to help determine my students' identity as readers, I used the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) to help determine their self-efficacy and motivation for reading. Scores on the AMRP were a little higher in some regards than what I had expected. However, overall, 79% of the students fell between 50% and 74% in their self-concept as a reader and value of reading. Their comments indicated they did not believe they could successfully complete the reading assignments given by their teachers, so they generally were not willing to even try. In the interviews at the end of the dystopian unit, students repeatedly commented that they had not read assigned novels all the way through at their

home campuses in years past. When the teacher had students do whole-class novels, they were usually “boring” or “too hard” or “stupid,” and the students could not even get started. Some were willing to admit they knew they were not going to understand the novels, and when they said that, others shook their heads in agreement. Multiple problems plagued them when it came to these reading assignments. They rarely saw any relevance to their own lives, and therefore did not wish to participate, especially if they believed they would have a difficult time and would not be successful. These students had learned to cope in multiple ways, depending mostly on listening to class and group discussions that were dominated by those who had read the assigned chapters. Some, like Amanda, were willing to engage with the SparkNotes version of the novel, while some made the effort to rent the movie (because inevitably there was a movie since the novels were usually classics). Limping along using these strategies often proved to be enough to help students pass the quizzes and tests or to bluff their way through an essay. Unfortunately, these strategies continued to foster the lack of self-efficacy for reading. So along with a concern for identity, I had a concern for their self-efficacy. If I could not mediate their self-efficacy, motivation and engagement would not follow. Using critical literacy practices played an essential role in mediating my students’ self-efficacy for reading.

However, students needed some help becoming motivated to at least start so they could begin to build their self-efficacy. Critical literacy practices appeared to have a significant impact on the students’ willingness to at least give the reading and writing assignments a try. Because these assignments were so different from what they were

used to, they did not have as strong a sense of impending failure as they had with their assignments that were traditionally centered on the reading itself. Critical literacy moved the focus off the assignments as an end in themselves and onto the assignments as a tool for thinking about life. Some of the pressure was lifted as I encouraged students to read in order to be able to give their opinions about what was happening in the plots of their novels. At the end of the dystopian unit during the class interviews, I noted aloud how all of them had read at least a large portion of the text if not the whole novel, and I asked them what made the difference. Students commented several things. One was the fact that we took time to get to know the books. In fact, we took two days to introduce and select books by beginning with a book talk one day followed by a book pass the next. Students actually complimented me on the book talk presentation. They enjoyed seeing each cover, hearing the premise of the plot, being introduced to the main characters, and talking about the social issues involved in each story. They said the ability to hear about novels and ask questions gave them a chance to figure out which book seemed most interesting. Then on the next day when they were able to handle each book, read a page or two, and peruse the covers, it almost guaranteed that they would be able to choose the best match. By that second day, several students were so interested in a particular novel that they checked out the library or classroom copies of their selection so they could get started right away rather than wait for the books to be assigned and distributed the next Monday. The students described the books enthusiastically, using words such as “good,” “interesting,” and “modern” to describe the dystopian novels. Motivation was increased and students were able to more easily engage with the book. The use of the dystopian

genre will be discussed further below; however, the interesting topics of the novels provided motivation to give the reading a try where they might otherwise have chosen their comfortable path of faking their way through. Taking the time to build interest had been well worth it.

Choice was another motivator that was mentioned repeatedly. Someone in every class period brought up how they liked that they were able to choose, and others agreed. In the interview with his class, Trip emphasized the fact that being able to choose rather than being assigned a book made a huge difference in his attitude. Rather than immediately shutting down and deciding not to participate, he was willing to give the book a try because he knew enough about the books from the book talk and book pass to choose one that seemed interesting to him. Students made comments that suggested that they were already invested in their selection before they even started, and they wanted to know what was going to happen. Several students discussed the fact that even though the novels seemed better than the ones that were usually assigned by their teachers at their home campus, they felt like this was “still an assignment,” but their ability to choose the novel that appealed to them most helped them feel motivated to participate in the reading. Students like Juanita, who rarely did any work at all, were motivated to continue reading. Even when it got difficult, she said, “at first I didn’t get it, like the words were hard, but I just kept going and then I started getting it.” Alexis echoed the sentiment when he commented on a difficult part of his novel, “but it was alright.” Brady noticed that this assignment “felt easier, I guess, ‘cause I was interested. Sometimes I was confused, but it was OK.” Over and over again students said they continued to work through difficult



reading when they had not done so before because they were interested in the novel. Jesus admitted that his plan in the beginning was to pretend to read the book like he always did, but this time he found that he was interested in it and kept going. As we discussed this phenomenon, I asked students what they thought the difference was, and in every class period, someone brought up the fact that they had been allowed to choose their book and that made a difference. Luis told me, “Before, we’re all like ‘books suck’ until we got a book we like,” and the group nodded in agreement.

After selecting a book and getting started, another significant factor contributing to motivation and engagement was time. As Maria said, “We can’t do anything else, so we might as well read. And it’s fun when you have time to do it.” When she started making that statement, I thought that her point was going to mainly be about the structure of the school which does not allow students to talk with their neighbors, put their heads down, doodle, or any of the other things they usually did at their home campus when they were finished with classwork. But the second part of her statement surprised me. I did not expect her to say that reading was fun, and the important part of that statement was “when you have time to do it.” Time. Students have so little of it outside of school. They work, babysit, socialize, and are sometimes involved in extracurricular activities. So many of these students had busy lives outside of school, and like adults, their responsibilities were not trivial. If it did not get done in school, it did not get done at all. I had read about the importance of allowing for reading time in school. If reading was important enough to do, then time should be provided for at least a large portion of it. However, students are rarely afforded the time in school to read. Fortunately, the

structure of our day permitted students multiple opportunities to read. When they finished with an assignment in any other class and had time to spare, they were encouraged to take out their books and read. And once they were engaged in their books, they were hard to stop. Gilberto asked to take his book home, and when he was told that was not allowed, he was reprimanded for reading his book in his other classes when he should have been working on other assignments. Luis threatened to sneak his book out of the building, but in lieu of getting in trouble for yet another infraction, he read at lunch instead. Trip asked if there was a sequel to his book and Amanda read two of the other novels after completing her initial selection. Once they had time to read, they wanted more time. Gone were the complaints about having to read for extended periods of time, replaced by hopeful requests for additional reading time. Darion, who never did any of the assignments for my class, entered the classroom saying “I love this book; it’s a really good book. Are we reading today?”

The elements of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002) contributed to the motivation and engagement of the students by shifting the focus away from the assignments as an end in themselves to using the assignments as tools for participating in the world. This discussion of the role of these four elements continues in depth in the next section.

My approach to the reading was a surprise to most students, and this approach allowed them to relax and try reading the novels and doing the related assignments without the pressure often associated with English class. Many of the students were distrustful of my claim that the novel was a tool for thinking, and they would not be

penalized if they did not finish the novel. Once they realized there would not be any chapter-by-chapter reading guides or quizzes and tests designed to see if they actually read the novel, they were able to let down their guard and do their best to grapple with the texts, knowing that there would not be the risk of embarrassment. The assignments and assessments allowed them to demonstrate what they understood and what they were thinking rather than exposing what they did not know. In Stephen Krashen's (1982) work regarding second language acquisition, he emphasizes the need to lower the affective filter – in other words, it is important to create an environment that lowers the anxiety of the students so they are willing to participate. This seems to be true in this case as well. Once students felt secure, they were willing to take the risks involved in reading. And in doing so, they emerged from the experience believing they could read challenging texts better than they thought they could. Their self-efficacy for reading increased. However, this new-found self-efficacy was fragile, and further experiences were necessary in order to help solidify it in these struggling students.

### **Impact of Critical Literacy**

Struggling readers who have been labeled as at-risk for not graduating due to cultural, language, socioeconomic, and behavioral categories have often realized they are not very good at certain school-related tasks, such as reading and writing. The first two research questions were concerned with mediating students' identity as readers and their self-efficacy for reading. When the focus of school appears to be to take tests, whether teacher-created tests or high stakes state tests, students have learned they often do not pass the tests and they decide they simply cannot read and write well enough and do not

realize they can improve. They needed a different way to approach literacy assignments, and critical literacy practices seemed like a good way to organize lessons in order to facilitate that new approach. Lewison et al. (2002) named four elements of critical literacy which were used in the research study: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. These were used in planning and presenting the dystopian unit as well as to analyze the data collected through student work. While I did not use these terms with the students in class, the elements were noticeable to them as we proceeded through the reading of the novels, the related nonfiction, and the activities that accompanied the readings. My goal in planning using critical literacy practices was to shift the focus from the reading being an end in itself to the reading being a tool for thinking. In doing this, students were not reading in order to pass a test about the reading itself, but rather they were reading in order to help them think about relevant topics. This made the reading meaningful and consequently more interesting. Students repeated over and over how these novels made them think about topics that were real and important to them and to their families. Relevancy was critical to these students. Realizing that these novels tied into what is happening now made a difference in their willingness to entertain the idea of reading the novels to the end.

One of the most noticeable differences to the students was the first element of critical literacy – disrupting the commonplace – in this particular instance, disrupting the commonplace of English class. Students were quite surprised by the fact that they were neither reading a novel written a long time ago, nor were they being required to finish

reading the novels, and that the reading guides they were using were not chapter-by-chapter questions and lists of vocabulary. Several times through the five weeks of the unit, students questioned me regarding what would happen if they did not finish. They found it hard to believe me when I told them they could still pass the final test over the novels even if they had not finished them. The timelines were fairly tight given that all the reading had to be done at school since students were not allowed to take home the books. (Materials are not allowed to come into or leave our campus with very few exceptions). Students were told to try to be finished with the first half of the book by the end of the first full week of reading, and most were insistent they would not be able to accomplish that goal. I encouraged them to simply do the best they could, stating that I was sure they would be able to get further than they thought they could. By the end of that first full week, while not everyone had made the halfway mark, many students stated incredulously that they had either made the goal or had gotten much further than they expected. As we neared the end of the second week of reading when novels were to be completed, someone in every class period asked me what would happen if they did not finish. I explained to them that it might make it harder to thoroughly answer one or two of the questions on the test, but it would not make it impossible to pass the test. “Is this a trick?” one student asked. I repeatedly explained to them that the purpose of the reading was to help us process the concepts of the dystopian novels and discuss what the implications were to us today. The books, the articles, the reading guides, and the assignments were all tools that would give us a chance to discuss some important social issues that needed attention. As residents of the United States, we had the power to not

only think about what could affect us in the future, but the power to act now so that those issues could be handled positively instead of negatively. Jesus echoed this thought when he stated, “I think these assignments that are here are better than those that are over there [at his home school] because [the home school assignments] don’t really help you a lot. This had stuff to think about. I kinda got worried like maybe I should do something.” Trip commented that he had read *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) when he was in eighth grade, but stated he was not into it as much then as he was into his novel this time. I asked him what the difference was, and he answered that this time he had a good reason to read the book he chose.

In addition to disrupting the commonplace, students particularly enjoyed the sociopolitical issues that were part of the novels. The fact that the issues in the novels were based on future projections of issues we face today gave them relevancy they were not used to having in their classroom reading. Jesus commented on the sociopolitical side of his novel when he said, “This one had stuff, like, what if this really happened? And then how could we make it stop? Oh, and how could people think *that* was a good idea? They were crazy!” Luis also pointed out that he liked “real life things that are really going on” which made the novel more interesting. The related articles discussing the sociopolitical issues today caught the students’ attention better than most nonfiction reading we had done, and the students commented on that fact when I asked them about it. The combination of fiction and nonfiction surrounding the sociopolitical issues made all the reading meaningful and relevant. Students enjoyed telling stories of how some of the social issues had personally affected them. Additionally, students asked deeper, more

complex questions in response to their reading. In previously trying to teach the students to question their reading, questions were mostly superficial and lacked complexity of thought. However, questions raised during the reading of the novels and the related nonfiction were important to them and gave them food for thought. They asked about civil rights and privacy issues, asked questions that compared their novels to Watergate and the financial crisis that involved Enron and other institutions, asked questions about changes in security at airports and uses of surveillance equipment in public places. They asked questions about what was admissible in court and how would Homeland Security know if someone were a threat. Interesting conversations came up in the discussions of the sociopolitical issues that gave us the opportunity to pursue vocabulary that not everyone knew; for example, words and phrases such as “conspiracy theories” and “propaganda” could be addressed when students either used a term which others were unfamiliar with, or when a student needed help finding the words for a concept.

The reading guides gave students a chance to think about those sociopolitical issues rather than trying to memorize details of the novel itself. The part of the reading guide which students commented on the most was the section that asked them to interrogate multiple viewpoints, one of the critical literacy elements. Each novel had enough information from multiple points of view to allow students to delve into motivations of different characters in the novels. Rather than there simply being good characters versus evil characters, the students could see that the people who might be considered the bad people were actually sometimes misinformed, especially the characters who had fallen for the propaganda of the ruling power. Characters who were

not liked could suddenly become sympathetic as the novel progressed. Jesus noted that twist of feelings when he got to the part in *Unwind* where one boy Roland, a particularly disliked bully, was unwound in a descriptive passage told from Roland's point of view. Alexis noted the same thing with regard to the surgery on a character he did not like in *Uglies*. Seeing issues from different points of view helped the students become more thoughtful about how other people might be feeling and to consider why they might act the way they did. This led to rich discussions about real people around us with whom we disagree. Different points of view are created by different circumstances, and by seeking to understand others, we might find it easier to work with them when we disagree.

Of course, there was also discussion about people in positions of power and how power can corrupt the thinking of those who have it. To that end, the conversations turned toward taking action, the fourth element of critical literacy. How could we prevent power from turning society into the future versions seen in the novels? Jesus, in explaining how much he enjoyed reading his novel said, "I kinda got worried like maybe I should do something." This brought up the question of what we can actually do. As with the deeper questions students were able to generate, their insights into taking social action also led to some surprisingly deep thoughts on their involvement as individuals. I jokingly said to a class one day that I did not want them to go home and tell their parents that their English teacher was trying to start a revolution. Trip immediately responded to the comment by telling me, "I sure was thinking about it, too. Let's just start one. Let's start a revolution!" So I asked them how we would do that. They had several ideas that were actually a little tamer than starting a revolution in the denotative sense of a sudden,



violent, or extreme change (“Revolution,” n.d.) but were important thoughts nonetheless. Students suggested steps such as talking to others about how we feel. “You are almost never the only one who feels that way,” Emilio stated. Students talked about banding together and protesting. Antonio asked what difference it could possibly make against big government by banding together. Another student excitedly mentioned Martin Luther King, Jr. and how the Jim Crow laws had changed because people began to group together and protest. Someone else mentioned that being vocal and banding together might be more effective at the community level, to which another student added that if communities started to change, it would eventually change the whole. Someone else mentioned voting, but how that is what everyone always says. One vote did not seem like a very effective way to make changes. In response to that comment, a student living in a community where immigration had been a controversial topic remarked about how his community was starting to vote out the city’s incumbent city council members as people started to talk with each other and realized that the opinions of the city council did not reflect the views of many of the city’s residents.

These conversations were deeper than any I had ever had in response to reading a piece of fiction or nonfiction. The connections students were making across disciplines were surprising. They were entering class each day with more excitement and enthusiasm than I had ever seen. Students who never finished their work or who tried to sleep through class every day were more engaged. While these students still did not complete the reading assignments, they were reading and completing parts of the assignments and were voluntarily involved in class discussions. They answered written

questions that they were interested in or for which they had something to say rather than leaving them all completely blank. Their demeanor was improved, and their responses toward me and their peers was more respectful. Some students who normally did not receive passing grades on their assignments were able to find that success; others still did not do enough to receive the passing grades, but were much more pleasant in class and seemed to enjoy being there more. The girls' class which had shown repeated reluctance to engage as a group showed improvement individually as they worked on assignments, completing more than they normally had prior to starting to the dystopian unit. Juanita did not finish reading her novel, for example, but she *started* and got more than halfway through. For her, that was a major change. We both felt good about that, and it was a good beginning.

Interestingly, I did not plan to focus each week's work around one of the elements of critical literacy; however, upon reviewing the data, each week seemed to naturally fall into one of the elements. Week One centered around sociopolitical issues. Week Two focused on disrupting the commonplace. Week Three explored taking action. Week Four examined multiple viewpoints. The final week, Week Five, revisited sociopolitical issues and multiple viewpoints. Would the order always fall like this? Upon reflection, I do not think that it necessarily would. I chose to focus on the sociopolitical issues first because I believed this would be the hook to lure the students into the idea of dystopian fiction and create interest and hopefully motivation. Then I emphasized the elements of the dystopian unit that were unlike the novel units the students were used to seeing on their home campuses in many of their teachers' classrooms in order to further encourage

motivation and engagement. When purely looking at the elements of critical literacy, interrogating multiple viewpoints would seem to be the next logical move; however, because of the place where many students were in their reading, they led the discussion throughout the next week into the area of what could be done to prevent futures such as the ones they were seeing unfold in their novels. Then in the fourth week, they were able to discuss the multiple viewpoints present in their novels because they had finished the reading and had had time to process some of the plot points and characters. While the four elements overlapped and were present each week, these foci made sense given that I planned for assignments to be in one-week chunks. The timing of my dystopian unit was purposely scheduled to take advantage of some time when our school did not allow intakes and exits due to standardized testing, thus minimizing the weekly overturn of students, but I still planned assignments in weekly chunks in order to maintain our usual routine. While disrupting the commonplace seems to be an umbrella concept – everything about these lessons disrupted the commonplace for my students – the rest of the elements are concepts that could be viewed consecutively or concurrently.

### **Dystopian Literature**

The third research question centered around using dystopian fiction with at-risk students who are struggling readers. Dystopian fiction provided promising possibilities for helping young adult readers explore their position in a society that is constantly changing and not always for the better. When faced with current issues which gave inspiration to the dystopian plot lines and settings, students were able to see a relevant purpose for reading as they sought to develop responses to essential questions about the

issues (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006) – “real” questions that did not have right or wrong answers. A unit based on dystopian fiction gave them the opportunities to formulate and substantiate opinions about meaningful topics. Critical literacy practices provided the means to teach dystopian fiction in a way that made the reading interesting and relevant to the adolescent reader. Critical literacy practices disrupted the commonplace found in classrooms, looked at issues from multiple viewpoints, focused on sociopolitical issues, and encouraged taking action to promote social justice. (Lewison et al., 2002). These procedures gave adolescents the opportunity to see where they fit in society and how they could participate in it. This type of applicable reading was something many high school students had not experienced. While there are better ways to present a traditional, classical canon of literature (Wilhelm, 2008; Gallagher, 2009), students who are at an especially high risk of not completing high school may need something different altogether. This study found a possible solution to the question of materials that are effective with at-risk students.

Choice in reading has been proven to be effective in helping adolescents connect to reading and grow in their reading skills (Krashen, 2004). While the idea of choice is no longer a new idea, and many schools are working to give students more choices in their reading, as well as time to read self-selected materials, students who do not have someone to point them toward specific books which might prove interesting and engaging while also being appropriate for their abilities have less chance of becoming engaged. Dystopian fiction, with the right guidance from a teacher who knows the novels as well as the students who will be reading them, has the potential for helping students

with little or no self-efficacy and self-identification as readers see the potential in themselves for becoming better readers as well as people who are readers. Choice combined with relevant texts and critical literacy practices were powerful tools in working with these at-risk students who were struggling both in school and out of it.

The three research questions asked what happens when students who do not identify themselves as readers and do not have self-efficacy for reading were taught using critical literacy practices with dystopian fiction used as the vehicle for those practices. This qualitative study demonstrated that these at-risk students who had not been able to experience success in reading and writing were able to enter the sphere of participants in literacy activities when the approach was changed. Critical literacy practices made that change in approach possible by helping student reframe assignments. Rather than approaching literacy assignments as an end in themselves, they could look at assignments as a way to participate in the world around them. They were interested in exploring how current events could affect the future. Dystopian novels were intriguing specifically because of their focus on sociopolitical issues and how what is happening now could affect the future. Focusing on sociopolitical issues disrupted the commonplace by allowing students to think about what was relevant about reading. They could explore multiple sides of an issue inherent in dystopian fiction and apply it to themselves as citizens of a global community. Thinking about what their part would be and how they could take action and respond gave them reason to care about the concepts. When the approach was significantly different from what they had previously experienced, they were able to put their interest in the sociopolitical issues to work for them by providing

the motivation to at least start. Once they started the reading and realized they could successfully understand the content with some support from their teacher, they were willing to continue working. Their self-efficacy continued to increase and their identity as readers improved as they demonstrated their understanding of the text and how the text impacted their thoughts as people. This change in perception was exciting for both the students and me as their teacher. The excitement these assignments had created in our class discussions and reading time was exhilarating and energizing. By the end of the dystopian unit, we were all primed to engage in the next reading adventure and somewhat saddened by the idea that once back on the home campuses, most students would not be able to recreate the experiences. These thoughts led me to consider what needed to happen next, in both my classroom and in classrooms where these students usually spent most of their time.

## **Implications**

### **Future Practice**

**My DAEP classroom.** Students in my classroom were more engaged in reading a complex work than I had ever observed in my 25 previous years of teaching. Comments the students made about what encouraged that experience included the choices they were given in their reading and the relevance the reading had in their lives. I had received multiple comments in the years prior to this research project where students stated they enjoyed and appreciated the time I took to introduce them to genres and the books in those genres. My knowledge of young adult literature had been repeatedly noticed by students as we looked at books week after week. I had also been paying

attention to which genres generated the most interest. I used that knowledge of young adult fiction to choose books for this research project that I believed would be appropriate for my students – providing appropriate levels of challenge along with high interest. Choice of reading materials within this high-interest genre allowed students to select what they felt would be most suited to their interests. Students commented over and over about how much they enjoyed getting to choose a novel rather than having to all read the same one. In addressing the sociopolitical issues which provided the foundations of the plots, students were able to apply what was occurring in their stories to what is happening now in society. This connection provided enough interest to get most students to continue reading and to discuss the implications of the futuristic settings. Dystopian fiction was definitely a successful tool to use to encourage motivation and engagement.

Another genre of contemporary young adult fiction that might have the same results as the dystopian fiction is realistic fiction, sometimes called “problem fiction” (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009). With similarly intense plot lines which cover topics that are of concern to young adults, realistic fiction has the potential to capture the young readers’ attention and encourage their engagement. Popular authors of contemporary realistic fiction for young adults such as John Green, Laurie Halse Anderson, Walter Dean Myers, and Sarah Dessen are easy to find in school and public libraries as well as new and used bookstores, making them an excellent choice for offering a range of storylines including serious topics such as eating disorders and other serious health

issues, difficult relationships, incarceration, and abuse. In providing variety in the reading experiences of my students, this genre will be the next one I try with the students.

Using the elements of critical literacy during the planning process allowed me to shift my thinking to a new paradigm, which I was able to pass on to my class. Rather than novels and assignments being an end in themselves, the novels and related articles were a tool for thinking. Therefore, I could give students freedom from the pressure of finishing the reading. The reading guides were also tools to help students focus on the sociopolitical issues, recognize multiple viewpoints on an issue, consider solutions to current problems which contributed to the conflicts in the novels, and ponder actions they could take now and as adults to avoid similar conflicts in the future. Students had a hard time believing me when I told them that if they did not finish reading their novels that there would not be severe consequences either to their success in the DAEP program or to their grades. In fact, I had trouble believing I meant it myself! But as I gave my relaxed approach time to take root, students began to realize that they did not want to be left out of the conversations because the conversations were rich and deep. And they were interesting! We were all realizing the benefits of learning together. I could honestly tell the students that I did not have answers to all the questions I was asking. They were able to draw the conclusion that if they did not think about these issues, the future could be bleak. While these futures might not happen in their lifetime, they were intrigued by the idea that they had the power now to stop that type of future.

Educators know that there is no such thing as a “silver bullet” which will solve all problems, yet we seem to be constantly looking for one anyway. While there were so



many positive outcomes to the dystopian unit using critical literacy and interesting reading material, there were still issues. While most said that this dystopian unit was much better than what they were used to, several students stated that “it’s still school, and it still feels like schoolwork.” I do not know if there is a solution to this issue in a school setting. Add the fact that students often feel as if they are “in jail” when they come to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program campus in spite of the caring atmosphere the teachers provide. They still experience severe restrictions on their behavior which is quite different than what they are used to at their home campus; maintaining their self-control when they have so many personal issues pressing down on them can be difficult when they are redirected to follow the school rules multiple times a day. I believe this was an issue with the girls’ class which never seemed to engage. While there were individual successes with those young women, as a group, I finished the dystopian unit feeling as if I had failed them by not creating a classroom environment and providing the teacher interaction they needed to participate as fully as the other groups had been able to achieve.

Since this research unit was conducted, I have continued to struggle with the constant entering and exiting of students. However, as my campus has begun to loosen some of the restrictions on our classroom procedures since then, I have begun incorporating more whole group and small group conversation into the classroom literacy experiences. Sometimes classes are not large enough to break up into smaller groups; for the first six or eight weeks of a new school year, there are classes which have only one or two students in them. However, as the class sizes grow, those practices may become

easier to implement. Students can always work with a partner when there are at least two of them, but we struggle with the awkwardness of working in environments that have such small groups.

To that end, working on providing technology to my students is a problem I experienced which I will continue to work on solving. I would like to have laptops available throughout the course of any unit so that students can grab one anytime they want to post a thought on the discussion board for their novels or other reading they are doing. Then they can read and respond to other students as they go and the conversations can be ongoing throughout the reading. That is how I had hoped to do this unit, and the next trip through the action research cycle will include providing better technological access. I believe access to students in other classes will be another piece of the puzzle in getting students motivated and engaged to participate. As I continue to work through the action research spiral, my focus will be on how to continue to work critical literacy practices and contemporary literature and current nonfiction into the curriculum so that students feel that what they are being asked to do is relevant to life outside of school. Given that I have them for such short periods of time, I can afford the luxury of focusing less on the traditional English curriculum and more on reading and writing practices that these struggling readers need in order to begin to participate in literacy activities.

**Traditional classrooms.** Students need repeated experiences in which they identify themselves as readers in order for this identity to become permanent. This goes beyond what one single teacher can do on her own. Other teachers must recognize the need for students to have engaged experiences in order to transfer the experiences into a

permanent identity. Gee (2001a, 2001b) found that people become a member of a community as a result of various factors, including what others say about them, and identities imposed upon them by an institution. When teachers see students as good readers or bad readers, they may be imparting this identity onto the students so that after time, the students realize they are part of the good reader community or the bad reader community. Therefore, students must have experiences which allow them to feel like a part of a literacy community. They must have appropriate challenges while being given the support to successfully meet those challenges. In order to achieve this, students need choice and relevance. The use of multiple dystopian titles in this research project provided the choice necessary for students to feel they could choose what interested them the most, helping them feel motivated to start and engaged once they began reading. The genre of the dystopian novel also provided the relevance. If using dystopian fiction as the basis for a unit of reading can impact these at-risk high school readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the potential for improving instruction in the high school English class is significant. However, other genres may provide the same type of engagement and relevance. Students repeatedly expressed how being given a novel that the whole class was going to read instantly stopped any motivation they might have had. The traditional reading guides containing chapter-by-chapter questions and vocabulary also impeded motivation. Julian gave a list of the things his class had to do the last time they had a novel unit: a book report, a test, an essay, a summary of each chapter, a list of quotes and their significance. He reported that he did very little work, just enough to squeak by and pass. Antonio noted that the novels we read were not "classic" books,

which he was glad of because he usually did not understand classic books and stories. When I asked him what he meant by “classic,” he and several others started to name works that were written well in the past such as Shakespeare, Homer, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald. While introducing students to books that are classic has merit, if students are not allowed to read contemporary fiction which has a more relevant feel, they may never develop the motivation to engage with text. Contemporary young adult fiction mixed in with more iconic works may help students feel that the reading is going to be worthwhile, especially if the teacher sets up every reading assignment to help students connect with the relevant themes (Gallagher, 2009). Luis expressed how his book was “addicting,” but he also commented on the fact that I helped him get interested in the book by providing extensive background information and making it seem interesting before we even started. Students stated that this rarely happened in their English classes.

When I asked students if they would read when they returned to their home campuses, most said no. When I asked them to explain, one of the most serious stumbling blocks they mentioned was time. Students need time to read in school. They expressed that they were usually expected to do most of the reading of a novel at home, and as Julian said, “If there is a choice between a boring book and TV or computer games, well, which would you pick?” I believe time is a crucial part of the solution to getting struggling high school students to read. If students are not given time to read in school, they are likely not going to read at all. However, if students receive significant amounts of time in which to grapple with texts at school, with the support of teachers and

peers, the likelihood that they will wish to continue reading outside of school increases. This was proven when students began asking if they could take their books home and when they got in trouble in other classes for reading instead of working on their assignments.

Students need more experiences in reading where the pressure is lowered, and comfort levels are nurtured. So many of the students I have worked with on both the DAEP and traditional campuses have the feeling that they are not going to be successful even before they start. The assignments they must do time after time have not been successful in the past, so there is no motivation to try again. Additionally, they also do not see any benefit to doing the assignments they are being asked to do. As mentioned before, there may not be a way to take the feeling of school out of assignments, no matter how different the assignments are. However, the pressure to make good grades as an end in itself is not enough motivation for many struggling students. Some students believe grades are simply used to help teachers decide who is smart and who is not, which students know is not a good way to decide. By the time students are in high school, getting them to engage in literacy activities when they have been in the habit of avoidance for so long is a difficult obstacle to overcome. Some students who were engaged in the content, such as Jesus, for example, still would only do the written parts of the assignments that they were interested in, leaving whole sections blank if they were not motivated enough to put in the effort to write the responses. However, self-efficacy is positively impacted when students are allowed to show what they have learned without the fear of being embarrassed or ridiculed in class. The more opportunities they have to

demonstrate their learning and to see how that learning connects with the world outside of school, the easier it should be to get students to repeat the process.

### **Future Research**

**My DAEP classroom.** As the restrictions on classroom practice continue to ease up on my campus, exploring how to present critical literacy practices in ways that continue to motivate and engage students more fully is of utmost concern for me. If students can be engaged in the social aspects of reading and writing, I may have a greater chance of drawing in some of the reluctant readers that I never felt were willing to engage and with whom I could not connect well. Future research for me will be to continue trying to find ways to help the struggling students I work with feel comfortable enough to take the risk of participating. Getting started is more than half the battle, and feeling comfortable is part of the issue. Additionally, continuing to work with critical literacy practices on assignments that are both long term and short term will be at the center of my attention. In all honesty, I did not spend any time trying to coordinate what I was doing in the dystopian unit with the district's English curriculum. I am quite familiar with our state's standards and the activities included many of those standards, but I chose to create literacy activities which addressed what I believed would benefit my students without regard for the state standards or the district curriculum. While this was a luxury I was able to enjoy at the time, if I am going to continue working with critical literacy practices, I am going to have to do some research and planning on how to coordinate the assignments with the standards and the curriculum better without compromising the integrity of the work I am trying to accomplish. I continue to have great concern for the

students' self-efficacy for reading and want to continue to find ways to mediate their feelings about themselves as readers and their attitudes toward reading. This will remain the foundation of any future work I do with my struggling students. Helping them increase their motivation and engagement with the goal of improving their perceptions of their abilities as readers and increasing their identity as readers is a top priority for me.

**Traditional classrooms.** This research study offers several questions for further study in classrooms outside of a DAEP campus. If given more time with the students – a whole year, for example – would the paradigm shift away from reading works for their own sake and toward using reading as a tool for exploring relevant concepts be enough to permanently mediate students' self-efficacy for reading and their self-perceptions as readers? How much time would actually be required to shift students' perceptions of themselves as readers? Additionally, how would critical literacy practices work with much larger groups of students who are in classrooms where discussion groups, Socratic seminars, and other strategies for diving deeply into texts could easily be incorporated into the daily routine?

What are the implications for high stakes tests? Students exhibited deeper levels of thinking than I had ever observed in my struggling students. The critical literacy practices I employed with the dystopian unit did not incorporate any test preparation. We completed this unit after students had taken their state tests for the spring when the pressure was lessened and teachers were free to teach units that were not focused on skills covered in the tests. How can using contemporary novels, related nonfiction, and

critical literacy practices be combined with studying other literary and grammatical elements which are tested? And how would this affect student scores?

For various reasons, many high school students in large, urban districts enter high school without the academic reading skills they need to be successful. So many students seem to get lost in the large comprehensive high schools, and teachers have a very difficult time keeping students engaged. Older pieces of literature which have traditionally been part of the English canon for so long, when taught with traditional methods, are losing students who do not have the academic skills necessary to complete reading and writing assignments successfully. Students do not see the relevance, and when the seemingly irrelevant texts are combined with the difficulty these complex texts present, many will not have the motivation for putting in the effort required to demonstrate even minimal proficiency. The same research questions I used to guide my research could be addressed in the traditional high school classroom. What happens when students who have low self-efficacy for reading and who do not identify themselves as readers are taught with critical literacy practices using dystopian fiction? Would their motivation and engagement be impacted positively, thus improving their self-efficacy for reading and their self-perception as readers? Furthermore, how would this affect students who do identify themselves as readers and have high self-efficacy for reading?

### **Summary**

High school students who make their way to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program campus are often struggling academically. They have had multiple experiences, usually over the course of several years, which negatively impact their self-efficacy and



their perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. Thus, they are unmotivated and disengaged from academic practices, especially those which involve reading and writing. As the years progress, they become further behind and lose hope that they can ever be successful at literacy activities. When taught in traditional ways, students see reading and writing as an end in themselves, not as tools to prepare them for life outside of school. Critical literacy practices combined with contemporary young adult literature such as dystopian fiction have the potential to help students who have given up to re-engage in reading and writing so they can continue to develop and practice the literacy skills which are necessary not only for school, but for life. Put these teaching practices in the hands of some caring teachers who can create a comfortable, nurturing environment, and many of these students may take the types of risks which can so easily impact not only their self-efficacy and identity, but their self-esteem as well. Secondary students who thought that their reading skills were as good as they could be – which was not good enough – may be able to get a second chance at reading and writing success.

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APPENDIX A

BOOK TALK POWERPOINT AND STUDENT BOOK PASS SHEET



# DYSTOPIAN FICTION

## What is a dystopia?

A dystopia is a society gone “bad” ~

- Excessive government control (for the people’s own good)
- Advanced technology
- Severely restricted individualism
- Survival of the protagonist(s)
- Focus on what happens *next* following some sort of societal disaster

Coined from “utopia” – a beautiful, perfect society

## What is a dystopia?

Dystopias often reflect the fears of modern-day society – **WHAT IF?**

- Excessive governmental control
- Lack of resources necessary for survival
- Religious differences
- Revolution and war
- Effects of rapidly changing technology
- Loss of personal freedom
- Natural disaster

## The House of the Scorpion

by Nancy Farmer



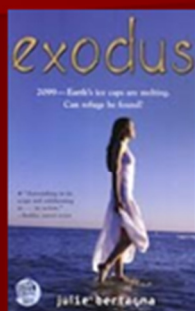
**Social Issues:**

**Cloning**  
**Despotism**  
**Nature vs. Nurture**  
**Freedom**

"Tam Lin says rabbits give up when they're caught by coyotes [...]. He says they consent to die because they're animals and can't understand hope. But humans are different. They fight against death no matter how bad things seem, and sometimes, even when everything's against them, they win."

# Exodus

by Julie Bertagna



## Social Issues:

**Global Warming**

**Social Castes**

**Self-preservation vs. Helping Others**

"You can betray someone with a word or an action. You can betray them with silence or inaction too. And in betraying that one person, you can betray a whole world."

"luxury means little when there's no real freedom in the world"

# Feed

by M. T. Anderson



## Social Issues:

**Advanced Technology**

**Social Media**

**Brainwashing by the "powers that be"**

**Consumerism and Happiness**

"I don't know when they first had feeds. Like maybe, fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body. They carried them around outside of them, in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe."

# Unwind

by Neal Shusterman



## Social Issues:

### Abortion

Parental Authority

Organ Donation

Religious Rituals

"I'd rather be partly great than entirely useless."

"Fine," Connor tells him. "Think about stuff until your head explodes. But the only thing I want to think about is surviving to eighteen."

# Uglies

by Scott Westerfeld



## Social Issues:

### Beauty and Perfection

Conformity vs. Individuality

Environmental Protection

"Your personality - the real you inside - was the price of beauty."

"Perhaps the logical conclusion of everyone looking the same is everyone thinking the same."

# Social Issues

The House of the Scorpion

## Cloning

Despotism  
Nature vs. Nurture  
Freedom

Feed

## Advanced Technology

Social Media  
Brainwashing  
Consumerism and Happiness

Unwind

## Abortion

Parental Authority  
Organ Donation  
Religious Rituals

Uglies

## Beauty and Perfection

Conformity vs. Individuality  
Environmental Protection  
Personal Freedom

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

### BOOK PASS

As you watch the book talk, complete the "Description" column.

As you look at each of the books, do the following and then write in the "Comment" column.

- Look at the covers – front and back. Notice the title, the art and read the summary.
- Flip through the book to see what it looks like inside. Look at the print size and pages.
- Read the first page or two. Notice the vocab and sentences. See if it's too hard.

After you have passed through all the books, rank them 1-5, with one being the one you liked best.

| Title/Author  | Description | Comment | Rank |
|---|-------------|---------|------|
| <i>The House of the<br/><u>Socrion</u><br/>Farmer</i> |             |         |      |
| <i>Exodus<br/><u>Bertagna</u></i>                     |             |         |      |
| <i>Feed<br/>Anderson</i>                              |             |         |      |
| <i>Unwind<br/><u>Shusterman</u></i>                   |             |         |      |
| <i>Uglies<br/><u>Westerfeld</u></i>                   |             |         |      |

APPENDIX B  
READING GUIDE

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date Started \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?  
Dystopian Fiction Unit

Title of Your Book \_\_\_\_\_

| Social Issues | Book Number |
|---------------|-------------|
| _____         | _____       |
| _____         |             |
| _____         |             |
| _____         |             |

Why did you like this book best out of the 5?

Write down some initial thoughts you have about the main social issue.



### FOCUSING ON THE "PLAYERS"

Complete the T-chart by making notes in the right column that help answer the questions on the left.

| Questions  | Notes |
|--|-------|
| Who has the <u>power</u> ?   |       |
| What do the <u>people with power</u> do to <u>keep the power</u> ? |       |
| How do those <u>In power</u> abuse <u>Their power</u> ?            |       |
| Who are the <u>victims</u> ?                                       |       |
| How do <u>most of the victims</u> <u>respond to the problem</u> ?  |       |
| Who is in the <u>"middle"</u> and <u>How do they respond</u> ?     |       |

FOCUSING ON THE SOCIAL ISSUES

Main Social Issue \_\_\_\_\_

| PROS | CONS |
|------|------|
|      |      |

#### FOCUSING ON AUTHOR'S CRAFT

Discussion Points (things that make you go "OMG!")

Connections (how this relates to now - 2014)

Visualize (some scenes you found particularly interesting to picture in your head)

Word Choice (words the author used that were especially interesting or good)

Predict (what will happen as a result of the characters' actions)

Questions (about anything)

#### FOCUSING ON PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Choose three quotes from the novel that are meaningful to you. Write the quote and the page number on the left, and write your thoughts about it on the right.

| Quote and Page Number | Your Thoughts |
|-----------------------|---------------|
|                       |               |
|                       |               |
|                       |               |

Your favorite part.

Would you recommend this novel to someone else to read? Why or why not?

# STUDENT SAMPLES FROM UNWIND

Name [REDACTED] Date Started April 21, 2014 Period Second

**HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?**  
Dystopian Fiction Unit

Title of Your Book unwind

Social Issues Abortion Parental Authority Organ Donation Religious Rituals

Book Number 1

Why did you like this book best out of the 5?

It seem more interesting and the organization seem better because it's telling each person's side of the story. Also the topic seem like and out of this world that seem interesting.

Write down some initial thoughts you have about the main social issue.

Abortion, I know it's a choose, meaning your body your choice; but I still believe if a person doesn't want a baby or can't afford a baby, but still end up pregnant there are other options than killing an innocent life.

# FOCUSING ON THE "PLAYERS"

Complete the T-chart by making notes in the right column that help answer the questions on the left.

| Questions   | Notes  |
|---|--|
| Who has the power?                                  | COPS. } Cleaver. } DOCTORS.<br>government<br>war people.   |
| What do the people with power do to keep the power? | If one escapes they track him down.<br>They set people to jail that help the unwinds   |
| How do those in power abuse their power?            | possibly<br>Cleaver kills the "Goldens" to rise to the top.<br>Doctors unwind the teens who are close to turning 18 faster so they won't lose funds.   |
| Who are the victims?                                | Risa, Conner, Levi.<br>All Unwinds thirteen - eighteen year olds.  |
| How do most of the victims respond to the problem?  | Conner - he runs away to hiding, planning to make it until he is 18.<br>Risa - runs away, also trying to save herself<br>Levi - says it's a gods will that he needs to go through.                               |
| Who is in the "middle" and How do they respond?     | Levi's family is sorrowful and sad. Risa's friends are sad and missing her.<br>Conner's girlfriend, she leaves him b/c she can't through with running away.<br>Normal teenagers that don't know the the unwinds. |

FOCUSING ON THE SOCIAL ISSUES

Main Social Issue

Abortion

PROS

Abortion is illegal

The bodies part get sent to people who need them.

every part of the body is use

All the people who want som up to be "important" or "successful" get to be helping someone who will.

CONS

they let you hear your kid apart at age 13

They can feel the persons thoughts and emotions, depending on what body part they remember.

same

They're no longer a person.

kid's lives get taken away too soon, and don't get the opportunity to change and learn more.



## FOCUSING ON AUTHOR'S CRAFT

### Discussion Points (things that make you go "OMG!")

- o when Cyrus brain switches to Tyler's emotion.
- o That still in the "future" it's a big deal and illegal for men to marry men + women to marry women.
- o In pg 240, the Admiral summons Hailan - or Homphney which the rumor is that his parents are crazy and the Admiral has sent embryos to his wife.
- o when Levi goes with Cleaver and the bald guy hints that they could of killed the "Goldens".
- o Pg 251 when Cleaver confesses.
- o Ronald's betrayal.

### Connections (how this relates to now - 2014)

- o People still leave babies at peoples doorsteps.
- o Kids are aborted, but just in unwind it's a different more advance way to abort.
- o transplants.
- o Runaways.

### Visualize (some scenes you found particularly interesting to picture in your head)

- o Pg. 17 when Conner gets caught.
- o Chapter 3. when they're describing Levi's Party.
- o Also when they describe the scene of the accident
- o and all the main characters come together in the same scene.
- o Pg 245-52 when the mob tries to get the Admiral and they start to destroy everything while Conner tries to get Ronald to. Conner & Ron later he finds out Cleaver was the one who killed the Goldens.
- o The ending chapters.

Word Choice (words the author used that were especially interesting or good)

- 11 families - to describe many parenting.
- stroked - for finding a baby at your doorstep.

Predict (what will happen as a result of the characters' actions)

Real

- Maybe Risa and Conner will turn into a couple, instead of pretending to be one.
- That Levi will betray Cleaver and warn the other unwinds once he finds out the true cause.
- Conner, Levi, Risa all the same unwinds continue the the Admirals program.

Questions (about anything)

- Why is it illegal for the people to not take the babies they left on their doorstep?
- Who is Julie-Ann?
- Why did Levi get sent to Alaska?
- Why did Ronald betray them?
- What happen to Conner?

### FOCUSING ON PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Choose three quotes from the novel that are meaningful to you. Write the quote and the page number on the left, and write your thoughts about it on the right.

| Quote and Page Number  | Your Thoughts   |
|--|---|
| <p>"Maybe, maybe not. One thing you learn when you've lived as long as I have - people aren't all good, and people aren't all bad. We move in and out of darkness and light all of our lives."</p> | <p>People can be "bad" but have the hugest hearts &amp; others can be "good" but very selfish. Never "all bad" or "all good."</p> |
| <p>"They all keep seeing him as a leader when all he wants is to be ignored"</p>   | <p>Many people like me have that problem because they're just so noticeable in some way. I hate it but it is what it is.</p>      |
|  |   |

Your favorite part.

Would you recommend this novel to someone else to read? Why or why not?

## APPENDIX C

### ARTICLES

## General Technology

How is technology affecting your family? *Huff Post*

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jan-cloninger-and-rosemary-strembicki-lcsw/how-is-technology-affecting-your-family\\_b\\_3915849.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jan-cloninger-and-rosemary-strembicki-lcsw/how-is-technology-affecting-your-family_b_3915849.html)

How technology is changing the way children think and focus. *Psychology Today*

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-power-prime/201212/how-technology-is-changing-the-way-children-think-and-focus>

My privacy is alive and well. *Teen Ink*

[http://www.teenink.com/opinion/pop\\_culture\\_trends/article/525009/My-Privacy-is-Alive-and-Well/](http://www.teenink.com/opinion/pop_culture_trends/article/525009/My-Privacy-is-Alive-and-Well/)

How technology affects us. *Teen Ink*

[http://www.teenink.com/opinion/social\\_issues\\_civics/article/166619/How-Technology-Affects-Us/](http://www.teenink.com/opinion/social_issues_civics/article/166619/How-Technology-Affects-Us/)

We're living 1984 today. *CNN*

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/03/opinion/beale-1984-now/>

The CNN 10: Inventions

<http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2013/11/tech/cnn10-inventions/>

Prophets of Science Fiction: George Lucas (Discovery Education, CFBISD Library Resources)

<https://app.discoveryeducation.com/search?Ntt=George+Lucas>

Top 10 Most Important Inventions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Technology

<http://www.infoniac.com/hi-tech/top-10-most-important-inventions-of-the-21st-century-in-technology.html>

21<sup>st</sup> Century – Most Important Inventions In Technology

<http://www.infoniac.com/hi-tech/top-10-most-important-inventions-of-the-21st-century-in-technology.html>

1. iPhone
2. iPad
3. Driverless Car
4. Electric Charging Stations for Cars
5. Flip Mino Mini Camcorder
6. Nintendo Wii
7. Google Android
8. Tesla Roadster Battery Sports Car
9. YouTube
10. Facebook

## Technology Specific to the Novels

Transplants and Cloning (*House of the Scorpion, Unwind*)

<http://www.nature.com/nm/journal/v14/n3/full/nm0308-225.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/fertility/etc/cloning.html>

<http://www.humancloning.org/>

[http://www.transplant.bc.ca/what\\_organs\\_can.htm](http://www.transplant.bc.ca/what_organs_can.htm)

Computer Chip Implants (*Feed*)

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2005/08/01/chip-implants-better-care-or-privacy-scare/>

<http://www.extremetech.com/extreme/149879-brown-university-creates-first-wireless-implanted-brain-computer-interface>

<http://www.smartplanet.com/blog/smart-takes/brain-implants-could-control-computers-by-2020-intel-says/>

Cosmetic Surgery (*Uglies*)

<http://www.prlog.org/10474389-top-ten-plastic-surgery-advances-of-the-21st-century.html>

APPENDIX D

SAMPLES OF DATA SPREADSHEETS AND JOURNALS



|   | B  | C  | D  | E  | F  | G  | H  | I | J                        | K    | L       | M   | N |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|--------------------------|------|---------|-----|---|
|   | PR | OC | SF | PS | SC | V  | FS |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 24 | 21 | 36 | 31 | 76 | 50 | 64 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 28 | 15 | 15 | 17 | 50 | 28 | 39 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 28 | 19 | 30 | 35 | 63 | 75 | 69 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 32 | 22 | 34 | 20 | 75 | 68 | 71 |   | *permission form on file |      |         |     |   |
|   | 34 | 19 | 30 | 30 | 70 | 70 | 70 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 35 | 21 | 25 | 23 | 73 | 56 | 65 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 36 | 13 | 20 | 24 | 58 | 50 | 54 |   | RSPS                     | high | average | low |   |
|   | 36 | 15 | 26 | 21 | 68 | 65 | 66 |   | Progress                 | 44   | 39      | 34  |   |
|   | 36 | 16 | 31 | 29 | 80 | 67 | 74 |   | Observational Comparison | 26   | 21      | 16  |   |
|   | 36 | 17 | 21 | 25 | 63 | 70 | 66 |   | Social Feedback          | 38   | 33      | 27  |   |
|   | 36 | 18 | 28 | 30 | 75 | 75 | 75 |   | Psychological State      | 37   | 31      | 25  |   |
|   | 36 | 20 | 27 | 15 | 73 | 65 | 69 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 36 | 22 | 30 | 29 | 80 | 65 | 73 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 36 | 24 | 30 | 22 | 75 | 45 | 60 |   | AMRP                     |      |         |     |   |
|   | 36 | 24 | 34 | 30 | 88 | 80 | 84 |   | Self-concept             |      |         |     |   |
|   | 37 | 15 | 22 | 18 | 73 | 63 | 38 |   | Value                    |      |         |     |   |
|   | 37 | 15 | 26 | 16 | 65 | 53 | 59 |   | Full Survey              |      |         |     |   |
| * | 37 | 20 | 31 | 31 | 75 | 83 | 78 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 37 | 21 | 26 | 27 | 65 | 68 | 66 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 37 | 24 | 26 | 30 | 80 | 75 | 78 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 37 | 24 | 35 | 34 | 88 | 75 | 81 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 38 | 21 | 32 | 27 | 85 | 70 | 78 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 38 | 22 | 24 | 29 | 78 | 50 | 64 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 39 | 17 | 34 | 21 | 83 | 55 | 69 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 39 | 18 | 40 | 32 | 83 | 70 | 76 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 39 | 23 | 35 | 22 | 88 | 43 | 65 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 40 | 17 | 35 | 20 | 75 | 48 | 61 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 40 | 19 | 36 | 36 | 73 | 78 | 75 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 40 | 21 | 32 | 29 | 90 | 76 | 82 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 40 | 22 | 34 | 34 | 78 | 53 | 65 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 41 | 18 | 23 | 10 | 58 | 50 | 54 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 41 | 24 | 28 | 18 | 83 | 53 | 68 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 41 | 24 | 30 | 31 | 75 | 75 | 75 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 42 | 20 | 26 | 19 | 75 | 50 | 63 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 43 | 25 | 22 | 33 | 88 | 60 | 74 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 44 | 15 | 32 | 31 | 83 | 63 | 73 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 45 | 22 | 32 | 34 | 85 | 83 | 84 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |
|   | 45 | 27 | 37 | 33 | 95 | 80 | 88 |   |                          |      |         |     |   |

| C         | D                          | E      | F                      | G   | H                       | I                                 | J                                 | K                               | L             | M          | N          |
|-----------|----------------------------|--------|------------------------|---|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|------------|------------|
| Date      | Type of Data               | Period | Topic/?                | Text  | Disrupting Common Place | Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints | Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues | Action Promoting Social Justice | Self-efficacy | Engagement | Motivation |
| 5/13/2014 | Student Reaction to Lesson | 3      | student reaction 21A   | <p>Gilberto is the only student in my 4th period class right now after the other 3 exited. It allows for some personal conversation with him. He was reading the article about Cloning, and wondered what the difference between "genotype" and "phenotype" is. He speculated that "genotype" sounds like "genes" and "phenotype" starts with "ph" and sounds like "physical."</p> <p>I looked up the two words and we discussed – genotype is what is encoded into genes (predisposition to certain diseases, for example), while phenotype is what is observable (color or hair or eyes or weight, for example). Phenotypes are determined by a combination of genes and environment. Some flamingoes are pink, while some are white, because of what they eat, but none are blue, for example.</p> |                         |                                   |                                   |                                 |               | X          | X          |
| 4/18/2014 | Teacher Observation        | All    | teacher observation 5A | I noticed today that 6 students checked out the library copy or took my classroom library copy of the novel they selected as their first choice! I hope they aren't frustrated if they have to go back and reread in order to complete some of the reading assignments. I'm going to try to make those global enough and based on critical literacy enough that they don't have to do that much, if any at all.   | X                       |                                   |                                   |                                 |               | X          |            |
| 4/24/2014 | Teacher Observation        | All    | teacher reflection 8A  | The middle periods were great! A lot of fun talking to the students about their books, how they were liking them, why I want to be able to report their thoughts. They read with a higher percentage of engagement and enthusiasm.  |                         |                                   |                                   |                                 |               | X          |            |
| 4/24/2014 | Teacher Observation        | 2      | teacher reflection 8B  | I'm really tired of my 2nd period girls. They have a lot of issues outside of school that are impeding their progress – attitudes and behaviors that interfere with their ability to engage with academics. They are struggling as a whole all day with their behavior. Three of the seven are disrespectful and uncooperative. The remaining girls are lethargic and uninterested and the behavior of the three is affecting their willingness to participate and engage.  |                         |                                   |                                   |                                 |               | X          |            |
| 4/25/2014 | Teacher Observation        | All    | teacher reflection 9A  | This was a super-tiring day for me. I was tired when I started, and it was going to be nonstop until bedtime. I didn't make notes at the end of the day – and by the time I came back to it on Monday the 28th, I couldn't remember much about it other than the sketchy notes I'd made during the day (below). Had to leave straight after work to go get Corbyn's bag, pick him up and deliver him to my mom, and then get home and changed for a 5:00 birthday dinner reservation.   |                         |                                   |                                   |                                 |               |            |            |

| H                             | I                                       | J  | K  | L                 | M          | N          | O        | P      | Q                         | R                  | S                   |
|-------------------------------|---|--|--|-------------------|------------|------------|----------|--------|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Disrupting<br>Common<br>Place | Interrogating<br>Multiple<br>Viewpoints | Focusing<br>on<br>Sociopolitical<br>Issues | Action<br>Promoting<br>Social<br>Justice | Self-<br>efficacy | Engagement | Motivation | Identity | Choice | Instructional<br>Strategy | Social<br>Literacy | Teacher<br>Attitude |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   | X          | X          |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        | X                         |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        | X                         |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        | X                         |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               | X                                       |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   | X  |  |                   |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        | X                         |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  | X                 |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  | X                 |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |
|                               |   |  |  |                   |            |            |          |        |                           |                    |                     |

## SAMPLE PAGES FROM DAILY DIARY AND REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

Student names have been redacted.

### Thursday, April 24, 2014

Library day – I gave students a choice: either read their dystopian novel, or read their self-selected choice. I reminded them that the goal was to be half finished with their dystopian novel by tomorrow, but Thursdays I consider to be *their* reading day, so either way was fine.

We talked about reading two novels simultaneously. I told them that they probably would find that it is not as hard to do that as they think, but it was up to them.

Most students read their dystopian novels. (Notes per period on the “Library Day Notes for 4/24/14)

2<sup>nd</sup> period – several of the girls in that class ( ) are very angry in general and are not receptive to doing anything cooperative. Rather than addressing them as a group, I spoke with individual girls and invited them to participate personally. I skipped these three as they had already lost their day and the principal had had to come and address their behavior. I will talk with these tomorrow, perhaps, depending on how the morning goes.

3<sup>rd</sup> period – I told the group what Mrs. had said the day before (without using ’s name, but he confessed!) and read some of the wording from their surveys. They seemed positively receptive to taking a consent form and getting it signed. None of the boys in this period had one on record. Only one boy who had already exited had turned one in.

4<sup>th</sup> period – as students entered the room, they made these comments:  
 – I love this book; it’s a really good book. Are we reading today?  
 – I don’t like to read, Miss, but I really like this book.  
 – This book is addicting! I want to see what happens next.

5<sup>th</sup> period – one student, , was already finished with her book. She began reading one of the other dystopian novels.

6<sup>th</sup> period – these boys were the least engaged of the bunch. It’s right after lunch, and they were more subdued sleepy.

23/29 students chose to continue reading their dystopian novel.

At this point, completion of the novels looks like this:

13 students are at the 1/5 way mark or less  
3 students are about 1/3 of the way through  
9 students are about 1/2 way through  
3 students are well beyond half way  
1 student is finished

The middle periods were great! A lot of fun talking to the students about their books, how they were liking them, why I want to be able to report their thoughts. They read with a higher percentage of engagement and enthusiasm.

I'm really tired of my 2<sup>nd</sup> period girls. They have a lot of issues outside of school that are impeding their progress – attitudes and behaviors that interfere with their ability to engage with academics. They are struggling as a whole all day with their behavior. Three of the seven are disrespectful and uncooperative. The remaining girls are lethargic and uninterested and the behavior of the three is affecting their willingness to participate and engage.

### **Wednesday, April 30, 2014**

30 minutes of reading time.

Clarification of reading guide questions and instructions as students continue to take notes as they read.

3<sup>rd</sup> period – all but one of the students are reading *House of the Scorpion* and someone wanted to know why the clones were grown in cows. I told them I wasn't sure. They speculated that if an embryo could be grown in a cow, it would be an easy, uncomplicated way to create a clone, especially if it was just for body parts. (Could it really survive, though? They were doubtful.)

Why would human cloning be illegal? If they are for body parts, then it would be wrong to treat another person that way.

Another student wanted to know if the government was part of cover-ups – aliens in Roswell, the Illuminati (illuminati spelled backward dot com leads to the NSA website, one student told me. Sure enough, it does! But it is a hoax perpetrated by a person with good computer skills.)

Discrepancies in what the RSPS and APP said, and what students indicated in discussion and conversations were used as "teachable moments" focus students in particular?

Book talks might feed into higher scores on instruments. They gave SSR and guidance on good books. This may be a "variable" that accounts for better attitudes on instruments. Also small classes, individualized attention, etc.

I had previously read RSPS & APP as individually rather than as a group. Now might that impact?

What are the implications for high-stakes testing?

Our School will continue to change. Relating on group work + "best practice"

Students who don't care about grades or credits - Grading, only doing the parts he "cares about" - too much like school" - writing assignments.

Grading - farthest she ever got in a book, even though she didn't finish.

Now to use the elements of CL and get the TEKS in there.

Students who had been involved in the bulk of the research project were influential in encouraging reading time when there was an influx of new students (Ch. 4, book 5 (p. 52))

APPENDIX E

IRB APPROVAL LETTER





**Institutional Review Board**

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619  
940-898-3378  
email: IRB@twu.edu  
<http://www.twu.edu/irb.html>

DATE: March 17, 2014

TO: Ms. Sherri Wilcox  
Department of Reading

FROM: Institutional Review Board - Denton

Re: *Approval for Using Critical Literacy and Dystopian Fiction with Diverse High School Students to Mediate Self-Efficacy as Readers: An Action Research Study (Protocol #: 17590)*

The above referenced study has been reviewed and approved at a fully convened meeting of the Denton Institutional Review Board (IRB) on 2/7/2014. This approval is valid for one year and expires on 2/7/2015. The IRB will send an email notification 45 days prior to the expiration date with instructions to extend or close the study. It is your responsibility to request an extension for the study if it is not yet complete, to close the protocol file when the study is complete, and to make certain that the study is not conducted beyond the expiration date.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Connie Briggs, Department of Reading  
Dr. Patricia Watson, Department of Reading  
Graduate School