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Jessica Klee
St. John Fisher College

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With in the confines of this action research project I answered my question about how urban 8 th graders talk critically, specifically about the Holocaust. Using the book Night by Elie Wiesel three students from an urban upstate New York school district met with me and discussed the Holocaust, particularly events around the novel. In addition to participating in two critical discussions, the students wrote in their journals, answered a questionnaire and responded to a picture. The journals, questionnaire, picture response and transcriptions were analyzed using the four dimensions model of critical literacy. The study showed that students were able to talk critically about the Holocaust and how teacher questioning can affect discussion.

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Critical Talk:
How Urban 8th Grade Students Critically Talk About the Holocaust

By

Jessica Klee

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Dr. Joellen Maples

School of Arts and Sciences
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

With in the confines of this action research project I answered my question about how urban 8th graders talk critically, specifically about the Holocaust. Using the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel three students from an urban upstate New York school district met with me and discussed the Holocaust, particularly events around the novel. In addition to participating in two critical discussions, the students wrote in their journals, answered a questionnaire and responded to a picture. The journals, questionnaire, picture response and transcriptions were analyzed using the four dimensions model of critical literacy. The study showed that students were able to talk critically about the Holocaust and how teacher questioning can affect discussion.

Critical Talk: How Urban 8th Grade Students Critically Talk About the Holocaust

Urban youth have been presented in the media as thugs, gangbangers and mediocre citizens. Why is that? I began to ask myself this question and others mid way through my Masters program at St. John Fisher College. I have been teaching inner city youth in Upstate, New York for the past four years and these young adults are being misrepresented. Through my studies in the Literacy program, I was introduced to a type of thinking that taught me consider perspectives beyond my own. The program taught me to question what I know and start talking about the issues I have. Talking about the issues began to force me to reflect upon problems outside of my own personal bubble. I see value in critical literacy, and had a teacher in my past felt the same I might not have been so surprised by the marginalization of people that occurs in our country. The forethought for my study stems from my need to engage my students in critical thought and discussion about worldwide issues. I wanted to show that urban youth have the ability to think and talk critically about global issues.

Critical literacy allows students to develop their analytical skills, it encourages analyzing, and higher order thinking. Critical literacy encourages people to think beyond the words on a page. Critical instruction is essential to developing these students higher level thinking skills, “Students who engage in critical literacy become open minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing texts from a critical perspective” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 58). It is imperative that teachers embed critical literacy into their daily instruction. Teachers who support critical literacy will “encourage their students to view themselves with in the larger, historical, political, cultural and economic structures where they exist” (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 379). These teachers understand that critical literacy in the classroom “is characterized by an emphasis on student voices and dialogue as tools with which students reflect on and construct meaning

from texts and discourse” (Beck, 2005, p. 394). When students “engage in a critical literacy approach to representations of different sociocultural events they will create powerful literacy experiences through which students can begin to both deconstruct and reconstruct themselves and their world” (Spector & Jones, 2007, p. 47). Enhancing the educational experiences via critical literacy allows students to develop higher level thinking skills, while providing them with meaningful experiences with in the classroom.

This study involved three students from an urban upstate New York school district who participated in a critical discussion around the Holocaust and the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Each student participated in a small group discussion, journaling and a questionnaire. The small group discussions were recorded for transcription and further analysis. Each of these items was analyzed using the four dimension model of critical literacy. The research suggests that these students were able to reach various levels of critical talk. The critical discussion engaged students as they were allowed to fully express their ideas and thoughts. The students benefited greatly from the exchange. One final consideration of the study, suggests that teachers who choose to explore critical literacy in the classroom need to have exposure to it. They should also consider their role as the facilitator of critical literacy discussion.

What is Critical Literacy?

Before considering critical literacy, one should understand that the term literacy is no longer synonymous with reading and writing. Literacy however, is far more complex than just reading and writing (Gee, 2001; Kucer, 2009; Lankshear & Knoble, 2007; Larson & Marsh, 2005). Literacy is global; people who are literate can participate in politics, social networking, they can participate in the work force and communicate with their families. Barton & Hamilton (1998) state that “literacy is something people do; it is an activity located between thought and

text” (p. 3). Lending support to Barton and Hamilton (1998) are Lankshear & Knobel (2007) who also state that “literacies are socially recognized ways of generating meaningful content through the medium of encoding texts within the contents of participation in Discourses (or as a member of Discourses)” (p. 64). Both Barton & Hamilton (1998) and Lankshear & Knobel (2007) state that literacy goes beyond reading, and in order to stay current students need to be able to participate in a discussion that covers a wide variety of topics.

Defining critical literacy is even more of a challenge because there is “no singular, normative version of critical literacy. Rather it is a concept that has been shaped by various theoretical paradigms over the years and formulated in practice in ways that are deeply contextualized and specifically situated” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 40). Historically, Paulo Freire gets credit for developing a literacy program with critical pedagogy (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Critical pedagogy is a type of instructive model that “locates schooling in political context” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 40) where teachers and students are constantly challenged to uncover social and political inequalities like race, power, class, gender and other aspects of identity (Larson & Marsh, 2005).

Freire (1972) developed the program from a critical perspective because he did not want its participants to merely read, he wanted “a literacy program which would be an introduction to the democratization of culture, a program with human beings as it’s subjects rather than as patient recipients, a program which itself would be an act of creation, capable of releasing other creative acts” (Freire, 1972, p. 43). Over time, critical literacy and instruction have reached a global audience (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Considering critical literacy has reached a global audience, it is no wonder there are several models for it.

The critical literacy perspective encourages people to examine topics through a microscope, and to think critically about them. Individuals should question, critique and analyze various topics like economics, politics, gender and race (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Critical literacy encourages people to look beyond the 'normal' to ask; what does 'normal' even mean? Then you would ask critical follow up questions; who is 'normal'? How can we decide 'normal'? Who is being marginalized by the word or concept of 'normal'? Who even decided 'normal was normal' (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002)?

The model of Critical literacy that is being used for this action research project is the four dimensions model which Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys (2002) adapted from other theoretical frames. The first dimension is called 'Disrupting the common place' (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). Disrupting the common place means placing everything you know into a dystopian state. Teachers should encourage students to interrogate texts, and analyze popular culture and media. Teachers who include popular culture and media are using entertaining ways to both engage students and analyze how people are positioned and constructed by television, video games, comics, toys and so on (Marsh, 2000; Shannon, 1995; Vasquez, 2000). Students should begin to ask themselves questions like 'How does this text position me?' (Luke and Freebody, 1997). Students will begin to develop the language of critique (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002).

The second dimension is interrogating multiple viewpoints (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). Students would reflect on contradictory viewpoints. Theorists who describe this dimension ask people to "understand experiences and texts from our own perspectives and the viewpoints of others, and to consider these various perspectives concurrently" (Lewiston, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 233). Teachers will ask students to focus on the voices that are not being

heard (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Students will then begin to “pay attention to and seek out the voices of those who have been silenced or marginalized” (Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ociepka & Vasquez, 2000, p. 507) within the confines of texts and media.

The third dimension is focusing on sociopolitical issues and power relationships (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). In this dimension students should attempt to understand the sociopolitical systems, and the relationships between power and language (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). When thinking critically about power and language you begin to see that those who do not understand the language have no power (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). Teaching in itself is a power relationship and is a “non neutral form of social practice, yet it often takes place with no attention focused on how sociopolitical systems, power relationships and language are intertwined and inseparable from instruction” (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 233). The third dimension of critical literacy asks people to go “beyond the personal and attempting to understand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong” (Boozer, Maras, & Brummett, 1999, p. 60).

Lastly, the fourth dimension is, taking action & promoting social justice (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002), this may sound more difficult than it actually is. Talk. Comber (2001) states that people should use “language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question practices of privilege and injustice (p. 1). Talking is one of the best ways to take action. Talking about issues, getting and seeking, reliable, valid information and sharing it will help. Your students do not necessarily need to go on a trip to the poorest places in Africa to make a difference; simply talking about it is taking action. Talking about, “challenging and redefining cultural borders, encouraging students to be border crossers in order to understand others, and

creating borderlands with diverse cultural resources” (Giroux, 1993). Doing these things will help create a culture of tolerance and understanding.

Children by nature are tolerant beings. They ask a question when something is not ‘fair’. However, at a point in a child’s life it begins to turn away from ‘being fair’. Children no longer question the value of fairness. It is about them, their wants and needs. Attending to ones wants and needs is not a bad thing so long as you can still consider others. Creating children who think only of themselves is a travesty. Students need to see the value in others and begin to once again question the injustices that occur in the world. Teachers of critical literacy must “establish a supportive environment in which students can participate in thoughtful exchanges with one another that will lead them to new and richer understandings of first personal and later social issues” (Beck, 2005, p. 394). Students again need to understand that “responsible citizenship means confronting and taking action against the social inequalities and injustices perpetuated through texts and discourses” (Beck, 2005, p. 394). Confronting societal issues will allow students to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Research Question

Given that literacy is a global practice and true knowledge occurs during higher-level thinking, this action research project asks, how do urban 8th grade students have critical talk around the Holocaust?

Literature Review

Critical literacy has been defined within the theoretical framework of this paper as a literacy that is more than linguistic; it is a sociopolitical practice that encourages people to question the world around them (Van Sluys, Lewiston & Flint, 2006). It is fundamental that teachers and educational professionals agree that there is a place for critical literacy in the

classroom. The research indicates that although implementing critical literacy in this classroom is difficult it is worth the challenge. Teachers should feel comfortable with critical literacy themselves prior to the exercising the theory into the classroom. Using young adult literature can help ease the transition from critical literacy in theory to critical literacy in practice. Young adult literature is a powerful tool for applying critical literacy to the classroom because teachers can form questions around texts. These questions can engage students, and teach them to ask themselves “How is this book positioning me?” Another factor that comes into play with critical literacy implementation is discussion. Critical discussion should have characteristics that allow for respect and flow. Teachers need to facilitate discussion in a manner that allows students to openly discuss their opinions no matter how politically correct or incorrect the teacher considers them to be. There also needs to be room within the discussions to move from topic to topic without restraints.

Critical Literacy in the Classroom

Teachers and students need to be aware of the changing times. Van Sluys et. al (2006) wrote “Definitions of what it means to be literate are shifting. Linguists, anthropologists, educators, and social theorists no longer believe that literacy can be defined as a concrete list of skills that people merely manipulate and use” (p. 199). Critical literacy is a dynamic way of asking questions, a new way of thinking. When people are critically literate they challenge, question and interrogate the things they read, hear, and see (Beck, 2005; Wood 2006; Lewiston, Flint, Van Sluys & Henkin, 2002; Van Sluys et.al, 2006). As educators it is crucial to prepare students for this new way of thinking. Teachers must incorporate critical literacy into the curriculum.

In order for teachers to implement critical literacy successfully, they must be critically aware themselves (Lewiston et. al, 2002; Mclaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Lewiston et. al (2002) studied a group of teachers that were newcomers and novices to the practice of critical literacy, and they observed the teachers while they implemented critical literacy into their curriculum. The research showed that teachers with little experience or understanding of critical literacy only reached the first or second dimensions, which are disrupting the common place and interrogating multiple viewpoints (Lewiston et. al, 2002) (these are outlined in more detail in the theoretical framework section of this paper). The overall goal of critical literacy is taking action and promoting social justice (Lewiston et. al, 2002) Kevin, one of the teachers in the Lewiston et. al (2002) study was considered a ‘novice’ because he had a broader understanding of critical literacy. Researchers observed Kevin in his classroom and found that he was comfortable with discussing social issues with his students. The first dimension of critical literacy was evident in Kevin’s daily teaching practices. Kevin’s experiences with critical literacy were growing as he was beginning to develop an awareness of how sociopolitical systems and power relationships impacted his teaching. Having teachers raise their own awareness to societal issues and power relationships will help them see their teaching practices in a new light (Lewiston et. al, 2002). This study shows how teachers can begin to implement critical literacy in their curriculum, even if their familiarity with critical literacy is minimal. Of course, the ultimate goal of critical literacy is taking action and promoting social justice (Wood, 2006; Groenke & Maples, 2008; Lewiston et. al, 2002). However, introducing the disruption of the commonplace and inviting students to interrogate multiple perspectives can make a difference.

Teachers new and old to the practices of critical literacy should consider a number of factors, one being students and the experiences they bring with them to the classroom (Glasglow,

2001; McGregor, 2000; Beck, 2005; Groenke & Maples, 2008). Instruction should be student centered, and characterized by an emphasis on students' voices where students can construct meaning from texts and discourses (Beck, 2005). In doing so, teachers create an environment of trust and show their students that they understand that each student brings with him or her different experiences (Beck, 2005; Groenke & Maples, 2008). For example, Amanda a pre-service teacher in Groenke & Maples (2008) study was unable to set aside her own agenda to reach the fourth dimension of critical literacy. The study was based around a web pen pals project to see how kids talk critically about the book *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, and how pre-service teachers facilitated the critical talk (Groenke & Maples, 2008). Amanda's web pals often raised critical questions during their chats about the book *Monster* and how Steve's (main character from *Monster*) color had something to do with his arrest, the students were just starting to talk critically about the book when Amanda initiated a new topic, when asked why she did so, she explained that she felt like she needed to 'get everything covered' rather than elicit more critical talk and possibly reach the goal of critical literacy (Groenke & Maples, 2008). Had Amanda left the agenda at home and let the discussion be student driven she may have elicited a conversation that lead to a focus on sociopolitical issues. Agee (2000) argues "how high school teachers approach literature sends messages to their students not only about what kinds of literature are valued but also who is valued" (p. 306). In this case Amanda may have been sending the message to her web pals that she did not see race as an issue within the novel, therefore silencing their efforts to make the connections to the world around them.

In addition to realizing that all students come with different experiences, teachers need to relinquish control over the discussion their students are having whether it is in small groups or whole class (McGregor, 2000; Groenke & Maples, 2008; Connly & Smith, 2002). Connly &

Smith (2002) studied two 9th grades honors English classes to determine the qualities of good classroom discussion. In doing this Connly & Smith (2002) decided to review three different poems. One poem Bill Connly wrote, another he had taught before, and a third that he had no direct teaching experience with. The researchers then collected the journals as the students had been recording their reflections in about their discussions; they found that the students did not feel as intimidated to share their responses when Connly taught the poem he did not know. One student Jane commented that Connly was “more like ‘one of us’ that is, we were not hearing responses from someone who knew the poem like the back of his hand” (p. 22). In fact, several of Connly’s students shared the same impression. In fact, Connly’s students felt uncomfortable sharing their responses with him about the poem he wrote; they did not want to offend him. When Connly reflected about the experience he had when he read the poem neither he nor the class knew he wrote “I like how I felt comfortable not knowing it all and equally comfortable giving my opinion or interpretation” (p. 23). Relinquishing control for Connly was a positive experience. McGregor (2000) had a similar experience when she help create and encouraged a group called the ‘Social Justice & Equity Group’ at her Australian High School. This group originally started in 1994 but was dismantled. The group was then reassembled in 1998, and wanted to challenge status quo to have a more truthful experience at school, and disintegrate the picturesque image the school had painted of itself. In this group McGregor sat back deliberately because she wanted the students to be in complete control, her presence was a facilitator and supporter (McGregor, 2000). In doing so, the students managed to develop and get approval for a ‘Body Image’ week, where the students worked hard in getting speakers, workshops, and activities around promoting positive self-images (McGregor, 2000). McGregor’s (2000) students were able to reach the goal of critical literacy, the fourth dimension, taking social action. Though

each study had a different focus, the end result was the same, proving that relinquishing control in the classroom can help foster critical literacy.

Critical literacy is not an easy entity to tackle; it takes experience, perseverance and knowledge (Wood, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Lewiston et. al, 2002; Groenke & Maples, 2008). However, as seen in the examples above, it is worth the work. The next section will be focusing on the ways in which Young Adult literature can serve as a resource to help develop critically literate students.

How Can Young Adult Literature Help Students Develop Critical Literacy?

Young adult literature can be a powerful tool in assisting teachers in their quest to introduce critical literacy in the classroom (Glasglow, 2001; Maples & Groenke, 2009; Beck, 2005; Wilson & Tropp-Laman, 2007; Shariff & Jankns, 2001; Bean & Rigoni, 2001, Spector & Jones, 2007, Behrman, 2006; Carico, 2001). Young adult literature affords the opportunity for students to critically analyze and question the world and societal relationships (Glasglow, 2001; Beck, 2005; Wlison & Tropp-Laman, 2007). When using critical literacy with young adult literature teachers and students experience a shift from the person to the social. Social issue texts are a critical part in engaging students with the world around them (Glasglow, 2001; Beck, 2005; Wlison & Tropp-Laman, 2007). For example, Shariff & Janks (2001) reported that black students in a segregated high school in South Africa created a comic strip about relationships, and they produced a comic strip that was about young lovers in their rural village, and it included three stories. The first story the young couple had a baby and got married; the second story was an account of the ways in which the students who wrote the comic strip revised it. The third comic was the revised version, in which the girl insisted upon having safe sex, but then found out the boyfriend had been cheating on her and dumped him. Students in this case considered

multiple perspectives and topics (sex, marriage, relationships) and in turn these students were also able to create a powerful female role. They were able to take their story and turn it into a social issue text. These students critically examined relationships between men and women and were able to construct a comic that had questioned multiple perspectives and focused on sociopolitical issues.

In addition to young adult literature providing a structure for critical examination of the world and societal relationships (Glasglow, 2001; Beck, 2005; Wilson & Tropp-Laman, 2007) young adult literature can also serve as a gateway for children to see themselves in texts and the world around them (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Glasglow, 2001). Adolescent readers view characters in young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems that are close to their own (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Glasglow, 2001). Take Qing from the study conducted by Wilson and Tropp-Laman (2007). Qing is an immigrant to the United States who, is a bright and scholarly young man but usually did not speak out in class. His family valued their Chinese culture and sent Qing to Saturday school to maintain his first language. He and a small group of his peers were reviewing the book 'I Hate English' by Ellen Levine, in which the main character moves to America and learns English. As the students are reading this text, they discover that the main character fears she will not remember Chinese. Qing was able to identify with this character and shared with his peers by saying "That was basically me, except I relearned it" (p. 42). Qing was able to validate the idea that you could really lose your real first language and authenticated some of his group mates' remarks. Qing and his group mates were able to reach the second dimension of interrogating multiple viewpoints (Lewiston et. al, 2002), during their discussion and further their analysis of the text. There was Chinese written in the text which Qing translated for his group, Keisha another girl in the group was upset by the fact that other readers would pick

up this picture book and never know what those Chinese words meant and if they were real or not (Wilson & Tropp-Laman, 2007). Wilson and Tropp-Laman (2007) state “her statement implied that if one could not trust the illustrations in the text, perhaps they couldn’t trust the story either” (p.44). Keisha, Qing, and the rest of their group began to enter the realm of the third dimension ‘focusing on sociopolitical issues’ (Lewiston et. al, 2002). This study is similar to the previous study in that it shows students engaged in critical discussion, questioning multiple viewpoints, however, the students in the Wilson & Tropp-Laman (2007) study shows students entering into the third dimension. Through their interrogation of this text these students were able to ask questions that disrupted what they thought was true, and share experiences that lead to the interrogating of multiple view points and begin to focus on sociopolitical issues.

Young adult literature can be a vehicle to stimulate discussion and change (Glasglow, 2001; Maples & Groenke, 2009; Beck, 2005; Wilson & Tropp-Laman, 2007; Shariff & Jankns, 2001; Bean & Rigoni, 2001, Spector & Jones, 2007, Behrman, 2006; Carico, 2001). When implementing instruction, text sets can serve as a means to guide understanding (Spector & Jones, 2007, Behrman 2006). A text set is a series of multiple books varying in type (fiction, non-fiction, poetry, graphic novels, picture books, film, pictures, etc.) around a theme (coming of age, heroism, etc.) or topic (racism, gender issues, economy, history, etc.) (Behrman, 2006). Spector & Jones (2007) conducted research in the classroom of Mrs. Parker, well-known for teaching Holocaust literature in Adams Township, a primarily white, middle class suburb outside a large mid-western city. The purpose of this study was to disrupt the student’s pre-conceived notions about Anne Frank. Mrs. Parker worked closely with Karen Spector over two years. They started the unit out asking students what they knew about Anne Frank, many students painted her in a positive, hopeful light. In order to have the students get a better understanding of Anne, Mrs.

Parker chose to set up a text set that comprised of several variations of the Diary of Anne Frank, including a Definitive Edition of the story that was not the Americanized edited edition. Mrs. Parker wanted her students to know that Anne was not the hopeless optimist that Americans have painted her to be (Spector & Jones, 2007). Through the use of the text set Mrs. Parker was able to show her students that Anne struggled, was depressed, and upset by the things going on around her. Mrs. Parker's students were finally able to look at the multiple perspectives and see Anne's experiences for what they were (Spector & Jones, 2007). Mrs. Parker was able to give her students an experience that allowed them to think critically about the texts she presented.

Teachers must understand that books alone does not equate to critical literacy (Wilson & Tropp-Laman, 2007). All types of literature with discussion and facilitation by a critically literate teacher can help foster the fire with in a student to begin to question the world around them in a meaningful way (Glasglow, 2001; Maples & Groenke, 2009; Beck, 2005; Wilson & Tropp-Laman, 2007; Shariff & Jankns, 2001; Bean & Rigoni, 2001, Spector & Jones, 2007, Behrman, 2006; Carico, 2001). Rochman (1993) states "Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community' not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others" (p.19). When we reach the point where we see people for who they are and not what they do we have broken down barriers, and books can help us do this (Glasglow, 2001).

Critical Talk: Fostering Discussion Beyond the Surface

Critical literacy is inherently social (Lewiston et. al, 2002; Van Sluys et. al, 2006; Groenke & Maples, 2008; Glasglow, 2001; Connly & Smith, 2002, Moller, 2002) and allows students and teachers to discuss global issues. Dialogue is an integral part to critical literacy, it is transformational as power is shared with in talk and participants gain additional insights into

themselves (Fain, 2008). It is fundamentally important that teachers work with their students to develop a safe place for everyone to share their opinions, thoughts and questions (Fain, 2008; Groenke & Maples, 2008; Groenke, 2008). Teachers need to play a role in classroom discussions in order to foster critical thoughts, and position their students to become critically literate.

When setting up a classroom that stimulates discussion for critical literacy, teachers should be the facilitator (Clarke, 2007; Moller, 2007; Carico, 2001) rather than the authority. Teachers can support critical discussion by providing students with encouragement for their contributions (Moller, 2007). As evident in Groenke's (2008) study of a pre-service teacher named Amanda. Amanda encouraged the comments of her students during their discussion around the book 'Nothing but the Truth' by Avi. Amanda praised the students' contributions by saying "Great job guys, u r making great points" (p. 12). (Groenke, 2008). She validates their critical responses and encourages further comments. Moller's (2007) study provides an additional example about the ways in which teachers can provide varying degrees of support, by stating "at times teacher support for a student who wanted to share an idea includes efforts to validate their contributions" (p. 471). Moller (2002) provides an example of how this type of validation and support works. Karla, the teacher in the study encourages students in a small group discussion to listen to Amby's (a student in the study) idea about "Native American names and symbols by professional sports teams" (p. 471) by saying "Amby has an idea about The Heart of a Chief... she's going to tell y'all. I want you to look at Amby and listen" (p. 471). In this instance, Karla provided support to the critical discussion that occurred. She was able to validate Amby's critical thought and guide her students to listen to Amby as well. Both Karla and Amanda were able to provide their students with the confidence and support needed to foster a critical discussion.

Other way teachers can support students in critical discussion by clarifying unfamiliar events or ways of thinking (Moller, 2002). Occasionally, there is need for the facilitator of the discussion to help clarify words, phrases or events that may be hindering critical talk (Moller, 2002). For example, the students in Moller's (2002) study asked Karla (the teacher) what the term 'internment' meant in relation to the book "The Heart of a Chief". They had a critical conversation about the term and why American's would do something like that (Moller, 2002). Karla was able to assist in the students with their questions and still was able to create an environment for critical talk to occur.

Teachers can cultivate critical talk by working collaboratively with the students during discussions (Groenke & Maples, 2008; Connly & Smith, 2002). When teachers sit down in the groups with students, share their opinions, and think out loud with students about issues, it sends the message that the teacher values what is being said (Groenke & Maples, 2008). Bill Connly had this exact experience when he provided his 9th grade honors class with the opportunity to read a poem together that he had never read or taught before (Connly & Smith, 2002). Both Bill and his students had similar feelings about working collaboratively. Bill wrote "I felt comfortable not knowing it all and equally comfortable giving my opinion or interpretation" (Connly & Smith, 2002, p. 23). His students agreed because they felt less threatened by right or wrong answers. One student wrote "Whatever came to mind, I wrote. There was nothing holding me back. The teacher had not read the poem before, so he was doing the same thing as me-trying to understand it" (Connly & Smith, 2002, p. 23). This student showed us that working collaboratively can help foster critical thought and critical literacy.

When teaching about critical literacy and encouraging critical talk teachers should consider the ways in which students view discussion. Teachers should realize that over time and

with scaffolding, children can confront issues of racism, power, social injustices and discrimination (Moller, 2002). However, students need to feel comfortable in order to share their opinions freely (Groenke & Maples, 2002). When students engage in critical talk about literature it is usually not because of the teacher's carefully crafted question, but from the students own questions and curiosities that emerge through discussion (Simpson, 1996). The students in the Groenke (2008) study were able to reach the second dimension of critical literacy more commonly referred to as interrogating multiple viewpoints. The students were asked to read 'Nothing but the truth' by Avi, and participate in web chats with Amanda (a pre-service teacher). Amanda posed a variety of different questions to which the students responded and then asked each other questions. The most evident question of interrogating multiple perspectives was what was asked by Kendra. She asked Steve a boy from the study, "wat is a guys idea?" (Groenke, 2008, p. 12). Asking this question proves that Kendra is cognizant of other perspectives (Groenke, 2008). Students value discussion with each other and should be allowed the opportunity to discuss literature and topics in the classroom setting (Connly & Smith, 2002). Many students consider small groups more favorable over larger groups (Connly & Smith, 2002). One student from the Connly & Smith (2002) study stated that small groups are "a less threating forum" in which "people get to know the other group members and so are less self-conscious when speaking their mind" (p. 23).

A balance must occur within the classroom setting in order for both students and teachers to engage in true critical literacy (Moller, 2002). Students and teachers must value and trust each other in order to achieve the highest dimension of critical literacy or taking social action. Discussion can spur the type of trust and understanding with in a classroom that is needed to achieve the ultimate goal of critical literacy.

When considering the information provided about critical literacy in the classroom it is no surprise that implementing critical instruction is a challenging task. It is also clear that the rewards and benefits far outnumber the challenges to the implementation of instruction. Wood (2006) states “as educators, our goal should be to teach our young adolescents to become more than “social actors”, but rather to become “social transformers” of their world. This will require us to develop in them and understanding of the emancipatory practices associated with being critically literate in today’s society” (p. 59). Like the other authors and studies that have been reviewed, I believe that it is not only a goal to teach students to become critically literate but a requirement. Students need to be able to combat sociopolitical issues with an open mind and develop resolutions to problems.

Methods

Context

The research for this study occurred in a small urban high school in upstate New York. Their school is one of about a dozen or so high schools within the city school district. The New York State Report Card reported 401 students during the 2009-2010 school years (grades 7-12). There are about 100 special education students. 305 students, or 75% are eligible for Free Lunch, and 34 students or 8% are eligible for Reduced-Price Lunch. There is an estimated 31-40% of students’ families are receiving public assistance. The ethnic make-up of the school is 76% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 10% white. Kanye, Daw & Sammiee are part of the 8th grade class, which is composed of 82 students. Kanye, Daw & Sammie’s classroom has 27 students. Of the 27 students 49% (13 students) are students with disabilities, and 51% (14 students) are students that receive no services for special needs. The class is 65% African America, 42% Hispanic and 3% white. The majority of the students receive free or reduced

lunch. The class has clearly defined rituals, routines, and structure but there are students with challenging behavior. These behaviors occasionally interfere with instruction.

Participants

Kanye is a 13 year old African American male. He has a quiet disposition; he is well liked by his peers and teachers. Kanye works hard in all of his classes but really has been beginning to like math and gym. Kanye also indicated that he enjoys reading both at home and in school. Although Kanye can be quiet in large group discussions, he will answer when called on and participates actively in small groups. Kanye reads above 8th grade level as indicated on the Scholastic Reading Inventory he takes three times per year. Based on the Scholastic Reading Inventory Kanye was chosen to participate in a literature circle group that read the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Kanye's grades reflect his hard work; he has been on honor roll all year. Kanye receives free lunch. His family is extremely supportive of his education.

Daw is a 14 year old African American female. She is a very positive student that enjoys reading a variety of different books. She really enjoys reading Ellen Hopkins novels and scary horror stories. Daw actively participates in small and large group discussions. She also enjoys math by especially Pythagorean Theorem, and the hypotenuse. Daw, like Kanye scored well on the Scholastic Reading Inventory and was selected to participate in the literature circle that read the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Daw's grades are very good. Like Kanye, Daw has been on honor roll all year. Daw receives free lunches and has a supportive home environment.

Sammiee is a 14 year old Hispanic female. She is a confident student that enjoys reading both in class and at home. Sammiee reads a variety of different novels but admitted that she really enjoys love stories and books that relate to teens. Her favorite book is "Romiette and Julio" by Sharon Draper. Sammiee also enjoys when teachers give her projects to do on the

computer. Like Daw and Kanye, Sammiee scored above grade level on the Scholastic Reading Inventory and was selected to participate in the literature circle that read the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Sammiee has also been on honor roll all year. She receives reduced priced lunches. Sammiee's home environment is extremely supportive of her education.

Researcher Stance

As the researcher I will work with Kanye, Daw and Sammie in a small focus group where we critically discuss the Holocaust. I am currently enrolled in the M.S. in Literacy at St. John Fisher College. Currently, I am a special education teacher at the high school Kanye, Daw, and Sammiee attend. In this study I was a participant observer, in addition to observing the activities, people and physical aspect of the situation, I engaged in the activities (Mills, 2007). Participating in the study affects the discussion because I am able to sway it by asking questions and positioning students to think and respond the way I want them too.

Data Collection

During this study, I used several data collection methods in order to discover the answer to my research question. The first method of data collection I did was old journal entries from the school year. I thought that my co-teacher and I had prompted students to write critically about the Holocaust and wanted to review the depth of their responses in terms of the four dimensions of critical literacy. I then gathered the students in small groups on two separate occasions in order to discuss the holocaust. I prompted the students with a question and allowed them to take the conversation where ever they saw fit. I recorded the chat sessions and transcribed them. The recordings allowed me to analyze the discussion and my role as a facilitator. I interjected with a few guiding questions when needed. I used a questionnaire with a photo and writing prompts as the final piece to the puzzle. The questionnaire and photo allowed me to see if their opinions had

changed from their previous journal entries. The photo was an image I obtained off of google.com, it was the image of children in striped jumpsuits behind a barbed wire fence (See Appendix A). I asked the students questions about the photo and what it must have been like to be in a concentration camp. The combination of these things allowed me to get a wide variety of information from and about the students' thoughts.

Quality and Credibility of Research

As an action researcher it is important to maintain quality and credibility with in your study. Mills (2007) defines credibility as “the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (p. 104). To help ensure the credibility of the study I applied several strategies one was prolonged participation at the study site (Guba, 1981). Since I was the students’ teacher at the school, my students felt comfortable discussing the Holocaust with me. The prior relationship I had with the students’ allowed for minimal distortion of their opinions (Guba, 1981). In addition to prolonged participation, I practiced triangulation (Guba, 1981). Using several types of data allows me to have an accurate picture of how my students think and discuss critically.

I also maintained transferability by collecting detailed descriptive data (Guba, 1981). Transferability occurs when action researchers do not over generalize their findings, as teacher researchers we realize that the implications can only be made on a case by case basis (Mills, 2007). Collecting data that is detailed and descriptive allows me to look at the reliability of what my students said during the discussions; there should be consistency with in the different types of data (Guba, 1981). In addition to transferability, I acquired dependable data which refers to how constant the data is (Mills, 2007). I did this by overlapping methods, which is similar to triangulation. I used several different methods to obtain data (Guba, 1981). Finally, I will

practice conformability which Mills (2007) defines as “the neutrality or objectivity of the data” (p. 105). Conformability occurs when I used triangulation and reflective journal writing.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Right of the Participants

I discussed with Kanye, Daw and Sammiee the details of the study and asked them if they were interested. They consented verbally, so I sent home a parental consent form to obtain parental permission prior to the study. In order to further protect my students I had them fill out an informed assent form. Anonymity occurred by given the student their chosen pseudonym.

Data Analysis

The various forms of data described above were collected over the span of two weeks. I collected journal entries. These journal entries provided me with insight into their knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. In addition, I recorded our discussions. The recordings allowed me to review and reflect upon the things we said to each other, questions that were posed and find out if the students were able to critically discuss the Holocaust. I also had the students review an image of children behind a barbed wire fence and fill out a questionnaire to gain their opinions about the Holocaust.

After my initial run through of analysis I thought I had identified over 20 instances of critical literacy, however after I used the following chart that I adapted from Van Sluys et. Al (2006) the number was drastically reduced. See table 1 below:

Table 1

Dimension: Questions to ask while analyzing	Page #, Date of Artifact	Analysis
Disrupting the common place: <i>-Do participants question “everyday” ways of seeing?</i> <i>-Do participants use language and other sign systems to</i>		

<p><i>interrogate “how it is”?</i></p> <p><i>-Does activity question textual intentions or consumer positioning by exploring underlying messages and or histories that inform constructed meanings?</i></p>		
<p>Interrogating multiple viewpoints:</p> <p><i>-Do participants consider alternative ways of seeing, telling, or constructing a given event or issue?</i></p> <p><i>-Does activity involve considering the marginalized voice?</i></p> <p><i>-Do participants engage in activity that focuses on difference?</i></p>		
<p>Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues:</p> <p><i>- Do participants:</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>-challenge power relationships</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>- Go beyond personal and attempt to understand the sociopolitical systems in which we belong?</i></p>		
<p>Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice:</p> <p><i>- Are participants crossing borders and creating new borderlands that welcome and build on rich cultural resources?</i></p>		

Adapted from: Van Sluy, K., Lewison, M., & Flint, A.S. (2006). Researching Critical Literacy: A Critical Study of Analysis of Classroom Discourse. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 38(2), 197-233.

I began to again analyze the data using this chart which dramatically reduced the instances of critical literacy. I looked at phrases or blocks of conversations and asked the questions you see in

the boxes above. When I examined the data I began to see true instances of critical literacy, I asked myself; are these students questioning “everyday” ways of seeing? Asking these questions helped me understand whether I should code the conversation as disrupting the common place or reader response. Reader response was the most common theme to emerge in the data analysis. Students responded thoughtfully but on most occasions it could not be coded for critical literacy. After determining that students on several occasions did not reach any of the dimensions of critical literacy it led me to the decision to analyze my questions for their effectiveness in encouraging critical talk. I also began to examine the occurrences where critical literacy could have occurred but did not due to a missed opportunity.

Findings and Discussion

Initially, while analyzing, I noticed a lot of comprehension related discussion which was the first theme to surface. The data will show students seemed to have a lot of knowledge about the Holocaust. They wanted to share facts and make text to text connections. These types of discussions are good when you want to know if your students have learned the content but I was looking to probe deeper into their thoughts and understandings about the Holocaust. In addition to reader response, I also began to take notice that my questions in most cases promoted reader response rather than in sighting the critical responses I had hoped for. I analyzed my questions to determine the capacity for critical discussion and used it as a reflective tool which is an additional theme. Most occasions as it turns out I was not asking the most insightful questions. With that said, the student did still manage to engage in some forms of critical literacy which is the final theme. With another theme of critical talk, I will show that my students reached each of the various levels of critical literacy with, or without my help.

Instances of Critical Literacy

While initially analyzing the data I had collected during this action research project, I thought that these students were going to be able to be critically aware without much prompting from me. They were smart and knew a lot about the Holocaust, and they were ready to share it. In my opinion they were able to reach every dimension of critical literacy, with disrupting the commonplace as the most prominent. I will break it down by category to demonstrate the students' capacity for critical literacy, and how it was coded as such. After analyzing all the different types of data the results are as follows:

Instances of Critical literacy

Dimensions of Critical Literacy					
		Disrupting the Commonplace	Interrogating multiple viewpoints	Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues	Taking Action & Promoting Social Justice
Artifacts	Journals	2	0	0	0
	Photo	0	0	0	0
	Questionnaire	0	0	0	0
	Discussion #1	3	2	2	1
	Discussion #2	2	2	2	0

Disrupting the Commonplace

When I coded disrupting the common place, I looked for the students to show the ability to understand that a topic can have more than one side, or that what they think is not always correct. One example of disrupting the common place was the following:

Table 2.0:

Teacher: What do you think about the people that don't believe it happened?

Daw: Wait. People don't believe what?

Teacher: There are people that don't believe the Holocaust happened.

Kanye: They are probably not properly –

Daw: (Cuts off Kanye) Trained. Taught right

Teacher: You don't think they received enough education about it?

Daw: Yeah

Teacher: What about people back then? People where like NO- it didn't happen, we talked about the Terrible Things.

Kanye: They probably denied it

This conversation shows how well Daw understood the Holocaust and how people denying its existence clashes with her belief when she asked for clarification of the question. She stated “Wait. People don't believe what” (Discussion # 1, June 21, 2011) The tone and manner in which she said it shows that she does not believe people would believe anything other than the occurrence of the Holocaust. Daw's comment led into discussion around the news which I analyzed under focusing on sociopolitical issues.

Another example of disrupting the common place was a response in Sammiee's journal where she wrote:

Table 2.1:

It is important not to judge people who are different. It is because when you are different from a group of people it will get back at you. Sometimes you feel good when you don't judge people. If you were to get judged you would get upset. Imagine how they feel? They (Jewish people from the Holocaust) get judged all the time.

Here Sammiee demonstrated the ability to interrogate what being judged is like. She stated

“Imagine how they feel? They get judged all the time” (Journal Entry; June 17, 2011). Sammiee

reflected on the way being judged affects Jews. She began to question the everyday way of seeing things.

Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

The students were able to discuss other perspectives of the Holocaust. Sammiee, Daw and Kanye all demonstrated the ability to consider an alternate viewpoint. Daw and Kanye are in the midst of a conversation about starting a rebellion and it almost seems to dawn on Kanye that the prisoners of the Holocaust are hungry and weak. See the conversation below.

Table 2.2

K: How do you get uh the guns then?

D: You kill one of them and you get a gun, then you kill another one and get their gun, that's two guns. So you could like have two people easily kill them. If you get a third gun- its over!

K: But how would you kill a guy with a gun?

D: Sneak

K: Well if you are really hungry and starving

D: I don't know what they're supposed to do. If you really hungry and starving... That's a really weird question. If you're hungry and starving, that don't even sound like a question.

Daw began to get into her strategy for rebellion and Kanye asked her how she planned on killing a man with a gun. He refused her answer of sneaking it, and actually stumped her when he said that she needed to consider that these prisoners are starving and weak. Kanye was speaking about the marginalized voice, that of the weak, tired, hungry prisoners.

Focusing on Sociopolitical Actions

The following exchange is the carryover from the conversation I coded as disrupting the common place. Daw's ideas about how people receive their information have been challenged and we begin to discuss the news. See the following exchange:

Table 1.3

Teacher: What do you think about the people that don't believe it happened?

Daw: Wait. People don't believe what?

Teacher: There are people that don't believe the Holocaust happened.

Kanye: They are probably not properly –

Daw: (Cuts off Kanye) Trained. Taught right

Teacher: You don't think they received enough education about it?

Daw: Yeah

Teacher: What about people back then? People where like NO- it didn't happen, we talked about the Terrible Things.

Kanye: They probably denied it

Daw: maybe it was kept from them. So they never believed it. They may have never got books about it; it wasn't on the news like (In a reporter voice) "in Germany this was happening to all these people".

Teacher: So you're saying the news could play a part?

Daw: Yeah, there was no evidence for them to believe it. That's how I think anyway

Teacher: Ok, you think that's how it was before?

Daw: Yeah

Teacher: Do you remember talking about German propaganda? How they tried to make people believe one thing when it wasn't really true?

Kanye: Also, they may not like Jews and stuff. Or they never had like a Jewish friend or something like that. Everybody didn't really feel like thinking of them, or they really didn't

Daw began to question how people denying the existence of the Holocaust could be possible; she stated "maybe it was kept from them. So they never believed it. They may have never got books about it; it wasn't on the news like (In a reporter voice) "in Germany this was happening to all these people" (Discussion #1, June 21, 2011). I coded this section of Daw's opinion as focusing on sociopolitical issues. She began to question the news and the way they reported it. Showing her understanding that people believe what they see she stated "there was no evidence for them

to believe it. That's how I think anyway" (Discussion #1, June 21, 2011). These exchanges show their capacity for questioning on a deeper level. Daw is going beyond the context of the Holocaust to question the news.

The same type of conversation occurred between Sammie and Kanye in the second discussion, Kanye begins to cite the differences between men and women. See the following conversation:

Table 2.4

Kanye: What if they treated the girls differently?

Teacher: What *if* they treated the girls differently?

Kanye: Because they did separate them.

Teacher: They did, how might they have treated the girls differently

Kanye: They probably would've let them lay down more, I guess. Or let them have more food, I'm not sure. They did act kinda rude, so I'm pretty sure they did something bad.

Teacher: They did bad things to them?

Kanye: Make em work and run around

Sammiee: yep

Kanye asked the question "What if they treated the girls differently" (Discussion # 2, June 22, 2011)? I asked him how and he elaborated by saying they would've let the women lay down more or have more food. When Kanye said he thought women would get to eat and rest more it showed that he saw women in a light that was weak and incapable of handling abysmal situations. Rather than oppose his view point Sammiee agreed with him. In previous lines of the discussion, she stated her belief that women are the weaker sex. I also coded this interaction as focusing on sociopolitical issues because gender is such a hotly debated topic.

Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice

In the final dimension of critical literacy, taking action and promoting social justice, it could be argued as to whether or not these students achieved this goal of critical literacy but in my analysis they did. The following discussion was about a rebellion that Daw would have tried to arrange if they were in the Holocaust:

Table 2.5

Daw: No because maybe if you killed one you could get a gun, and then maybe if someone else killed one they could get a gun

Kanye: What if five people come after you

Daw: But then

Kanye: And then the whole fleet starts knowing that

Daw: You could try to kill them first, like surround them of something do like sneak attacks if someone tried to shoot you, you could jump out the air and jump on top of them and then they get shot, then you pick up the persons gun

Kanye: Like a little

Teacher: Like a battle

Kanye: Wouldn't you think that most of the Germans would have guns before it actually happened

Daw: No because they are spread apart in there, some are over there

Kanye: How do you get uh the guns then?

Daw: You kill one of them and you get a gun, then you kill another one and get their gun, that's two guns. So you could like have two people easily kill them. If you get a third gun- its over!

Here Daw believed that she could have arranged a rebellion among the prisoners. I coded this as taking action and promoting social justice because it was clear Daw was not going to give up. She wanted people to be saved and to help others. I realized that no real action occurred however, I believe that she laid out a plan to take action. Kanye clearly was skeptical as to

whether or not Daw’s plan would play out but she was so insistent upon an upheaval she eventually convinced Kanye that her method was correct and they should try to plan an escape.

Reader Response & Teacher Questioning

Even though there were 14 instances of critical talk, there were several instances where critical talk did not occur. The reason critical talk did not occur was a direct result of reader response questions and answers. I am presenting the themes together. They are interrelated and play off one another. Initially, when I was beginning my action research I felt extremely apprehensive, I stated in one of my reflections “I was really nervous because I didn’t know how to approach the situation (study)” (Discussion 1 Reflection, June 21, 2011) and my experience with critical literacy instruction is limited. This is evident when you consider the chart below:

Table 3.0

	Discussion 1	Discussion 2
Teacher Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alright, can you guys tell me what you remember about the book <i>Night</i>? 2. Let me ask you a question, do you remember when Moshe came in and tried to warn the Jews? In the beginning of the story? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. So... in the book <i>Night</i> Eli has a little sister, right? How do you think she may have felt? 2. Yeah, I guess you’re right, it doesn’t say exactly that they die, just; can you imagine that her experience was similar to his?

When you look at the four questions, the students have no choice but to respond with restating and re-telling of the novel *Night*, which is exactly what occurred. See the table below:

Table 3.1

Teacher: Alright, can you guys tell me what you remember about the book <i>Night</i> ?
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Kanye: I remember that it is about this kid that was growing up in the Holocaust, and surviving the Holocaust with his dad and after a while the Americans stopped it. I think the Russians too stopped it. Stopped the people from dying and saved the people that survived and brought them to a shelter.

Daw: And in the book *Night* everyone died. Except Elie, how do you say? Elie?

Both students conveyed what they remembered which is what I asked them. Even in my reflection from this discussion, it did not occur to me that this was reader response. I wrote, “They responded well and we began discussing the Holocaust and specifically the book *Night*” (Discussion 1 Reflection, June 21, 2011). It is clear that I lack experience with critical literacy. I found comfort in the research I had done because previously because several researchers believe that critical literacy is not easy to implement, and it takes experience, perseverance and knowledge (Wood, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Lewiston et. al, 2002; Groenke & Maples, 2008). Given my lack of experience the students in the study managed to talk critically without my help. On one or two occasions I asked them to elaborate by asking why or could they explain further, but overall, I did not assist in their instances of critical literacy.

Reflective Tool

Upon analysis of the data, I wanted to look at occasions where I could have led my student s to more critical thought. I am looked critically at my own role in this and reflecting upon my actions as the facilitator in order to inform my teaching practices further. I found on several occasions I could have opened up the discussion to several sociopolitical issues and dropped the ball. Consider the following:

Table 4.0

Teacher: She probably did cry, do you think her experience was the same as Eli’s?

Sammiee: No, cause, like she was lost

Kanye: Well actually she was with her mother

Sammiee: I mean like she didn't know what was going on, she was young. How old was she?

Kanye: She was 5

Teacher: She was younger, but I don't know exactly how old she was

Sammiee: She probably didn't know what was going on, why they were treating her that way. Why they were treating her and her family that way. Here and her family go split up it was her and her mom and her brother and her dad.

Sammiee is clearly stating that she sees the young girl at a disadvantage because of her age.

After reflecting on the interaction, I wish I had asked Sammiee why she thought she was too young to understand what was occurring and why. I would have asked her how she came to this conclusion and where she thought she developed these opinions. Another occasion where critical literacy could have taken place was around a conversation that involved Daw, Kanye and I. We were discussing a character from the book *Night*, named Moshe and asking why people in town did not listen to him when he warned them of the Nazi's. See the following discussion:

Table 4.1

T: All right, when Moshe came did the people in that town, how did they feel? Did they believe him?

K: Nah, they probably just went around with their own business probably.

T: Why?

K: Because he is homeless and he might not know that much

T: Do you think they didn't believe him because he was homeless?

K: No... Yeah, that's probably the reason.

D: I think so cause you be seeing a whole bunch of crazy people when their homeless.

T: Do you think Eli and his family wished they would've listened to him?

D: Yeah

In the discussion above I let the conversation drop. Kanye and Daw showed their perceptions about homeless people. Asking questions about why they perceived homeless people in this

manner could have lent itself well to critical discussion. Daw's comment "I think so cause you be seeing a whole bunch of crazy people when their homeless" (Discussion #1, June 21, 2011) lends itself to her describing her own personal experiences. We could have picked up on personal experience and began to talk critically about why people are homeless and what we could do about it thus potentially achieving the goal of critical literacy which is taking action and promoting social justice.

Using the data as a source of reflection is important. Groenke (2008) and her study of Amanda, a pre-service teacher had similar results to me. Like me, she had several discussions that could have turned into real critical talk but led the conversation into a different direction. However, unlike Amanda, I did not have an agenda that I needed to meet. I believe my inexperience is to blame for the lack of critical conversation. None the less, my students were still able to achieve several instances of critical talk.

After reviewing and analyzing all the data, I observed parallels between my research and the research I had reviewed before. Lewison et. Al (2002) confirms that critical literacy takes time by stating that "newcomers were beginning to initiate critical conversation around books and to encourage children to interrogate everyday beliefs and practices" (p. 391). Beck (2005) also explains that implementing critical literacy is not with risk, a risk that I took, and have now learned from. The analysis of the themes that emerged have given me access to a better understanding of critical literacy in the classroom as well as my own abilities to implement it. I have uncovered some of my own difficulties and can see where I need to improve. However, the data shows that urban 8th grade students can in fact discuss the Holocaust critically, even if their teacher lacks the skills to facilitate the critical discussion.

Implications and Conclusions

The analysis of data suggests that these urban 8th grade students were in fact able to talk critically about the Holocaust. I was given insight into the ways in which they related to the novel *Night*. They were able to respond thoughtfully to questions that I posed as well as initiate their own critical comments. Most of the discussion, journal entries and questionnaire responses hovered around reader response. They responded to my questions that asked them to restate, recall and summarize events from the story perfectly. However I wanted to lead the conversation into the realm of critical literacy. I was unable to do so. Fortunately enough the students in the study were able to have conversations that reached every level of critical literacy. They were able lead themselves into critical dialogue.

In addition to observing critical talk, I also saw how important the role of the teacher is to small group discussion. Teachers need to guide students to critical thought while maintaining the integrity of the students' ideas. There should be a balance between the questioning that occurs and the discussion that follows. I learned that I need to think about the questions that I ask and the ways I ask them, as I set myself up on several occasions to limit the amount of critical talk that occurred. I would in the future like to remind myself to pose questions that interrogate the students' positions by asking: Where this knowledge came from? And who says these ideals are correct? In the back of my mind, will be questions of power, position, and marginalization.

I was initially looking to gain knowledge of the ways in which students from an urban school district spoke critically about the Holocaust, I was able to achieve this goal and more. I found other implications to inform my teaching practices as well. I learned ways to implement critical literacy, I saw how a good small group discussion should be and most importantly I was able to reflect and again analyze my own teaching practices. Critical literacy is an important

factor in any education setting. Analyzing and questioning global issues is fundamental for students who plan on going out into the world as productive citizens. This study has informed my teaching on several levels, I have been able to reflect upon my role as the discussion facilitator and experience critical talk first hand.

If I was to design and implement a study like this again I would like to have done several things differently. I would have planned it out to embed the critical talk into the curriculum, observing both whole class and small group discussion. I would have liked to investigate group dynamics and how students build off of each other's ideas as well as break them down. In addition to these changes I would also be interested in the ways in which other teachers use critical literacy. In order to complete any of these things I would need more time.

After reflecting fully on the study I see several limitations, one being my preparedness. Now that I am on the outside looking in, I can see how I fell short. I should have designed questionnaires that asked the students to reflect on the discussions. In hindsight, I would have liked to ask them about their positions and why they felt the way they did about various topics. I would have like to have more time with them. I was completing this study during finals at their school and was fortunate enough to spend as much time with them as I did. I would have also liked my sample size to be a little bit bigger. While three students participated in the study each discussion session only had two students and me. If I had been more confident from the jump I might have been able to design a study that gave me even more results.

Though the study has several short comings and has seemed to have left me with more questions than answers, I still wonder how teachers can facilitate discussion that lends itself to critical discussion. I would like to research and implement a yearlong study where one class is

given a curriculum rich in critical literacy while the other is given the usual curriculum and see who fairs better on state exams. I believe the data collected is a valuable tool that will inform my teaching practices. As a teacher, it is my duty to consciously make an effort to embed critical literacy into my classroom whether the curriculum calls for it or not. As teachers we must “understand that the teaching of literacy is vital for students to become productive citizens; yet, we can do more than just simply teach literacy. We must step out of the box and adopt a literacy program that teaches our students to read, write, listen, view, and speak in order to recognize and confront inequities in their lives” (Wood, 2006, p. 55). Students need to become active participants in society. They need be ready to challenge the injustices that are prevalent. These students must come together with adults and affect change.

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Appendix A

