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Critical Literacy Through Making Connections in the Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

Literacy is an incredibly vital skill that all students must master in order to be successful in today's world. For a long time, comprehension has been the long-term goal of teachers to instill in their students. Through comprehension, students are able to identify the main parts of a text they read. However, literacy must extend beyond simple comprehension. Students must become active participants in their reading, and this can be done through critical literacy. Through critical literacy, students are able to read move beyond comprehension by identifying authorial intention, connecting text to their own lives, and encouraging social commentary and change. The following research presents critical literacy as an effective tool in teaching literacy and comprehension. Results from the study show a positive correlation between making text-to-self connections and reading comprehension. These results enhance the literature on how critical literacy can be effectively used by teachers in the elementary classroom.

Keywords: literacy, critical literacy, text-to-self connections, comprehension

Introduction

Having the ability to read is an incredibly powerful gift that teachers bestow on their students. When students read, they are transported from the classroom to a world of their own. Through strategies such as decoding and visualization, our students are able to change the symbols on the page from letters and words to words and sentences with various meanings. In comprehending the text, students are able to understand the things they read. That being said, text can mean more and be represented by more than just words on a page. According to Bonsour Kurki (2015), teachers and students must understand that text is “far more broad than the traditional idea of text related to written script; rather text could include things like jewelry, videos, clothing, dance, scripture, etc” (p. 14).

Likewise, there are other aspects to text itself that affect the way it is written, presented, and read. Context creates additional aspects that include the readers’ experiences, the authors’ experiences, and the cultural and historical events that affect the human race as a whole. Therefore, while something like comprehension is an important aspect and goal that students must reach, it is equally important that they are not limited in the scope in which they are analyzing text. Comprehension can no longer be the ultimate goal we have for our students; instead, teachers must have their students extend from the text by becoming active participants in the reading process. Being literate no longer means simply being able to decode. “The notion that being literate means having an active role in reading, understanding, sharing, and producing texts. Because texts are so varied in form and meaning, there are many different kinds of literacies with which one engages, and in which one can become proficient” (Bonsour Kurki, 2015, p. 15). Through critical literacy, students are able to question and examine the text they

read while simultaneously being able to relate what they read to themselves and the world that surrounds them.

In researching critical literacy and its effect on comprehension, it is my hope that by having students make text-to-self connections, the wheels of critical literacy begin to turn in motion. By beginning with having students connect their own lives to text, they will become much more sympathetic human beings. If critical literacy begins by building empathy and developing character in students, then its potential to encourage social commentary and change are endless. With the springboard of text-to-self connections, students may continue to grow, develop their own opinions, and become leaders themselves in their communities by becoming and enacting the change they wish to see. However, this cannot occur without the building blocks teachers establish with strategies such as critical literacy.

Literature Review

Mantei and Kervin (2014) wanted to determine the type of text-to-self connections that students make with a certain picture book, and how teachers can utilize literacy circles to further supplement the background knowledge students have. The students were then given the task to complete a task card, consisting of answering comprehension questions, and the chance to create corresponding artwork. This data was used to support the critical literacy strategy.

Beach and Cleovoulou (2014) interviewed a teacher who combined inquiry pedagogy and critical literacy instruction in her classroom. By utilizing inquiry pedagogy to develop critical literacy instruction, the research explicitly exemplifies a successful teaching strategy with proven results. Parker and Burns (2012) determined whether or not interest plays a role in having students stay on task during reading instruction. Furthermore, it explores how interest affects

reading comprehension. The participants were five fourth-grade students, none of whom were identified as having a learning disability.

Sampson, Linek, Raine, and Szabo (2013) employed mixed methods research to determine the knowledge and implementation of reading comprehension strategies utilized by pre-service teachers in their student teaching. The findings concluded that the strategies that were most widely utilized were more highly affected by outside factors, such as mentor teacher strategies and district policies, rather than what pre-service classes and research taught the pre-service teachers. Graham and Hebert (2011) presented evidence to prove that writing about texts students have read improves their reading comprehension. It also presents research that supports reading comprehension being improved with more writing prompts. Therefore, teaching effective ways to write about a text correlates directly to the comprehension of that text.

Because critical literacy is such a broad and generalized topic, it lacks a clearly defined universal definition. Nevertheless, definitions of critical literacy usually have similar characteristics and aspects that make recognizing the ideals of critical literacy very prominent and easily identifiable. According to Behrman (2006), “Critical literacy espouses that education can foster social justice by allowing students to recognize how language is affected by and affects social relations. Among the aims of critical literacy are to have students examine the power relationships inherent in language use, recognize that language is not neutral, and confront their own values in the production and reception of language” (p. 480).

In his definition, Behrman focuses on the aspect of critical literacy that affects the social world around the students. Therefore, he stresses the power that language has, and how language can be used as a political tool to advocate for social change. It is, in fact, a tool used by students themselves to affect their immediate social existence. Behrman also highlights the biases that

exist within a text because language itself contains biases. However, instead of simply trying to eliminate any subjectivity, Behrman insists on having students recognize the biases of language, analyze them, and use the language itself to create and formulate their own opinions.

Bonsour Kurki (2015) has a similar definition of critical literacy in that it also touches upon the social action that stems from reading. Critical literacy “focuses on a broad understanding of reading, which includes thinking about, responding to and creating texts, moving to social action, and developing an awareness of texts in relation to the larger context in which we live” (p. 16). She expands upon Behrman’s definition by addressing other possible results of critical reading such as the creation of texts as a response to another text.

This kind of critical action is interesting in that Bonsour Kurki is quick to point out the fact that there is a difference between critical thinking and critical literacy. Bonsour Kurki assigns such tasks as evaluating and analyzing texts in order to better understand its surface value as tasks that a critical thinker would do. However, critical literacy, she argues, requires active participation. By actively participating with the text, the reader challenges and questions what is read, thus transforming themselves as a person. “The mindset of critical literacy is adopted by the reader when her/his push beyond the analytical or evaluative (as found in a critical thinker) and he/she begins to consider how cultural ideologies and social practices of the author and of him/herself impact the meanings of the text” (Bonsour Kurki, 2015, p. 17).

Another common aspect of critical literacy is the ability to question authorial intention. In doing so, students are able to take context into consideration. By analyzing the author of a text, students are able to question why a piece was written, for whom it was written, and if there was any agenda behind writing the piece. According to Bennett (2012), “When students are taught how to evaluate a text in critical terms, they are empowered to consider and analyze the

influences that are shaping their thoughts and ideas. Strong critical thinking skills enable students to question and challenge attitudes, values, and beliefs that are hidden below the surface as they read or listen to an author's message" (p. 65). While Bennett's definition of critical literacy is much more author-based, it still allows for students to analyze and dig out certain biases and prejudices that exist in a society based on the attitudes, values, and beliefs that exist from and through a text.

Molden (2007) defines critical literacy as being synonymous with analytical reading. Therefore, she stresses the importance of critical readers having certain skills that allow them to properly analyze a text, such as questioning why a text was written. According to Molden (2007), "Critical literacy is defined as not only a teaching method but a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges texts and life, as we know it. Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action. It encourages readers to be active participants in the reading process: to question, to dispute, and to examine power relations" (p. 50). Molden's definition encompasses many aspects of other definitions of critical literacy found in the research. Not only does she touch upon authorial intention, but she uses it as a starting point to question why a piece was written. From there, she encourages students to reflect on how a text affects them, and finally, how the students themselves can use what they have learned from the text to change and modify the world around them.

Discussion

There is a plethora of instructional strategies that can be used in the elementary classroom to implement critical literacy. According to Janks (2014), there are five main skills that students should be able to do: "1. Make connections between something that is going on in the world and their students' lives, where the world can be as small as the classroom or as large as the

international stage. 2. Consider what students will need to know and where they can find the information. 3. Explore how the problematic is instantiated in texts and practices by a careful examination of design choices and people's behavior. 4. Examine who benefits and who is disadvantaged by imagining the social effects of what is going on and of its representations. 5. Imagine possibilities for making a positive difference" (p. 350). These five skills cover a wide range of aspects of critical literacy, ranging from text-to-self connections, social justice, and community service.

Voice is another commonly analyzed aspect of critical literacy. Behrman (2006) suggests that "practices may include identifying multiple voices in texts, dominant cultural discourses, multiple possible readings of texts, and sources of authority where texts are used and critiquing and producing a wide range of texts" (p. 491). These strategies range from a variety of perspectives, ranging from in-text analysis to point of view and critique. Bennett (2012) also emphasizes the importance of voice in text. He states, "When students are taught to question the text, to consider the author's intent, to think about whose voice is evident or whose voice is missing, they delve deeply into analyzing and understanding the text" (p. 66).

Molden (2007) lists a variety of strategies to implement in the classroom. The first she explains is Guided Comprehension, which closely follows Bloom's taxonomy. With Guided Comprehension, teachers first present a strategy, explain it, model it, and then guide their students in creating responses, followed by applying the strategy to an actual text and reflecting on how it worked. Another strategy, background knowledge, encourages students to use their own background knowledge to examine what is missing or underrepresented in a text. The strategy called story reporting has students identify the main information of a story, ranging from character, setting, conflict, and sequence. Switching is a strategy that exemplifies biases in text.

Different types of switches include gender switch, theme switch, setting switch, emotion switch, race switch, and relationship switch. Another strategy the Molden recommends for implementing critical literacy in the classroom is using alternative texts, in which an aspect, like a character, is substituted for someone else. Juxtaposition, another strategy, deals with examining two contrasting texts. Focus helps students to determine whether or not bias exists in a text, and allows them to focus on different points of view during specific parts of a story.

Connections

One important strategy incorporated by critical literacy is the ability to make text-to-self connections. Not only does comprehension play a key role in being able to make such connections, but it also allows for personal reflections and growth. According to Mantei & Kervin (2014), “An invitation that prompts students to consider the links between a text and their own lives can offer teachers opportunities for pedagogical changes in response to their deepened understanding of their students” (p. 78).

Molden (2007) also provides several different ways of assessment using what she calls Connection Stems. “The students use the Connection Stems to make connections as they read a text. They can be compelled orally, in writing, or by sketching. When sharing their completed Connection Stems, students use text support and personal experiences to explain their connections” (p. 54). This variety of ways of assessment allows teachers the opportunity to incorporate different ideals such as multiple intelligences and learning styles in conjunction with critical literacy. Ultimately, connection stems and text-to-self connections not only helps students relate personally to text, but it also allows them to connect the text they are reading to other text while simultaneously becoming more empathetic and sympathetic human beings.

Methodology

This research will determine whether or not there is a correlation between making text-to-self connections (critical literacy) and reading comprehension. Data will be collected from eighteen students in a third grade class in a rural elementary school who will participate in reading stations as part of their instruction for this study. Consent forms will be sent home in order to inform parents of the study and allow their child's assessment score to be used in this research (Appendix A). Assent forms will also be sent home for the students to read and sign (Appendix B). For four weeks, students will engage in their respective station groups, which are predetermined by reading level (Appendix C), and will be given a text to read based on their independent reading level. The blue group is the highest reading group, followed by the green group, the yellow group, and the red group. For each text, the researcher will introduce the students to the text (Appendix D). The students will then read the text silently and independently.

They will then independently respond accordingly to journal prompts given to them by the researcher. Students will be given six prompts, and are required to answer three of the six. For the first two weeks, the students will be given critical literacy prompts (Appendix E) which encourage making text-to-self connections and were derived from Kate Molden's article: "Critical literacy, the right answer for the reading classroom: Strategies to move beyond comprehension for reading improvement." For the third and fourth weeks, students will be given guided comprehension questions. These are prompts that were created in order to help students in their comprehension of a text by Fountas and Pinnell (Appendix F). Once this intervention is completed, students will be given an assessment (Appendix G) to complete individually. This assessment will be scored based on a rubric (Appendix H) created by the researcher using the

appropriate grade level Virginia Standards of Learning. This process will be repeated each week, for each reading group.

Results

Data was collected based off the students' assessment scores over the four weeks of the study. The assessment scores were organized by reading group and week. By taking the average of each students' scores in each reading group for the first two weeks, a mean assessment score was calculated based on completing the assessment after participating in the critical literacy prompts intervention (Appendix I). Assessment scores are out of 20 points. The students in the blue group (the highest reading group) scored an average of 17.3 points. Students in the green group (second highest reading group) scored an average of 11.5 points. Students in the yellow group (third highest reading group) scored an average of 14.3 points, and students in the red group (lowest reading group) scored an average of 12 points.

The average of each students' scores in each reading group was then calculated for the following two weeks (weeks three and four). A mean score was calculated based on completing the assessment after participating in the basic guided comprehension intervention (Appendix J). The students in the blue group scored an average of 15.3 points. Students in the green group scored an average of 8 points. Students in the yellow group scored an average of 14.3 points, and students in the red group scored an average of 14 points.

Data was then organized to show the trends in mean assessment scores for each reading group over the four weeks the study took place. The means were then be calculated by averaging mean scores of weeks one and two, and averaging mean scores of weeks three and four. These scores were averaged together by calculating the mean of all groups' assessment scores after completing the critical literacy intervention. The mean score was determined to be 14.4. The

same will be done to assessment scores after completing the basic guided comprehension intervention. This mean score was determined to be 13.2. A t-value and p-value will then be calculated by comparing these scores. The result was determined to be not significant at $p < 0.05$ (Appendix K).

Discussions/Limitations

The two highest reading groups scored higher on their assessments after completing the critical literacy intervention. The blue group scored 17.3 points, while the green group scored 11.5 points. This is compared to their scores after completing the basic guided comprehension intervention, in which the blue group scored a mean of 15.3 points, while the green group scored an average of 8 points. The yellow group, the third highest reading group, did equally well after completing both interventions with an average score of 14.3 points for the first two, and second two weeks. The lowest reading group, the red group, was the only group who scored higher after completing the basic guided comprehension intervention. They scored an average of 12 points after completing the critical literacy intervention, and 14 points after completing the basic guided comprehension intervention (Appendix L) It would be interesting to see whether there is some correspondence between critical literacy and Bloom's taxonomy based on the ideal that critical literacy is higher up on Bloom's taxonomy. This trend may also be due to the fact that lower leveled readers may struggle to decode more, which leads to a higher exertion of energy required to read, leaving the students with inability to make text-to-self connections, which requires higher level thinking.

It is interesting to note that despite an insignificant difference between mean scores, assessment scores after completing the critical literacy intervention were still higher on average than the assessment scores after completing the basic guided comprehension intervention

(Appendix M). Were the study completed over a longer period of time, or with a larger sample size, the result may then be significant in that the difference between the two means may be high enough to obtain a significant result. It is also interesting to note that no student ever scored a perfect score (20 points) on their assessment. This is mainly due to the fact that no student identified the setting of the story as both the time and place in which the story takes place. While that definition was modelled for the students before the first week of the study took place, no student included both elements in their assessment. The definition was not modelled correctly again in fear of skewing the results for weeks two through four.

It was also difficult to find enough books to last throughout the four weeks of the study at the appropriate independent reading level for the students' groups. Reading groups contain multiple reading levelled students within each group. Ideally, each student in each group would have a book levelled at their appropriate independent reading pace, rather than a single book for the entire reading group. However, even with the host school's extensive book room, this expectation was unrealistic.

Conclusion

Despite a low probability value, using critical literacy prompts to guide students in their reading comprehension is just as effective, if not slightly more so, than basic guided comprehension prompts. Therefore, there is a positive correlation between having elementary students making text-to-self connections and reading comprehension.

Critical literacy extends further than decoding or comprehension. It requires its students to become active participants in the reading process. It takes the power of words and literature and transfers it to its readers. "Literature holds influence over readers. When we take the time to develop critical thinking skills with our students, we equip them with tools they need to be

reflective, responsible, and empathetic members of our society now and well into the future” (Bennett, 2012, p. 68). When students become critical readers, they are able to analyze the text they read and use that information to inform, shape, and change the world around them.

Critical literacy is a compelling concept. It puts power in the hands of the students, and can inspire them to be the change in the world they wish to see. Critical literacy makes a huge difference in the world outside the walls of the classroom, and it was very interesting to note that it can make another difference with reading comprehension inside the classroom.

Appendix A

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Hello! My name is Erik Gajeton, and I am a student teacher in your child's classroom. I am currently a graduate student at the University of Mary Washington. I am asking your permission to have your child participate in a study that I am conducting as part of my graduate work. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary.

I am interested in learning about how critical literacy and journal writing affects reading comprehension. Critical literacy is a strategy in which a student relates what he or she reads in a text and relates it to his or her own life. Your child will be reading level-appropriate texts provided by the school and completing assessments based on the corresponding grade level Virginia Standards of Learning. Your child will keep a journal where he or she will be given the pre-determined assignment of writing the main idea and supporting details of the text, or relate the text to their own lives. I will also take notes while observing your child while he or she is writing in the journal. At the end of each week of journal writing, students will be given an assessment to check their reading comprehension. This project will be part of your child's work for class. It will in no way require extra work for him or her, and will take place during regular school hours.

The only difference is that if you permit your child to be a participant in this study, I will use his or her data in my research report. Your child's work will be kept confidential. His or her name will not appear in any papers in the project and pseudonyms will be provided to protect his or her privacy. Following the project, all original journal entries and assessments will be returned to your child. Any copies made for my research of journal entries, assessments, and observation notes I collect will be destroyed.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping me understand the influence of the critical literacy strategy on reading comprehension. The risks to your child for participating in this study are minimal, and include comparing journal written notes with other students and possible frustration when being assessed on comprehension. However, these risks will be minimized by making sharing journal responses voluntary, emphasizing that these assessments will not be given as a grade, and students simply need to give their best effort. Likewise, assessments will be confidential and will not be seen by other students.

The research described above has been approved by the University of Mary Washington IRB which is a committee responsible for ensuring that research is being conducted safely and that risks to participants are minimized. For information about the review of this research, contact the IRB chair, Dr. Jo Tyler at jtyler@umw.edu.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me (egajeton@mail.umw.edu), or my university supervisor, Dr. Nancy Guth (nancyguth@comcast.net). I look forward to working with you and your child!

Thank you,

Erik Gajeton

All of my questions and concerns about the research to be conducted by Erik Gajeton have been addressed. I choose, voluntarily, to allow my child to participate in this research project. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

print first and last name of child

print name of parent/guardian

signature of parent/guardian

date

print name of investigator

signature of investigator

date

Appendix B

Dear Student,

Hello! I am very excited to be your student teacher throughout the spring! My name is Mr. Gajeton and I am a student at the University of Mary Washington. I am asking if you would agree to be a part of a research project I am doing because I am trying to learn how different reading strategies affect the way you comprehend texts. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. I am now going to explain the study to you.

While you work in your stations, I will be collecting information through your journal reflections and assessments based on books you read and observations of what you do at the stations. You will not be graded for your help in my study, and this study will not require you to have extra work. All of this work will be completed during stations.

Your parents were given a letter about taking part in this study. If they did not allow you to participate in this study, you will not be asked to sign this form, but if they did, I encourage you to agree as well. However, if you decide not to participate you will still write in journals, take assessments, and do all of the work assigned; I will just not use your journals or assessments in my research. Even if you agree now to be a participant in the research, you can stop later if you want. Before you decide whether or not to let me use your journals and assessments, or observations of you, you should ask me any questions you have. I will keep your information confidential. This means that I will not use your names or the name of the school in anything I write and I will not reveal any personal, identifying information about you.

I look forward to working with you!

Thanks,
Mr. Gajeton

Assent Form to be Signed by Student

I have read the above letter or have had it read to me, all my questions have been answered, and I agree to voluntarily participate in the research described above.

(Print Student's Name)

(Student's Signature)

(Date)

To be Completed by the Researcher:

I confirm that the student named above was given an opportunity to ask questions about my research, and all the questions asked by the student have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability.

A copy of this Assent Form will be given to the student's parent or guardian. All data collected for this research will be kept confidential.

(Print Researcher's Name)

(Researcher's Signature)

(Date)

Appendix C

Blue Group (Student #)	Green Group (Student #)	Yellow Group (Student #)	Red Group (Student #)
3	1	8	10
6	4	11	18
9	5	15	
12	7	17	
13			
14			
20			

Appendix D

	Red Group	Yellow Group	Green Group	Blue Group
Week One	<i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i> (L)	<i>Rumpelstiltskin</i> (N)	<i>The Hunterman and the Crocodile</i> (P)	<i>The Tortoise Shell</i> (R)
Week Two	<i>Miss Nelson is Missing</i> (L)	<i>The Field Mouse and the Dinosaur Named Sue</i> (N)	<i>The True Story of the Three Little Pigs</i> (P)	<i>How the Frog Lost Its Tail</i> (R)
Week Three	<i>The Magic Fish</i> (L)	<i>Rooster's Off To See The World</i> (M)	<i>Nacho and Lolita</i> (Q)	<i>Why the Sun and Moon are in the Sky</i> (R)
Week Four	<i>Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day</i> (L)	<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> (N)	<i>Come on, Rain!</i> (P)	<i>Shrek</i> (Q)

Appendix E

Set One:

- This reminds me of...
- I remember when...
- An experience I have had like that was when...
- I felt like one of the characters in the book when...
- If I were one of the characters in the book, I would...

Appendix F

- The author wanted me to learn...
- One of the character's perspectives changed when...
- The main problem of this book was...
- The conflict in this book was resolved when...
- One example of cause and effect in this book was...
- I know this book is fiction because...

Appendix G

Instructions:

Please identify the following parts of the book you read. Write your answers in complete sentences.

Setting:

Characters:

Summary (one sentence):

Main Idea:

Supporting Details:

Appendix H

RUBRIC:

	4 points	2 points	0 points
Setting	The student correctly identified the time and place of the story	The student only correctly identified the time or place of the story	The student incorrectly identified the time and place; did not answer
Characters	The student correctly identified all the characters in the story	The student correctly identified only some of the characters in the story	The student incorrectly identified the characters; did not answer
Summary	The student was able to summarize the story in one sentence	n/a	The student did not summarize the story
Main Idea	The student correctly identified the main idea of the story	n/a	The student did not identify the main idea of the story
Supporting Details	The student correctly identified all supporting details of the story	The student correctly identified most of the supporting details of the story	The student was unable to identify at least half of the supporting details of the story

___/20 points

Appendix I

Student #	Test 1:	Score	Test 2:	Score	Average CL:
Blue Group					
3		18		18	18
6		18		18	18
9		16		16	16
12		18		18	18
13		18		16	17
16		18		14	16
20		18		18	18
	Average:	17.7	Average:	16.9	17.3
Green Group					
	Test 1:	Score	Test 2:	Score	Average CL:
1		6		18	12
4		8		14	11
5		6		18	12
7		6		16	11
	Average:	6.5	Average:	16.5	11.5
Yellow Group					
	Test 1:	Score	Test 2:	Score	Average CL:
8		14		12	13
11		14		16	15
15		12		16	14
17		14		16	15
	Average:	13.5	Average:	15	14.3
Red Group					
	Test 1:	Score	Test 2:	Score	Average CL:
10		12		12	12
18		10		14	12
	Average:	11	Average:	13	12

Appendix J

Student #	Test 3:	Score	Test 4:	Score	Average
		e			BC:
Blue Group					
3		16		16	15
6		18		18	18
9		18		16	17
12		16		12	14
13		12		14	13
16		14		10	12
20		18		18	18
	Average:	16	Average:	14.9	15.3
Green Group	Test 3:	Score	Test 4:	Score	Average
		e			BC:
1		4		8	6
4		12		14	13
5		4		8	6
7		6		8	7
	Average:	6.5	Average:	9.5	8
Yellow Group	Test 3:	Score	Test 4:	Score	Average
		e			BC:
8		14		16	15
11		14		16	15
15		14		8	11
17		16		16	16
	Average:	14.5	Average:	14	14.3
Red Group	Test 3:	Score	Test 4:	Score	Average
		e			BC:
10		16		8	12
18		16		16	16
	Average:	16	Average:	12	14

Appendix K

	Critical Literacy	Guided Comprehension
Mean:	14.6	13.2

T-value	P-value	Significance
1.25	0.22	The result is not significant at $p < 0.05$

Appendix L

	Critical Literacy	Guided Comprehension
Blue	17.3	15.3
Green	11.5	8
Yellow	14.3	14.3
Red	12	14

Appendix M

	Critical Literacy	Guided Comprehension
Mean:	14.6	13.2

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