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Exploring the American Revolution from Multiple Perspectives through Critical Literacy  
Discussions in a Fifth-Grade Classroom

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### **Introduction: What is Critical Literacy?**

Critical literacy is an instructional approach that helps students to become active readers. Critical literacy is particularly beneficial when reading content area texts. Many students in schools today tend to take what they read at face value. They don't ask questions and simply assume what they have read presents all of the facts they need to know (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Since reading and writing are being implemented across curricula, students should be knowledgeable on how to question and evaluate texts rather than taking the material at face value. It is important for students to trust what they have read, however, they need to know that questioning the text is not bad; rather it is what critical readers do.

Critical literacy is a form of active reading. Critical literacy helps students to not just passively read and accept what the author has written but to instead question, examine, and dispute the text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Critical literacy can be done individually or as a class. There is a powerful relationship between the reader and the author of a text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). The relationship should be questioned by readers to encourage reflection, transformation, and action (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). When students read the title of a text, they trust the author to provide them with the information that is implied by the title. After reading a text, students can ask themselves who wrote the text, whose voice may be missing, or what perspectives may have been lost. This is the reflection process (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Transformation occurs when readers take what they already know along with what is in the text and take action upon it. They may agree or disagree and present what they see is missing or what may need to be added to help elaborate on a specific detail (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Students can practice critical reading by discussing texts that they have read with their peers or a guardian at home. McLaughlin & DeVogd (2004) explain Friere's (1970) belief that

“social constructivists believe that learners make sense of their world by connecting their prior knowledge with that they are learning” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, p. 21). When students connect their prior knowledge to the text at hand, it becomes more memorable and relatable. Students can exercise critical thinking not only when reading texts but also when viewing media, social media, magazines and newspapers. By engaging in critical reading of a variety of texts, students develop as critical thinkers (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

### **Theorists and Researchers within Critical Literacy Practices**

The environment in which students read is important. The powerful relationship between a reader and the text is always changing. Paulo Freire sees that the relationship between reader and author as one where the reader has the power (Freire & Macedo, 1987). When students make the connection between their previous knowledge and the present text, they are increasing their comprehension by building upon what they already know. This allows students to create their own understanding rather than allowing the author to tell the student what to think. That is how critical literacy can form within schools (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Textbooks, which schools distribute to students, often share only one perspective. This perspective is many times perceived as the only important perspective when understanding a subject. Freire & Macedo (1987) explore this idea by describing that illiterate, or limited details of the experiences of others, hinder student learning because illiterate texts, “provide an ideological cover for powerful groups simply to silence the poor, minority groups, women, or people of color” (Freire & Macdeo, 1987, p. 12). When this happens to students, they are not able to understand all perspectives and begin to believe in misconceptions. Since the texts are lacking in information or perspectives, students begin to rely on incorrect information therefore passing along these ideas to others. Those who are from the dominant European-American culture silence those from non-European American

cultures which limits the information provided to others (Wink, 2010). Whether schools are aware of this or not, textbooks often proliferate the ideologies of the dominant culture, making students unaware of different perspectives about various topics (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Louise Rosenblatt, founder of reader response theory, is a believer in the power and relationship with words. Reader response theory is the transaction between a reader and a text in a particular context. Within this transaction, readers approach their reading from an aesthetic or efferent stance, and neither can stand alone (Rosenblatt 2002; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Taking an aesthetic stance is more emotional for the reader than if they took an efferent stance which is more factual (Rosenblatt 2002; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Rosenblatt believes that no reading experience can be purely from one stance or the other. It is the continuous job of the reader to be making choices and focusing on both stances when reading even though one stance may be stronger than the other (Rosenblatt 2002; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). A student who picks a text on their own is more likely to read it from an aesthetic stance for more pleasure than from an efferent stance for factual information. However, whether they realize it or not, students are still learning information even though they may be reading for pleasure. When a teacher assigns a text, a student is likely reading it more efferently because they know there will be discussions or questions asked about the information within the text. Even when individuals read for content, there is still an experience of pleasure involved in the reading.

In addition to the aesthetic stance and the efferent stance, is the critical stance. Taking a critical stance allows the reader to break down the text and envision alternate viewpoints by using their background knowledge to develop an understanding of what they believe as well as what the author is presenting to them (Luke & Freebody, 1999; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Rosenblatt (2002), as well as other theorists, believe future generations are lacking the critical

stance. In classroom's today, more than ever, students are experiencing many different texts and multimedia resources (Rosenblatt, 2002). It is vital for them to understand that it is important to read from a critical stance when reading multiple texts. Students can raise questions about the way the text is written including the author's message, who is privileged, and who is marginalized in the text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Students, who take a critical stance while reading, will become critical thinkers in their day to day lives outside of the classroom (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

Freire emphasizes that readers not only need to read the text in front of them but also "read the world." The reader must understand that the text is important but not to be manipulated by it (Freire 1970; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). To "read the world," critical readers must comprehend beyond the literal level and think about the purpose of the text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Persuasion is often present in texts that students encounter in everyday life so for them to take a text as it is leads them to be controlled by the text they are reading. Readers must be able to analyze and evaluate the texts they read to see the whole picture.

### **Critical Literacy in the Classroom: Principles**

McLaughlin and DeVogd describe four principles that are necessary when implementing critical literacy in the classroom (McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004). These four principles include the idea of power, understanding the text's problem and complexity, being able to understand critical literacy, and allowing the students to view multiple perspectives. In a classroom, all of these principles are important for students to be able to read from a critical stance.

The first, the principle of power, deals with the idea that whenever someone reads, there is always a power relationship between the author and the reader. The reader assumes that the

author knows what they are talking about and therefore gives the author their trust (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

The second principle is understanding the text's problem and complexity. Instead of accepting the text placed in front of them, critical readers problematize, or solve a problem that the text presents to them (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). A student's lack of motivation to problematize in the classroom may come from various circumstances such as the lack of high-quality texts, students' past reading experiences or the limited opportunities to self select, and/or reading and discussing books in social settings such as the classroom. These problems should come to the attention of the educator (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Students do not need to read just from textbooks. It is important for students to read from multiple sources because it challenges the students to expand their thinking and discover beliefs and positions they might have not known before (Freire, 1970; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Reading from different texts can be implemented throughout all subject areas and grade levels (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

When engaging in critical literacy the teacher's ability to understand the material is important; however, the context it is taught in is even more important. This is the third principle that is necessary when implementing critical literacy in the classroom. It begins and ends with the teachers' understanding of critical literacy. When students see their teacher model critical literacy skills, it helps the students to mold into critical readers as well (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Providing students with the background knowledge that they need in order to understand the text helps the students begin to critically read the text. The teacher can use think-alouds or a read-alouds to model for students what it means to be critically aware. The teacher can model critical literacy skills while the students listen and gain an understanding. After, the

students can break off into groups or pairs and practice doing it themselves. To tie everything together, there must be a reflection process between the students and the teachers. This is where the students are guided to make text to text, text to self, and text to world connections (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

The fourth principle focuses on allowing the students to examine multiple perspectives. If students are only taught from one perspective, they are not being provided with the whole picture. Reading different points of view of a story or a specific topic provides the multiple perspectives that students need in order to understand as well as formulate their own opinions. Multiple perspectives can be used in language arts and history (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

During a social studies lesson, a student may be led to believe that a more authentic voice, or genuine use of ideas, would come from a classroom textbook rather than a letter written by the descent of someone who was present at a historical event (Soares & Wood, 2010). These students are led to believe that their textbook tells them all that they need to know. The letter by the descent has a more authentic voice because it is coming from a primary source. In addition, the students are unintentionally led to believe they should trust the textbook more because it was given to them by their school. Students will recognize an authentic voice in a text once they realize that in many texts, not all voices are heard or accepted. It is good for students to speak out against the unequal power relations that exist in every form of text (Soares & Wood, 2010).

Finding an authentic voice is important for students to learn while reading multiple forms of text. Voice has many different meanings, in different circumstances, and to different people. Bakhtin (1981, 1986) believes voice is dialogic and means language and ideas (Soares & Wood, 2010). Some words may be listened to more than others because of who is presenting them and what is being talked about. Some words may not even be heard by the listener (Soares & Wood,



2010). After reading multiple sources, elementary aged students can learn to create their own voice through dialogue, debates, drama, and film (Soares & Wood, 2010). Critical literacy allows students to ask questions and bring the silenced voices to the forefront along with using different texts to create their own authentic voice about the event being discussed.

Critical literacy can be taught in all grade levels and reach all students, lower level readers as well as gifted readers. Not only does it help to challenge struggling readers and increase their ability to read, but it also helps to give the gifted readers the academic challenge and deeper meaning that they are looking for in the classroom (Kenny, 2013). Critical literacy provides gifted readers with the opportunity to delve deeper into the text and talk more in depth with their teacher and peers (Kenny, 2013). Text sets, a collection of 20-25 books on a topic varying in genre and reading level, are used for critical literacy lessons, can be read by all students because of the varying reading levels (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Manak, 2012). Some students will read the chapter books word for word while others may just look at pictures to interpret the main idea. Both can be done by using text sets and in the end reach that teacher's ultimate goal of addressing each student's needs. Jessica Kenney (2013), in *Fostering Critical thinking Skills: Strategies for Use with Intermediate Gifted Readers* explains this concept further when stating, "Although it may look different when used with regular education students, critical thinking increases academic rigor for all students, which is the ultimate goal for educators" (Kenny 2013, p. 30). All readers can make some connection with the author which then can lead to the critical thinking that teachers want all readers to have. Struggling readers often receive the most attention and in return, the more advanced, gifted readers get lost in the shuffle (Kenny 2013). Critical literacy is a way to reach all students and engage them in a way that can not only help them as readers but also as citizens of society.

### **Critical Literacy in the Classroom: Techniques**

There are many different techniques to teach critical literacy that can take place within the classroom. One of them is juxtapositioning. Juxtapositioning, referring to the act of positioning two or more things side by side, occurs when students read many different texts or sources about one theme or topic. These sources all provide different perspectives about the same topic. Juxtapositioning helps to demonstrate multiple perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). By using many informational sources in a variety of formats, students will be able to understand the big picture. A teacher can use juxtapositioning when a theme has multiple viewpoints. It is important for the students to see all of the perspectives by using different texts and putting them side by side to compare.

Problem posing is another technique that can be used to question the author's message. In order for students to successfully problem pose, they need to have a good understanding of the topic being discussed. After a solid understanding, the teacher models problem posing for the students so they can understand what type of questions to ask. For example, questions could include, "Whose voice is silenced?" or "Why is the author presenting this information in this way?" Problem posing works best in an instructional setting such as whole class discussions or student-facilitated literature circles (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). While participating in literature circles, the students and teacher can have an in-depth critical literacy discussion about the topic being studied (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

The last technique is alternative texts. Alternative texts provide a different perspective about the topic that the reader has experienced. One example of alternative texts is the *Three Little Pigs*. The traditional fairytale of the *Three Little Pigs* is told from the pigs' viewpoint. Some authors, such as Jon Scieszka, tell the story from the wolf's perspective. Alternative texts

can range from narrative to informational. When a student reads a main text or story, and comes up with an alternative viewpoint, they will view the main story differently (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). When providing alternate texts, students can analyze them and begin to see the depth of the issue being studied (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). As a classroom activity, a teacher may present to the students one perspective of a topic and have the students create their own opposing perspectives. The students can read alternate texts as well as create or write their own alternate texts (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). All of these techniques are used to help students achieve the ultimate goal of becoming critical readers. Not only can students use these practices in a classroom, but they are skills that they can carry with them as they become critical thinkers of information for the rest of their life.

There is no one way to teach critical literacy. There is also not a single practice that can be placed in every subject area the same exact way (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). There must be some kind of adaption to the setting when using critical literacy. It is important for the teacher to always assess the students' responses to make sure they are achieving their highest potential (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Critical literacy is made to adapt and change to the setting that it is taking place in, and that is why it works so well.

### **Critical Literacy in the Classroom: Action**

Children are very easily influenced. Their learning environment is crucial because of the significant impact it has on them. Steven Wolk defines traditional teaching as “inherently uncritical and antidemocratic because it does not question or assess the knowledge being taught” (Wolk 2003, p. 102). The reason for this is because traditional teaching is more concerned with efficiently transmitting an “official” curriculum to the students. These official curricula often times are either a textbook or a standardized test; both of which are highly politicized. The

knowledge that these learning sources provide are seen as the correct knowledge that students should possess (Wolk, 2003). Teachers can challenge these practices by using critical literacy discussions to improve the students' learning.

When improving students learning, the teacher guides the students' understanding of the world around them. With the demands of high-stakes testing, students often just memorize, then forget, what the teacher tells them and assumes that school authority figures tell them everything they need to know about the topics they are learning in school. Similarly, when students read texts inside and outside the classroom, they assume that authors are experts telling them the truth. Outside the classroom, students are exposed to texts including media, the internet, and magazines that are often not telling the truth. Inside the classroom, students are told what they need to learn because teachers often have little control of what they are teaching and are pressed for time due to mandated assessments. There are many different circumstances in which students have authority figures or authors to guide them, but it is important for them to know that it is okay to question the sources and to explore a topic more in-depth.

Not only is developing students' critical literacy important for preparing students for state assessments, it will also benefit them as individuals in society. The transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is holding teachers and students to a higher standard. The CCSS make it more important for students not just to read and be able to answer multiple choice questions, but to really dig into what the text is saying and be able to make connections. Ferdi Serim, an executive director of the New Mexico Society for Technology in Education, states in *Scholastic Instructor* (2013) magazine: "If you think, 'All we have to do is wait until the questions come out, and then teach to those questions,' you're going to be in for a very rude awakening, because the new tests are being designed to assess skills such as critical thinking,

communication, collaboration and creativity” (Fink, 2013, p. 37). The new assessments are designed to have students compare, contrast, and synthesize information from multiple sources (Fink, 2013). This is exactly what critical literacy does; using multiple sources to gather all the information needed to understand the whole picture.

On these assessments, there will no longer be multiple choice questions for students to narrow down their answers. Each student will be expected to be proficient on an electronic device such as a tablet or laptop in order to complete the test (Fink, 2013). Having experience with technology will significantly help the students to succeed since the new tests such as PARCC and SBAC, mandate all students to take them on a technological device (Fink, 2013). Critical literacy allows students to explore multiple perspectives by not only using paper materials but using text that can be gathered from a tablet or laptop. Being technology savvy is important not only for understanding how to use multiple sources but also to grow as writers. The CCSS want students at all grade levels to have proficient writing skills, synthesize information, as well as be able to support their conclusions (Fink, 2013). Practicing critical literacy in the classroom will prepare the students to succeed on the standardized tests because they have been practicing how to support their answers, use multiple sources, and focus on what they believe is a well-rounded answer. The tests are no longer measuring how students do in the classroom but how they do as real-world problem solvers (Fink, 2013). Critical literacy allows students to practice and achieve the tools needed to be real-world problem solvers and critical thinkers (Fink, 2013).

### **Integrating Critical Literacy into Social studies Instruction**

Social studies brings history to life for students and they deserve to engage with this knowledge. In social studies students learn about the past as well as the present, so this subject is

favorable for students to practice questioning and evaluating the sources that they read. Using critical literacy in social studies, and in other subjects, can start as young as elementary school. Soares and Wood (2010) explain that “students are able to construct meaning within a social studies context and, within that context, develop knowledge and ways of knowing that will help them become discerning readers of text” (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487). When students gain knowledge from a text, they are building a relationship with the author and the text, as well as reading it from a critical stance. By understanding what they are reading and questioning what they are reading about in history, they can develop their own view on what took place as well as make real world connections to the life they live today (Soares & Wood, 2010). Critical literacy can help make real life connections for the students. It will also help the students to reflect on their values in life and begin to ask questions in the world around them, both inside and outside of the classroom (Soares & Wood, 2010). After practicing questioning the author, making real world connections, and developing one’s own view, these concepts will start to reflect in the students’ everyday lives.

Social studies is a good subject area to practice critical literacy because there are many sources out there that share information about current and historical events. In Soares & Wood’s (2010) examination of using critical literacy in social studies, the authors describe Ciardiello’s five themes for enlightening readers on issues of social justice: examining multiple perspectives, finding an authentic voice, recognizing social barriers, finding one’s identity and finally the call to service (Soares & Wood, 2010). Social studies is a subject of multiple perspectives. The events that have happened, involved many individuals and groups of people who were all impacted in different ways. When students look at one event from multiple perspectives, it helps them raise questions of who is and isn’t present in this telling of the event. Looking for the

missing perspectives, students can understand what details are missing and search for the information that the author has not presented (Soares & Wood, 2010). This helps to influence small group discussions as well as classroom discussions. Harste (2003) believes that a good curriculum involves student conversation and having student conversations will help the students come to the conclusion that no one text shows the whole picture (Soares & Wood, 2010).

### **Social Studies: Becoming Critical Learners**

Wolk discusses five different suggestions that can be used in social studies units to help students become critical learners. He understands that these practices may not already be implemented in the classroom thus forcing the teachers to think creatively themselves and break away from the textbook and use other resources (Wolk, 2003). Knowledge is always prevalent in the classroom thus making it the hardest to teach. Knowledge is not a neutral thing. It is the teacher's job to make sure that all of the knowledge being brought depicts the whole picture (Wolk, 2003). Teachers can ask themselves as well as the students the following questions, "Whose knowledge is this?", "Where did it come from?", "What perspectives are missing?" When answering these questions, the students and the teachers need to seek out sources that provide the answers to these questions (Wolk, 2003). These questions are often not asked when reading the classroom textbook because students, and sometimes teachers, feel as though they can "trust" in the textbook. They believe that the information that they are given, is the right information. However, this is not the case. Social studies textbooks are typically written from the "winners" of that period in history. This means that the "losers" are often lost or not perceived in the correct light (Wolk, 2003). These perspectives can be, but not limited to, the poor, native people, working people, women, minority cultures, gays and lesbians, the planet and ecosystems

(Wolk, 2003). These silenced voices can be brought fourth for the students to understand that there are always multiple perspectives to a story.

Implementing these multiple perspectives in the classroom can be done by using resources that teachers already have but may never have used before. One easy way to implement critical literacy discussion in the classroom is by connecting the social studies topic to the children's own life. By connecting social studies to students' lives, students are better able to relate to and understand the topic. This provides the students with relevance to what they are learning (Wolk, 2003). This may not always be easy because the teacher needs to focus more on the big picture rather than the individual facts (Wolk, 2003).

Writing and reading are being implemented in all subject areas due to the change to the CCSS. Critical literacy allows students to come up with their own perspectives and what a better way to have them express this than through writing. Through writing they will form their own identity by reflecting on important issues that are discussed within social studies units.

Children's literature is an opportunity to implement reading into a social studies unit. Children often only read from the textbook in a classroom, but children's literature allows them to explore other perspectives and stories that may not have been discovered by using just a textbook.

Through children's literature, the students will be able to read, understand the pictures, and connect to the ideas learned (Wolk, 2003).

Wolk's discussion and ideas about how to use critical literacy in social studies units are very prevalent to everyday life within the classroom. Critical literacy is not something that can just be taught. Teachers, who are excited about reading and critical literacy, will be able to pass on the skills needed for the students to be successful (Wolk, 2003). Critical literacy is a skill that needs to be practiced in order to achieve its full potential and it can be practiced in the students'



everyday life. Wolk (2003) shares that, “if teachers really want to practice and implement critical literacy in social studies, then the first step is for the teacher to pursue and practice it in their everyday life” (p. 105). This way the teacher is the number one example that the students can look to in order to achieve their greatest potential as critical readers.

While viewing other identities is a part of life, viewing one’s own identity is also an important part. Social studies is made up of individuals who are considered to be outside the mainstream society (Soares & Wood, 2010). In the classroom, many students are in the outside margins due to racial, cultural and language, thus creating who they are as an individual (Soares & Wood, 2010). It is easy for students to connect to characters and situations found in literature that are reflective on their own lives (Soares & Wood, 2010). This helps the students to make the connections between the word and world (Freire, 1987). Social studies provides students with the opportunity to see how the world and its cultures have grown and give them a chance to find their true selves by exploring and opening their minds (Soares & Wood, 2010).

Previous studies have identified principles and best practices for literacy instruction by demonstrating students learn best by relating previous knowledge alongside questioning the context of the text. By practicing these various strategies of critical literacy, students will be able to apply how to be critical readers and thinkers outside the classroom. This study explores various practices of critical literacy, such as multiple perspectives and relating to background knowledge, within a social studies unit about the American Revolution.

This study supports previous research on how children’s literature can be incorporated into the content area curriculum to teach social studies (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). In addition, findings from this study address how children’s literature enables students to learn about a historical topic, such as the American Revolution, from multiple perspectives. Various

ways a teacher can incorporate critical literacy in the classroom and how to facilitate critical literacy discussions are reflected in this study. This study provides intermediate elementary school teachers with a list of children's books and a practical method which can be utilized when teaching about the American Revolution.

The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks requires students in the fifth-grade to learn about the American Revolution. Oftentimes, historical topics such as this are taught through a textbook. Textbooks have been criticized as being poorly written, poorly organized and uninviting for students (George & Stix, 2000). Textbooks often portray one point of view, superficially address multiculturalism, and may omit controversial topics (Lamme, Astengo, Lowery, Masala, Russo, Savage, & Shelton, 2002; Smith and Johnson, 1994). The details within textbooks are limited to facts and often do not help students to develop a comprehensive understanding or paint a picture of an event or topic (Smith and Johnson, 1994). In turn, students may not enjoy learning, may not find the topic to be relevant, or may not be interested in the curriculum (George and Stix, 2000). Integrating quality children's literature in social studies curricula can provide a more well-rounded view of historical events. Although many times social studies is taught through a textbook, integrating children's literature into the social studies curriculum may provide students with new ideas and viewpoints about a historical event that they may not have been previously considered (Manak, 2012). Furthermore, critical literacy discussions encourage children to better comprehend a text, question what may be missing from the text, and understand content from multiple perspectives.

The purpose of this study is to examine how reading quality children's literature on the American Revolution from a critical literacy stance influences students' understandings of this historical time period from multiple perspectives. Throughout a fifth-grade unit on the

American Revolution, the students will have opportunities to read and explore text sets or groups of children's books on the American Revolution. These text sets will each contain children's books that include the perspectives of men, women, young people, Patriots, Loyalists, African American, and Native Americans that lived during this time period.



Figure 1. African Americans in Revolutionary America. This figure illustrates an example of a text set used.

## Methodology

### Research Setting and Participants

This descriptive, naturalistic study was conducted in a fifth grade classroom in an urban, culturally diverse elementary school in Southeastern Massachusetts. One class of 19 fifth-grade students and their teacher participated in this study. The teacher was currently participating in the Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study (C.A.G.S.) in Reading program at Bridgewater State University. She had recently taken coursework focusing on critical literacy and critical theory. She was chosen as the teacher for this study because she had an understanding of how to use critical literacy in the classroom as well as how to provide the students with the tools and materials they needed to become successful critical readers. As part of the C.A.G.S. program, the teacher exposed her students to critical literacy concepts and practiced prior to this study. At the beginning of every school year, the teacher provided her students with a lesson on becoming critical thinkers and learners using Wikipedia. She explained to the students that Wikipedia is a

source and why it may not always be a reliable source to use when doing a research project. She extended the students' understanding by going in herself and changing the information on a topic that the students were familiar with. From this lesson, they were able to understand that anyone can go in and change any detail of Wikipedia and therefore provide them with misinformation.

Throughout the year, the students worked collaboratively in pairs and groups on various activities, so when the students were asked to work in pairs and groups, the students were able to do so successfully. The teacher also had a good rapport with her students and circulated while they were working on projects. The students felt comfortable having conversations with each other as well as asking the teacher questions when they needed some guidance. The teacher made sure that the students felt comfortable in classroom discussions and allowed these discussions to happen frequently in small group and whole class settings. Not only were the students familiar with each other's opinions but they also had many resources available to them for further information. The school had a laptop cart available for the teachers to use in their classroom. The students had been using the laptops all year and in this study the students used the laptop cart to access BrainPOP (an educational website) and when working on their final projects. The school provided each student with their own social studies textbook that they had used all year and worked with during this study.

The students' desks were arranged in groups that changed every few weeks so the students could have the opportunity to work with different people. The students were very comfortable with independent work as well as with group work. During classroom discussions, they were not afraid to voice their opinions or ask questions.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This descriptive, naturalistic study was conducted in a fifth-grade classroom in an urban, culturally diverse elementary school in Southeastern Massachusetts. From the beginning of May through the end of June, I observed nineteen fifth-grade students and their teacher during their social studies block as they read and explored their textbook, *Our Nation*, an educational website called BrainPOP and children's literature about the American Revolution. While observing twice a week, I collected the data for this study. The teacher who participated in this was familiar with critical literacy and how to facilitate critical literacy discussions.

In this study multiple research methods were employed. These included, classroom observations, field notes, pre, mid, and post-assessments (See Appendix A), semi-structured student interviews and a collection of artifacts. All of these were used to examine how reading quality children's literature about the American Revolution influences students' understandings of this historical time period when using texts from multiple perspectives. As a participant observer during the social studies block, I observed the teacher and students as they engaged in open small and whole class critical literacy discussions about the sources they read.

While the teacher and students discussed the texts, I took detailed field notes and digitally recorded the discussions. I later transcribed the discussions verbatim. Throughout the unit, I took pictures of the students working in their groups as well as on their final presentation day. At the closing of the unit, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the students and asked ten questions about what they had learned from reading the textbook, listening and viewing BrainPOP and various children's books on the American Revolution as well as their view on the quality of each source (See Appendix B). At the final presentations, I video recorded each presentation along with digitally recording it.

After each of my observations, I transcribed the audio recordings and coded them. When analyzing the digital recordings, I specifically analyzed the students' oral responses that occurred during the critical literacy discussions between different students and between teacher and students after reading the sources they used that day. In addition, I analyzed their semi-structured interviews and their pre, mid, and post assessments regarding their understanding of the American Revolution. I used content analysis and the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the data and look for themes or patterns to emerge from the data. Three themes mentioned here as just a statement emerged from critical literacy discussions and interview transcriptions addressing how children's literature influenced students to learn about the American Revolution from multiple perspectives.

### **Classroom Research Context**

Before the teacher introduced the unit, she handed out a pre-assessment to see what the students had for background knowledge as well as misconceptions about the American Revolution. The pre, mid and post assessments were identical and had three questions to determine students' knowledge of the American Revolution (See Appendix A). The pre, mid and post assessment results will help us to see if the students learned from the three different sources, the textbook, BrainPOP, and the children's literature

The teacher then introduced the unit with pre-revolutionary war events to help the children build their background knowledge. These events and people included the French and Indian War, the Stamp Act, the Sons and Daughters of Liberty, Townshend Acts, The Boston Massacre, the Tea Act, The Boston Tea Party and the First Continental Congress. To explore these events, the students used their textbook, *Our Nation* by Macmillan and McGraw-Hill, and an educational website called BrainPOP. BrainPOP (1999) is a website that is used by teachers

and students inside and outside the classroom. The webisodes, quizzes, and activities cover standard curriculum topics and can be used in all subject areas. The students worked in pairs and used BrainPOP & their textbook to answer the questions on teacher crafted worksheets as the teacher's way to help scaffold the students' learning (See Appendix C). These questions talked specifically about the events listed above. The students were told they could find the information they needed in five specific videos from BrainPOP and two chapters within their textbook. During partner work, the students had critical literacy discussions about each of the sources guided by the questions on the teacher crafted worksheet. After each lesson, the teacher engaged the students in a whole class critical literacy discussion. The class would talk about the texts that they were reading and ask questions. Questions on the reliability of the sources came up during the partner discussions as well as in the whole class discussions. The teacher provided another teacher crafted worksheet to help the students evaluate BrainPOP and their Textbook as sources (See Appendix D). Were they reliable sources? Were some biased? To support the answers to these questions, the students looked for evidence in each author's background as well as in the texts' backgrounds.

After the students had a significant understanding of the events prior to the American Revolution, the teacher handed out the same pre-assessment as their mid-assessment. This assessment assessed the knowledge of the students after using their textbook and BrainPOP. After viewing the responses from the mid-assessment, we realized the open-response answers had more details from the pre-assessment but the answers to the question about who participated, remained the same. The students demonstrated that they understood why the American Revolution occurred by using words such as *taxes*, *acts*, *colonists*, and *rebelled*. One student who initially responded with the northern and western states, demonstrated a change in thinking when

she wrote, “It occurred because the British was taxing the Americans.” She understood that the American Revolution was between Americans and the British.

Following the mid-assessment, the teacher provided the students with quality children’s literature to learn about the American Revolution. The students worked in groups of four (two sets of the same partners as before). In these groups, they were given a text set, or set of children’s books, and were asked to determine what perspective the books were providing (See Appendix E) (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). There were six text sets, each containing one to five children’s books. Some sets included multiple copies of the same text. Each set was labeled with a number one to six on a post-it note and took on one of the following perspectives of the war: Young People, African Americans, Women, Patriots, British and Native Americans. The teacher gave the text sets to her students without acknowledging which perspective each contained, so they had to decide which perspective each of the text sets portrayed. The teacher provided them again with a teacher crafted worksheet that helped scaffold their thinking on critical literacy by asking the questions, “Whose point of view are these books mostly from?” “What was the war like for this group of people?” “Are any other points of view shown?” “If yes, whose?” “Whose points of view are missing that you think should be shown?” This guidance helped the students to read the literature from a critical stance and complete the worksheet for all the text sets (See Appendix F). While the students worked in their groups, the teacher made herself available by circulating around the classroom and listened to the students’ critical literacy discussions. For the next few days, the students read from a different text set and explored multiple perspectives in-depth.

After the students had the opportunity to examine each of the text sets, the teacher explained the final project to the students. The final project was to work in a small group and



focus in-depth on one of the perspectives shared in the text sets. The students were able to pick which perspective they wanted to further examine based on what they enjoyed reading about the most. The groups contained three to four students. Their job was to research their group's perspective further using the children's books, the textbook and the internet, including but not limited to BrainPOP. Once the students felt they had acquired enough information about their perspective, each group created a visually appealing poster to present to the class. The students had about three social studies block periods to work on their presentation. On the final day of the unit, each group presented their poster as well as what they learned about the perspective to the class. The students in the audience listened attentively and asked thoughtful questions at the end of each presentation. The questions stimulated a thorough classroom critical literacy discussion between the students and the teacher. After the group presentations, the students took the same assessment again as their post-assessment.

### **Findings**

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrated how students' understanding of the American Revolution changed over the course of this literature based unit. The teacher's responses helped to guide the students to a more comprehensible understanding of the American Revolution. Students demonstrated these understandings throughout the process during whole class and small group critical literacy discussions, teacher and student conversations, interviews, and final project presentations. Students' responses on the pre and post assessments demonstrated students' evolved understanding of the various participants within the American Revolution. On the pre-assessment, students demonstrated their belief that only male American Patriots and British Loyalists were involved in the American Revolution. On the post-assessment, students showed that their initial thinking changed when the students chose on the

post assessment that women, young people, Native Americans, and African Americans were also all involved. Some students' demonstrated some misconceptions about the American Revolution on the pre-assessment but none of the students' demonstrated misconceptions on the post assessment.

Three themes emerged within the student's responses from the critical literacy discussions and interview transcriptions including: evaluating texts from multiple sources, evolving understandings over the course of the unit, and developing a whole picture through multiple perspectives. First, the students were able to critically evaluate texts from multiple perspectives by noticing biases; looking at multiple forms of texts such as their textbook, BrainPOP and children's literature; and evaluate what perspectives and information each text was able to provide for them as critical readers. Second, the students' understanding of who was involved in the American Revolution evolved over the course of the unit. The student's perspectives about the American Revolution developed and changed. Finally, by critically reading and discussing the texts about the American Revolution, students were able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the time period from multiple perspectives. Students were able to see the American Revolution through multiple perspectives, gain knowledge of information they had not known prior, and related to this historical event within its rich context.

Three themes emerged from the teacher responses through the coding process. These three themes were when the teacher modeled critical reading and thinking, activated and related to prior knowledge, and facilitated critical literacy discussions. First, the teacher modeled critical thinking by thinking aloud how to question sources and to examine the perspectives shared in the different texts. Second, when the teacher activated and related to prior knowledge, she helped the students to connect what they already know about social studies and related information to

current information being learned. Lastly, the teacher facilitated critical literacy discussions by guiding the students to examine the perspectives within the various sources, promoted critical thinking and viewing of sources, and encouraged critical literacy discussions with positive reinforcement.

### Pre and Post Assessment Results

The students took a pre assessment at the beginning of the unit, an assessment in the middle of the unit, as well as a post assessment (See Appendix E). Below is a graph of the student responses to the pre, mid, and post assessments that illustrate the students' developed understanding of the participants within the American Revolution. The students showed great improvement in their understanding of who participated in the American Revolution and the different roles that these groups of people played.

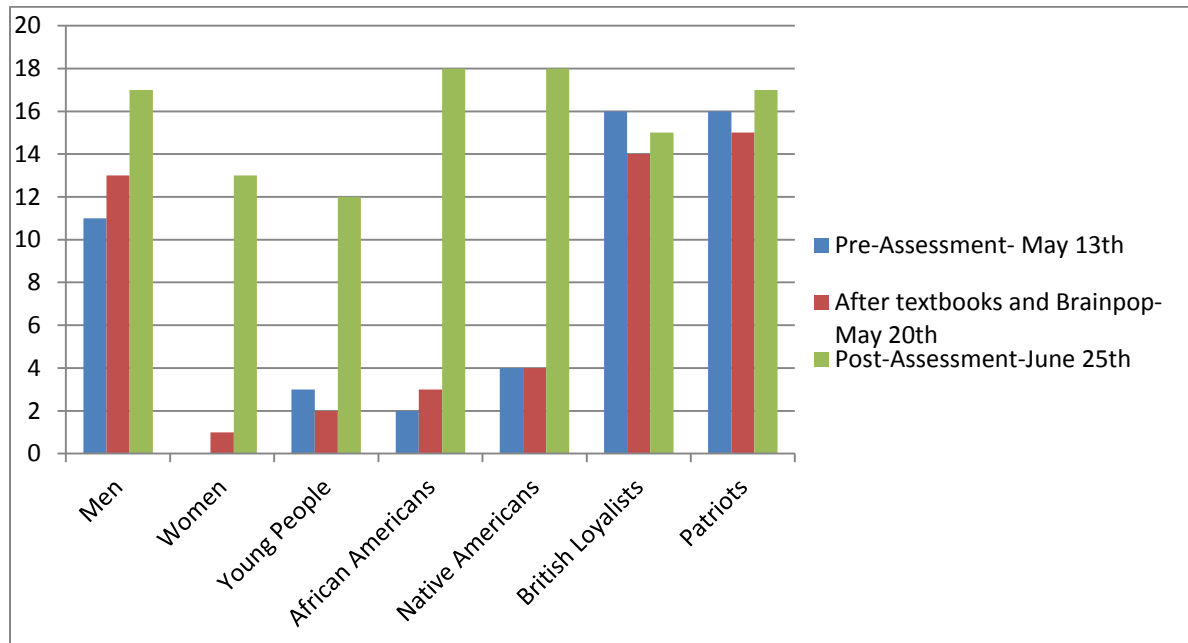


Figure 2. Pre, mid, and post assessment results. This figure illustrates the results of the pre, mid, and post assessments to the question, "Who was involved in the American Revolution?"

This study took place over a seven week period. The pre-assessment demonstrated that all of the students knew the American Revolution was a war but only a little more than 50% knew

that it was a war between America and England. Less than 50% of the students understood that the war was to fight for America's freedom. Only one student mentioned the Red Coats and Paul Revere as important historical figures to the American Revolution. The pre-assessment also illustrated that students believed that only male British Loyalists and male Patriots were involved in the American Revolution. On the pre assessment, only 21% of students thought that Native Americans were involved in the American Revolution compared to on the post assessment when 95% of students understood that Native Americans were involved in the war (See Figure 2). One student carried the misconception that the war was between northeastern and western states coming together. All of the students carried the misconception that women didn't participate at all in the war. The pre-assessments allowed us to guide the student's learning moving forward and to hopefully change the misconceptions that some students may have had about the war.

The mid assessment was given after the students researched the American Revolution on BrainPOP and read the chapter(s) on the American Revolution in their textbook, *Our Nation*. These two sources that were used had few, if any, references about women, young people, African Americans and Native Americans. On the mid- assessment, only one student said that women participated in the war. The students' previous knowledge of young people participating was questioned after using these two sources. One student changed their mind and decided that since it wasn't referenced, that maybe young people did not participate. More students understood that African Americans participated and the amount of students who understood that the Native Americans participated stayed the same.

As the students further engaged with the children's books within the text sets, so did their perspective on who participated in the war. The post-assessment took place after the students had explored all of the six categories of children's literature. The children's literature allowed them

to explore how each group of people had a role in the American Revolution. The students created a final project and presented to their classmates on one group of people they found the most interesting. Critical literacy discussions between the students and teacher occurred after each presentation and the teacher helped to guide and expand upon the students' learning. Students asked each other questions to help further their understanding. After all of the groups of students presented, the students took the post-assessment. The results proved that after reading the children's literature, their understanding of who participated in the American Revolution greatly increased. For instance on the post assessment, 68% of students demonstrated that women were involved. 63% of students responded that they understood that the young people were also involved and 95% of students understood that African Americans and Native Americans participated. The results demonstrate that over the course of the unit, using three different sources, as well as having small group and whole class critical literacy discussions, the students were able to understand the whole picture of the American Revolution by exploring multiple perspectives.

### **Student Responses**

Among the student responses, three themes emerged; evaluating texts from multiple perspectives, evolving understandings over the course of the unit, and developing the whole picture through multiple perspectives.

**Evaluating texts from multiple perspectives.** This theme emerged when analyzing the teacher and student conversations during critical literacy discussions and the student interviews. The students were able to evaluate their textbook, BrainPOP, and the children's literature selections in order to develop an understanding the multiple perspectives of women, young people, men, Native Americans, African Americans, British Loyalists and Patriots of the

American Revolution. The students evaluated each of the texts based off of the different perspectives of the war presented. For instance, during a classroom discussion, the teacher and students evaluated the textbook from multiple perspectives. The teacher asked:

Teacher: Tell me about it. Our textbook...how did we feel about our textbook as a source?

Student: I don't want to use it anymore.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because it's always coming from the colonists' side or perspective. It doesn't really talk about how the British felt or how they didn't like it.

Teacher: So it was pretty biased. But did you learn a lot from the colonist's point of view? Student: Yes.

The students recognized that the textbook did not show all perspectives. Together, during a class discussion, they decided that the textbook only showed the colonists' point of view. The point of view that the textbook showed could be a reason why the majority of students still believed on the mid-assessment that only male British Loyalists and American Patriots were involved in the war. While much of this theme was explored during classroom critical literacy discussions, it also emerged when the students were reading the children's literature in small groups. In the following excerpt, students were working together to evaluate the children's book, *Everybody's Revolution*:

Student 1: [We are focusing on chapter] three and that is the Warriors for the Republic.

Researcher: So who do you think chapter three is about?

Student 2: The Native Americans.

Student 3: Well, um, it says Indians in here.

Student 2: Well, Mrs. C and I were talking earlier and we were listing all of [the different perspectives], and I think Allison said Native Americans and she said yes.

These students read the text and debated what it meant. They later learned from the teacher's explanation that both *Native Americans* and *Indians* referred to the same group of people. At that point, the teacher addressed the students' misconceptions about Native Americans and reminded them of the history of Christopher Columbus. Furthermore, the teacher explained why there are two names that refer to the same group of people. This conversation was able to further the students understanding that Native Americans were also involved in the American Revolution. The results from the post assessment demonstrate that 95% of students knew Native Americans were involved in the war after reading the children's literature. During a semi-structured interview, one student enthusiastically explained that children's literature helped him to have a better understanding of the American Revolution. When asked which source (textbook, BrainPOP, and children's literature) he found the most helpful, he expressed that he would use children's books in the future:

Researcher: Which source did you feel you could see the whole story of the American Revolution with?

Student: I'd still stick with children's books.

Researcher: Children's books. How come?

Student: Because one specific book, *Everybody's Revolution*, has a whole different perspective. It gives the British, it gives the colonists, it gives the Native Americans and it gives the Indians and it shows how the Native Americans joined the colonist's side and how the British tried to come and bribe them and they get into a huge fight. I realize that

*George vs. George* gave both perspectives and how they both were kind of similar. They both had farms and they both had kids.

This student made connections to the texts in the young people text set as well as the British Loyalists text set. He read these sets and specifically recalled important details from the children's books that helped him to develop his understanding that there were multiple perspectives of the Revolutionary War. He also commented that the book, *George vs. George*, showed how even though George Washington and King George were on opposite sides; they still had very similar lifestyles. This student would not have been aware of these connections if he did not read the children's literature.

**Evolving understandings over the course of the unit.** During the American Revolution unit, the students' simplistic understanding of the American Revolution evolved to a more comprehensive understanding of the American Revolution and its participants. This theme of evolving understandings was prevalent during small group and whole class critical literacy discussions. The small group critical literacy discussions happened between students on their own while the teacher walked around the room, available at any time to clarify. Whole class critical literacy discussions were teacher lead and a time when students could share their opinions of the sources and new information they had learned. These critical literacy discussions enhanced the students' understanding of the American Revolution by addressing the multiple perspectives that were present at the time of war as well as evaluating the quality of the different sources. Without these critical literacy discussions, the student would not have a full understanding of what it means to evaluate sources and recognize biases. After reading the children's literature, the students became self-aware of their misconceptions. One student's



perspective changed after reading the British perspective through the children's literature. During an interview the student responded:

“I am on the British side now because I don't think that the colonists should have over reacted that much. Like dumping all of their tea into the ocean. I also thought it was a bad thing because they are basically polluting the water. I also thought that boycotting was kind of bad and could have ruined the government right at that moment and lost thousands and thousands of dollars. And I said in my writing that the British have an empire scattered across the whole world so they need to get money and supplies to keep those people around the world safe and get them protection.”

If this student hadn't read the children's books addressing the British perspective of the war, he would not have been able to develop his own opinion about the American Revolution. Students' evolved understandings were also evident when listening to the students in small groups critically discuss the texts they were reading. During a small group discussion, the teacher discussed with a student about Deborah Sampson, an important female figure in the American Revolution:

[Teacher: If you think that it is interesting that Molly Pitcher fired a gun, then you will be very surprised at what Deborah Sampson did. Go over and ask Rebecca about Deborah Sampson.....] (Elizabeth goes over and asks her classmate, Rebecca, about Deborah Sampson and then returns to her small group.)

Elizabeth: I think she either cut her hair or put it into her helmet. And she disguised herself as a boy.

Teacher: Why did she have to disguise herself as a boy?

Elizabeth: Because she was going into the war. So they wouldn't know and they didn't let women in war.

Teacher: Okay, so now I want you to think, put yourself in her perspective. Now imagine that you're in the Revolutionary War, she was obviously very passionate about it, but they said, "Oh you're a girl. You can't be in it". How are you going to feel?

Elizabeth: Mad.

Teacher: Yea!

Elizabeth: Because you know what, I can do this!

Teacher: Absolutely! She pretended that she was a boy so she could get out there and fight! I thought you might find her very interesting.

This student was able to explore a woman's perspective through the children's literature as well as connect to her feelings to develop a full understanding of how this woman may have felt during the American Revolution. When the students took the pre-assessment, none of the students believed that women were involved in the war. The women's text set provided this perspective and 68% of students demonstrated the knowledge that women were involved in the war. Students also evolved their understanding over the course of the unit by connecting their prior knowledge to the knowledge they were learning from the texts. During a small group discussion, students made connections between their community and what they were reading in *Patriots in Petticoats: Heroines of the American Revolution*, a children's book in the women of the American Revolution text set:

Student 1: Well, I guess at the beginning of this book it says, "To my daughter, who served for the country"

Student 2: I do know. Wasn't it the American Revolution that Deborah Sampson....

Student 3: Oh yea! She dressed up as a man but then got shot in the leg. And she had to take the bullet out herself because she didn't want the doctor knowing that she was a girl.

I remember seeing a statue of her next to a library. I think in Sharon. Might be Sharon.

Student 1: The doctor that treated her, his house is in [our town] and Jake lives next to it.

It's Jake's brother's best friend!

The students were able to make connections from their personal lives and their surroundings with the new information from the text. The students demonstrated that they had background knowledge of Deborah Sampson but did not recognize her as a female figure during the American Revolution. By reading about her in the children's books, they were able to integrate their previous knowledge with the historical context and develop a more complex understanding of this historical time period.

**Developing the whole picture through multiple perspectives.** This theme emerged when examining students' final project presentations, interviews, and small group discussions. By the end of the unit, the students had developed a comprehensive or whole picture of the American Revolution by reading about the different people that participated in the war. Their knowledge also grew after hearing their peers present their final projects. They were able to understand the American Revolution as a whole rather than just view it from one side. A group of students presented on the African American's perspective of the war and explained to the class how the British made promises to them but didn't keep them. The group also explained that many of the African Americans did not make it because they were used in the front lines. After the presentation, during the whole class discussion the teacher asked:

Teacher: So overall was it a pleasant experience for the African Americans during the American Revolution?

Student: No it wasn't pleasant because they were tricked, fooled, and used in the war. Just to try and win the war. And they didn't even win so they had to stay with the British instead of going back to their families.

Initially, students thought that only male British Loyalists and male Patriots were involved. Now, the students understood that there were multiple perspectives and people involved in the war. By reading the children's literature, students were able to explore the idea that African Americans were involved in the American Revolution. The students read that some women even fought in the war. In their small group, the students looked at the women of the American Revolution text set and explored the women's impact on the war:

Student 1: I think [the women] were trying to help (*Student 2: They were definitely trying to help.*) I think they wanted to be in the war but couldn't.

Student 2: I think Molly Pitcher wanted to be in the war.

Student 3: And Sybil is riding her horse.

Student 2: Yeah, she's riding her horse. And I think that Molly Pitcher really wanted to fight in the war because on the cover illustration, it looked like she is fighting in this.

After reading about the women who participated in the American Revolution, the students were able to develop a better understanding of the whole picture of the war. They understood that although women wanted to fight in the war they couldn't but they helped in many ways. In the end, the students understood that even though women were not supposed to fight in the war, they either did fight or played a critical role in helping the men during the war. On the post assessment, 68% of students understood that women were involved in the American Revolution demonstrating that their understanding did evolve. Below, a student made

connections during her interview about her previous knowledge and the learning that took place during this social studies unit.

Student: I didn't know women had such a big part in the war. With what they did like they made stuff for the men and some tried to fight like Deborah Sampson tried to fight.

Researcher: So you didn't know that beforehand?

Student: Well, I knew about Deborah Sampson but I didn't know they were such a big part of it?

Researcher: How come you knew about Deborah Sampson?

Student: Because she was from Massachusetts.

During an interview, this student was able to describe what she had learned by connecting the classroom context to her background knowledge. This study took place in Southeastern Massachusetts so many of the students brought previous knowledge to the classroom about historical Massachusetts. This student in particular was able to build upon this knowledge by connecting a female historical figure to the impact and role that the historical figure played within the war. By connecting previous knowledge to new learning, the student was able to understand the bigger picture of the American Revolution and the people that played particular roles. Although these are only a few of the many student responses that were gathered throughout the study, these best represent the three themes that emerged through the study, evaluating texts from multiple perspectives, evolving understandings over the course of the unit and developing the whole picture through multiple perspectives.

### **Teacher Responses**

After coding the student responses, I went back to the transcriptions to look for themes in the teacher's responses during the critical literacy discussions. Through the coding process, I

found three major themes that the teacher used to help guide the students to become critical thinkers including: modeling critical reading and thinking, activating and relating to prior knowledge, and facilitating critical literacy discussions.

**Modeling critical reading and thinking.** The first theme occurred when the teacher modeled critical reading and thinking strategies for the students. The teacher modeled critical thinking by thinking aloud about how to question sources and to examine the different perspectives shared in the texts. This theme demonstrates how the teacher modeled critical thinking for the students in order for the students to better understand what a critical thinker would do. At the beginning of the unit, the teacher asked the students during a whole class discussion to think about the feelings of the people involved during the war on both the British side and the American side. The teacher modeled for the students by thinking aloud:

I really want you to think about why the British would have done this. How did the colonists then feel? If I were a colonist, how would I feel? If I were in Britain's shoes, why would I do this? Really try to understand where they are coming from.

By thinking aloud, the teacher demonstrated questions that critical readers may ask themselves when reading from various sources. She asked the students to put themselves in the shoes of the historical figures during the time of the war. Critical thinking about this historical event involves looking at it from both sides, and she provided a great example of this by asking the students to think about it from the perspectives of both the colonists as well as the British. Students are learning to become critical readers when they connect feelings that they experience with how people in history have felt.

In another whole class discussion, the teacher asked the students to become critical thinkers by evaluating the different sources they were using. As the students thought about who

wrote the text and the author's background, the students developed more background knowledge to understand the text better. When reading, students were able to identify gaps or missing perspectives in the information they were reading. Before students did this on their own, the teacher modeled it for them. When the teacher gave directions to the whole class, she modeled a situation using one of her students:

Teacher: So if someone said to you Breanna, "I want you to do a report and I only want you to use BrainPOP, how would you feel about that? Do you think your report would be reliable? Did you get the right information? Think about things like that. Okay? Then I want you to do the same thing with your textbook. So on this paper I said, "Look not only at the different chapters, but at the list of authors in the beginning and what their jobs are". See who they are, see what they do. Are these people qualified to write a social studies text book? I want you to think about the biased we talked about before. Do you think it is from one person's point of view or do you think it is pretty fair? Think about all those things.

The teacher modeled critical literacy for the students by questioning the sources including, "Who is writing the text?" and "Are they qualified?" She helped to guide the students to independently think and read as critical readers. After the students read from the textbook and BrainPOP, they understood that there was a perspective missing. The students brought this issue to the teacher's attention and the teacher addressed the dilemma by demonstrating what good critical readers would do in this situation. In a whole class discussion, she explained the next steps a critical reader would take:

Teacher: You're all saying, 'I don't understand that British side of it'. What could you do then to fix it? Instead of throwing away your textbook, and throwing BrainPOP away; use

the BrainPOP, use the textbook, but what else could you do to make sure you see all sides of it?

Student: Go get another source from the British side

Teacher: You could go look at another source from the British point of view. Because you are smart enough to realize that hey, something is missing here! I'm not quite getting the whole story. So you know what, I'm going to go out and find other perspectives about this topic. That is exactly what we are going to do.

In this example, the teacher guided the students to think critically by asking questions and explaining how students could look further into a topic to understand the whole picture. Critical readers use many sources to gain information about one topic. The teacher modeled this for her students by showing them that just because a source does not have all the information you need, you don't throw it away or not use the source; you go find other sources to fill those gaps. By using different sources, students gain the whole picture and are able to come to their own conclusions in the end based upon all of the perspectives gained.

**Activating and relating to prior knowledge.** The second theme is activating and relating to prior knowledge. The teacher helped the students to connect what they already knew about social studies as well as related information to current information being presented. The teacher connected to prior knowledge throughout the whole unit during whole class discussions and small group discussions. At the beginning of a unit, the teacher had the students think about their past learning and helped the students make the connection to the American Revolution. During this whole class discussion, the teacher stated:

Teacher: ...Remember in 3rd grade we learned all about the Massachusetts colonies.

We've talked especially the New England colonies. Like we talked about yesterday aren't



we seeming pretty happy right? We're pretty content in the colonies... How did we get from the happy 13 colonies, going about their own little business here to these 13 colonies were so upset with their government, their leader.... remember way back at the beginning of the school year, we talked about paying attention to your sources, looking at where you are getting information from. What did we decide that a lot of people use that wasn't such a good source?

Student: Wikipedia

Teacher: Wikipedia. Why?

Student: Because some people are writing.

Teacher: Could you go in and write anything you want? / Class: Yea.

Teacher: Sure! You can go in and change anything you want...

The teacher made two connections to past learning for the students, one to when the students were in third grade and one to the current academic year. The first connection she helped the students make was to their learning in their third grade class when the students learned about the thirteen colonies. She refreshed the students' memories by setting the scene and describing some ideas they may have discussed in their third grade class. The second connection that she made was one that she taught the students at the beginning of the year about sources. She discussed with the students about using Wikipedia and the conclusions they came to as a class about how it was not a reliable source since many people had access to change the information. She prepared her students for the next few class periods by making this connection for them and reminding them that some sources were better than others to use. In just a few moments, she prepared the students for a successful critical literacy experience by connecting their current learning to past social studies learning, general knowledge and then setting the

scene for what the students would be expected to accomplish within their upcoming unit of study.

When the students were in their small groups reading the children's literature, the teacher helped a group make a connection between the John Quincy Adams that they knew about, to a different way of looking at him, as a child. The students were familiar with John Quincy Adams as an important historical adult figure but had never thought about him as a child. The teacher helped to guide the students to think critically about the text that they were reading by discussing him in the two timeframes:

Student: Mrs. C, I don't really see this from a kid's point of view.

Teacher: You don't believe that this is told from a kid's point of view? Some of the stories do seem to be about it. Like the one you were just on, John Quincy Adams, they are kind of talking about him when he was younger. *When Johnny Adams was eight, a sound like thunder rocked his family's farm. His mother grabbed his hand and pulled him to the top of Penn's Hill, the highest point on their property. Looking north toward Boston Harbor, he could see a British warship launching cannonballs at the village of Charlestown.* So it is telling you this from his point of view. John Quincy Adams, why is he important in history? What did he later go on to do? He went on and became President. So during the American Revolution, he was eight years old. So [this statement] is telling you the American Revolution from his point of view, when he was eight years old. Though he is a historical figure later, he was only eight when this happened. So it is telling you what it was like from his point of view. He might not have had a role in the war, you have to read it, but like you read on *Sleds on Boston Common*, those kids had a role in the war right?

In this small group discussion, the teacher helped the students to think outside of the box and to think critically about what they are reading. She brought forward the knowledge that the students already knew about John Quincy Adams from their past experiences and demonstrated to the students how they could see him as a child during the American Revolution. The teacher showed the students how to make connections in hopes that the students would eventually make these connections on their own. When the students eventually made these connections on their own, they demonstrated that they had become successful critical thinkers and learners.

On a different day and with a different small group, the teacher had a similar experience guiding students to recognize what they already knew and connect it to what they were learning from the children's literature that they were currently reading. In this small group discussion, the teacher helped the students connect two female historical figures:

Teacher: You don't expect to hear that from a woman do you?

Student: That is pretty cool though.

Teacher: Now, what do you know about Deborah Sampson? When you get a chance, take a look at the women's book again and see if you can find anything on Deborah Sampson. Because if you think that it is interesting that Molly Pitcher fired a gun, then you will be very surprised at what Deborah Sampson did.

The teacher discussed with the students about a female historical figure that they just learned about, Molly Pitcher. She knew that the students knew about Deborah Sampson, another female historical figure. In the town next to where the school is located, there is a statue of Deborah Sampson, as well as the doctor's house who revealed she was a woman in war. The teacher helped the students make these connections by talking about Sampson and Pitcher in historical context. She helped to guide them as critical thinkers by connecting the little

background knowledge that they knew and telling them to critically look through different texts to build upon that knowledge.

**Facilitating critical literacy discussions.** The final theme that emerged was how the teacher facilitated critical literacy discussions. The teacher facilitated critical literacy discussions by guiding students to examine the perspectives within the various sources, promoting critical thinking and viewing of sources, and encouraging critical literacy discussions with positive reinforcement. During a whole class discussion, the teacher and students reflected on the textbook and BrainPOP videos that they just explored in class:

Teacher: So let me ask you. Are you finding all of the answers to these questions in the textbook and the videos? I see a lot of heads shaking no. Well, where are you getting your answers from then?

Student: The textbook gives information but I haven't really used BrainPOP and I use my head because the textbook only has one side.

Teacher: So I want you all to listen to what Breanna just said. She says she feels like she has been using the textbook a lot for information but for the why this happened and how did the colonists feel, she feels like the textbook is taking the colonists side. How many of you agree with that? */Class hands go up about 1/2 the class/*Interesting. At the last class you didn't really feel that way did you?

The teacher and students reflected on what information the sources provided and what critical readers would do when a perspective wasn't provided. The students used their textbook all year long but for many, this may have been the first time that they really examined the perspectives that the textbook presented as well as dismissed. The teacher and the students

worked together during a class discussion to come to conclusions about the different sources and what each one provided for the reader.

While exploring the different texts, the teacher helped the students to conduct critical literacy discussions and evaluate the sources that they were using. Throughout a whole class discussion, she promoted critical thinking of the different texts and prompted the students to look at how different sources might have been appropriate to use at different times:

Teacher: Now let me ask you. The ones who said the books we are reading, how you read the textbook and how you found information. It was pretty easy right? Chris is shaking his head yes. Yea it goes boom, boom, boom. Fact, Fact, Fact. These books, did you have to put a little bit more effort into finding these facts? (*Students: Yes*). Sure you did! But you were still able to find them. So I want you to think about this. If you were going to study something, would you only use textbooks? Would you only use these types of books? Do you think it is okay to use both kinds of books? Yea! But what is the important thing to keep in mind when reading the textbook? Big flashing red light! These are great facts but!

Student: It is only told from one point of view, the American male point of view.

Teacher: I'm only getting one perspective here! This isn't the whole story. So I am going to go over here and use these books, but what do I need to remember though? I'm getting multiple perspectives but...

Student 2: they're stories so it takes longer.

Teacher: I am going to have to put more effort in to get the information out. It's not going to be a quick look.

The teacher made it relatable for the students when she connected to what the students were learning presently to what one might have faced when researching a topic. She also brought to their attention why a critical reader would use different sources. If students are able to answer the questions on their own with little guidance, it shows that they are becoming critical readers and thinkers. The students come to understand that different sources are appropriate for different times and each source serves a purpose depending on what the reader is looking for.

Lastly, the teacher connected the students to real life experiences that they might face down the road. She encouraged critical literacy discussions for future use by accompanying the examples with positive reinforcement. The teacher gave an example of a real life situation during a whole class discussion:

Teacher: Excellent. Take a look at all the sources. And that is not just important to remember when studying the revolutionary war, but as you go forward. When you go into middle school, and high school, and college, you are going to be asked to do research. To look at books and to look at sources and it is going to be tempting to type it into Google. But you need to remember, there might be more here, there might be something missing. Thinking about other perspectives. Be thinking of different types of sources. You guys have been doing a really great job taking information out of those books. ...That is awesome guys. Good job!

By conducting best practice techniques and using positivity, the teacher addressed real life encounters that the students would likely have to face in the future. The teacher provided the students with the knowledge that critical literacy is used not only inside the classroom, but is also important to use it in everyday life in the outside world. Evaluating a source is an important concept to learn. Now that the students in the class had the confidence and reassurance to

evaluate texts on their own, they understood that they had made the transition to critical readers and thinkers.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study reflect and extend the literature addressed by previous critical literacy researchers (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Wolk, 2003; Soares and Wood, 2010; Kenny, 2013) The teacher's facilitation of critical literacy experiences within her classroom demonstrated McLaughlin and DeVogd's (2004) four principles necessary for implementing successful critical literacy experiences. Like McLaughlin and DeVogd's (2004) suggested, the teacher and student addressed the idea of power within the texts. The relationship between reader and author is a powerful one and through critical literacy discussions, the students in this research study explored their relationships with many different authors. The students and teacher addressed the issue of power when the students evaluated texts from multiple perspectives. The students asked questions about who the author was, when the text was written, and what the text was trying to portray to the reader. By evaluating the texts and having small group and whole class critical literacy discussions, the students were able to develop a whole picture of the American Revolution through multiple perspectives.

The students were continuously engaged in conversation with each other while exploring different texts' complexity. The teacher for this study implemented critical literacy discussions and guided student to view multiple perspectives throughout the school year. The students had an understanding of what a critical literacy discussion was like and during this study were comfortable having these discussions in small group and whole class settings. She had recently taken coursework focusing on critical literacy and critical theory before this study at Bridgewater State University. She practiced critical literacy in her life and therefore was able to model critical

reading and thinking for the students. Throughout this study, the teacher and students' critical literacy discussions demonstrated the four principles for successful critical literacy experiences described by McLaughlin and DeVoogd.

Wolk (2003) explained that having a topic that students easily relate to helps them to better understand the topic. The students in this classroom were able to relate to the American Revolution better because many historical figures and events occurred in and around the commonwealth of Massachusetts and more specifically their town and/or surrounding towns. The teacher provided opportunities for the students to explore these connections and to build upon them by facilitating critical literacy discussions. When relating to the topic, the students were able to create a whole picture of the revolutionary war from multiple perspectives. Soares and Wood (2010) discussed how students became more insightful and asked questions by exploring a topic from multiple perspectives. While reading from the children's literature, the students in this study were able to dig deeper rather than just view what was at the surface of the text. Students started to ask questions about different perspectives to better understand how these people may have felt during this time. Finally, the students from this study were able to pull from their background knowledge and relate it to what the author is saying to create their own conclusions just as McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) explored in their work. The teacher guided the student's critical thinking when she activated and related to their previous knowledge. The students' background knowledge came from previous grades, their own experiences, as well as knowledge on artifacts from their own community. By bringing forth all of this background knowledge and the texts' information, the students' understanding evolved over the course of the unit. One student went as far as stating he no longer was on the American side but now believed the British were right.



In contrast to previous research (Kenny, 2013) that gifted readers get lost in the mix of the classroom day to day activities because the focus is on struggling students, except when the teacher uses critical literacy, this study proved that every student had an equal opportunity to read, discuss, and explore before using critical literacy. The groups and pairs in which the students worked in were not based off of reading levels but rather strengths and weaknesses paired together in order for the students to achieve their fullest potential. The text sets that were used were not just one reading level. The texts were a mix of narrative and informational as well as chapter books and children's literature. Students who were advanced readers had the opportunity to read informational chapter books. The struggling readers could gain knowledge from the illustrations or by reading text. During discussions, both small group and whole class, all students had an opportunity of discussing the knowledge gained as well as their own views. The teacher within this study provided challenging questions for students of all levels and facilitated critical literacy discussions well.

From the results of the student's responses, interviews and final projects, critical literacy proved to be a successful way for all students to gain knowledge and explore their own perspectives on the American Revolution. By allowing the students to explore the American Revolution using critical literacy discussions, the students were able to view themselves as critical readers and analyze and interpret information in their own way. Critical literacy discussions are important for teachers and students to participate in because everyone is able to reflect on what has been presented and share their conclusions. Varying the types of discussions and having the teacher model critical reading and thinking, like this teacher did, allows each student to question the sources and for their perspective to be heard and discussed with peers.

After students are more comfortable having critical literacy discussions in the classroom, they would likely demonstrate this behavior in the outside world.

By guiding students to engage in critical literacy, students will view media and texts from different perspectives and not be afraid to ask questions or challenge what the author has presented. The students understand that what is presented in front of them may just be one perspective and that in order to understand the whole picture they will need to explore a variety of texts. The text sets used in the classroom provided each student with the appropriate challenges because of the various levels of text available in the text sets. Text sets can be used across all subject areas while multiple perspectives can be practiced in social studies and language arts instruction. Critical thinking and incorporating informational texts into the literacy and content area curriculum are a large part of the Common Core state standards. Practicing critical literacy discussions and using texts with multiple perspectives will better prepare students for the outside world as well as for the upcoming PARCC assessments requiring higher order thinking skills.

For students to gain a full understanding of critical literacy, it is important for the teacher to have a full understanding of critical literacy. Teachers, just as the students, need to have practice using critical thinking in their everyday life. When the students have a strong role model to build off of, the better the experience is for the students to understand what critical discussions look like and what questions critical readers ask. The teacher must also provide multiple perspectives for the students to explore. The teacher should be knowledgeable of all the perspectives of the topic being discussed and prepared to use reliable and informational for the students to build their viewpoints.

Overall, critical literacy is a practice that has proved to be successful for both students and teachers. Students feel a sense of independence by exploring and creating their own point of view rather than just being told what to think or write. Critical thinking should be encouraged by the teacher for the students to practice outside the classroom. By doing so, students will become more active members of society. Students and teachers can benefit from such experiences and apply them inside the classroom as well as incorporate it into their everyday life.

There was one limitation found within this research. When the pre, mid, and post assessments were distributed, different students were absent at various times so not all the students completed all three assessments.

Future plans for research could include implementing this study in multiple schools in different school districts. The personal connections that the students made could also be different if done in different areas of the country such as the mid-west, west, or the south. The students in different parts of the country may not have the monuments or as many historical connections as the students in this study did because of geographical location. This study could be done over multiple years to see how the change in students can affect the implementation of the unit and what different ways the teacher conducts the lesson plans. A follow-up study could be done with the students from this study at a later grade to see what they still know about the American Revolution and if they still demonstrate the use of critical literacy in their lives.

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## Appendix A

## Pre, Mid and Post Assessment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was the American Revolution?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Why did the American Revolution occur?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Who participated in the American Revolution?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Men               | <input type="checkbox"/> Native Americans  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women             | <input type="checkbox"/> British Loyalists |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Young People      | <input type="checkbox"/> Patriots          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> African Americans |  |

## Appendix B

## Student Interview Questions

1. What was the American Revolution?
2. Why did the American Revolution occur?
3. Who was involved in the American Revolution?
4. Who participated in the Revolutionary war that you didn't know about before this unit? What have you learned about this group or groups?
5. Between your textbook, BrainPOP and the children's books, which resource did you find the most helpful? Why?
6. Which source did you feel you could see the whole story of the American Revolution?
7. After using the different sources, which one left you with the most questions unanswered when you finished with it? Did it keep you wondering? Why?
8. Which source did you enjoy working with? Why?
9. Which source surprised you with the most details?

Explain to the students that the sources used are categorized as: Textbook, BrainPOP or Children's Literature.



## Appendix C

## Teacher Crafted Worksheets-Gathering Background Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Using BrainPOP.com and your Social studies textbook, answer the following questions. Try to take the perspective of each side when writing your response.

**On BrainPOP, helpful videos would be:**

Causes of the American Revolution  
French and Indian War  
Declaration of Independence  
American Indians  
British Empire

**In your textbook, helpful chapters are:**

Chapter 8, Lesson 3  
Chapter 9, Lesson 1

1. **Proclamation of 1763** What is it?  
Why did the British do this?  
How did it make the colonists feel? Why?
2. **The Sugar Act** What is it? ]  
Why did the British do this?  
How did it make the colonists feel? Why?
3. **The Stamp Act** What is it?  
Why did the British do this?  
How did it make the colonists feel? Why?
4. **The Townshend Acts** What are they?  
Why did the British do this?  
How did it make the colonists feel? Why?
5. **The Sons of Liberty / The Daughters of Liberty**  
What are the Sons of Liberty?  
What are the Daughters of Liberty?  
Why did the colonists form these groups?  
How did it make the British feel? Why?
6. **The Boston Massacre** What is it?  
Why did this happen?  
How did it make the colonists feel? Why?
7. **The Boston Tea Party** What is it?  
Why did the colonists do this?  
How did it make the British feel? Why?

## Appendix D

## Evaluating our Textbook and BrainPOP

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

For this activity, you relied on Brain Pop, as well as your Social studies Textbook.

Let's think about each of these sources.

Log onto BrianPOP.com. On the bottom left of the home page, click the box that says "About Us". After reading this, do you think BrainPOP is a reliable source?

\_\_\_\_\_

Why or why not? Give SPECIFIC evidence to support your answer.

Do you think the videos on this site show a bias towards one group or another (are everyone's opinions and perspectives talked about)? \_\_\_\_\_

Explain:

Take a look through your textbook. Look not only at the different chapters, but at the list of authors in the beginning and what their jobs are.

Do you think this textbook is a reliable source? \_\_\_\_\_

Why or why not? Give SPECIFIC evidence to support your answer.

Do you think your book shows a bias towards one group or another (are everyone's opinions and perspectives talked about)? \_\_\_\_\_

Explain:

## Appendix E

## The text sets used and book titles

BOOKS ABOUT REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE	
Text Set Categories	Book Titles
Young People in Revolutionary America	<i>Sleds on Boston Common: A Story from the American Revolution</i> (Borden) <i>We Were There, Too! Young People in U.S. History</i> (Hoose)
Women in Revolutionary America	<i>Sybil Ludington's Midnight Ride</i> (Amstel) <i>Patriots in Petticoats: Heroines of the American Revolution</i> (Redmond) <i>They Called her Molly Pitcher</i> (Rockwell)
African Americans in Revolutionary America	<i>Dear Benjamin Banneker</i> (Pinkney) <i>Benjamin Banneker: Pioneering Scientist</i> (Wadsworth) <i>Building a New Land: African Americans in Colonial America</i> (Haskins & Benson) <i>Liberty or Death</i> (Blair)
The British in Revolutionary America	<i>George vs. George: The Revolutionary War as Seen from Both Sides</i> (Schanzer)
Patriots in Revolutionary America	<i>George Washington's Teeth</i> (Chandra and Comora) <i>The Hatmaker's Sign: A Story by Benjamin Franklin</i> (Fleming) <i>The Amazing Life of Benjamin Franklin</i> (Giblin) <i>Paul Revere's Midnight Ride</i> (Krensky) <i>How Ben Franklin Stole the Lightning</i> (Schanzer) <i>John, Paul, George and Ben</i> (Smith) <i>The Boston Tea Party</i> (Freedman) <i>The Journal of William Thomas Emerson, a Revolutionary War Patriot</i> (Denenberg) <i>The Winter of Red Snow: The Revolutionary War Diary of Abigail Jane Stewart</i> (Gregory)
Native Americans in Revolutionary America	<i>Everybody's Revolution</i> (Fleming)

Appendix F

Teacher Crafted Worksheets- Evaluating the Children's Literature

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Read each book in the group. Share and discuss with your partners as you answer the questions below.

Group # \_\_\_\_\_

Book Titles:

Whose point of view are these books *mostly* from?

\_\_\_\_\_

What was the war like for this group of people?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Are any other points of view shown? Yes OR No

If yes, whose?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Whose points of view are missing that you think should be shown?

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Write facts about the Revolutionary War that you learned from these books:

How are these books, as a source?