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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A FIFTH GRADE CLASS TAKES AN INQUIRY STANCE  
INTO THEIR OWN WELLNESS THROUGH A CRITICAL LITERACY LENS?

by  
Casey Shalhoub

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Science in Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
June 27, 2006

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor

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## ABSTRACT

Casey Shalhoub

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A FIFTH GRADE CLASS TAKES AN INQUIRY STANCE  
INTO THEIR OWN WELLNESS THROUGH A CRITICAL LITERACY LENS?

2005/06

Dr. Susan Browne

Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study is to teach wellness to students in a fifth grade class using inquiry and critical literacy books. I taught lessons that incorporate the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Health to find out how this knowledge affected the students lives. I worked with twenty-four students in a fifth grade class for a sixteen week period during my student teaching. I used a student questionnaire to gather information and also analyzed the student participation during lessons and responses to what was taught. I found that through the teaching of wellness through inquiry and critical literacy books, my class developed into a learning community in which they worked together, enjoyed books, treated each other with respect, and learned how to be their best selves by making good decisions.

## Acknowledgements

I would never have been able to successfully complete my undergraduate and graduate career without the love and support of my family and friends. It is because of all of you that I am the person I am today.

A special thanks to my mom and dad who have always been there for me. Thank you for helping me grow into a successful adult. To my three brothers, Joey, Matt, and Louie-I hope that you will all find happiness and love in your lives. To all of my grandparents who have been a wonderful source of support and love. To my entire family for always giving me a great reason to come home from school. To my boyfriend, Brian, who is always by my side and is a reminder of what is great in the world. To my best friends- Lauren, Heather, Linda, Amina - It is because of all of you that college was such a blast. Thanks to each and every one of you for being you.

Thank you to all of my college professors, especially Dr. Browne and Dr. Fitch, for passing on to me your knowledge of the teaching profession. A special thanks to my fifth grade students with whom I completed my research. I hope that it had a positive effect on your lives.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### Statement of the research problem and a statement of the purpose

The purpose of this study is to implement New Jersey Core Curriculum Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Standards through the use of critical literacy and inquiry.

Many students are not getting the proper health education in their elementary school classrooms. The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards addresses the importance of a Wellness education in the Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Standards. However, many teachers do not find time for it in their schedules. With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, teachers feel pressured to improve students math and reading skills. Since so much emphasis is placed on these subjects, teachers often tend not to spend time on topics that the students will not be tested on. Thereby, the teaching of wellness unfortunately falls to the wayside. The NJCCCS mandate the teaching of a range of wellness issues and educators need to teach in a way that the students will enjoy learning and take what they learned with them for the rest of their lives. Teaching students about their own wellness is important because “teaching is about reaching that deeper part of students and helping them become their biggest and best selves” (O’Sullivan, 2005)

This study focuses on two ways to teach what is mandated in the Wellness content standards. The first aspect of this teaching strategy is using literature that promotes critical literacy. Peterson and Eeds believe that it is the goal of the teacher “to expand the student’s knowledge of the world through literature” (1990). The study also focuses on students taking an inquiry stance into their learning. According to the Galileo Network, when students take an inquiry stance they should “respect and cultivate the dispositions of all children, they must have a drive to understand the world, and bring with them imagination and curiosity” (2000). By doing so, students will learn first hand the importance of studying their own wellness because they will be actively involved in their learning.

In this study, students will take an inquiry stance into their own learning of wellness. According to Reader Response Theory, by using critical literacy books, students will have the opportunity to make connections between their own life and the lives of the characters in the story. Students will take an inquiry stance into their own learning which will promote an in depth and active learning environment. Students will have the opportunity to think deeply about what it means to be healthy. Students will begin to see themselves as responsible for their own wellness.

#### Relevance and Importance of Study

The study of ones own wellness is the most valuable study that a human being is capable of doing. Compared to one’s own wellbeing, little else is as important in the world. It is extremely important for every person to look deep down into their soul to find out who they are in terms of their physical, mental, emotional, and social health. If a person cannot fully realize who they are, they cannot truly live fulfilled life.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has become a fast paced world full of technology. Technology has brought many wondrous things to our society but with it many vital things have been lost in the exchange. Children watch television or play game boy instead of playing outside with their friends and family. According to the Media Awareness Network “Television can affect learning and school performance if it cuts into the time kids need for activities crucial to healthy mental and physical development” (2005). For a growing number of families, dinners are spent at the drive-thru of a fast food restaurant instead of at the dinner table with a well-balanced meal. With the current lifestyle, children do not exercise everyday, eat healthy meals, or develop relationships because technology and lifestyle has given them more fashionable alternatives.

The school environment should provide a place of learning to teach children the importance of developing a strong character, of eating fruits of vegetable, and of taking care of themselves and other people. The teacher should act as a guide and give students the foundation and the tools that will allow them to delve into a comprehensive analysis of a healthy and safe life. The children of today need to learn these things or their children will grow up just like them, and the cycle will continue.

By reading critical literacy books, the students will develop a love for reading. They will realize that books can either be a mirror of their own life, or a new place for them to explore. Either way, students will learn to enjoy reading and will find comfort in the books. When the students take an inquiry stance into their learning they will discover that learning can be fun. They will work cooperatively to find meaning in their learning. These teaching strategies will help the students realize their own potential in the classroom and in their own lives (Peterson and Eeds, 1994).



## Operational Definitions

1. New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standard Comprehensive Health and Physical Education: Describes what students should know and be able to do upon completion of a thirteen-year public education. The Comprehensive Health and Physical Education standard includes five main objectives; wellness, integrated skills, drugs and medicine, human relationships and sexuality, motor skill development, and fitness.
2. Wellness: The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standard Comprehensive Health and Physical Education combines Health education and Physical education to reinforce and support each other. This idea of the two being intertwined is called “Wellness”.
3. Critical Literacy: Texts that help students to develop a collective vision of what it might be like to live in the best of all societies and how such a vision might be made practical.
4. Reader Response Theory: Students read literature with the goal of constructing meaning of the text. Focuses on reader/text relationship.
5. Literature Discussion Groups: A group of students who have read the same text meet together to talk about the text, its relevance and what it meant to them.
6. Inquiry Stance: Students should not simply be taught and given the answers, but should be given the opportunity to be actively involved in the learning process by questioning and investigating.

### How the Proposed Research Will Be Carried Out

Each lesson will deal with one critical issue in Wellness that will be reinforced throughout the week, as well as throughout the rest of the year. Lessons will start off with topics that are easier and more comfortable to discuss in class and gradually move towards topics that are not usually talked about in school. Initial topics that will foster a comfortable learning community include nutrition, decision-making, character development, sportsmanship, and exercise. Students will take an inquiry stance into the learning of these topics. Students will be encouraged to discuss their opinions and ask questions with the other students.

More complex topics that are relatively difficult to talk about will be taught after the foundation of wellness has been set. Since students will have gotten used to working together to learn about wellness, the environment will be a comfortable one where students should not be easily embarrassed. Students will now take an inquiry stance into topics that involve their own growth and development, social and emotional health, drugs, relationships and sexuality, and pregnancy and parenting. The books that I will use to supplement the lessons will make it more comfortable and natural for students to form and share opinions with the rest of the class.

A key to each lesson is the reading of children's literature that deals with the issue at hand. The students will take an inquiry stance into their learning, which means that they will not sit idly by, and listen to the teacher lesson, but they will actively pursue the topic at hand. They will work cooperatively in groups to come up with ideas. They will participate in hands on activities that require higher thinking skills and work to raise their own questions. Specific tasks during each lesson will have different assessment

methods that assess the skills for the individual assignment. As a whole, I will be able to judge the student's progress based on their participation in high quality contributions to classroom discussions.

#### Statement of assumptions and limitations of the proposed study

While implementing this study, I will be completing my student teaching at Edgewood Park School, in a co-taught 5<sup>th</sup> grade inclusion class. A major limitation of this study is that it will take place over a short period of time with only one class. It is possible that my cooperating teachers, Mr. Avdalas and Ms. Pastore will not think that wellness is as important as my research implies. They might not agree with my belief that wellness is truly among the most important topic to teach students and they might be very reluctant to let me spend so much time on the issues. It would be challenging to really get across to the students if I do not have the full support of my cooperating teachers.

Even if Mr. Avdalas and Ms. Pastore do appreciate my topic and see the benefits of teaching wellness in the same way that I do, a major limitation of this study will possibly be the lack of time during the school day to accomplish as much as I would like. The class schedule is most certainly already jam packed as it is. It is possible that Mr. Avdalas and Ms. Pastore are already struggling to teach every concept and complete every activity in its allotted time. It will be a challenge changing around the schedule and fitting in enough time to incorporate this study. They have had a routine for the entire first half of the year. I will be coming in halfway through and it will be hard to change the schedule around.

If it were my own classroom that I was completing this study in, I would be certain to set aside time each day for wellness, and/or incorporate the activities into other

lessons to ensure that all the material was learned. However, it is not my classroom and I will have to persuade my cooperating teacher to love my topic as much as I do and make time to incorporate it.

If the aspects of the proposed study are not fully incorporated into the curriculum and just becomes a once or twice a week activity, it will be hard to get students to become fully involved with the topics. In addition, I will only be in the classroom for sixteen weeks, which is a relatively short period of time. The effects of the lessons might not reach deep enough inside of the children if they are not being reinforced consistently.

I expect that the students in the class will be willing to openly participate in the tasks that I present to them. Fifth graders are going through a lot of physical and emotional changes and many of them might be too shy, or too caught up in the latest fads, to even pretend to be interested in what I am teaching them. I realize that it is up to me to present the information to the students in an interesting and exciting way that will make them want to participate. In order to truly have a positive outcome of this study, the students will have to accept and come to enjoy and appreciate the activities involved. The design of the study, which includes books and inquiry, fosters motivation of the students.

In order for the study to reach its fullest potential, it would be beneficial if the class already has an effective learning community in place. In order for the students to talk about the sensitive issues that must be dealt with according to the NJCCCS they need to feel comfortable with each other enough to discuss their feelings and ask questions. If there is not a strong learning community in place, it will be hard to implement one halfway through the year. However, through the nature of the study, students will take an

inquiry stance into their learning, which will foster a comfortable learning environment and ideally implement a learning community.

### Story of the Question

I am currently completing my certification in Reading at Rowan University. Therefore, I have a lot of background knowledge in the field. I have taken many valuable reading classes at Rowan, but one of the most priceless classes that I took was Children's Literature. In this class I learned about the value of using children's books in the classroom and different methods of incorporating books into lessons. I also learned first hand of the significant impact that critical literacy texts can have on a person. While reading critical literacy texts, I participated in engaging literature discussions with other students. Because of this experience, I am a true believer in the use of children's literature in the classroom. I believe that readers can connect with critical literacy books and through them learn about themselves and others.

Another extremely valuable class that I took at Rowan during my undergraduate career was Health and Wellness. In this class, I learned about the importance of teaching students about their own Health and Wellness. I learned about the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standard Comprehensive Health and Physical Education and the important role of the classroom teacher to incorporate this standard into the daily routine of the class. I was taught many fun and informative ideas for lessons to use in the classroom. It was in this class that I began to realize the potential that the elementary school teacher has in shaping the future of her student's lives. When I become a teacher, not only do I have to teach the students about math and social studies, but I also have the responsibility to teach the students about wellness. I believe that if children learn about

how important it is to be healthy and safe, they will realize their full potential and live more fulfilling lives.

Because I have always had a strong fondness of children's literature and of wellness education, I naturally began to see a connection between the two. I realized that a great way for students to relate to the information involved with wellness would be to present it to them through the use of books that deal with the issues at hand.

While trying to think of how else I could make wellness education interesting, I again looked back into all of the classes that I have taken at Rowan University. There were many classes in which I sat in my desk and took notes as the professor lectured. However, my most memorable classes are those that involved me taking an active role in my learning. When I was involved in the learning process, whether I worked by myself or with groups of my peers, I was able to use my prior knowledge to form a basis of understanding and then do my own research and questioning to figure things out. Those are the classes that I learned the most from and take away with me to this day. I can remember the lessons learned and how I can apply it to my life now. While thinking about this, I began to realize what better subject to take an inquiry stance in than wellness? Some of the major goals of wellness education are to have students take ownership of it and remember it for the rest of their lives. I believe that by having the students take an inquiry stance into the learning of wellness, they will accomplish these goals.

## Organization of the Proposal

The second chapter is the Review of The Literature and is broken up into 5 subtopics, Wellness, Children's Literature, Critical Literacy, and Inquiry Stance. The chapter consists of a concept map, which is a basic outline of the literature review, and the literature review itself. The literature review attempts to summarize the research that exists on each subtopic.

The third chapter of the thesis, Methodology, provides a complete description of the method of study that will be implemented in the classroom. It will describe the field placement, the data sources, and any other pertinent information that deals with the implementation of the study.

## Concept Map of Literature Review

### Health and Wellness

- Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno
- O'Sullivan
- New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards
- Palmer

### Children's Literature

- Cullinan
- Lehman, Freeman, & Allen
- Routman
- Peterson & Eeds
- McGowan & Guzzetti
- Gambrell, Morrow, Pennington
- Church
- Rosenblatt
- Evans

### Critical Literacy

- McGowan & Guzzetti
- Wolk
- Kretovics
- Benjamin
- Palardy

### Inquiry Stance

- Dyasi
- National Science Education Standards
- Galileo Network



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In this comprehensive review of the current state of literature regarding the thesis question, four different subtopics will be discussed. The first subtopic is Wellness, the intertwinement of Health education and Physical education. The second subtopic, Children's Literature, states the importance of using children's books in the classroom. The third subtopic is Critical Literacy. Critical Literacy texts deal with issues that are not normally discussed in the classroom and make them easier for the students to relate. The fourth and final topic is Inquiry Stance, which describes the importance of having students take an active role in their learning.

#### Wellness

No knowledge is more crucial than knowledge about health. Without it, no other life goal can be successfully achieved.

-Ernest Boyer

Most teachers enter the profession with the hopes of making a difference in the lives of their students. Young and old teachers alike have a dream that they can help their students to become better people by making them more competent and more caring (O'Sullivan, 2005). In a study completed in 2000, only ninety-seven percent of

perspective teachers said that the reason they wanted to become teacher was to “contribute to society and help others”. Eighty-six percent of these prospective teachers believed that only people with a true sense of calling should enter the teaching profession (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000). It is not often that one hears a teacher say that the reason she chose her craft was in the hopes of improving the standardized test scores at the end of the year. There is little doubt that these achievement tests are important, however according to many teachers, the true test is how the students have grown as individuals. For students to reach their fullest potential they need to learn math and science facts, however “teaching is about reaching that deeper part of students and helping them become their biggest and best selves” (O’Sullivan, 2005).

The classroom teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have eagerly taken on the role of health educator to their already full repertoire of duties. In a descriptive study of 287 teachers in 1998, ninety percent of those surveyed agreed that teachers play an important role in framing the character of students (Mathison, 1998). The framers of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS) for Comprehensive Health and Physical Education believe that children have to deal with many issues and that an important place to deal with them is in the classroom. It is vital that students learn how and why they should make good choices and choose healthy behaviors that will enhance their quality of life. Children need to “develop the knowledge and skills they need to be healthy and to achieve academically,” and the most beneficial way to do this is to teach students at school (NJCCCS). Teaching students how to live well has become a primary role of the teacher. This role has been acknowledged and enveloped by the legislators who see the need to develop children into their best selves.

For almost a century New Jersey legislators have realized that school is an appropriate place to educate children on health issues. In 1917, New Jersey adopted N.J.S.A.18A: 35 which requires all students in grades 1-12 to participate in two and one-half hours per week of instruction in health, safety, and physical education. In 1996, New Jersey took its health curriculum a step further and adopted the New Jersey Core curriculum Content Standard Comprehensive Health and Physical Education. The standards were recently updated in April of 2002. Within this standard are six standards that define what knowledge students should develop through education. These standards are Wellness, Integrated Skills, Drugs and Medicines, Human Relationships and Sexuality, motor Skill Development and Fitness. It is important to mention that the standard, Integrated Skills, focuses on decision making and goal setting, effective communication in situations that impact health and safety, character and leadership development, and health careers and services, and that all of these characteristics should be integrated into all of the five other standards which include wellness, drugs and medicine, human relationships and sexuality, motor skills development, and fitness. Each of these has its own strands that give more detail to the topic.

The legislatures implemented this standard for a reason; they know that it is vital for children to learn these healthy behaviors while they are young so that they can grow up to be productive adults. Unfortunately, since the passage of No Child Left Behind, much emphasis in classrooms goes to more traditional subjects like Math and Science. Schools are so concerned with passing standardized tests that there is little or no time to focus on such important things as character education, leadership skills, or nutrition.

Many teachers who went into the field hoping to shape his or her students lives find themselves under pressure from the school district to teach to the test. This can lead to “the pain of disconnection” in which what one had hoped to do is not what one actually does” (Palmer, 1993). It is important to bypass this flaw in the system and one way to do so is by teaching students through the use of books. Children’s literature can set the stage for student’s deeper understanding about their own wellness. After reading a book about a topic, students will feel more connected to the topic. When this occurs, students can take an inquiry stance in which they are actively involved in what they are learning because they can now relate it to the real world and themselves.

So many of the important wellness topics that are included in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards deal with issues that have not traditionally been taught in school. With the increasing awareness of the importance of health education, teachers want to- and are now required to- have discussions that deal with sensitive issues.

### Children's Literature

I've traveled the world twice over,  
Met the famous; saints and sinners,  
Poets and artists, kings and queens,  
Old stars and hopeful beginners,  
I've been where no-one's been before,  
Learned secrets from writers and cooks  
All with one library ticket  
To the wonderful world of books.

-Anonymous

Since it has become increasingly important to include Wellness in New Jersey's classrooms, it is now equally important to find ways to teach the subject matter in an effective way. By using children's literature in the classroom to teach these key wellness issues, children can gain an understanding of the value and personal relativity that the content has to their lives.

Literature-based instruction plays an enormous role in supporting students in their academic and personal growth. The literature-based perspective is that "literacy acquisition occurs in a book-rich context where there is an abundance of purposeful communicating and meaning is socially constructed" (Cullinan, 1987). It is important to include all types of books that fit into this perspective such as; picture books, big books, predictable books, folk tales, fables, myths, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction, informational books, and biographies (Lehman, Freeman, & Allen, 1994; Routman, 1988).

In their book, *Grand Conversations*, Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds compare what they call “real books” to curriculum textbooks (1990). What Peterson and Eeds call real books have also been called trade books. These are the books “that rest beside your bed, clutter the coffee table, and stand on shelves at the ready-waiting to be lifted, opened and brought to life by your reading” (Peterson and Eeds, 1990). Peterson and Eeds say that “Real books are not outfitted with drills or remedial and enrichment activities. They do not come imprisoned in boxes and kits, with directions for usage. Real books have no manuals to tell teachers all the things they must do and when to do them. The story contained in each book stands on its own. It is up to teachers and readers to work at interpreting what the author has written, and once the story is read, to decide what might be done in response” (1990).

Peterson and Eeds argue that textbooks do not bring life to the topics and that they need to be supplemented with real books that allow children to enjoy reading and use their minds to interpret the literature, not only memorize facts (1990). They believe that it is the goal of the teacher “to expand the student’s knowledge of the world through literature”. Peterson and Eeds say that students should make interpretations, discuss their thoughts and emotions, and reflect on how the main character in the story felt or why the character chose to do what he did, all without feeling as if they are doing an assignment. Part of what goes into an inquiry stance is having students get so involved in the work that they are eager to figure out what they are learning. Children’s literature lends itself well to this kind of strategy.

Real books can be incorporated into the curriculum in many ways. It can lay the foundation for a lesson, introducing the topic to the children. On the other hand, the book

can be read at the end of a unit in order to wrap it all up and reinforce what was already taught. Teachers could also introduce activities while reading the book that will directly correlate what the students are reading in the real book as compared to what they are learning out of the textbook (McGowan, Guzzetti, 1991).

In order to understand why reading literature will help students develop wellness concepts, it is important to understand why literature-based reading instruction is beneficial to the student. The foremost theory related to literature-based instruction is reader response theory, which explains how readers interpret literature (Gambrell, Morrow, Pennington, 2002). Louise Rosenblatt created Reader-Response Theory in 1938 and it remains a dominant teaching approach today. Reader-Response Theory is primarily concerned with the “reader’s relationship with the text” (Church, 1997).

Rosenblatt identified two stances readers might take while reading a text: aesthetic and efferent. Which stance the reader takes depends on his or her purpose for reading. The aesthetic stance shifts the “reader’s attention inward and centers on what is being created during the actual reading, such as personal feelings, ideas, and attitudes.” The efferent stance makes the “reader’s attention more narrow so that he or she can build up the meaning and ideas to be retained from the text”. While reading any text, the readers “shift along a continuum from the aesthetic to the efferent stance” (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1991). While reading a text that deals with wellness, students will be able to attain knowledge and insight into their own wellness by shifting along this continuum. Since wellness is a very personal and individual matter, it is important for students to see the facts and also understand the emotional aspects of each topic. Literature is the perfect

way to introduce students to and get their interest in the different aspects of any given wellness topic.

According to reader-response theory, when students read literature their goal is to construct meaning of the text. When students construct meaning to texts that deal with wellness issues, the students are building a better foundation for wellness understanding. Students can read these texts to explore the lives of others and gain insight to be thoughtful people. Because books can be so packed with real life issues and real life situations, they can prepare the students for higher-level thinking.

Literature discussion does well in a classroom that has a thriving learning community. Students must feel comfortable with one another and be able to interact freely. When students participate in a literature discussion they can bounce ideas off of one another and debate opposing opinions. Students should have open-ended discussions and feel free to share their thoughts, ideas, and uncertainty. Teachers should act as the facilitator and give ideas; however let the students do most of the thinking and questioning. After the students read, it is important for the teacher to interact with them immediately after in order to respond to any questions that the students have. When children receive immediate feedback, it can add to their literacy development (Gambrell, Morrow, Pennington, 2002).

Literature groups are an excellent way of getting students actively involved. Groups of students read the same text and then gather together to discuss the text and what they thought of it. Students lead and participate in the discussion. There have been many studies that rationalize the use of literature groups because students “can take



ownership of their learning and provide a forum that allows all students' voices to be heard" (Evans, 2002).

### Critical Literacy

"There was once a young man who, in his youth, professed his desire to become a great writer. When asked to define "great," he said, "I want to write stuff that the whole world will read, stuff that people will react to on a truly emotional level, stuff that will make them scream, cry, howl in pain and anger!"

-Anonymous

The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards extensively cover a wide range of issues that children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have to deal with. For example, Standard 2.1.D3 states that by the end of the sixth grade students should be able to compare and contrast diseases and health conditions prevalent in adolescents, including asthma, obesity, diabetes, Lyme disease, STDs, and HIV/AIDS. By the end of the sixth grade, as dictated in standard 2.4.B5 students should be able to identify sexual feelings common to young adolescents and differentiate between having sexual feelings and acting on them. Standard 2.6.A1 mandates that students be able to describe the physical, social, and emotional benefits of regular physical activity. These issues require both students and teachers to take a risk and venture outside of their comfort level as they are not something that are talked about every day. All of these mandated areas of curriculum present the teacher with a huge responsibility.

Fortunately, there are ways to incorporate these critical issues into the classroom in an effective and least intrusive way. As previously proven, the use of real books in the classroom has a positive effect on the student. An innovative way to approach this is by

using critical literacy texts, or children's books that deal with sensitive issues. As discussed in the previous section, real books provide students great insight and relatedness to what they are learning. When choosing to deal with issues related to wellness through the use of literature, it is inevitable that critical literacy texts be read.

When choosing critical literature for any subject, but especially for wellness, it is very important that the students will find the texts relevant to their own lives. The purpose of teaching wellness in schools is so that students can realize and become their best selves. According to authors McGowan and Guzzetti, "When students can correctly relate their ordinary-life experiences and prior knowledge to content concepts, their understanding of new information is facilitated" (1991). Therefore, teachers should find children's books that provide everyday concepts and ideas that students will be able to relate to and that will offer them a way to develop higher level thinking about the given topic.

According to Steven Wolk, critical literacy is "about how we see and interact with the world; it is about having, as a regular part of one's life, the skills and desire to evaluate society and the world" (2003). Critical literacy has also been defined as "providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, critical literacy can stress the need for students to develop a collective vision of what it might be like to live in the best of all societies and how such a vision might be made practical" (Kretovics, 1985). Critical literacy is vital in the arena of wellness since it deals with personal and societal issues.

It is pertinent that students completely understand the importance of wellness in order for them be able to relate it to their own life. They must be presented with the information in such a way that they see value in it and can relate to it. By using critical literacy texts, students can relate to the texts on a personal level. These types of books bring the issues to life and the information becomes real and important to the students. When it comes to wellness, if the students do not construct meaning from what they are learning, and if they are not able to relate to the information, then they will not truly be able to look into the depths of their own wellness.

When reading material is enthralling to students, their desire to read will sprout from deep down within them. Reading and discussing high quality, risk-taking literature will give students the opportunity to grow. According to cognitive psychologists, literature-based instruction can “be a catalyst for students to use higher-order thinking skills, to problem solve, and to arrive at generalizations to support or reject hypotheses” (Benjamin, 1995). Books can give students the chance to gain understanding about people from different parts of the world as well as a better understanding of different perspectives from their own. Books that deal with characters provide students with the chance to see that they are not alone in dealing with their problems (Palardy, 1997

#### Inquiry Stance

"You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions."

-Naguib Mahfouz

Curiosity is a fundamental human trait that should be used to the fullest extent in the classroom. Humans are constantly questioning things in the world around them and

the classroom should be no different. Dyasi states that when presented with a new concept, students should not simply be taught and given the answers, but should be given the opportunity to take an inquiry stance into their own learning (1996). For students to get the most out of any lesson, they need to be actively involved in the learning process. Teachers should try to create an intense curiosity in their students to learn. Students should be able to create their own learning experiences in which they not only hear the information from the teacher, but in which they live it and feel it. If students are actively involved in learning about their own wellness they are more likely going to put what they learned into practice.

Dyasi discusses The National Science Education Standards, which were developed by the National Research Council. The standards outline the basic apparatus of an inquiry approach to learning. The following excerpt is taken from the context of teaching science, however as Dyasi explains, it is relevant to all areas of inquiry, as inquiry is a tool that spans the curriculum. The standards say that “Students should have the opportunity to use scientific inquiry and develop the ability to think and act in ways associated with inquiry, including asking questions, planning and conducting investigations, using appropriate tools and techniques to gather data, thinking critically and logically about relationships between evidence and explanations, constructing and analyzing alternative explanations, and communicating scientific arguments”.

Inquiry is a teaching strategy that involves students working together to solve the problems and figure out the questions that come to the surface during an activity. Just as how students need to feel comfortable in their learning environment during literature discussion groups, they also need to feel that they are part of a learning community while

participating in inquiry. Students should feel free to express their opinions, thoughts, and fears. Teachers should design their classrooms so that is fundamentally a comfortable environment where students can work together in meaningful way. Students benefit socially when inquiry is used collaboratively in a classroom in which they work together to figure out and carry out their plans. Students can present their work to their class, which sharpens their public speaking skills. This enables groups of students can compare their findings and gain new insights from each other (Dyasi, 1996).

The Galileo Network is a charity association whose mission is “to improve student performance through the provision of engaging inquiry-based learning opportunities for students” (2005). According to the Galileo Network, when students take an inquiry stance they should “respect and cultivate the dispositions of all children, they must have a drive to understand the world, and bring with them imagination and curiosity.” When students engage in active questioning and problem solving they learn the material front and back. They understand all sides of an issue and they realize the significance of it. Through inquiry, students can figure things out for themselves. When they are completely in control of what they are learning the light bulb will go off and they will realize the magnitude of it all.

Since inquiry involves total involvement of the students, teachers might wonder how they can develop the students’ desire to take an inquiry stance. An excellent place to start is with a critical literacy text. The reading of the text will provide a foundation for the topic. If it is a well-chosen book it will spark an immediate interest among the students that will help achieve successful literature discussions among peers. Once the

students begin talking with each other about the issues they will be ready to take an inquiry stance and become fully enveloped in the topic.

The students will want to probe into the world around them. They will want to understand what they are learning, and not simply accept it as fact. Higher level thinking skills, research, questioning will become second nature to the students as they strive to grasp the concepts at hand. Much of the current state of wellness in America is socially constructed. If students take an inquiry stance into the topics included in the wellness curriculum they will want to find out why these constructs exist. They will not only learn that they should live a life of wellness, but they will learn how to live a life of wellness.

#### Conclusion

The world is round and the place, which may seem like the end, may also be the beginning.

-Ivy Baker Priest

With the adaptation of the New Jersey Core Curriculum content Standards for Comprehensive Health & Physical Education, teachers are presented with a new curriculum that's purpose is to develop and mold the wellness of the students, so that they will carry with them the tools to live a high quality life. Through the use of real books, teachers can provide students with access to literature that they can relate to. When students relate to material they are more likely to remember it, and in the case of wellness- live it. Because many of the issues in this curriculum are sensitive topics that have not traditionally been talked about in school, teachers can incorporate critical literacy texts into their lessons. These texts provide the groundwork for literature discussions among the students. These discussions lend themselves to students taking an

inquiry stance into their learning. Teachers will set the stage for students to become curious about what they are learning. The use of books will spark the students need to satisfy their curiosity and research the topics to come up with their own answers. When students are actively learning like this, they will be able to grasp wellness concepts and transfer them to their own life. Thus, by taking an inquiry stance into their own wellness through a critical literature lens, students will gain the skills to have a high quality life.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Context of the Study

This study will be conducted in Edgewood Park School, in Deptford Township, in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. It will be in an inclusion class that is composed of 14 general education students and 9 special education students. The class is co-taught by the special education teacher, Mr. Avdalas and the elementary teacher, Ms. Pastore.

Edgewood Park School is located in Deptford Township. According to the 2005 census, Deptford has a total population of 34,971 people. The percent of the population that is male is 47.7. The percent of the population that is female is 52.3. The average age of the population is 38.4. The percent of people that are married is 54.6. The total number of white people in Deptford is 82.7% of the population. 12.7% of the population is black. 0.2% of the population is American Indian. 1.9% of the population is Asian or Pacific Islander. 1.5% of the population has two or more races. 3.3% of the population is of Hispanic origin, and 1% of the population falls into the 'other' category.

The total square mile land area of Deptford is 17.5. The population per square mile of land area is 1,529.7. The number of housing units per square mile of land area is 608.6. The average number of people per household is 2.6, and the total number of households is 13,460. The average value of a home is \$214,907. The median household income is



perspective teachers said that the reason they wanted to become teacher was to “contribute to society and help others”. Eighty-six percent of these prospective teachers believed that only people with a true sense of calling should enter the teaching profession (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000). It is not often that one hears a teacher say that the reason she chose her craft was in the hopes of improving the standardized test scores at the end of the year. There is little doubt that these achievement tests are important, however according to many teachers, the true test is how the students have grown as individuals. For students to reach their fullest potential they need to learn math and science facts, however “teaching is about reaching that deeper part of students and helping them become their biggest and best selves” (O’Sullivan, 2005).

The classroom teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have eagerly taken on the role of health educator to their already full repertoire of duties. In a descriptive study of 287 teachers in 1998, ninety percent of those surveyed agreed that teachers play an important role in framing the character of students (Mathison, 1998). The framers of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS) for Comprehensive Health and Physical Education believe that children have to deal with many issues and that an important place to deal with them is in the classroom. It is vital that students learn how and why they should make good choices and choose healthy behaviors that will enhance their quality of life. Children need to “develop the knowledge and skills they need to be healthy and to achieve academically,” and the most beneficial way to do this is to teach students at school (NJCCCS). Teaching students how to live well has become a primary role of the teacher. This role has been acknowledged and enveloped by the legislators who see the need to develop children into their best selves.

to read and discuss the chapter, go over comprehension questions, and then complete the two worksheets that go along with each lesson.

In order to effectively research my thesis question, I will use a critical literacy book to supplement each lesson. I will still use the curriculum text book as well however I will incorporate hands on activities in which the students will inquire into their own learning. I will keep an ongoing journal of notes throughout the span of the study to write my reflections of each lesson. Very importantly, I will focus on student responses to critical text and inquiry. Students will reflect on how they connected the critical literacy texts that they read to their own lives. I will observe and take notes on group discussions about the book in which I will learn how the students relate personally to the topics. I will record questions that the students formulate after reading the text and then record the ways in which the students find answers to those questions. Students will produce responses to the material being taught in various ways, such as art projects, written responses, question/answer formats, and presentations. Each student will keep a response journal that they will write in during or after each lesson. Students will write about the feelings that they experienced while reading the book and during the lesson. Students will record any questions they had, how they came to the answer of the question, and what they learned throughout the process.

#### Analysis of Data

I will analyze each piece of data individually and then look at them together holistically to see how they all fit together. I will first make sure that the lesson plans incorporate the NJCCCS. I will look back in my journal to keep track of changes that should be made, and what works and doesn't work. Through careful observation of these

notes I can modify lessons for the future and also make realizations about how the students reacted to each lesson.

I will observe the students while they are working during each lesson. On the spot observations will be important while the students are taking an inquiry stance. Much will depend on what I see the students doing and what I hear from the students in terms of oral responses. I will also analyze the student's products; whether an art project or essay to make sure the students understand each objective. I will analyze the student's response journals through the use of a rubric. The rubric will check to make sure that each student understands the main goals of the lesson and has applied it to real life.

#### Assumptions and Limitations

There are a few assumptions and limitations of the study. It is safe in assuming that the students will have some prior knowledge about health and wellness. It is also an assumption that the students will be interested in the content being taught and will therefore participate in discussion. Since some of the issues that will be dealt with may be uncomfortable for the students, it is reasonable to assume that some immature behavior might emerge and therefore be dealt with effectively.

The staff at the cooperating school may not have emphasized the importance of wellness to the students, and therefore it will be necessary for me to establish its importance. The lack of time that I have in the classroom may be another concern preventing the study from reaching its full potential. A vital part of my study is the incorporation of critical literacy books into the lessons. The students might have a required number of books set by the district that they must read during the year. If this is so, it will be difficult to find time to include the texts for this study into the workload.

## Chapter 4

### Data Analysis and Findings

While developing my research question I found out that I would be doing my student teaching in a fifth grade classroom which is how I arrived at the question “What happens when a fifth grade class takes an inquiry stance into their own wellness through a critical literacy lens”. My student teaching placement turned out to be a perfect setting to implement my research. The district’s curriculum already called for the teaching of health and my cooperating teachers incorporated it into their routine three times a week. This immediately eliminated my fears that my cooperating teachers would not see an importance of teaching health to the students.

My cooperating teachers were very cooperative in letting me take over health instruction and implement lessons in whatever way I chose. The school was already using a health curriculum for health instruction and it included all the aspects of wellness, such as emotional and physical health and safety. This allowed me to follow the curriculum and supplement the material with trade books and activities. To introduce my students to the research work I would be doing in the classroom, I explained to them what a thesis was and that all I was going to do was teach them health and then write about it. I had the

students get permission slips signed by their parent/guardian that allowed them to participate in my research.

As an initial activity I had the students fill out a questionnaire that assessed how much they liked learning health in school and how relevant they thought it was to their real lives.

There were a total of 14 questions on the survey. The first question asked the students to number the classrooms subjects in the order that they liked learning them in school. School subjects were math, social studies, health, science, and reading. The favorite subject was labeled one and the least favorite was labeled five. I found it interesting that only one student out of twenty-four chose health as their favorite subject. I thought that more students would have enjoyed it more because it is about how to take care of themselves and is less academic pressure and tedious work than other subjects. Six students put health as their second favorite subject, eleven students put health as their third favorite subject, two students put health as their fourth choice, and four students put health as number five for their least favorite subject. I thought this question was very important in determining how open my student's minds were to learning about health. I think the foremost thing needed when teaching students is to have them like what they are learning and/or what they are doing. My goal ahead of me was to help the students enjoy and be interested in learning about their own wellness.

The remainder of the thirteen questions followed the same format. Students read a statement and then had to decide if they agreed with it a lot, a little bit, not that much, or not at all. The questions were split up into three categories; health, trade books, inquiry. The results were interesting to me because it found that the majority of the students felt

the same way about learning health. They liked learning it in school a little bit, even though they thought that it helped them in real life a lot. This finding shows me that the students are smart and know that health is important, but that as teachers we are not doing enough to make the health curriculum attractive to students.

About two thirds of the students reported that they felt comfortable participating and asking questions during health class. This number seemed high to me and while I was teaching I noticed that many of the students who said they were comfortable did not appear that way in class until the rest of the students started to participate first. The majority of the students reported that they did not think they could learn a great deal from trade books and that they did not enjoy reading them. I attribute this initial response partially to the typical fifth grade pubescent attitude and looked forward to seeing if I could change it once I started instruction. The majority of the students reported that they enjoyed working with a partner or in a group for an activity while a few said they didn't like it that much. Every single student in the class reported that they would rather do an activity than a worksheet after learning a health lesson. I thought this might be the reason that only one student put health as their first choice, being that the only reinforcement the students currently did after a health lesson was in fact a worksheet.

I wanted to gain a more informal assessment of my student's thoughts on health and wellness, so I decided to make a Wall of Words as a basis for class discussion. I told the students to write down a few sentences about what health and wellness means to them. I did not explain what it meant to me because I wanted to see how many students included more than just being 'physically healthy'. Students were able to come up to the board where I had placed a huge piece of yellow paper. On it I wrote the question at

hand. A few of the students asked, “Can we write on it or are you?” I was happy to see that the students wanted to participate. The first students up were the few that were excited about writing on the paper. A few of the more shy students asked me if they had to write. I told them that they only had to write on the board if they wanted to. They seemed relieved at this. However, as more and more students got up to write, the more reserved students felt more at ease and joined in. It was wonderful to see that the students could work together and feel comfortable in creating something together. When we first started the activity there was no sense of a learning community in the classroom, however by the end of the activity all of the students were actively involved in the learning process, eager to read what others had written, and to share their own thoughts. We were able to have a class discussion about what they all wrote on the yellow paper. Out of the twenty-four students in the class, nineteen of them wrote the typical answer that I would expect. All of these responses included something about diet, exercise, and not being sick. Only five of the students thought outside the box and hit the wellness nail on the head. The following are quotes taken from students who thought more about wellness than health, “It also means having a good personality”, “To me being healthy and well means to feel good about yourself”, “It means to me I can do well in school. Do more activities. Play with my friends”. At the end of the class discussion, the students all agreed that all of these things were correct and that being healthy and well included many aspects of our lives.

This was a great introductory activity into my research because the students were able to work actively together and discuss each other’s ideas. We laid down a framework for what wellness really meant. I told the students that when we hear the word health we

often only think about diet and exercise, however when I hear the word health I think about what it means to be well in all aspects of their lives. I gave the students a sneak peak at the kind of learning they'd be doing in the upcoming weeks.

When I began my research, the students were currently learning about germs and the way bacteria and mold could spread if not controlled properly. To supplement the curriculum I read the book "Germs Make Me Sick" to the students. It was a short book with a lot of information that I thought would be a great way to introduce the students to the idea of using trade books in the classroom. We weren't yet discussing any topics that were hard to talk about, however we did bring the lesson to another level that got the students ready for future lessons that involved more intense issues.

As thoroughly discussed in the literature review, and talked about in his Dyasi's own research, I argue that students should be given the opportunity to take an inquiry stance into their own learning. In an effort to get the students actively involved from the beginning I conducted an "oldie moldy" experiment that would show the students how mold can grow if untreated. I brought in two Tupperware jars and two pieces of bread. I told the students that I wanted to conduct two experiments at the same time to see if the mold grew in the same way in both experiments. It was up to the students to decide where to place the Tupperware bowls containing the bread in the classroom. After a group discussion and vote, the students chose to put one container, with dry bread, near the sink, which is in a relatively darker corner of the room. They put the other container, with wet bread, on the window ledge to see what would happen when it got direct sunlight. The students made hypothesis of what they thought would happen based on the information they had learned in the health lessons. Every day the students asked me what



was going on with the bread and if they could see it. I encouraged them to look at it themselves and to tell me what they saw. It became a daily occurrence to make notes on how the two pieces of bread changed and make guesses about what continued to happen. The students really enjoyed conducting this experiment, checking their hypothesis, and reporting what they saw to myself and to the rest of the class.

The next chapter in the health curriculum book dealt with safety in your community. I was surprised at how many safety tips the students were unaware of, such as walking on the street in the opposite direction of traffic, pulling out a cord from the top of it and not tugging on the wire, not walking on a frozen lake. I felt that the lesson went very well and that the kids learned a lot of safety tools from our class discussions. The students had many stories to share about accidents that happened to them or someone they knew and that could have been prevented if the person had taken safety precautions. The students worked in groups and made charts that depicted common accidents and ways to prevent them and then we hung up the charts in the hallway for all of the other students to see.

It was important to include novels in my research so I chose two different novels that I would be able to incorporate into the health curriculum. Both novels discussed issues that occur in all aspects of wellness such as safety, peer pressure, making choices, death, divorce, and moving. I decided to take two different approaches of using each book in the classroom. As discussed in the literature review, Author Steven Wolk discussed critical literacy as being about ones interaction with the world and being able to evaluate society through books. The two novels we read in class provided students with an opportunity to look at and evaluate issues in our society.

The health curriculum often recommends literature that would go along with the lesson and for this chapter they recommended the novel, “On My Honor” written by Marion Dane Bauer. This book deals with elementary school age boys who take the risk of swimming across a moving river. Because of peer pressure both boys felt the need to swim across, and unfortunately one of the boys drowns in the meantime. This was a tragic and touching story that taught the kids the importance of making right and safe decisions in their life because even something that seems easy to do might hold serious consequences. If I had simply lectured to the students about making smart decisions with safety issues, I would never have had the same affect on them as the book did. The students were brought into the story, got to know the characters, and felt what they all went through.

When I told the students that we would be reading “On My Honor”, which is a chapter book, there was a synonymous grown among the students. I think that chapter books should not always seem like a chore to children and that they should learn to experience them with their minds open and get completely enthralled in the story. Because the students in this class do not do a lot of reading for enjoyment, I thought a great way to introduce them to short novels was for me to read parts of it aloud to them each day, as a whole class. I didn’t assign work to correlate with the readings; instead I just encouraged group discussion during of after the reading. The students really liked being read to and I think it was a great way for them to enhance their listening skills as well as use their imagination. Because the students liked the book so much, we wound up having formed one big literature circle as a class, where the students felt free to discuss the story and what they thought about it.

During one particular literature circle, a boy named Michael, who is notorious for getting himself into trouble, shared with the class that he has done a lot of things that remind him of what happened in the book. Michael said “There are so many things that I never realized could actually be dangerous or that I just figured wouldn’t actually happen to me, but I guess anything would be possible”. Because the book was about kids the same age as my students, they were able to relate to them and see that what happened in the book could happen to real people. My students were able to have a reality check and think about some of the choices that they have made in their lives to see what they will have to do in the future to be safe. This is an example of the kinds of deep critical thinking that critical literacy texts can provide.

The chapter book “A Martians Tale” is a book that deals with issues that many students have to deal with in their own life. It is written as a narrative in the point of view of a fifth grade boy named Saunders, who others describe as quirky and different. Because of his unique nature, he often feels excluded from other students and is occasionally mocked by them. Saunders’ is also having a hard time dealing with his parent’s separation and eventual divorce. When his parents split up, he moves across the country to live with his grandfather who he hardly knows.

The students all had a copy of the book and we rotated reading out loud and silently. At first the students did not like reading the book because it did not seem exciting to them and there was no mystery or suspense. However, as we continued to read the students were able to overcome their biases and realize that the book was dealing with real life issues. Because the students didn’t seem very comfortable at first relating the book to real life, I supplied each of them with their own journal. The kids were so excited

to be getting them as they were different colors and had a pocket to hold their book. I told the students that I was not going to grade their journal and that it would never be for homework. In the book, Saunders often wrote in a journal in which he expressed his feelings. I explained that they were going to use their journals in the same way. Sometimes I had them write about whatever they wanted. Other times I asked them a question in relation to the text, such as “Saunders is nervous about moving across the country to live with his grandfather. Was there ever a time when you had to go somewhere new? How did you deal with it?” Students responded to this question differently. One girl, Jessica, wrote about the first time she went to the mall and how excited she was. Another child wrote about coming to a new school and how nervous she was about meeting all of the new students. The work that the students completed in their journals are examples of the critical literacy texts can relate to the real lives of students and formulate deep thinking and response.

Questions like this gave the students a guideline for their writing and a direction for their thoughts. One student related well to the character in the book because her parents got divorced as well. This is an example of a student relating to the character in the text. The student continues to write about what she does to get happy when she is upset about her parents.

“I know how you feel because my parents aren’t together anymore either. I was just a baby when my parents split up. But know what I do to stay happy is I play on my computer or I talk on the phone with my friends. I like to play games with my sister and friends”.

While writing in their journals, the students were able to talk about their own

coping mechanisms and how they deal with stressful situations in their lives. I really enjoyed reading the students journals and after a while they enjoyed writing in them too. If a couple of days went by that we didn't have time to write, the students would ask when they were going to be able to. I told them that they could write whenever they want, it doesn't have to be only when I ask them to. I got to know the students very well while reading their journals and I always wrote a little note back to them letting them know that I appreciate what I wrote.

Because the students became comfortable expressing their feelings in writing, they also became more comfortable talking about some of the issues with the rest of their peers. During a literature circle with a small group we were talking about Saunders parents divorce and about how Saunders felt like it was all his fault. One of the girls in the group bravely spoke up and said that her parents got divorced and that she could relate to the way Saunders felt. Because she started the discussion, other students felt comfortable adding in. Another student spoke about how he never knew his dad and that it has been very hard dealing with it. Discussions like this occurred more and more the further we got into the book as the students started opening up and relating the text to real life.

Earlier in the year the students had already learned the chapter in their health book that dealt with bullying. However, I felt that it would be extremely beneficial to talk about this topic again. Not a day or even an hour went by that I did not hear some form of bullying go on in my classroom. I constantly told the students to stop and tried to get them to see the light however it was to no avail. Eventually I realized that this would be a perfect opportunity to implement more research for my thesis, while really helping the

students as well. It was difficult to find critical literacy books that dealt with bullying that was on a fifth grade level but eventually I found two wonderful books that I plan to use with every class I ever teach.

“My Secret Bully” is a trade book that deals with girls who act like best friends to each other’s faces, but then talk about each other and spread gossip behind each other’s backs. The story tells of a girl who learns to overcome her secret bully and find confidence in herself as well as friends who do not backstab her. This story was an especially important part of my research because the girls in my class are having a lot of problems with this exact issue. Every day they are getting in fights and talking about each other so I hoped the book would bring the issue out into the open and raise awareness that it doesn’t have to be like that.

When I first started discussing the book with the class, I was surprised to see that the boys were very vocal in making the connection to the behavior of the girls in the class to the girls in the book. These fifth grade boys were very aware of the problems the girls were happening which spoke volumes about the amount of drama going on in the room. The girls were giving each other looks as if to say, “Uh oh, we are in trouble,” or “She can’t be talking about us?” and it took them time to get over their embarrassment and feel comfortable. After the lesson, I asked the students to write about how they felt during the lesson and a few of the girls wrote that they felt intimidated by the topic and guilty because they knew that they did the same thing as the girls in the book, so they were ashamed.

Before the conversation really began, I laid down a few ground laws dealing with respect. The students couldn’t use names or dish out gossip. We were going to respect

everyone's feelings. Because the boys were so open about talking about the girl's problems in the class, it allowed the conversation to start without the input of the girls. Eventually the girls started to add in their own two cents and started talking about what has been happening amongst them. I was astonished at the level of maturity the girls held during the discussion. The ground rules stuck with them and at no time did they blame a person or talk about a very specific situation. Instead, we talked about the problem as a whole from an observer's point of view. Many of the girls talked about their feelings and how bad it made them feel when they were in a fight with another girl. It turned into a wonderful opportunity for all the girls to see that they were in this together, that no one liked the constant bickering. Now that it was out in the open it would be easier for them to make the decision to stop. I explained that each of them could make a difference by making the decision to personally stop talking behind someone else's back.

I drew a triangle up on the board and explained to the students that when people bully there are usually three people that are affected by it. I had the students come up to the board and write down on each point that they thought those people were. Surprisingly the students had no problems figuring out, a sad statement of the fact that they have all been in more than one of those places. At each end of the triangle were the bully, the victim, and the bystander. We discussed what it means to be each of these people, how they feel and how they make other people feel. The kids worked in pairs and picked one of the points of the triangle to write a poem about. The poems were extremely insightful and touching. The following is an excerpt from one of the poems about being a victim;

“Sometimes I cry, sometimes I hide, sometimes I wish I could hide behind the teacher and scream help me!”

The triangles extension serves as a critical way of responding to “My Secret Bully”. When I heard this statement it made me realize that bringing awareness to the students was so important. The student’s poem is significant of the lessons learned from the book. It shows how deeply the student related to the book Too often bullying goes unnoticed or ignored altering the life of the students forever. Responding to the text is a critical way to change the bullying pattern. The students were able to read and respond to the book while creating their own outlet for their thoughts. As described in the literature review, it was the book that gave the students the foundation and the courage to let their feelings out through the poems and relate to real their feelings from the book to their real lives.

Piggybacking off of the bully triangle idea was the idea that as a bystander we have a huge opportunity to make a difference. When you are the victim or the bully it is often a hard task to end the problem, however as a bystander there are more options. We read the book “Say Something” which dealt with a student who always saw bullying going on but did nothing about it. Then one day, she became the victim and was very hurt that no one around her did anything to stop it. Because of this, she sat next to a girl on the bus who everyone else ignored or made fun of behind her back. She found out that this girl was very nice and caring. This story proved to be a great example for the small things that everyone could do to either stop the bully or make the life of the victim much happier. The students were very into the idea and really were excited about coming together as a class to make a difference. They were very aware that there were many students who were outright teased or just plain ignored and they wanted to make a difference.



I had planned on creating a class contract, but before I even brought up the idea the kids were asking me what I could do to make sure that everyone really stops bullying. A very insightful boy said, “Yea, everyone is talking about not bullying now but who knows if they still will be tomorrow”. Another student proclaimed that her father is a lawyer and he could draw up a legal contract that we could all sign and then if anyone broke it, they would be breaking the law. In the end, we created our own class contract in which the students worked together to make all of the agreements. They kept coming up with more and more ideas of things that they would like to see changed and added them to the list. The class was able to work collaboratively on finding out what was important enough to them that they would work to change it. Our major rules on the list were “Be nice to others”, “No teasing”, “Do not say shut up”, and “Talk to everyone”. The class had been having problems with all of these and they were able to recognize them without the help of the teacher. They knew what they needed to change and they were collectively taking the first step at changing it. The ideas that transpired among the students were because of the material in the critical literacy books that dealt with the topic of bullying. The books served as a catalyst for discussion and action among the students.

Many were very eager to sign, but there were some girls who got an attitude and said, “Well this is just too hard and I know I am going to break it”. I explained to the students that now that we have the contract we would all be more aware of what we are doing and will try not to break it. If we do break it we will be aware of what we did and we will work on changing our behaviors so that we don’t break it again. In the end all of the students signed it and then proudly hung it up on the room behind my desk, where it still hangs today.

In the students health book there was a story about an elementary school in Texas who adapted a school wide peer mediation program after the Columbine shootings in Colorado. The story told of how they designed and implemented the program as well as how they trained the students to be peer mediators. The program was an overall success in their school; however my students were skeptical that it would work, so I decided we would try it out in our classroom. I created a skit and had students volunteer to be actors, one playing the mediator and two students playing feuding friends. Because I had designed the skit to be a successful mediation, the students were able to see the benefits of the program. Next, the students broke up into groups of three and wrote their own skit. They were challenged to first write a skit that went badly due to lack of compromise or too much of a judgmental mediator. Then the students had to rewrite their skit as a successful mediation. After the students were done writing, each group presented their skits to the class.

Each skit represented different social situations that usually occurred in the school. In writing the skit, the students worked together to find an injustice that they saw at the school. They were able to talk about the problem and figure out what needed to be done from the mediator's perspective to help fix the problem. This process demonstrated the students understanding of how to successfully solve a problem without violence, something of which would not occur to some of them.

My favorite skit dealt with something that happened every day in my classroom. It was about a student who was often left out from the rest of the kids because they all thought that he was weird. During the unsuccessful mediation, the mediator told the kid that he really was weird and that there was no wonder the rest of the kids don't want to

play with him. This got a rise out of the rest of the class because they found it humorous. At this point I asked them why they were laughing and what was it about this response that they found so funny. The overwhelming response was that this was an inappropriate way for the mediator to talk to the student because it was not nice and defeats the purpose of the mediation. I told the kids to remember how ridiculous it sounded because that is how they sounded every time they were mean to someone else.

The second part of this particular skit dealt with a mediator who was able to help the students get along. He pointed out the good qualities in all of the people involved and talked with them about finding something they had in common. This approach to the situation stemmed directly from the examples in the book about mediation. The students had a positive model to work with and were able to adapt to those positive standards. Whereas before this study, any students who were able to come up with a positive mediation might have been laughed at, now they were applauded.

The students decided that peer mediation could work and expressed interest in developing a program in their classroom. I wished we had done this lesson earlier during my research because at this point I knew I would be leaving in one week. My cooperating teachers told the students that they would work them to start a peer mediation program in the classroom.

As a culminating activity the students created a classroom bulletin board to display all that we had learned during health. They all made suggestions for the bulletins title and came up with "We Will Not Get Sick in 2006". I was slightly thrown off by the "sick" part of the title because I had worked so hard to teach them that being well meant more than simply not being ill. However, they soon put my fears to rest when they

created posters that dealt with all aspects of wellness. Each student created an advertisement for being well. The advertisements titles ranged from “Don’t Be a Fool, Swim in a Pool!” to “Just Do It- Say No to Bullying” to “You’ve Got to Have Friends”. I was very proud of the students for being so creative with their advertisements as well as for really thinking about all aspects of wellness. It felt great to see that the students now understood that being healthy meant more than just diet and exercise. The students were so excited that their work was hanging up in the room and anxiously looked at everyone else’s work.

I gave the students the same questionnaire that I had given them at the beginning of my research. The numbers did not change in terms of whether or not students felt comfortable participating and asking questions during health class. In both the pre and post questionnaire, about two thirds of the students reported that they felt comfortable participating and asking questions during health class. Even though the numbers did not raise drastically, the change in students attitudes during health lessons were more than evident. On the post test most of the students reported that they did think books could help them in real life. This was a complete turn around from the pre test because on that most of the students did not think books could help them. By showing the students great books that related to their lives, the students were able to see how valuable books could be. Students also answered more favorably for inquiry and active participation over worksheets. The responses in favor were very high to begin with; however now almost all of the students said they were not in favor of worksheets. Only three of the students said they would rather work alone than in partners or in a group.

## Chapter 5

### Implications and Conclusion

By the end of my time with the students, they were proud of themselves and I was proud of them for letting go of their 'cool' personas and being able to discuss serious and unexplored issues with each other. In the beginning of my time with the class, I did not sense an overwhelming learning community; however by the end it was quite obvious that the students had learned to trust each other by working together in inquiry projects, group discussions and activities. The transition from a class of relative strangers to a class with a true learning community was remarkable. This was something that I had not particularly planned for, but was something that grew from the students being actively involved with each other in the learning process. At first, the students behaved differently only during the health lessons. They were comfortable working with each other and participating in discussions. However, as time went on the students exhibited this same behavior during other subjects as well. The aspects of socialization that the students developed during health lessons slowly began to be exhibited in all other areas of the classroom throughout the day.

I felt an overwhelming sense of proud of finding out the answer to my research question “What happens when a fifth grade class takes an inquiry stance into their own wellness through a critical literacy lens?” My students developed a new understanding of themselves and the different ways that they could make themselves well. Through their hard work they developed a learning community in the classroom, which inevitably led to better social health among all of the students. It took time for the students to reach this new place, as many were apprehensive to let their guard down. However, as soon as some brave souls lay their feelings on the line, the rest were sure to follow. The students seemed to develop into young adults with an awareness of the world around them. This class became connected to the fight against bullying and worked at stopping the injustice that they saw everyday. Students got to know each other in a way they never did before by talking about their families, divorce, death, peer pressure, and more. The students developed a respect for each other that cannot be questioned.

As stated in the literature review, O’Sullivan claims that “teaching is about reaching that deeper part of students and helping them become their biggest and best selves.” I have no doubt that my students learned things a bout themselves that hey had never thought of before. The lessons that I implemented during my research were not about rote memorization of facts, but truly about learning how to be one’s best self. My hope is that the students will carry these lessons with them throughout their life. They may not remember exactly what I said or the play by play of the lesson, but they will always remember how they felt in my classroom. They will know that there is a safe haven in being aware of yourself and your surroundings. Hopefully they have learned to

make the right decisions in their lives, become responsible individuals, and will positively affect other people that they come in contact with.

Because of this newfound community in the classroom, the students were able to enjoy participating in inquiry activities. Before, it was uncomfortable for some students to partner up or work in groups. There were always some students who did not feel they belonged because other students were mean to them or made them feel like outcasts. Our discussions about bullying brought a new light to the otherwise un-discussed topic and the students made a commitment to having a safer learning community where bullying was not allowed. Now, students who never were able to work successfully together had learned how to cooperate in a mature manner while treating each other with respect. Students who had formerly chosen to work alone were now enjoying working with others. This groundwork for a friendly environment made all inquiry activities more successful. The students felt more comfortable while working and therefore got more out of each lesson.

The students learned a new appreciation for books as they thoroughly enjoyed both our novels and all of the trade books that incorporated into the lessons. I was able to teach the students that books are a great tool to use in all aspects of life. Not only were they entertaining but they also taught a lot. The students expressed interest in the books and enjoyed reading them. They no longer looked at books as another boring assignment, but rather as a fun part of the day that they looked forward to. Some of my colleagues were doubtful that fifth graders would like being read to; however the students truly did enjoy the books. I can personally attest to the fact that students of all ages like being read to, as there was many times in my college courses that professors read to us and we

enjoyed it. I consider the students new found interest in books to be one of the biggest accomplishments of the research project.

Overall the research project was successful in finding out what happens when a fifth grade class takes an inquiry stance into its own health and wellness through a critical literacy lens. The students eagerly took part in each aspect of the research, which was the essential ingredient in the project being successful. Because the students became so open to my health lessons they learned about themselves and others in a way that could not be taught by traditional curriculum guided material.

This research project has many implications for future teachers who can use its ideas in their own classrooms. My hope is that other teachers will read this study and see that health should not be a subject that is pushed to the side to make more room for traditional subjects such as reading and math. Teachers should change their thinking from reading and math being the only thing that really counts, to really wanting to help the souls inside the students. Health is the most important subject to teach students how to grow and develop into individuals. More time should be allotted for these important life lessons in order to have its biggest impact. Principals should adopt school wide reform in areas dealing with the student's health.

Teachers should realize that students who may seem unwilling to work together and or participate during class only need to be taught how to work well in this type of classroom environment. As seen in this study, the class went through a transformation from the beginning to the end of the research period. By taking control as the teacher in developing a safe environment in the classroom, the students learned how to adapt to the environment and feel safe with one another. Teachers who think that fifth graders are too



old to have a true learning community should read this study and see that on the contrary fifth graders need and benefit greatly from a learning community because of the social issues that they face everyday at home and in school.

In my experiences it seems that many teachers think that not only are fifth graders too old for learning communities, but that they are also too old for reading books for fun, and fro doing hands on activities. I have heard teachers say that fifth grade is all about getting ready for middle school and there is no time for frills. However, I strongly disagree in this theory as made evident in my research. Books and activities should not be considered frills but should be considered the foundation of a healthy and active classroom. Reading is fun for people of all ages, especially those in fifth grade at the onset of a whole new world of adolescence. Fifth graders can connect through the characters and setting in the books and relate it to their own lives. Fifth graders who might not think it is cool to read a book only need a teacher to show them that it is cool in order for them to change their minds. My students expressed that their favorite part of the day was when I read to them. They openly discussed and talked about the books they were reading, and they also responded critically to the stories. My students went from a group who never read and claimed that they hated to read, to a group who claimed they enjoyed book time more than any other part of the day. I challenge all teachers to start reading to their students and just see what happens. I would be surprised to hear anything less than positive results.

Teachers reading this research project should remember to give their students opportunities for inquiry. Students learn best when actively working to find a solution or to create something. Students benefit from working in groups towards a common goal or

participating in group discussions. Students are extremely creative and unique individuals that often need guidance in learning ways to let their strengths come out and be shown to the rest of the class.

Because of my college education and prior teaching experiences, making hands on inquiry activities part of my lessons was not very difficult for me, however it was a huge change for my students and cooperating teachers. The students were not used to doing inquiry activities on a daily basis because my cooperating teachers felt that fifth graders should be more focused on pencil to paper independent assignments. In the beginning of my research period I was repeatedly told by my cooperating teachers that I should move down to first grade because I would like playing with the little ones. However, by the end of my time in the fifth grade classroom, I even saw a change in my cooperating teacher's attitudes. They saw the benefits of getting the student to work together in inquiry projects. The students creativity and expression was something that was not seen before because they were never given the proper outlet. Their grown up discussions offered insight into a more mature and inquisitive person that was trapped inside the monotony of the curriculum.

About a month after I finished my student teaching and said goodbye to the students that I had gotten to know so well, I went back to see them for a surprise visit on the night of their D.A.R.E. graduation. D.A.R.E. is a program for fifth graders in which a police officer comes in on weekly bases to teach the students to the danger of drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol in an effort to teach them to make good choices in their lives. I felt that coming to visit the students for their D.A.R.E. graduation was a good closing to my time with them and I think the students felt the same way. They were all happy that I

came to see them and they couldn't wait to tell me all that they learned in D.A.R.E. after I left. The students knew that I was proud of them for what they accomplished in D.A.R.E because I had continually expressed to them that I cared about them and wanted them to make good choices in their lives.

Perhaps the most touching point of my visit was when I was standing by my students class contract that was hanging in the back of the room. They had all signed the contract to promise to treat everyone with respect. As I was admiring all of the signatures, one of my old students Travis, a boy who is often labeled as the outcast by the other kids, came over to me and said "Miss Shalhoub, thank you for trying to make the kids be nicer to me. Guess what, Chris even asks me if I want to be his partner sometimes!" I was thrilled by this and felt that all my hard work paid off. As a teacher I can hope that at the very least I will touch the life of at least one child. Travis went on to tell me that some of the kids are still mean to him and that he tells the teachers but they don't do anything about it. This put a damper on my sense of accomplishment; however it made me realize that even if I cannot change the world, I can certainly try. The least I can do is bring awareness to my students and let them know that they have the power to make choices. It is my responsibility as a teacher to give them the tools they will need in order to make right choices.

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